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A NIGHT ON THE BORDERS OF THE BLACK FOREST

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My story (if story it can be called, being an episode in my own early life) carries me back to a time when the world and I were better friends than we are likely, perhaps, ever to be again. I was young then. I had good health, good spirits, and tolerably good looks. I had lately come into a snug little patrimony, which I have long since dissipated; and I was in love, or fancied myself in love, with a charming coquette, who afterwards threw me over for a West-country baronet with seven thousand a year.

So much for myself. The subject is not one that I particularly care to dwell upon; but as I happen to be the hero of my own narrative, some sort of self-introduction is, I suppose, necessary.

To begin then – Time: seventeen years ago.

Hour: – three o'clock p.m., on a broiling, cloudless September afternoon.

Scene: – a long, straight, dusty road, bordered with young

trees; a far-stretching, undulating plain, yellow for the most part with corn-stubble; singularly barren of wood and water; sprinkled here and there with vineyards, farmsteads, and hamlets; and bounded in the extreme distance by a low chain of purple hills.

Place – a certain dull, unfrequented district in the little kingdom of Würtemberg, about twelve miles north of Heilbronn, and six south-east of the Neckar.

Dramatis Personæ: – myself, tall, sunburnt, dusty; in grey suit, straw hat, knapsack and gaiters. In the distance, a broad-backed pedestrian wielding a long stick like an old English quarter-staff.

Now, not being sure that I took the right turning at the cross-roads a mile or two back, and having plodded on alone all day, I resolved to overtake this same pedestrian, and increased my pace accordingly. He, meanwhile, unconscious of the vicinity of another traveller, kept on at an easy "sling-trot," his head well up, his staff swinging idly in his hand – a practised pedestrian, evidently, and one not easily out-walked through a long day.

I gained upon him, however, at every step, and could have passed him easily; but as I drew near he suddenly came to a halt, disencumbered himself of his wallet, and stretched himself at full length under a tree by the wayside.

I saw now that he was a fine, florid, handsome fellow of about twenty-eight or thirty years of age – a thorough German to look at; frank, smiling, blue-eyed; dressed in a light holland blouse and loose grey trousers, and wearing on his head a little crimson

cap with a gold tassel, such as the students wear at Heidelberg university. He lifted it, with the customary "*Guten Abend*" as I came up, and when I stopped to speak, sprang to his feet with ready politeness, and remained standing.

"Niedersdorf, mein Herr?" said he, in answer to my inquiry. "About four miles farther on. You have but to keep straight forward."

"Many thanks," I said. "You were resting. I am sorry to have disturbed you."

He put up his hand with a deprecating gesture.

"It is nothing," he said. "I have walked far, and the day is warm."

"I have only walked from Heilbronn, and yet I am tired. Pray don't let me keep you standing."

"Will you also sit, mein Herr?" he asked with a pleasant smile. "There is shade for both."

So I sat down, and we fell into conversation. I began by offering him a cigar; but he pulled out his pipe – a great dangling German pipe, with a flexible tube and a painted china bowl like a small coffee-cup.

"A thousand thanks," he said; "but I prefer this old pipe to all the cigars that ever came out of Havannah. It was given to me eight years ago, when I was a student; and my friend who gave it to me is dead."

"You were at Heidelberg?" I said interrogatively.

"Yes; and Fritz (that was my friend) was at Heidelberg also. He

was a wonderful fellow; a linguist, a mathematician, a botanist, a geologist. He was only five-and-twenty when the government appointed him naturalist to an African exploring party; and in Africa he died."

"Such a man," said I, "was a loss to the world."

"Ah, yes," he replied simply; "but a greater loss to me."

To this I could answer nothing; and for some minutes we smoked in silence.

"I was not clever like Fritz," he went on presently. "When I left Heidelberg, I went into business, I am a brewer, and I live at Stuttgart. My name is Gustav Bergheim – what is yours?"

"Hamilton," I replied; "Chandos Hamilton."

He repeated the name after me.

"You are an Englishman?" he said.

I nodded.

"Good. I like the English. There was an Englishman at Heidelberg – such a good fellow! his name was Smith. Do you know him?"

I explained that, in these fortunate islands, there were probably some thirty thousand persons named Smith, of whom, however, I did not know one.

"And are you a milord, and a Member of Parliament?"

I laughed, and shook my head.

"No, indeed," I replied; "neither. I read for the bar; but I do not practise. I am an idle man – of very little use to myself, and of none to my country."

"You are travelling for your amusement?"

"I am. I have just been through the Tyrol and as far as the Italian lakes – on foot, as you see me. But tell me about yourself. That is far more interesting."

"About myself?" he said smiling. "Ah, mein Herr, there is not much to tell. I have told you that I live at Stuttgart. Well, at this time of the year, I allow myself a few weeks' holiday, and I am now on my way to Frankfort, to see my Mädchen, who lives there with her parents."

"Then I may congratulate you on the certainty of a pleasant time."

"Indeed, yes. We love each other well, my Mädchen and I. Her name is Frederika, and her father is a rich banker and wine merchant. They live in the Neue Mainzer Strasse near the Taunus Gate; but the Herr Hamilton does not, perhaps, know Frankfort?"

I replied that I knew Frankfort very well, and that the Neue Mainzer Strasse was, to my thinking, the pleasantest situation in the city. And then I ventured to ask if the Fräulein Frederika was pretty.

"*I* think her so," he said with his boyish smile; "but then, you see, my eyes are in love. You shall judge, however, for yourself."

And with this, he disengaged a locket from his watch-chain, opened it, and showed me the portrait of a golden-haired girl, who, without being actually handsome, had a face as pleasant to look upon as his own.

"Well?" he said anxiously. "What do you say?"

"I say that she has a charming expression," I replied.

"But you do not think her pretty?"

"Nay, she is better than pretty. She has the beauty of real goodness."

His face glowed with pleasure.

"It is true," he said, kissing the portrait, and replacing it upon his chain. "She is an angel! We are to be married in the Spring."

Just at this moment, a sturdy peasant came trudging up from the direction of Niedersdorf, under the shade of a huge red cotton umbrella. He had taken his coat off; probably for coolness, or it might be for economy, and was carrying it, neatly folded up, in a large, new wooden bucket. He saluted us with the usual "Guten Abend" as he approached.

To which Bergheim laughingly replied by asking if the bucket was a love-token from his sweetheart.

"Nein, nein," he answered stolidly; "I bought it at the Kermess[1] up yonder."

"So! there is a Kermess at Niedersdorf?"

"Ach, Himmel! – a famous Kermess. All the world is there to-day."

And with a nod, he passed on his way.

My new friend indulged in a long and dismal whistle.

"Der Teufel!" he said, "this is awkward. I'll be bound, now, there won't be a vacant room at any inn in the town. And I had

[1] Kermess – A fair.

intended to sleep at Niedersdorf to-night. Had you?"

"Well, I should have been guided by circumstances. I should perhaps have put up at Niedersdorf, if I had found myself tired and the place comfortable; or I might have dined there, and after dinner taken some kind of light vehicle as far as Rotheskirche."

"Rotheskirche!" he repeated. "Where is that?"

"It is a village on the Neckar. My guide-book mentions it as a good starting-point for pedestrians, and I am going to walk from there to Heidelberg."

"But have you not been coming out of your way?"

"No; I have only taken a short cut inland, and avoided the dull part of the river. You know the Neckar, of course?"

"Only as far as Neckargemünd; but I have heard that higher up it is almost as fine as the Rhine."

"Hadn't you better join me?" I said, as we adjusted our knapsacks and prepared to resume our journey.

He shook his head, smiling.

"Nay," he replied, "my route leads me by Buchen and Darmstadt. I have no business to go round by Heidelberg."

"It would be worth the *détour*."

"Ah, yes; but it would throw me two days later."

"Not if you made up for lost time by taking the train from Heidelberg."

He hesitated.

"I should like it," he said.

"Then why not do it?"

"Well – yes – I will do it. I will go with you. There! let us shake hands on it, and be friends."

So we shook hands, and it was settled.

The shadows were now beginning to lengthen; but the sun still blazed in the heavens with unabated intensity. Bergheim, however, strode on as lightly, and chatted as gaily, as if his day's work was only just beginning. Never was there so simple, so open-hearted a fellow. He wore his heart literally upon his sleeve, and, as we went along, told me all his little history; how, for instance, his elder sister, having been betrothed to his friend Fritz, had kept single ever since for his sake; how he was himself an only son, and the idol of his mother, now a widow; how he had resolved never to leave either her or his maiden sister; but intended when he married to take a larger house, and bring his wife into their common home; how Frederika's father had at first opposed their engagement for that reason; how Frederika (being, as he had already said, an angel) had won the father's consent last New Year's Day; and how happy he was now; and how happy they should be in the good time coming; together with much more to the same effect.

To all this I listened, and smiled, and assented, putting in a word here and there, as occasion offered, and encouraging him to talk on to his heart's content.

And now with every mile that brought us nearer to Niedersdorf, the signs of fair-time increased and multiplied. First came straggling groups of homeward-bound peasants – old

men and women tottering under the burden of newly-purchased household goods; little children laden with gingerbread and toys; young men and women in their holiday-best – the latter with garlands of oak-leaves bound about their hats. Then came an open cart full of laughing girls; then more pedestrians; then an old man driving a particularly unwilling pig; then a roystering party of foot-soldiers; and so on, till not only the road, but the fields on either side and every path in sight, swarmed with a double stream of wayfarers – the one coming from the fair – the other setting towards it.

Presently, through the clouds of dust and tobacco-smoke that fouled the air, a steeple and cottages became visible; and then, quite suddenly, we found ourselves in the midst of the fair.

Here a compact, noisy, smoking, staring, laughing, steaming crowd circulated among the booths; some pushing one way, some another – some intent on buying – some on eating and drinking – some on love-making and dancing. In one place we came upon rows of little open stalls for the sale of every commodity under heaven. In another, we peeped into a great restaurant-booth full of country folks demolishing pyramids of German sausage and seas of Bairisch beer. Yonder, on a raised stage in front of a temporary theatre, strutted a party of strolling players in their gaudy tinsels and ballet-dresses. The noise, the smells, the elbowing, the braying of brass bands, the insufferable heat and clamour, made us glad to push our way through as fast as possible, and take refuge in the village inn. But even

here we could scarcely get a moment's attention. There were parties dining and drinking in every room in the house – even in the bedrooms; while the passages, the bar, and the little gardens, front and back, were all full of soldiers, freeshooters, and farmers.

Having with difficulty succeeded in capturing a couple of platters of bread and meat and a measure of beer, we went round to the stable-yard, which was crowded with charrettes, ein-spänner, and country carts of all kinds. The drivers of some of these were asleep in their vehicles; others were gambling for kreutzers on the ground; none were willing to put their horses to for the purpose of driving us to Rotheskirche-on-the-Neckar.

"Ach, Herr Gott!" said one, "I brought my folks from Frühlingsfeld – near upon ten stunden – and shall have to take them back by and by. That's as much as my beasts can do in one day, and they shouldn't do more for the king!"

"I've just refused five florins to go less than half that distance," said another.

At length one fellow, being somewhat less impracticable than the rest, consented to drive us as far as a certain point where four roads met, on condition that we shared his vehicle with two other travellers, and that the two other travellers consented to let us do so.

"And even so," he added, "I shall have to take them two miles out of their way – but, perhaps, being fair-time, they won't mind that."

As it happened, they were not in a condition to mind that or anything very much, being a couple of freeshooters from the Black Forest, wild with fun and frolic, and somewhat the worse for many potations of Lager-bier. One of them, it seemed, had won a prize at some shooting-match that same morning, and they had been celebrating this triumph all day. Having kept us waiting, with the horses in, for at least three-quarters of an hour, they came, escorted by a troop of their comrades, all laughing, talking, and wound up to the highest pitch of excitement. Then followed a scene of last health-drinkings, last hand-shakings, last embracements. Finally, we drove off just as it was getting dusk, followed by many huzzahs, and much waving of grey and green caps.

For the first quarter of an hour they were both very noisy, exchanging boisterous greetings with every passer-by, singing snatches of songs, and laughing incessantly. Then, as the dusk deepened and we left the last stragglers behind, they sank into a tipsy stupor, and ended by falling fast asleep.

Meanwhile, the driver lit his pipe and let his tired horses choose their own pace; the stars came out one by one overhead; and the road, leaving the dead level of the plain, wound upwards through a district that became more hilly with every mile.

Then I also fell asleep – I cannot tell for how long – to be waked by-and-by by the stopping of the charrette, and the voice of the driver, saying: —

"This is the nearest point to which I can take these Herren.

Will they be pleased to alight?"

I sat up and rubbed my eyes. It was bright starlight. Bergheim was already leaning out, and opening the door. Our fellow-travellers were still sound asleep. We were in the midst of a wild, hilly country, black with bristling pine-woods; and had drawn up at an elevated point where four roads meet.

"Which of these are we to take?" asked Bergheim, as he pulled out his purse and counted the stipulated number of florins into the palm of the driver.

The man pointed with his whip in a direction at right angles to the road by which he was himself driving.

"And how far shall we have to walk?"

"To Rotheskirche?"

"Yes – to Rotheskirche."

He grunted doubtfully. "Ugh!" he said, "I can't be certain to a mile or so. It may be twelve or fourteen."

"A good road?"

"Yes – a good road; but hilly. These Herren have only to keep straight forward. They cannot miss the way."

And so he drives off, and leaves us standing in the road. The moon is now rising behind a slope of dark trees – the air is chill – an owl close by utters its tremulous, melancholy cry. Place and hour considered, the prospect of twelve or fourteen miles of a strange road, in a strange country, is anything but exhilarating. We push on, however, briskly; and Bergheim, whose good spirits are invincible, whistles and chatters, and laughs away as gaily as

if we were just starting on a brilliant May morning.

"I wonder if you were ever tired in your life!" I exclaim by and by, half peevishly.

"Tired!" he echoes. "Why, I am as tired at this moment as a dog; and would gladly lie down by the roadside, curl myself up under a tree, and sleep till morning. I wonder, by the way, what o'clock it is."

I pulled out my fusee-box, struck a light, and looked at my watch. It was only ten o'clock.

"We have been walking," said Bergheim, "about half an hour, and I don't believe we have done two miles in the time. Well, it can't go on uphill like this all the way!"

"Impossible," I replied. "Rotheskirche is on the level of the river. We must sooner or later begin descending towards the valley of the Neckar."

"I wish it might be sooner, then," laughed my companion, "for I had done a good twenty miles to-day before you overtook me."

"Well, perhaps we may come upon some place half way. If so, I vote that we put up for the night, and leave Rotheskirche till the morning."

"Ay, that would be capital!" said he. "If it wasn't that I am as hungry as a wolf, I wouldn't say no to the hut of a charcoal-burner to-night."

And now, plodding on more and more silently as our fatigue increased, we found the pine-forests gradually drawing nearer, till by and by they enclosed us on every side, and our road lay

through the midst of them. Here in the wood, all was dark – all was silent – not a breath stirred. The moon was rising fast; but the shadows of the pines lay long and dense upon the road, with only a sharp silvery patch breaking through here and there. By and by we came upon a broad space of clearing, dotted over with stacks of brushwood and great symmetrical piles of barked trunks. Then followed another tract of close forest. Then our road suddenly emerged into the full moonlight, and sometimes descending abruptly, sometimes keeping at a dead level for half a mile together, continued to skirt the forest on the left.

"I see a group of buildings down yonder," said Bergheim, pointing to a spot deep in the shadow of the hillside.

I could see nothing resembling buildings, but he stuck to his opinion.

"That they are buildings," he said, "I am positive. More I cannot tell by this uncertain light. It may be a mere cluster of cottages, or it may be a farmhouse, with stacks and sheds close by. I think it is the latter."

Animated by this hope, we now pushed on more rapidly. For some minutes our road carried us out of sight of the spot; but when we next saw it, a long, low, white-fronted house and some other smaller buildings were distinctly visible.

"A mountain farmstead, by all the gods of Olympus!" exclaimed Bergheim, joyously. "This is good fortune! And they are not gone to bed yet, either."

"How do you know that?" I asked.

"Because I saw a light."

"But suppose they do not wish to take us in?" I suggested.

"Suppose an impossibility! Who ever heard of inhospitality among our Black Forest folk?"

"Black Forest!" I repeated. "Do you call this the Black Forest?"

"Undoubtedly. All these wooded hills south of Heidelberg and the Odenwald are outlying spurs and patches of the old legendary Schwarzwald – now dwindling year by year. Hark! the dogs have found us out already!"

As he spoke, a dog barked loudly in the direction of the farm; and then another, and another. Bergheim answered them with a shout. Suddenly a bright light flashed across the darkness – flitted vaguely for a moment to and fro, and then came steadily towards us; resolving itself presently into a lanthorn carried by a man.

We hurried eagerly to meet him – at all, square-built, heavy-browed peasant, about forty years of age.

"Who goes there?" he said, holding the lanthorn high above his head, and shading his eyes with his hand.

"Travellers," replied my companion. "Travellers wanting food and shelter for the night."

The man looked at us for a moment in silence.

"You travel late," he said, at length.

"Ay – and we must have gone on still later, if we had not come upon your house. We were bound for Rotheskirche. Can you take us in."

"Yes," he said sullenly. "I suppose so. This way."

And, swinging the lanthorn as he went, he turned on his heel abruptly, and led the way back to the house.

"A boorish fellow enough!" said I, as we followed.

"Nay – a mere peasant!" replied Bergheim. "A mere peasant – rough, but kindly."

As we drew near the house, two large mastiff pups came rushing out from a yard somewhere at the back, and a huge, tawny dog chained up in an open shed close by, strained at his collar and yelled savagely.

"Down, Caspar! Down, Schwartz!" growled our conductor, with an oath.

And immediately the pups slunk back into the yard, and the dog in the shed dropped into a low snarl, eyeing us fiercely as we passed.

The house-door opened straight upon a large, low, raftered kitchen, with a cavernous fire-place at the further end, flanked on each side by a high-backed settle. The settles, the long table in the middle of the room, the stools and chairs ranged round the walls, the heavy beams overhead, from which hung strings of dried herbs, ropes of onions, hams, and the like, were all of old, dark oak. The ceiling was black with the smoke of at least a century. An oak dresser laden with rough blue and grey ware and rows of metal-lidded drinking mugs; an old blunderbuss and a horn-handled riding-whip over the chimney-piece; a couple of hatchets, a spade, and a fishing-rod behind the door; and a

Swiss clock in the corner, completed the furniture of the room. A couple of half-charred logs smouldered on the hearth. An oil-lamp flared upon the middle of the table, at one corner of which sat two men with a stone jug and a couple of beer-mugs between them, playing at cards, and a third man looking on. The third man rose as we entered, and came forward. He was so like the one who had come out to meet us, that I saw at once they must be brothers.

"Two travellers," said our conductor, setting down his lanthorn, and shutting the door behind us.

The players laid down their greasy cards to stare at us. The second brother, a trifle more civil than the first, asked if we wished for anything before going to bed.

Bergheim unslung his wallet, flung himself wearily into a corner of the settle, and said: —

"Heavens and earth! yes. We are almost starving. We have been on the road all day, and have had no regular dinner. Is this a farmhouse or an inn?"

"Both."

"What have you in the house?"

"Ham – eggs – voorst – cheese – wine – beer – coffee."

"Then bring us the best you have, and plenty of it, and as fast as you can. We'll begin on the voorst and a bottle of your best wine, while the ham and eggs are frying; and we'll have the coffee to finish."

The man nodded; went to a door at the other end of the room

– repeated the order to some one out of sight; and came back again, his hands in his pockets. The first brother, meanwhile, was lounging against the table, looking on at the players.

"It's a long game," he said.

"Ay – but it's just ended," replied one of the men, putting down his card with an air of triumph.

His adversary pondered, threw down his hand, and, with a round oath, owned himself beaten.

Then they divided the remaining contents of the stone jug, drained their mugs, and rose to go. The loser pulled out a handful of small coin, and paid the reckoning for both.

"We've sat late," said he, with a glance at the clock. "Good night, Karl – good night, Friedrich."

The first brother, whom I judged to be Karl, nodded sulkily. The second muttered a gruff sort of good night. The countrymen lit their pipes, took another long stare at Bergheim and myself, touched their hats, and went away.

The first brother, Karl, who was evidently the master, went out with them, shutting the door with a tremendous bang. The younger, Friedrich, cleared the board, opened a cupboard under the dresser, brought out a loaf of black bread, a lump of voorst, and part of a goat's milk cheese, and then went to fetch the wine. Meanwhile we each drew a chair to the table, and fell to vigorously. When Friedrich returned with the wine, a pleasant smell of broiling ham came in with him through the door.

"You are hungry," he said, looking down at us from under his

black brows.

"Ay, and thirsty," replied Gustav, reaching out his hand for the bottle. "Is your wine good?"

The man shrugged his shoulders.

"Drink and judge for yourself," he answered. "It's the best we have."

"Then drink with us," said my companion, good-humouredly, filling a glass and pushing it towards him across the table.

But he shook his head with an ungracious "Nein, nein," and again left the room. The next moment we heard his heavy footfall going to and fro overhead.

"He is preparing our beds," I said. "Are there no women, I wonder, about the place?"

"Well, yes – this looks like one," laughed Bergheim, as the door leading to the inner kitchen again opened, and a big stolid-looking peasant girl came in with a smoking dish of ham and eggs, which she set down before us on the table. "Stop! stop!" he exclaimed, as she turned away. "Don't be in such a hurry, my girl. What is your name?"

She stopped with a bewildered look, but said nothing. Bergheim repeated the question.

"My – my name?" she stammered. "Annchen."

"Good. Then, Annchen" (filling a bumper and draining it at a draught), "I drink to thy health. Wilt thou drink to mine?" And he pointed to the glass poured out for the landlord's brother.

But she only looked at him in the same scared, stupid way,

and kept edging away towards the door.

"Let her go," I said. "She is evidently half an idiot."

"She's no idiot to refuse that wine," replied Bergheim, as the door closed after her. "It's the most abominable mixture I ever put inside my lips. Have you tasted it?"

I had not tasted it as yet, and now I would not; so, the elder brother coming back just at that moment, we called for beer.

"Don't you like the wine?" he said, scowling.

"No," replied Bergheim. "Do you? If so you're welcome to the rest of it."

The landlord took up the bottle and held it between his eyes and the lamp.

"Bad as it is," he said, "you've drunk half of it."

"Not I – only one glass, thanks be to Bacchus! There stands the other. Let us have a Schoppen of your best beer – and I hope it will be better than your best wine."

The landlord looked from Bergheim to the glass – from the glass to the bottle. He seemed to be measuring with his eye how much had really been drunk. Then he went to the inner door; called to Friedrich to bring a Schoppen of the Bairisch, and went away, shutting the door after him. From the sound of his footsteps, it seemed to us as if he also was gone upstairs, but into some more distant part of the house. Presently the younger brother reappeared with the beer, placed it before us in silence, and went away as before.

"The most forbidding, disagreeable, uncivil pair I ever saw in

my life!" said I.

"They're not fascinating, I admit," said Bergheim, leaning back in his chair with the air of a man whose appetite is somewhat appeased. "I don't know which is the worst – their wine or their manners."

And then he yawned tremendously, and pushed out his plate, which I heaped afresh with ham and eggs. When he had swallowed a few mouthfuls, he leaned his head upon his hand, and declared he was too tired to eat more.

"And yet," he added, "I am still hungry."

"Nonsense!" I said; "eat enough now you are about it. How is the beer?"

He took a pull at the Schoppen.

"Capital," he said. "Now I can go on again."

The next instant he was nodding over his plate.

"I am ashamed to be so stupid," he said, rousing himself presently; "but I am overpowered with fatigue. Let us have the coffee; it will wake me up a bit."

But he had no sooner said this than his chin dropped on his breast, and he was sound asleep.

I did not call for the coffee immediately. I let him sleep, and went on quietly with my supper. Just as I had done, however, the brothers came back together, Friedrich bringing the coffee – two large cups on a tray. The elder, standing by the table, looked down at Bergheim with his unfriendly frown.

"Your friend is tired," he said.

"Yes, he has walked far to-day – much farther than I have."

"Humph! you will be glad to go to bed."

"Indeed we shall. Are our rooms ready?"

"Yes."

I took one of the cups, and put the other beside Bergheim's plate.

"Here, Bergheim," I said, "wake up; the coffee is waiting."

But he slept on, and never heard me.

I then lifted my own cup to my lips – paused – set it down untasted. It had an odd, pungent smell that I did not like.

"What is the matter with it?" I said, "it does not smell like pure coffee."

The brothers exchanged a rapid glance.

"It is the Kirschenwasser," said Karl. "We always put it in our black coffee."

I tasted it, but the flavour of the coffee was quite drowned in that of the coarse, fiery spirit.

"Do you not like it?" asked the younger brother.

"It is very strong," I said.

"But it is very good," replied he; "real Black Forest Kirsch – the best thing in the world, if one is tired after a journey. Drink it off, mein Herr; it is of no use to sip it. It will make you sleep."

This was the longest speech either of them had yet made.

"Thanks," I said, pulling out my cigar-case, "but this stuff is too powerful to be drunk at a draught. I shall make it last out a cigar or two."

"And your friend?"

"He is better without the Kirsch, and may sleep till I am ready to go to bed."

Again they looked at each other.

"You need not sit up," I said impatiently; for it annoyed me, somehow, to have them standing there, one at each side of the table, alternately looking at me and at each other. "I will call the Mädchen to show us to our rooms when we are ready."

"Good," said the elder brother, after a moment's hesitation. "Come, Friedrich."

Friedrich turned at once to follow him, and they both left the room.

I listened. I heard them for awhile moving to and fro in the inner kitchen; then the sound of their double footsteps going up the stairs; then the murmur of their voices somewhere above, yet not exactly overhead; then silence.

I felt more comfortable, now that they were fairly gone, and not likely to return. I breathed more freely. I had disliked the brothers from the first. I had felt uneasy from the moment I crossed their threshold. Nothing, I told myself, should induce me at any time, or under any circumstances, to put up under their roof again.

Pondering thus, I smoked on, and took another sip of the coffee. It was not so hot now, and some of the strength of the spirit had gone off; but under the flavour of the Kirschenwasser I could (or fancied I could) detect another flavour, pungent and

bitter – a flavour, in short, just corresponding to the smell that I had at first noticed.

This startled me. I scarcely knew why, but it did startle me, and somewhat unpleasantly. At the same instant I observed that Bergheim, in the heaviness and helplessness of sleep, had swayed over on one side, and was hanging very uncomfortably across one arm of his chair.

"Come, come," I said, "wake up, Herr fellow-traveller. This sort of dozing will do you no good. Wake up, and come to bed."

And with this I took him by the arm, and tried to rouse him. Then for the first time I observed that his face was deadly white – that his teeth were fast clenched – that his breathing was unnatural and laboured.

I sprang to my feet. I dragged him into an upright posture; I tore open his neckcloth; I was on the point of rushing to the door to call for help, when a suspicion – one of those terrible suspicions which are suspicion and conviction in one – flashed suddenly upon me.

The rejected glass of wine was still standing on the table. I smelt it – tasted it. My dread was confirmed. It had the same pungent odour, the same bitter flavour as the coffee.

In a moment I measured all the horror of my position; alone – unarmed – my unconscious fellow-traveller drugged and helpless on my hands – the murderers overhead, biding their time – the silence and darkness of night – the unfrequented road – the solitary house – the improbability of help from without – the

imminence of the danger from within… I saw it all! What could I do? Was there any way, any chance, any hope?

I turned cold and dizzy. I leaned against the table for support. Was I also drugged, and was my turn coming? I looked round for water, but there was none upon the table. I did not dare to touch the beer, lest it also should be doctored.

At that instant I heard a faint sound outside, like the creaking of a stair. My presence of mind had not as yet for a moment deserted me, and now my strength came back at the approach of danger. I cast a rapid glance round the room. There was the blunderbuss over the chimney-piece – there were the two hatchets in the corner. I moved a chair loudly, and hummed some snatches of songs.

They should know that I was awake – this might at least keep them off a little longer. The scraps of songs covered the sound of my footsteps as I stole across the room and secured the hatchets. One of these I laid before me on the table; the other I hid among the wood in the wood-basket beside the hearth-singing, as it were to myself; all the time.

Then I listened breathlessly.

All was silent.

Then I clinked my tea-spoon in my cup – feigned a long yawn – under cover of the yawn took down the blunderbuss from its hook – and listened again.

Still all was silent – silent as death – save only the loud ticking of the clock in the corner, and the heavy beating of my heart.

Then, after a few seconds that dragged past like hours, I distinctly heard a muffled tread stealing softly across the floor overhead, and another very faint retreating creak or two upon the stairs.

To examine the blunderbuss, find it loaded with a heavy charge of slugs, test the dryness of the powder, cock it, and place it ready for use beside the hatchet on the table, was but the work of a moment.

And now my course was taken. My spirits rose with the possession of a certain means of defence, and I prepared to sell my own life, and the life of the poor fellow beside me, as dearly as might be.

I must turn the kitchen into a fortress, and defend my fortress as long as defence was possible. If I could hold it till daylight came to my aid, bringing with it the chances of traffic, of passers-by, of farm-labourers coming to their daily work – then I felt we should be comparatively safe. If, however, I could not keep the enemy out so long, then I had another resource… But of this there was no time to think at present. First of all, I must barricade my fortress.

The windows were already shuttered-up and barred on the inside. The key of the house-door was in the lock, and only needed turning. The heavy iron bolt, in like manner, had only to be shot into its place. To do this, however, would make too much noise just now. First and most important was the door communicating with the inner kitchen and the stairs. This, above

all, I must secure; and this, as I found to my dismay, had no bolts or locks whatever on the inside – nothing but a clumsy wooden latch!

To pile against it every moveable in the room was my obvious course; but then it was one that, by the mere noise it must make, would at once alarm the enemy. No! I must secure that door – but secure it silently – at all events for the next few minutes.

Inspired by dread necessity, I became fertile in expedients. With a couple of iron forks snatched from the table, I pinned the latch down, forcing the prongs by sheer strength of hand deep into the woodwork of the door. This done, I tore down one of the old rusty bits from its nail above the mantel-shelf, and, linking it firmly over the thump-piece of the latch on one side, and over the clumsy catch on the other, I improvised a door-chain that would at least act as a momentary check in case the door was forced from without. Lastly, by means of some half-charred splinters from the hearth, I contrived to wedge up the bottom of the door in such a manner that, the more it was pushed inwards, the more firmly fixed it must become.

So far my work had been noiseless, but now the time was come when it could be so no longer. The house-door must be secured at all costs; and I knew beforehand that I could not move those heavy fastenings unheard. Nor did I. The key, despite all my efforts, grated loudly in the lock, and the bolt resisted the rusty staples. I got it in, however, and the next moment heard rapid footsteps overhead.

I knew now that the crisis was coming, and from this moment prepared for open resistance.

Regardless of noise, I dragged out first one heavy oaken settle, and then the other – placed them against the inner door – piled them with chairs, stools, firewood, every heavy thing I could lay hands upon – raked the slumbering embers, and threw more wood upon the hearth, so as to bar that avenue, if any attempt was made by way of the chimney – and hastily ransacked every drawer in the dresser, in the hope of finding something in the shape of ammunition.

Meanwhile, the brothers had taken alarm, and having tried the inner door, had now gone round to the front, where I heard them try first the house-door and then the windows.

"Open! open, I say!" shouted the elder – (I knew him by his voice). "What is the matter within?"

"The matter is that I choose to spend the night in this room," I shouted in reply.

"It is a public room – you have no right to shut the doors!" he said, with a thundering blow upon the lock.

"Right or no right," I answered, "I shoot dead the first man who forces his way in!"

There was a momentary silence, and I heard them muttering together outside.

I had by this time found, at the back of one of the drawers, a handful of small shot screwed up in a bit of newspaper, and a battered old powder-flask containing about three charges of

powder. Little as it was, it helped to give me confidence.

Then the parleying began afresh.

"Once more, accursed Englishman will you open the door?"

"No."

A torrent of savage oaths – then a pause.

"Force us to break it open, and it will be the worse for you!"

"Try."

All this time I had been wrenching out the hooks from the dresser, and the nails, wherever I could find any, from the walls. Already I had enough to reload the blunderbuss three times, with my three charges of powder. If only Bergheim were himself now!..

I still heard the murmuring of the brothers' voices outside – then the sound of their retreating footsteps – then an outburst of barking and yelping at the back, which showed they had let loose the dogs. Then all was silent.

Where were they gone? How would they begin the attack? In what way would it all end? I glanced at my watch. It was just twenty minutes past one. In two hours and at half, or three hours, it would be dawn. Three hours! Great Heavens! what an eternity!

I looked round to see if there was anything I could still do for defence; but it seemed to me that I had already done what little it was possible to do with the material at hand. I could only wait.

All at once I heard their footsteps in the house again. They were going rapidly to and fro overhead; then up and down the stairs; then overhead again; and presently I heard a couple of bolts

shot, and apparently a heavy wooden bar put up, on the other side of the inner kitchen-door which I had just been at so much pains to barricade. This done, they seemed to go away. A distant door banged heavily; and again there was silence.

Five minutes, ten minutes, went by. Bergheim still slept heavily; but his breathing, I fancied, was less stertorous, and his countenance less rigid, than when I first discovered his condition. I had no water with which to bathe his head; but I rubbed his forehead and the palms of his hands with beer, and did what I could to keep his body upright.

Then I heard the enemy coming back to the front, slowly, and with heavy footfalls. They paused for a moment at the front door, seemed to set something down, and then retreated quickly. After an interval of about three minutes, they returned in the same way; stopped at the same place; and hurried off as before. This they did several times in succession. Listening with suspended breath and my ear against the keyhole, I distinctly heard them deposit some kind of burden each time – evidently a weighty burden, from the way in which they carried it; and yet, strange to say, one that, despite its weight, made scarcely any noise in the setting down.

Just at this moment, when all my senses were concentrated in the one act of listening, Bergheim stirred for the first time, and began muttering.

"The man!" he said, in a low, suppressed tone. "The man under the hearth!"

I flew to him at the first sound of his voice. He was recovering. Heaven be thanked, he was recovering! In a few minutes we should be two – two against two – right and might on our side – both ready for the defence of our lives!

"One man under the hearth," he went on, in the same unnatural tone. "Four men at the bottom of the pond – all murdered – foully murdered!"

I had scarcely heeded his first words; but now, as their sense broke upon me, that great rush of exultation and thankfulness was suddenly arrested. My heart stood still; I trembled; I turned cold with horror.

Then the veins swelled on his forehead; his face became purple; and he struck out blindly, as one oppressed with some horrible nightmare.

"Blood!" he gasped. "Everywhere blood – don't touch it. God's vengeance – help!"…

And so, struggling violently in my arms, he opened his eyes, stared wildly round, and made an effort to get upon his feet.

"What is the matter?" he said, sinking back again, and trembling from head to foot. "Was I asleep?"

I rubbed his hands and forehead again with beer. I tasted it, and finding no ill flavour upon it, put a tiny drop to his lips.

"You are all right now," I said. "You were very tired, and you fell asleep after supper. Don't you remember?"

He put his hand to his head. "Ah, yes," he said, "I remember. I have been dreaming"…

He looked round the room in a bewildered way; then, struck all at once by the strange disorder of the furniture, asked what was the matter.

I told him in the least alarming way, and with the fewest words I could muster, but before I could get to the end of my explanation he was up, ready for resistance, and apparently himself again.

"Where are they?" he said. "What are they doing now? Outside, do you say? Why, good heavens! man, they're blocking us in. Listen! – don't you hear? – it is the rustling of straw. Bring the blunderbuss! quick! – to the window… God grant we may not be too late!"

We both rushed to the window; Bergheim to undo the shutter, and I to shoot down the first man in sight.

"Look there!" he said, and pointed to the door.

A thin stream of smoke was oozing under the threshold and stealing upward in a filmy cloud that already dimmed the atmosphere of the room.

"They are going to burn us out!" I exclaimed.

"No, they are going to burn us alive," replied Bergheim, between his clenched teeth. "We know too much, and they are determined to silence us at all costs, though they burn the house down over our heads. Now hold your breath, for I am going to open the window, and the smoke will rush in like a torrent."

He opened it, but very little came in – for this reason, that the outside was densely blocked with straw, which had not yet

ignited.

In a moment we had dragged the table under the window – put our weapons aside ready for use – and set to work to cut our way out.

Bergheim, standing on the table, wrenched away the straw in great armfuls. I caught it, and hurled it into the middle of the room. We laboured at the work like giants. In a few moments the pile had mounted to the height of the table. Then Bergheim cried out that the straw under his hands was taking fire, and that he dared throw it back into the room no longer!

I sprang to his aid with the two hatchets. I gave him one – I fell to work with the other. The smoke and flame rushed in our faces, as we hewed down the burning straw.

Meanwhile, the room behind us was full of smoke, and above the noise of our own frantic labour we heard a mighty crackling and hissing, as of a great conflagration.

"Take the blunderbuss – quick!" cried Bergheim, hoarsely. "There is nothing but smoke outside now, and burning straw below. Follow me! Jump as far out as you can, and shoot the first you see!"

And with this, he leaped out into the smoke, and was gone!

I only waited to grope out the blunderbuss; then, holding it high above my head, I shut my eyes and sprang after him, clearing the worst of the fire, and falling on my hands and knees among a heap of smouldering straw and ashes beyond. At the same instant that I touched the ground, I heard the sharp crack of a rifle, and

saw two figures rush past me.

To dash out in pursuit without casting one backward glance at the burning house behind me – to see a tall figure vanishing among the trees, and two others in full chase – to cover the foremost of these two and bring him down as one would bring down a wolf in the open, was for me but the work of a second.

I saw him fall. I saw the other hesitate, look back, throw up his hands with a wild gesture, and fly towards the hills.

The rest of my story is soon told. The one I had shot was Friedrich, the younger brother. He died in about half an hour, and never spoke again. The elder escaped into the forest, and there succeeded in hiding himself for several weeks among the charcoal-burners. Being hunted down, however, at last, he was tried at Heilbronn, and there executed.

The pair, it seemed, were practised murderers. The pond, when dragged, was found to contain four of their victims; and when the crumbling ruins of the homestead were cleared for the purpose, the mortal remains of a fifth were discovered under the hearth, in that kitchen which had so nearly proved our grave. A store of money, clothes, and two or three watches, was also found secreted in a granary near the house; and these things served to identify three out of the five corpses thus providentially brought to light.

My friend, Gustav Bergheim (now the friend of seventeen years) is well and prosperous; married to his "Mädchen;" and the happy father of a numerous family. He often tells the tale of our

terrible night on the borders of the Black Forest, and avers that in that awful dream in which his senses came back to him, he distinctly saw, as in a vision, the mouldering form beneath the hearth, and the others under the sluggish waters of the pond.

THE STORY OF SALOME

A few years ago, no matter how many, I, Harcourt Blunt, was travelling with my friend Coventry Turnour, and it was on the steps of our hotel that I received from him the announcement that he was again in love.

"I tell you, Blunt," said my fellow-traveller, "she's the loveliest creature I ever beheld in my life."

I laughed outright.

"My dear fellow," I replied, "you've so often seen the loveliest creature you ever beheld in your life."

"Ay, but I am in earnest now for the first time."

"And you have so often been in earnest for the first time! Remember the innkeeper's daughter at Cologne."

"A pretty housemaid, whom no training could have made presentable."

"Then there was the beautiful American at Interlaken."

"Yes; but – "

"And the bella Marchesa at Prince Torlonia's ball."

"Not one of them worthy to be named in the same breath with my imperial Venetian. Come with me to the Merceria and be convinced. By taking a gondola to St. Mark's Place we shall be there in a quarter of an hour."

I went, and he raved of his new flame all the way. She was a Jewess – he would convert her. Her father kept a shop

in the Merceria – what of that? He dealt only in costliest Oriental merchandise, and was as rich as a Rothschild. As for any probable injury to his own prospects, why need he hesitate on that account? What were "prospects" when weighed against the happiness of one's whole life? Besides, he was not ambitious. He didn't care to go into Parliament. If his uncle, Sir Geoffrey, cut him off with a shilling, what then? He had a moderate independence of which no one living could deprive him, and what more could any reasonable man desire?

I listened, smiled, and was silent. I knew Coventry Turnour too well to attach the smallest degree of importance to anything that he might say or do in a matter of this kind. To be distractedly in love was his normal condition. We had been friends from boyhood; and since the time when he used to cherish a hopeless attachment to the young lady behind the counter of the tart-shop at Harrow, I had never known him "fancy-free" for more than a few weeks at a time. He had gone through every phase of no less than three *grandes passions* during the five months that we had now been travelling together; and having left Rome about eleven weeks before with every hope laid waste, and a heart so broken that it could never by any possibility be put together again, he was now, according to the natural course of events, just ready to fall in love again.

We landed at the traghetto San Marco. It was a cloudless morning towards the middle of April, just ten years ago. The Ducal Palace glowed in the hot sunshine; the boatmen were

clustered, gossiping, about the quay; the orange-vendors were busy under the arches of the piazzetta; the *flâneurs* were already eating ices and smoking cigarettes outside the cafés. There was an Austrian military band, strapped, buckled, moustachioed, and white-coated, playing just in front of St. Mark's; and the shadow of the great bell-tower slept all across the square.

Passing under the low round archway leading to the Merceria, we plunged at once into that cool labyrinth of narrow, intricate, and picturesque streets, where the sun never penetrates – where no wheels are heard, and no beast of burden is seen – where every house is a shop, and every shop-front is open to the ground, as in an Oriental bazaar – where the upper balconies seem almost to meet overhead, and are separated by only a strip of burning sky – and where more than three people cannot march abreast in any part. Pushing our way as best we might through the motley crowd that here chatters, cheapens, buys, sells, and perpetually jostles to and fro, we came presently to a shop for the sale of Eastern goods. A few glass jars, filled with spices and some pieces of stuff, untidily strewed the counter next the street; but within, dark and narrow though it seemed, the place was crammed with costliest merchandise. Cases of gorgeous Oriental jewelry; embroideries and fringes of massive gold and silver bullion; precious drugs and spices; exquisite toys in filigree; miracles of carving in ivory, sandal-wood, and amber; jewelled yataghans; scimitars of state, rich with "barbaric pearl and gold," bales of Cashmere shawls, China silks, India muslins, gauzes, and the like, filled every inch

of available space from floor to ceiling, leaving only a narrow lane from the door to the counter, and a still narrower passage to the rooms beyond the shop.

We went in. A young woman who was sitting reading on a low seat behind the counter, laid aside her book, and rose slowly. She was dressed wholly in black. I cannot describe the fashion of her garments. I only know that they fell about her in long, soft, trailing folds, leaving a narrow band Of fine cambric visible at the throat and wrists; and that, however graceful and unusual this dress may have been, I scarcely observed it, so entirely was I taken up with admiration of her beauty.

For she was indeed very beautiful – beautiful in a way I had not anticipated Coventry Turnour, with all his enthusiasm, had failed to do her justice. He had raved of her eyes – her large, lustrous, melancholy eyes, – of the transparent paleness of her complexion, of the faultless delicacy of her features; but he had not prepared me for the unconscious dignity, the perfect nobleness and refinement, that informed her every look and gesture. My friend requested to see a bracelet at which he had been looking the day before. Proud, stately, silent, she unlocked the case in which it was kept, and laid it before him on the counter. He asked permission to take it over to the light. She bent her head, but answered not a word. It was like being waited upon by a young Empress.

Turnour took the bracelet to the door and affected to examine it. It consisted of a double row of gold coins linked together at

intervals by a bean-shaped ornament studded with pink coral and diamonds. Coming back into the shop he asked me if I thought it would please his sister, to whom he had promised a remembrance of Venice.

"It is a pretty trifle," I replied; "but surely a remembrance of Venice should be of Venetian manufacture. This, I suppose, is Turkish."

The beautiful Jewess looked up. We spoke in English; but she understood, and replied.

"*E Greco, signore*," she said coldly.

At this moment an old man came suddenly forward from some dark counting-house at the back – a grizzled, bearded, eager-eyed Shylock, with a pen behind his ear.

"Go in, Salome – go in, my daughter," he said hurriedly. "I will serve these gentlemen."

She lifted her eyes to his for one moment – then moved silently away, and vanished in the gloom of the room beyond.

We saw her no more. We lingered awhile looking over the contents of the jewel-cases; but in vain. Then Turnour bought his bracelet, and we went out again into the narrow streets, and back to the open daylight of the Gran' Piazza.

"Well," he said breathlessly, "what do you think of her?"

"She is very lovely."

"Lovelier than you expected?"

"Much lovelier. But – "

"But what?"

"The sooner you succeed in forgetting her the better."

He vowed, of course, that he never would and never could forget her. He would hear of no incompatibilities, listen to no objections, believe in no obstacles. That the beautiful Salome was herself not only unconscious of his passion and indifferent to his person, but ignorant of his very name and station, were facts not even to be admitted on the list of difficulties. Finding him thus deaf to reason, I said no more.

It was all over, however, before the week was out.

"Look here, Blunt," he said, coming up to me one morning in the coffee-room of our hotel just as I was sitting down to answer a pile of home-letters; "would you like to go on to Trieste to-morrow? There, don't look at me like that – you can guess how it is with me. I was a fool ever to suppose she would care for me – a stranger, a foreigner, a Christian. Well, I'm horribly out of sorts, anyhow – and – and I wish I was a thousand miles off at this moment!"

We travelled on together to Athens, and there parted, Turnour being bound for England, and I for the East. My own tour lasted many months longer. I went first to Egypt and the Holy Land; then joined an exploring party on the Euphrates; and at length, after just twelve months of Oriental life, found myself back again at Trieste about the middle of April in the year following that during which occurred the events I have just narrated. There I found that batch of letters and papers to which I had been looking forward for many weeks past; and amongst the former, one from

Coventry Turnour. This time he was not only irrecoverably in love, but on the eve of matrimony. The letter was rapturous and extravagant enough. The writer was the happiest of men; his destined bride the loveliest and most amiable of her sex; the future a paradise; the past a melancholy series of mistakes. As for love, he had never, of course, known what it was till now.

And what of the beautiful Salome?

Not one word of her from beginning to end. He had forgotten her as utterly as if she had never existed. And yet how desperately in love and how desperately in despair he was "one little year ago!" Ah, yes; but then it *was* "one little year ago;" and who that had ever known Coventry Turnour would expect him to remember *la plus grande des grandes passions* for even half that time?

I slept that night at Trieste and went on next day to Venice. Somehow I could not get Turnour and his love-affairs out of my head. I remembered our visit to the Merceria. I was haunted by the image of the beautiful Jewess. Was she still so lovely? Did she still sit reading in her wonted seat by the open counter, with the gloomy shop reaching away behind, and the cases of rich robes and jewels all around?

An irresistible impulse prompted me to go to the Merceria and see her once again. I went. It had been a busy morning with me, and I did not get there till between three and four o'clock in the afternoon. The place was crowded. I passed up the well-remembered street, looking out on both sides for the gloomy little

shop with its unattractive counter; but in vain. When I had gone so far that I thought I must have passed it, I turned back. House by house I retraced my steps to the very entrance, and still could not find it. Then, concluding I had not gone far enough at first, I turned back again till I reached a spot where several streets diverged. Here I came to a stand-still, for beyond this point I knew I had not passed before.

It was now evident that the Jew no longer occupied his former shop in the Merceria, and that my chance of discovering his whereabouts was exceedingly slender. I could not inquire of his successor, because I could not identify the house. I found it impossible even to remember what trades were carried on by his neighbours on either side. I was ignorant of his very name. Convinced, therefore, of the inutility of making any further effort, I gave up the search, and comforted myself by reflecting that my own heart was not made of adamant, and that it was, perhaps, better for my peace not to see the beautiful Salome again. I was destined to see her again, however, and that ere many days had passed over my head.

A year of more than ordinarily fatiguing Eastern travel had left me in need of rest, and I had resolved to allow myself a month's sketching in Venice and its neighbourhood before turning my face homeward.

As, therefore, it is manifestly the first object of a sketcher to select his points of view, and as no more luxurious machine than a Venetian gondola was ever invented for the use of man, I

proceeded to employ the first days of my stay in endless boatings to and fro; now exploring all manner of canals and canaletti; now rowing out in the direction of Murano; now making for the islands beyond San Pietro Castello, and in the course of these pilgrimages noting down an infinite number of picturesque sites, and smoking an infinite number of cigarettes.

It was, I think, about the fourth or fifth day of this pleasant work, when my gondolier proposed to take me as far as the Lido. It wanted about two hours to sunset, and the great sandbank lay not more than three or four miles away; so I gave the word, and in another moment we had changed our route and were gliding farther and farther from Venice at each dip of the oar.

Then the long, dull, distant ridge that had all day bounded the shallow horizon rose gradually above the placid level of the Lagune; assumed a more broken outline; resolved itself into hillocks and hollows of tawny sand; showed here and there a patch of parched grass and tangled brake; and looked like the coasts of some inhospitable desert beyond which no traveller might penetrate. My boatman made straight for a spot where some stakes at the water's edge gave token of a landing-place; and here, though with some difficulty, for the tide was low, ran the gondola aground. I landed. My first step was among graves.

"*E'l Cimiterio Giudaico, signore*," said my gondolier, with a touch of his cap.

The Jewish cemetery! The *ghetto* of the dead! I remembered now to have read or heard long since how the Venetian Jews, cut

off in death as in life from the neighbourhood of their Christian rulers, had been buried from immemorial time upon this desolate waste. I stooped to examine the headstone at my feet. It was but a shattered fragment, crusted over with yellow lichens, and eaten away by the salt sea air. I passed on to the next, and the next.

Some were completely matted over with weeds and brambles; some were half-buried in the drifting sand; of some only a corner remained above the surface. Here and there a name, a date, a fragment of emblematic carving or part of a Hebrew inscription, was yet legible; but all were more or less broken and effaced.

Wandering on thus among graves and hillocks, ascending at every step, and passing some three or four glassy pools overgrown with gaunt-looking reeds, I presently found that I had reached the central and most elevated part of the Lido, and that I commanded an uninterrupted view on every side. On the one hand lay the broad, silent Lagune bounded by Venice and the Euganean hills – on the other, stealing up in long, lazy folds, and breaking noiselessly against the endless shore, the blue Adriatic. An old man gathering shells on the seaward side, a distant gondola on the Lagune, were the only signs of life for miles around.

Standing on the upper ridge of this narrow barrier, looking upon both waters, and watching the gradual approach of what promised to be a gorgeous sunset, I fell into one of those wandering trains of thought in which the real and unreal succeed each other as capriciously as in a dream.

I remembered how Goethe here conceived his vertebral theory of the skull – how Byron, too lame to walk, kept his horse on the Lido, and here rode daily to and fro – how Shelley loved the wild solitude of the place, wrote of it in *Julian and Maddalo*, and listened perhaps from this very spot, to the mad-house bell on the island of San Giorgio. Then I wondered if Titian used sometimes to come hither from his gloomy house on the other side of Venice, to study the gold and purple of these western skies – if Othello had walked here with Desdemona – if Shylock was buried yonder, and Leah whom he loved "when he was a bachelor."

And then in the midst of my reverie, I came suddenly upon another Jewish cemetery.

Was it indeed another, or but an outlying portion of the first? It was evidently another, and a more modern one. The ground was better kept. The monuments were newer. Such dates as I had succeeded in deciphering on the broken sepulchres lower down were all of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries; but the inscriptions upon these bore reference to quite recent interments.

I went on a few steps farther. I stopped to copy a quaint Italian couplet on one tomb – to gather a wild forget-me-not from the foot of another – to put aside a bramble that trailed across a third – and then I became aware for the first time of a lady sitting beside a grave not a dozen yards from the spot on which I stood.

I had believed myself so utterly alone, and was so taken by surprise, that for the first moment I could almost have persuaded

myself that she also was "of the stuff that dreams are made of." She was dressed from head to foot in deepest mourning; her face turned from me, looking towards the sunset; her cheek resting in the palm of her hand. The grave by which she sat was obviously recent. The scant herbage round about had been lately disturbed, and the marble headstone looked as if it had not yet undergone a week's exposure to wind and weather.

Persuaded that she had not observed me, I lingered for an instant looking at her. Something in the grace and sorrow of her attitude, something in the turn of her head and the flow of her sable draperies, arrested my attention. Was she young? I fancied so. Did she mourn a husband? – a lover? – a parent? I glanced towards the headstone. It was covered with Hebrew characters; so that, had I even been nearer, it could have told me nothing.

But I felt that I had no right to stand there, a spectator of her sorrow, an intruder on her privacy. I proceeded to move noiselessly away. At that moment she turned and looked at me.

It was Salome.

Salome, pale and worn as from some deep and wasting grief, but more beautiful, if that could be, than ever. Beautiful, with a still more spiritual beauty than of old; with cheeks so wan, and eyes so unutterably bright and solemn, that my very heart seemed to stand still as I looked upon them. For one second I paused, half fancying, half hoping that there was recognition in her glance; then, not daring to look or linger longer, turned away. When I had gone far enough to do so without discourtesy, I stopped

and looked back. She had resumed her former attitude, and was gazing over towards Venice and the setting sun. The stone by which she watched was not more motionless.

The sun went down in glory. The last flush faded from the domes and bell-towers of Venice; the northward peaks changed from rose to purple, from gold to grey; a scarcely perceptible film of mist became all at once visible upon the surface of the Lagune; and overhead, the first star trembled into light. I waited and watched till the shadows had so deepened that I could no longer distinguish one distant object from another. Was that the spot? Was she still there? Was she moving? Was she gone? I could not tell. The more I looked, the more uncertain I became. Then, fearing to miss my way in the fast-gathering twilight, I struck down towards the water's edge and made for the point at which I had landed.

I found my gondolier fast asleep, with his head on a cushion and his bit of gondola-carpet thrown over him for a counterpane. I asked if he had seen any other boat put off from the Lido since I left? He rubbed his eyes, started up, and was awake in a moment.

"*Per Bacco*, *signore*, I have been asleep," he said apologetically; "I have seen nothing."

"Did you observe any other boat moored hereabouts when we landed?"

"None, signore."

"And you have seen nothing of a lady in black?"

He laughed and shook his head.

"*Consolatevi, signore*," he said, archly; "she will come to-morrow."

Then, seeing me look grave, he touched his cap, and with a gentle "*Scusate, signore*," took his place at the stern, and there waited. I bade him row to my hotel; and then, leaning dreamily back, folded my arms, closed my eyes, and thought of Salome.

How lovely she was! How infinitely more lovely than even my first remembrance of her! How was it that I had not admired her more that day in the Merceria? Was I blind, or had she become indeed more beautiful? It was a sad and strange place in which to meet her again. By whose grave was she watching? By her father's? Yes, surely by her father's. He was an old man when I saw him, and in the course of nature had not long to live. He was dead: hence my unavailing search in the Merceria. He was dead. His shop was let to another occupant. His stock-in-trade was sold and dispersed.

And Salome – was she left alone? Had she no mother? – no brother? – no lover? Would her eyes have had that look of speechless woe in them if she had any very near or dear tie left on earth? Then I thought of Coventry Turnour, and his approaching marriage. Had he ever really loved her? I doubted it. "True love," saith an old song, "can ne'er forget;" but he had forgotten, as though the past had been a dream. And yet he was in earnest while it lasted – would have risked all for her sake, if she would have listened to him. Ah, if she *had* listened to him!

And then I remembered that he had never told me the

particulars of that affair. Did she herself reject him, or did he lay his suit before her father? And was he rejected only because he was a Christian? I had never cared to ask these things while we were together; but now I would have given the best hunter in my stables to know every minute detail connected with the matter.

Pondering thus, travelling over the same ground again and again, wondering whether she remembered me, whether she was poor, whether she was, indeed, alone in the world, how long the old man had been dead, and a hundred other things of the same kind, – I scarcely noticed how the watery miles glided past, or how the night closed in. One question, however, recurred oftener than any other: How was I to see her again?

I arrived at my hotel; I dined at the *table d'hôte*; I strolled out after dinner to my favourite café in the piazza; I dropped in for half an hour at the Fenice, and heard one act of an extremely poor opera; I came home restless, uneasy, wakeful; and sitting for hours before my bedroom fire, asked myself the same perpetual question – How was I to see her again?

Fairly tired out at last, I fell asleep in my chair, and when I awoke the sun was shining upon my window.

I started to my feet. I had it now. It flashed upon me, as if it came with the sunlight. I had but to go again to the cemetery, copy the inscription upon the old man's tomb, ask my learned friend, Professor Nicolai of Padua, to translate it for me, and then, once in possession of names and dates, the rest would be easy.

In less than an hour, I was once more on my way to the Lido.

I took a rubbing of the stone. It was the quickest way, and the surest; for I knew that in Hebrew everything depended on the pointing of the characters, and I feared to trust my own untutored skill.

This done, I hastened back, wrote my letter to the professor, and despatched both letter and rubbing by the mid-day train.

The professor was not a prompt man. On the contrary, he was a pre-eminently slow man; dreamy, indolent, buried in Oriental lore. From any other correspondent one might have looked for a reply in the course of the morrow, but from Nicolai of Padua it would have been folly to expect one under two or three days. And in the meanwhile? Well, in the meanwhile there were churches and palaces to be seen, sketches to be made, letters of introduction to be delivered. It was, at all events, of no use to be impatient.

And yet I was impatient – so impatient that I could neither sketch, nor read, nor sit still for ten minutes together. Possessed by an uncontrollable restlessness, I wandered from gallery to gallery, from palace to palace, from church to church. The imprisonment of even a gondola was irksome to me. I was, as it were, impelled to be moving and doing; and even so, the day seemed endless.

The next was even worse. There was just the possibility of a reply from Padua, and the knowledge of that possibility unsettled me for the day. Having watched and waited for every post from

eight to four, I went down to the traghetto of St. Mark's, and was there hailed by my accustomed gondolier.

He touched his cap and waited for orders.

"Where to, signore?" he asked, finding that I remained silent.

"To the Lido."

It was an irresistible temptation, and I yielded to it; but I yielded in opposition to my judgment. I knew that I ought not to haunt the place. I had resolved that I would not. And yet I went.

Going along, I told myself that I had only come to reconnoitre. It was not unlikely that she might be going to the same spot about the same hour as before; and in that case I might overtake her gondola by the way, or find it moored somewhere along the shore. At all events, I was determined not to land. But we met no gondola beyond San Pietro Castello; saw no sign of one along the shore. The afternoon was far advanced; the sun was near going down; we had the Lagune and the Lido to ourselves.

My boatman made for the same landing-place, and moored his gondola to the same stake as before. He took it for granted that I meant to land; and I landed. After all, however, it was evident that Salome could not be there, in which case I was guilty of no intrusion. I might stroll in the direction of the cemetery, taking care to avoid her, if she were anywhere about, and keeping well away from that part where I had last seen her. So I broke another resolve, and went up towards the top of the Lido. Again I came to the salt pools and the reeds; again stood with the sea upon my left hand and the Lagune upon my right, and the endless

sandbank reaching on for miles between the two. Yonder lay the new cemetery. Standing thus I overlooked every foot of the ground. I could even distinguish the headstone of which I had taken a rubbing the morning before. There was no living thing in sight. I was, to all appearance, as utterly alone as Enoch Arden on his desert island.

Then I strolled on a little nearer and a little nearer still; and then, contrary to all my determinations, I found myself standing upon the very spot, beside the very grave, which I had made up my mind on no account to approach.

The sun was now just going down – had gone down, indeed, behind a bank of golden-edged cumuli – and was flooding earth, sea, and sky with crimson. It was at this hour that I saw her. It was upon this spot that she was sitting. A few scant blades of grass had sprung up here and there upon the grave. Her dress must have touched them as she sat there – her dress – perhaps her hand. I gathered one, and laid it carefully between the leaves of my note-book.

At last I turned to go, and, turning, met her face to face!

She was distant about six yards, and advancing slowly towards the spot on which I was standing. Her head drooped slightly forward; her hands were clasped together; her eyes were fixed upon the ground. It was the attitude of a nun. Startled, confused, scarcely knowing what I did, I took off my hat, and drew aside to let her pass.

She looked up – hesitated – stood still – gazed at me with

a strange, steadfast, mournful expression – then dropped her eyes again, passed me without another glance, and resumed her former place and attitude beside her father's grave.

I turned away. I would have given worlds to speak to her; but I had not dared, and the opportunity was gone. Yet I might have spoken. She looked at me – looked at me with so strange and piteous an expression in her eyes – continued looking at me as long as one might have counted five… I might have spoken. I surely might have spoken! And now – ah! now it was impossible. She had fallen into the old thoughtful attitude, with her cheek resting on her hand. Her thoughts were far away. She had forgotten my very presence.

I went back to the shore, more disturbed and uneasy than ever. I spent all the remaining daylight in rowing up and down the margin of the Lido, looking for her gondola – hoping, at all events, to see her put off – to follow her, perhaps, across the waste of waters. But the dusk came quickly on, and then darkness; and I left at last without having seen any farther sign or token of her presence.

Lying awake that night, tossing uneasily upon my bed, and thinking over the incidents of the last few days, I found myself perpetually recurring to that long, steady, sorrowful gaze which she fixed upon me in the cemetery. The more I thought of it, the more I seemed to feel that there was in it some deeper meaning than I, in my confusion, had observed at the time. It was such a strange look – a look almost of entreaty, of asking for help

or sympathy; like the dumb appeal in the eyes of a sick animal. Could this really be? What, after all, more possible than that, left alone in the world – with, perhaps, not a single male relation to advise her – she found herself in some position of present difficulty, and knew not where to turn for help? All this might well be. She had even, perhaps, some instinctive feeling that she might trust me. Ah! if she would indeed trust me…

I had hoped to receive my Paduan letter by the morning delivery; but morning and afternoon went by as before, and still no letter came. As the day began to decline, I was again on my way to the Lido; this time for the purpose, and with the intention, of speaking to her. I landed, and went direct to the cemetery. It had been a dull day. Lagune and sky were both one uniform leaden grey, and a mist hung over Venice.

I saw her from the moment I reached the upper ridge. She was walking to and fro among the graves, like a stately shadow. I had felt confident, somehow, that she would be there; and now, for some reason that I could not have defined for my life, I felt equally confident that she expected me.

Trembling and eager, yet half dreading the moment when she should discover my presence, I hastened on, printing the loose sand at every noiseless step. A few moments more, and I should overtake her, speak to her, hear the music of her voice – that music which I remembered so well, though a year had gone by since I last heard it. But how should I address her? What had I to say? I knew not. I had no time to think. I could only hurry on

till within some ten feet of her trailing garments; stand still when she turned, and uncover before her as if she were a queen.

She paused and looked at me, just as she had paused and looked at me the evening before. With the same sorrowful meaning in her eyes; with even more than the same entreating expression. But she waited for me to speak.

I did speak. I cannot recall what I said; I only know that I faltered something of an apology – mentioned that I had had the honour of meeting her before, many months ago; and, trying to say more – trying to express how thankfully and proudly I would devote myself to any service however humble, however laborious, I failed both in voice and words, and broke down utterly.

Having come to a stop, I looked up and found her eyes still fixed upon me.

"You are a Christian?" she said.

A trembling came upon me at the first sound of her voice. It was the same voice; distinct, melodious, scarce louder than a whisper – and yet it was not quite the same. There was a melancholy in the music, and if I may use a word which, after all, fails to express my meaning, a *remoteness*, that fell upon my ear like the plaintive cadence in an autumnal wind.

I bent my head, and answered that I was.

She pointed to the headstone of which I had taken a rubbing a day or two before.

"A Christian soul lies there," she said, "laid in earth without

one Christian prayer – with Hebrew rites – in a Hebrew sanctuary. Will you, stranger, perform an act of piety towards the dead?"

"The Signora has but to speak," I said. "All that she wishes shall be done."

"Read one prayer over this grave; and trace a cross upon this stone."

"I will."

She thanked me with a gesture, slightly bowed her head, drew her outer garment more closely round her, and moved away to a rising ground at some little distance. I was dismissed. I had no excuse for lingering – no right to prolong the interview – no business to remain there one moment longer. So I left her there, nor once looked back till I had reached the last point from which I knew I should be able to see her. But when I turned for that last look, she was no longer in sight.

I had resolved to speak to her, and this was the result. A stranger interview never, surely, fell to the lot of man! I had said nothing that I meant to say – had learnt nothing that I sought to know. With regard to her circumstances, her place of residence, her very name, I was no wiser than before. And yet I had, perhaps, no reason to be dissatisfied. She had honoured me with her confidence, and entrusted to me a task of some difficulty and importance. It now only remained for me to execute that task as thoroughly and as quickly as possible. That done, I might fairly hope to win some place in her remembrance – by and by,

perhaps, in her esteem.

Meanwhile, the old question rose again – whose grave could it be? I had settled this matter so conclusively in my own mind from the first, that I could scarcely believe even now that it was not her father's. Yet that he should have died a secret convert to Christianity was incredible. Whose grave could it be? A lover's? A Christian lover's? Alas! it might be. Or a sister's? In either of these cases, it was more than probable that Salome was herself a convert. But I had no time to waste in conjecture. I must act, and act promptly.

I hastened back to Venice as fast as my gondolier could row me; and as we went along I promised myself that all her wishes should be carried out before she visited the spot again. To secure at once the services of a clergyman who would go with me to the Lido at early dawn and there read some portion, at least, of the burial service; and at the same time to engage a stonemason to cut the cross; – to have all done before she, or anyone, should have approached the place next day, was my especial object. And that object I was resolved to carry out, though I had to search Venice through before I laid my head upon my pillow.

I found a clergyman without difficulty. He was a young man occupying rooms in the same hotel, and on the same floor as myself. I had met him each day at the *table d'hôte*, and conversed with him once or twice in the reading-room. He was a North-countryman, had not long since taken orders, and was both gentlemanly and obliging. He promised in the readiest manner

to do all that I required, and to breakfast with me at six next morning, in order that we might reach the cemetery by eight.

To find my stonemason, however, was not so easy; and yet I went to work methodically enough. I began with the Venetian Directory; then copied a list of stonemasons' names and addresses; then took a gondola *a due remi* and started upon my voyage of discovery.

But a night's voyage of discovery among the intricate back *canaletti* of Venice is no very easy and no very safe enterprise. Narrow, tortuous, densely populated, often blocked by huge hay, wood, and provision barges, almost wholly unlighted, and so perplexingly alike that no mere novice in Venetian topography need ever hope to distinguish one from another, they baffle the very gondoliers, and are a *terra incognita* to all but the dwellers therein.

I succeeded, however, in finding three of the places entered on my list. At the first I was told that the workman of whom I was in quest was working by the week somewhere over by Murano, and would not be back again till Saturday night. At the second and third, I found the men at home, supping with their wives and children at the end of the day's work; but neither would consent to undertake my commission. One, after a whispered consultation with his son, declined reluctantly. The other told me plainly that he dared not do it, and that he did not believe I should find a stonemason in Venice who would be bolder than himself.

The Jews, he said, were rich and powerful; no longer an

oppressed people; no longer to be insulted even in Venice with impunity. To cut a Christian cross upon a Jewish headstone in the Jewish Cemetery, would be "a sort of sacrilege," and punishable, no doubt, by the law. This sounded like truth; so, finding that my rowers were by no means confident of their way, and that the *canaletti* were dark as the catacombs, I prevailed upon the stonemason to sell me a small mallet and a couple of chisels, and made up my mind to commit the sacrilege myself.

With this single exception, all was done next morning as I had planned to do it. My new acquaintance breakfasted with me, accompanied me to the Lido, read such portions of the burial service as seemed proper to him, and then, having business in Venice, left me to my task. It was by no means an easy one. To a skilled hand it would have been, perhaps, the work of half-an-hour; but it was my first effort, and rude as the thing was – a mere grooved attempt at a Latin cross, about two inches and a half in length, cut close down at the bottom of the stone, where it could be easily concealed by a little piling of the sand – it took me nearly four hours to complete. While I was at work, the dull grey morning grew duller and greyer; a thick sea-fog drove up from the Adriatic; and a low moaning wind came and went like the echo of a distant requiem. More than once I started, believing that she had surprised me there – fancying I saw the passing of a shadow – heard the rustling of a garment – the breathing of a sigh. But no. The mists and the moaning wind deceived me. I was alone.

When at length I got back to my hotel, it was just two o'clock. The hall-porter put a letter into my hand as I passed through. One glance at that crabbed superscription was enough. It was from Padua. I hastened to my room, tore open the envelope, and read these words: —

> "Caro Signore, – The rubbing you send is neither ancient nor curious, as I fear you suppose it to be. It is a thing of yesterday. It merely records that one Salome, the only and beloved child of a certain Isaac Da Costa, died last Autumn on the eighteenth of October, aged twenty-one years, and that by the said Isaac Da Costa this monument is erected to the memory of her virtues and his grief.
>
> "I pray you, *caro signore*, to receive the assurance of my sincere esteem.
>
> "Nicolo Nicolai."

The letter dropped from my hand. I seemed to have read without understanding it. I picked it up; went through it again, word by word; sat down; rose up; took a turn across the room; felt confused, bewildered, incredulous.

Could there, then, be two Salomes? or was there some radical and extraordinary mistake?

I hesitated; I knew not what to do. Should I go down to the Merceria, and see whether the name of Da Costa was known in the *quartier*? Or find out the registrar of births and deaths for the Jewish district? Or call upon the principal rabbi, and learn from him who this second Salome had been, and in what degree

of relationship she stood towards the Salome whom I knew? I decided upon the last course. The chief rabbi's address was easily obtained. He lived in an ancient house on the Giudecca, and there I found him – a grave, stately old man, with a grizzled beard reaching nearly to his waist.

I introduced myself and stated my business. I came to ask if he could give me any information respecting the late Salome da Costa who died on the 18th of October last, and was buried on the Lido.

The rabbi replied that he had no doubt he could give me any information I desired, for he had known the lady personally, and was the intimate friend of her father.

"Can you tell me," I asked, "whether she had any dear friend or female relative of the same name – Salome?"

The rabbi shook his head.

"I think not," he said. "I remember no other maiden of that name."

"Pardon me, but I know there was another," I replied. "There was a very beautiful Salome living in the Merceria when I was last in Venice, just this time last year."

"Salome da Costa was very fair," said the rabbi; "and she dwelt with her father in the Merceria. Since her death, he hath removed to the neighbourhood of the Rialto."

"This Salome's father was a dealer in Oriental goods," I said, hastily.

"Isaac da Costa is a dealer in Oriental goods," replied the

old man very gently. "We are speaking, my son, of the same persons."

"Impossible!"

He shook his head again.

"But she lives!" I exclaimed, becoming greatly agitated. "She lives. I have seen her. I have spoken to her. I saw her only last evening."

"Nay," he said, compassionately, "this is some dream. She of whom you speak is indeed no more."

"I saw her only last evening," I repeated.

"Where did you suppose you beheld her?"

"On the Lido."

"On the Lido?"

"And she spoke to me. I heard her voice – heard it as distinctly as I hear my own at this moment."

The rabbi stroked his beard thoughtfully, and looked at me. "You think you heard her voice!" he ejaculated. "That is strange. What said she?"

I was about to answer. I checked myself – a sudden thought flashed upon me – I trembled from head to foot.

"Have you – have you any reason for supposing that she died a Christian?" I faltered.

The old man started and changed colour.

"I – I – that is a strange question," he stammered. "Why do you ask it?"

"Yes or no?" I cried wildly. "Yes or no?"

He frowned, looked down, hesitated.

"I admit," he said, after a moment or two, – "I admit that I may have heard something tending that way. It may be that the maiden cherished some secret doubt. Yet she was no professed Christian."

"*Laid in earth without one Christian prayer; with Hebrew rites; in a Hebrew sanctuary!*" I repeated to myself.

"But I marvel how you come to have heard of this," continued the rabbi. "It was known only to her father and myself."

"Sir," I said solemnly, "I know now that Salome da Costa is dead; I have seen her spirit thrice, haunting the spot where…"

My voice broke. I could not utter the words.

"Last evening at sunset," I resumed, "was the third time. Never doubting that – that I indeed beheld her in the flesh, I spoke to her. She answered me. She – she told me this."

The rabbi covered his face with his hands, and so remained for some time, lost in meditation. "Young man," he said at length, "your story is strange, and you bring strange evidence to bear upon it. It may be as you say; it may be that you are the dupe of some waking dream – I know not."

He knew not; but I… Ah! I knew only too well. I knew now why she had appeared to me clothed with such unearthly beauty. I understood now that look of dumb entreaty in her eyes – that tone of strange remoteness in her voice. The sweet soul could not rest amid the dust of its kinsfolk, "unhousel'd, unanointed, unanealed," lacking even "one Christian prayer" above its grave.

And now – was it all over? Should I never see her more?

Never – ah! never. How I haunted the Lido at sunset for many a month, till Spring had blossomed into Autumn, and Autumn had ripened into Summer; how I wandered back to Venice year after year at the same season, while yet any vestige of that wild hope remained alive; how my heart has never throbbed, my pulse never leaped, for love of mortal woman since that time – are details into which I need not enter here. Enough that I watched and waited; but that her gracious spirit appeared to me no more. I wait still, but I watch no longer. I know now that our place of meeting will not be here.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.