

Cousin Elof's Dream

By Unknown

My cousin, Kaspar Elof Imant, was a man of a melancholy disposition—which means, in other words, he had a bad liver, a little waist, hair of a black-brown, a sharp eye, a long and slightly bent nose, withered cheeks streaked with little red veins, red lips, white teeth, a protruding chin, and little backbone. One might often see him walking, in order to take the air, with shoulders bent, in the Avenue des Plantanes at Birkenfeld. At such times his piercing eyes would acquire a look of abstraction, and the prettiest girls in the place would feel pity for him, although in fact he rejoiced in a yearly rental of five thousand livres and possessed an excellent appetite. They thought he was the victim of some insidious melancholy, and would have done what they could to chase it away.

‘That poor M. Elof,’ they would say to themselves, ‘cannot forget the death of his mother! What he wants is distraction, the sweets of a home to efface the sad memory, a young wife, little children, etc. etc.’

Now Elof was not quite six years old when his mother died, and he was now almost thirty. As for me, I used to tell him of these remarks I heard made concerning him. He would smile, and then suddenly sink into melancholy thought.

Our Aunt Catherine, the wife of Counsellor Weinland, used to give at that time little musical parties, at which one met a crowd of charming young ladies. I have always thought that the worthy lady, who took a remarkable interest in bringing about matches, wished to see her nephews married, and cultivated what are called ‘reciprocal sentiments.’ However that may have been, Elof and I, willingly or unwillingly, had to take our part on these occasions, which were not a little tiresome to us: what, however, will not one do for an aunt possessed of three vineyards and of a fine estate in the neighbourhood of Frank-fort? She would ask us to sing the *duo langouroso*—

Ce qu'il me faut à moi
C'est toi! . . . c'est toi! c'est toi!

with Mademoiselle Ophelia, or Mademoiselle Fridoline—and we would sing. She would ask us to do the honours of the whipped-cream and of the *kougelhoff*—and we would do so. She would tutor us as to our deportment, as to the manner in which we tied our neckties, or on the turn of our moustaches, and we would listen with the most profound respect. I would laugh and say on such occasions—‘You are right, my dear aunt, always right.’

Elof would listen, his shoulder against the piano, looking very miserable, but resigned.

Then the prattle and small-talk would commence, the counsellor's wife or the baron's wife leading it to the subject of the absent friends. Did they happen to come in, with what exclamations of pleasure were they greeted! ‘How pleased we are to see you Oh! we had quite given you up. We had ceased to hope, etc. etc.’ And the dear friends would exchange smiles, kisses, embraces!

‘He! he! he Delicious, delicious! Get married then—get married!’

One evening, however, after the duet, the usual ballad and the arietta of *Colibri joli*, some of the ladies, patronesses of the charity-lottery, began to talk about a certain beggar woman who

had recently died at the age of ninety. Madame Freidag, the baron's wife, dwelt with unction upon this edifying death. Elof, as he sat in a window seat, his head bent down, appeared to listen very attentively. All of a sudden, seizing on a moment of silence, he asked—

‘You have doubtless, madam, seen many dead persons while you have been paying your charitable visits during the last twenty years!’

The tone, the look of Elof startled all in the room. I thought there was something strange about him.

‘Certainly,’ replied the lady, with her face a little flushed.

‘And,’ went on Elof, ‘is it a fact that all dead people have their eyes open?’

‘All.’

‘And the mouth also?’

‘Yes, the mouth too.’

‘I thought so,’ said Elof, bowing. ‘I thought so.’ And then he relapsed into his usual abstraction.

These few words produced such an effect upon the party that I saw several of them grow pale. Certainly it was a strange turn for the conversation to take, after the arietta from *Colibri joli!* All felt uneasy, and our worthy aunt, in order to reestablish the merriment, proposed that we should dance a waltz. We did so, but still we could not shake off the strange feeling which had fallen upon us. About eleven o'clock Elof disappeared, and ten minutes after, the last carriage might be heard rattling over the deserted street.

When I went to bid her adieu, my aunt, taking me by the arm, said—

‘In Heaven's name, Christian, what is the matter with him! Has Elof gone mad?’

‘Ha, ha! my dear aunt, you know what a strange fellow he is, and, after all, what did he say?’

‘Well, it is the fault of that woman with her tales of dead and dying folk. Let us think no more about it. Good-night, Christian.’

I went off full of thought. In the distance twinkled a lamp. I do not know why, but as I came to my lodgings in the Rue des Capuchins, I felt myself shiver. Before I went to sleep I actually took the extraordinary precaution of looking under my bed. It seemed to me as if some terrible danger were hanging over me. I could not imagine what it could be, but throughout the whole night strange fancies occurred to me. Several times I turned, startled by the rustling of the leaves of the high poplars against my window—listening to the wash of the river Erbach as it swept by the wall of my garden. The shouts of the sailors, the cry of the watchman, seemed to acquire a mysterious significance.

The next morning I was up at five o'clock. I pulled up my Venetian blinds, and listened to the swallows as they twittered on the eaves. All at once I saw Elof afar off, in the empty street. He was walking at a great pace, his hat over his eyes, and his little black cloak drawn tight across his chest. I was about to call out to him, when he turned suddenly to the left, and made his way towards my place. The door of my chamber opened, and there he stood, seemingly not the least surprised to find me up so early.

‘Christian,’ he said abruptly, ‘as archivist of Birkenfeld, I suppose you have the judicial documents of Hundsrück in your charge?’

‘Certainly; but sit down.’

‘Thanks. How far back do those documents go?’

‘A hundred and fifty years—to the reign of Yeri-Peter le Borgne.’

‘Well, that is all right. Would you lend me the papers relating to the year 1800?’

'It is impossible. None of the archives must go out of my possession—but I can show you them, if you wish it, in the library of Saint Christophe.'

'That is all I want,' he said, and he commenced to walk up and down impatiently.

'Do you want to go now?'

'Yes, certainly, as quickly as possible.'

'The matter is urgent?'

He stopped short in his walk, and fixed his dark eyes upon me.

'Christian,' he said, 'you shall know all—all. Will you put on your hat?'

 And he passed it to me.

'Bring the key and let us go.'

This impatience in a man who was generally so calm, and, besides that, the strange questions he had put to Madame Freidag, excited my curiosity. I did what he told me, and we set off at once.

The library of Saint Christophe is an old building in the Romance style, and is said to have been built in the time of Charlemagne. It consists of three high halls, the one above the other. A massive winding stair leads to the top of the building, where, through three loopholes, one can see all the surrounding country as far as eye can reach. In each story, on each side of the building, are six semicircular windows, little, deep-set, through which the light falls on the large flagstones, while the ceiling is left in deep shadow. In fact it is a barbarous building, which depends for its grandeur upon its height and the associations connected with it. Its position, outside the town, by the side of the river Erbach, gives it an important air. One would scarcely suspect the place was a library, the less so because its heavy oak door remains closed from the first day of the year to that of the feast of Saint Silvester.

We climbed up the winding stairs, lighted here and there by loopholes.

'If these passages are worn,' said I to my companion, 'it is not my fault or that of the savants of Birkenfeld. Since last year, when Count Harvig demanded of me his genealogical tree, no one has set foot here.'

When we had come to the third story, while I was putting my key in the hock, Hof seemed to awake from a dream.

'Now I shall see,' he said.

We entered the great empty hall. The sun shone without in all its brilliancy and with all its morning freshness. Through the windows, deep set in the walls, we could catch pretty pieces of landscape—the river, the foaming mills, and the trees, the foliage of which stood out with surprising distinctness. The hail was dark, and the big table was covered with that fine dust which is found in deserted rooms. Eloh, looking at the great oaken presses full of papers, uttered a cry of surprise. I pushed the rolling ladder into a dark corner, and said to him—

'What papers do you want?'

'Those of the year 1800.'

'Well, that will be the year eight of the Republic, one and indivisible. We were then a part of the department of the Sarre.'

I commenced to place the ladder. In about five minutes I descended with a big volume under my arm. We seated ourselves in two little walnut-wood arm-chairs with straight backs, and without pad or cushion, as was the mode in the last century, and I laid my book open upon the table. Any one who had seen us then, seated opposite one another, our shadows thrown on the old walls with their wooden presses, might have taken us for the ghosts of Merlin and the little

good-fellow of Liege searching in their conjuring-book. I read the headings. Elof, his eyes sparkling with feverish eagerness, murmured from time to time—

‘Go on, go on, it is not there.’

We had in this manner gone through three parts of the volume, and I was getting impatient, when I at last read—

‘Extract from the register of the criminal tribunal of the department of the Sarre, the eighth year, in the name of the French people; the criminal tribunal of the department of the Sarre having examined the *acte d’accusation*, dated the 9 Fructidor, against Philippe Gilger, of which the contents are set forth—’

‘Ah! Ah!’ cried Elof, ‘we have it. Read louder, my cousin.’

Elof’s look was so fixed that I was troubled by it. The sound of my own voice, re-echoed by the walls, filled me with indefinable terror. I went on—

‘The director of the jury of the district of Birkenfeld states that, on the 21st of the month Ventose, Mangel and Denier, *gens d’armes* of the department of the Sarre, living at Counsel, carrying a mandate of arrest, issued the 20th of the month Ventose, by the officer of judiciary police in the canton of Grumbach, against Philippe Gilger, native of Weiswilier, suspected of complicity in robbery and murder, have conducted to the prison of Birkenfeld the person of the said Gilger, and remitted the papers concerning him to the hands of the said jury. As no complaining party appeared within the two days of adjournment, the director of the jury has proceeded with the examination relative to the arrest and detention of the said Gilger, and finds—

‘Firstly. That six persons, of whom four belong to Hundsbach, and two to Schweinschied, returning on the 27th of the month Frimaire from the fair which had been held the day before in Birkenfeld, were attacked on the high-road, about nine o’clock in the morning, by three robbers, one of whom was Gilger. The robbers, threatening the travellers with pistols and daggers, extorted from them eighty-five forms.

‘Secondly. On the same day, a butcher of Meisenheim, having passed the night at a farm in Wickenhof returning from the same fair at Birkenfeld, was likewise attacked by the same robbers, and compelled to give them two hundred and eighty and odd forms.’

A list of many other crimes committed by Gilger and his companions followed. Elof listened without uttering a word, which led me to suppose that I had not yet found what he wanted. At length we came to the twenty-sixth head of the accusation.

‘Twenty-sixthly. The director of the jury states moreover that, on the 13th of the month Pluviôse, four robbers, armed with guns, at the head of whom was Philippe Gilger, entered, between the hours of one and two at night, a mill near to Birkenfeld, obtaining admission through a skylight, the iron bar securing which they forced; that the robbers, by these means, obtained access to the chamber of the miller Pierre Ringel—’

Elof interrupted me there with a kind of husky cry. I lifted up my eyes. His pallor alarmed me.

‘Yes, yes,’ he cried, with a doleful smile. ‘That is all right! Go on, Christian; I am listening.’

In spite of my fear I went on—

‘Obtained access to the chamber of the miller Pierre Ringel, coming to the door of which, in the interior of the mill, they broke the little glass window let into the door, and introducing the barrels of their guns through the opening, forced the miller to hand them the key. That, when they had entered into the chamber, they obliged Ringel to deliver up to them his money, his watch, his pipe marked with the initials P. R.; that, having searched all the parts of the house, not finding the sums of money they hoped for, not content with incessantly mocking the miller, with

a thousand imprecations they proceeded to torture him, placing in his hands a lighted taper; that, in that extremity Ringel, carried away by pain, beginning to defend himself, they knocked him down with the butt-end of their guns, and then threw him out of a window into the ditch which surrounds the mill, where, however, his body, in spite of all search, was never found, which makes it presumed that he was carried away by the stream.

‘Twenty-seventh. That on the 18th of the month Ventose, Philippe Gilger—’

‘That is enough,’ said Elof. ‘All my suppositions are verified. Christian you shall hear something which will make your hair stand on end. But let us see the end of the drama—that which refers to the register of Trèves.’

I turned over several pages and read the declaration of the jury of accusation of Birkenfeld; the order of arrest, dated the 11th Fructidor; then the unanimous declaration of the jury upon the numberless counts of the accusation. At last, following this declaration, the judgment concluded with these words—

‘The criminal tribunal of the department of the Sarre, after having heard the deputy of the government’s commissary, and having heard his demands according to law, the accused and his legal defenders, and having deliberated on the matter:

‘Condemns Philippe Gilger to suffer death, conformably, etc. . . . mulcts him, moreover, in the costs of the prosecution, etc. etc.

‘Done, pronounced, and explained in the public court of the tribunal of Trèves, the 23d of the month Brumaire, in the ninth year of the French Republic, one and indivisible, at six in the morning—Signed: Buchel, president; Bauter, Volbach, Hertzrod, and Warnier, judges of the tribunal, who have all signed the original of the present judgment. To the exact copy, to be joined to the papers, signed: Buchel president, and Warnier registrar.’

‘What a terrible thing! What a terrible thing!’ said Elof. ‘That man was innocent.’

‘Innocent! How do you know?’

‘I know it! I know it! It does not matter how, but I am sure of it.’

He walked up and down the hall with a haggard look on his face, and his long yellow jaws took a greenish hue.

‘Ah, that is it, that is it that has weighed upon me for twenty -five years,’ said he. ‘That is what has made me moody, melancholy.’

Then he came to me, and sitting down in his chair, said to me in a firm, most undoubting voice—

‘I do not mean to pretend, Christian, that Gilger was an honest man. All that the act of accusation says is true, with the exception of the murder of the miller. Gilger was a wretched fellow, a robber on the highway; he lived by theft and robbery, but he did not kill Ringel.’

‘Who then did kill him?’ I asked, astonished at his confident tone.

‘Let us see what happened,’ said he. ‘On the 13th of the month Pluviôse, in the year eight, between one and two in the morning, rain fell in torrents. Ringel, who had been a widower five years, was awake in his room at the back, looking towards the wheel of the mill. He listened to the water foaming in the great ditch, and, not having taken the precaution to lower the sluice before he went to bed, he was afraid he should find the dam somewhat damaged by the current. He was a man about sixty or sixty-five years old, still strong, with gray hair, and of an avaricious disposition. After having for some time to the rushing of the water, he rose to strike a light, meaning to turn the handle of the over-fall. At that moment, however, a grating noise struck upon his ear.’

At this point of his story Elof became pale as death, his eyes shone, he bowed his head, and one might have thought that he was listening. I was afraid.

‘He heard a grating noise,’ said he, drawing a long breath; ‘a grating noise in the mill—a sort of sinister grinding, very distinct, which could be heard above the foaming of the water which poured from the spouts and fell in sheets from the roof, above the clatter of the willows lashed by the storm. Then Ringel half-opened the door leading from his room into the mill. He looked for some seconds and saw against the gray background of a skylight to the left several black bent heads. As his sight, through fear, became so powerful that he could see like a cat in the dark, he clearly perceived a stout lever passed between the bars. Three men were using it, and it was this which had made the grinding noise he had heard. He was about to call out for aid when the bar gave way and sprang from the stone. At the same moment two men leapt into the mill. Ringel had only time enough to shut to his door, and recommend his soul to God. For some months past there had been talk of murders committed in the neighbourhood of Birkenfeld, of robberies, of great fires. The Schinderhannes band had visited Hundsrück.

‘All these things occurred to the unfortunate man, and he considered he was lost. The rain commenced to cease, and steps could be heard in the mill. The robbers were evidently looking for the owner. Ringel had no arms. He remembered that his son-in-law slept in the room below, and as loud cries were now heard there, he did not doubt that the robbers had discovered him. The fact is, the son-in-law, Hans Ornacht, had in the beginning escaped by jumping down into the garden, a height of about five-and-twenty feet. The robbers, when they entered, found his window open.’

There was a moment’s silence. Elof appeared to be endeavouring to recollect. I asked him how it was he had become acquainted with these particulars, for I did not see how he could have learnt them, the miller having been killed without having told any one what had passed.

‘You must know,’ replied my cousin, ‘that a deadly hatred existed between Pierre Ringel and his son-in-law. The daughter of the miller had been dead some months, leaving a child which ought, naturally, to succeed to the effects of its mother and of its grandfather. Ringel, however, finding himself alone in the world, with a stranger, and not having much affection for the child, which was out at nurse, resolved that he would marry again. He courted an old woman in Nuestadt; and the son-in-law, seeing that it was likely he should lose the mill and all the father-in-law’s wealth, conceived the greatest hatred for him.

‘But tell me, Elof, how do you know all this?’

I know it,’ he said gravely, ‘and that is enough. Listen to the rest. The greater part of the facts stated in the act of accusation are true, and that proves the penetration of those who prepared it. It is true that the robbers, after having discovered the room in which Ringel was, broke the window in the door, and threatened to shoot him if he did not give up the key to them. It is quite true that Ringel, not being able to get out of the reach of their guns, which commanded from one side of the room to the other, ended by yielding to the threats of death; that he opened the door, and was horribly maltreated; that, after having been stripped, when the robbers could not find the sums of money which they thought were in the mill, a taper was tied between his fingers in order to force him to say where the treasure lay. Ringel, however, was so avaricious that he would rather have died than give the information they desired. As for the rest, while one of them struck a light in order to set the taper on fire, disengaging himself from the grasp of the wretches who had hold of his throat, Ringel threw himself out of the window into the ditch of the mill. It was about four o’clock in the morning, and the rain had ceased. He came up to the surface of the water, for he swam excellently, and floated down to the Erbach, the waters of which, swollen by the rain,

rushed on with a great roar towards the Rhine. Nothing would have been easier than for the miller to land, but, thinking that there might be robbers on the banks, he was afraid of falling into their hands. He did not wish to land till he came lower down, near to a marshy piece of land covered with reeds, where he was sure no robber could find him. At last, at the end of about twenty minutes, feeling fatigued and chilled to the very marrow of his bones, he tried to gain the bank. At that moment the moon, which had been hitherto covered with clouds, shed a watery light over the country, and the miller, panting, saw, about five feet from him, a man in a boat. He knew him. It was his son-in-law.'

'"Hans," said he, gasping for breath, "it is me. Reach me the oar."'"

'But Hans did not answer, and he lifted the oar up. Ringel knew what he meant, and gave a cry of rage and despair. The oar descended on his head. He disappeared; but his vigour was so great that, after a few seconds, he again appeared on the surface. A second blow from the oar killed him. That is how these things happened, Christian. For that deed it was that Gilger was guillotined at Trèves, while the son-in-law, Ornacht, is the owner of the mill, and is esteemed a man of much honesty.'

Elof was silent, and as I looked at him, with my mouth open, it seemed to me that I saw the whole tragedy enacted before my eyes.

'But in heaven's name, cousin,' said I—

'That is not all,' interrupted Elof. 'Yesterday you appeared surprised at the question I addressed to Madame Freidag, whether dead people always have their eyes open.'

'Certainly. I was surprised at that question, and I was not the only one who was so.'

'Ah well, Christian, you shall know why I asked it. In the first place I must tell you I have never seen dead persons. The idea of looking at such is fearful to me. I have only seen one dead man—one only—in a dream, when I was quite a child. He lay amongst some reeds with his mouth and his eyes open. I seem to see him always—the face white; the big blue eyes turned towards the sky; the body, by the water, moving softly; the arms, stiff, stretched out in the mud, in which play a thousand—unclean things—worms, frogs; whilst overhead the long thin leaves of an old willow flutter with every breath of wind. I see that body, abandoned! Around is a deserted country; in the distance are the brown roofs of Birkenfeld; some birds wheel in the air above. To that place, in the morning, I saw a man come down the Erbach in the mist. He came to the body, after having looked around to see that no one was near. He stretched out a long hooked pole from his boat, and with a push sent the body out into the middle of the stream. But dead people float. Then the man tied a big stone to its throat, and it disappeared. That dead man was the miller Ringel, and the other was his son-in-law, the honest Hans Ornacht.'

'Well, but Elof, all this is but a dream.'

'A dream! Remember, Christian, my dream has not deceived me. Dead people have their eyes open, and their mouths also. No one had told me that. When I think of dead people—when one speaks to me of the dead, I always see them before me in the fearful guise of that man. Whence does the image proceed? Can it be a memory? No—when these things occurred I was not yet born. Can it be one of those magnetic visions of which the world has heard for more than a century without being able to define what they are? Can it arise from the vital fluid which is called the soul, will, breath, and which transmits itself from one organism to another? How can I tell? However it may be, the fact has never ceased to burden me from my infancy. I will tell you a thing more significant, more incredible—absurd, and nevertheless true. Some days ago, as I walked along the banks of the Erbach, doubting these impressions of mine, and looking on myself almost as a madman, all of a sudden, in spite of my repugnance, it seemed as if

something dragged me towards the mill. I went in, hoping that the sight of the interior would dispel my dreams. Well, judge of my surprise when I found everything just as I had imagined it. There was the high timberwork with its cross-beams, the wooden staircase leading to the loft, the millstone, the window with the broken bar—but now secured with a double chain which gives it greater strength, the room which Ringel occupied, and the little window through which he could watch the work going on in the mill—all, everything, even the least things, the most petty details! I was thunderstruck. At that moment a heavy step echoed on the stair. The step troubled me. He came down. I would have liked to fly, but an unknown force held me there. “It is lie,” I said. It was indeed the man Hans, the son-in-law of Ringel, become old in his turn. He has a bald head, wrinkled jaws, the face furrowed with lines begot by avarice, and perhaps by remorse. He compressed his lips, and then, with a wheedling air, said, smiling—

‘“What can I do for Monsieur?”’

‘Oh, nothing. I came in from simple curiosity. You have a fine mill here, Monsieur. Will you allow me to visit it sometimes?’

He said nothing but looked at me. Having walked across the lower hall, I went over the little bridge in front, above the sluice, and came to the side of the river. Here is the path—there the reeds. I went on trembling. Big trees, high brambles, scattered rocks, carried me away into the midst of olden dreams. The marsh was dry. I entered it, brushing aside with my feet the long horse-tail and the dry reeds. At length I came to the spot I had so often seen in my dreams. It was there, in that little hollow, that the dead man lay. I stood still and was lost in thought. At length recovering myself, and stamping my foot upon the ground, “Yes, yes,” I said. “It was here I saw him.” At that moment a slight noise startled me. I turned round. What did I see? The son-in-law, the miller—white, his mouth twitching, his eyes glaring. He had followed me.

‘What are you doing here?’ he asked roughly.

‘Me? Nothing, Monsieur. I am looking.’

‘Looking! At what do you look?’

‘Oh nothing! I wanted to see—’

‘There is nothing for one to see here.’

‘As I was about to reply, he proceeded in an insolent voice—’

‘“Go your way.”’

‘The appearance of the man had something terrible in it; a sinister light shone in his countenance. We were alone—night was coming on. I hastened to obey him.’

‘That is the exact truth, Christian; and although you may tell me that my dream was absurd—that it lacks common sense, all that will not prevent my being assured that it is true. Yes, Hans killed his father-in-law. I am sure of it. I would persist in my declaration under the very knife of the guillotine.’

‘But, then, why do you not denounce him?’ I asked, rising from my chair. ‘Why not tear the mask from the face of this wretched fellow?’

‘Denounce him! What are you thinking of, Christian? To denounce him I must have substantial proofs, and such are wanting. If I went and told my dream to the old procurator, Mathias Hertzberg, he would laugh in my face. I should not wonder if he had me seized and put into an asylum. What is a dream in the eyes of your reasonable people? Only a freak of the spirit during a time of sleep. Nothing. Less than nothing!’

‘It is true, Elof, it is true. When we cannot comprehend a thing we regard it as absurd—which is much the easier course than getting to the bottom of it. What a great thing is reason!’

We went down the stairs from the library, full of thought. That story had perplexed me.

