

GUSTAVE FLAUBERT

THREE SHORT
WORKS

Gustave Flaubert

Three short works

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Gustave Flaubert
Three short works The Dance of
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the Hospitaller, a Simple Soul

THE DANCE OF DEATH

(1838)

* * * * *

"Many words for few things!"
"Death ends all; judgment comes to all."

* * * * *

[This work may be called a prose poem. It is impregnated with the spirit of romanticism, which at the time of writing had a temporary but powerful hold on the mind of Gustave Flaubert.]

* * * * *

DEATH SPEAKS

At night, in winter, when the snow-flakes fall slowly from heaven like great white tears, I raise my voice; its resonance thrills the cypress trees and makes them bud anew.

I pause an instant in my swift course over earth; throw myself down among cold tombs; and, while dark-plumaged birds rise suddenly in terror from my side, while the dead slumber peacefully, while cypress branches droop low o'er my head, while all around me weeps or lies in deep repose, my burning eyes rest on the great white clouds, gigantic winding-sheets, unrolling their slow length across the face of heaven.

How many nights, and years, and ages have I journeyed thus! A witness of the universal birth and of a like decay; Innumerable are the generations I have garnered with my scythe. Like God, I am eternal! The nurse of Earth, I cradle it each night upon a bed both soft and warm. The same recurring feasts; the same unending toil! Each morning I depart, each evening I return, bearing within my mantle's ample folds all that my scythe has gathered. And then I scatter them to the four winds of Heaven!

* * * * *

When the high billows run, when the heavens weep, and shrieking winds lash ocean into madness, then in the turmoil and the tumult do I fling myself upon the surging waves, and lo! the tempest softly cradles me, as in her hammock sways a queen. The foaming waters cool my weary

feet, burning from bathing in the falling tears of countless generations that have clung to them in vain endeavour to arrest my steps.

Then, when the storm has ceased, after its roar has calmed me like a lullaby, I bow my head: the hurricane, raging in fury but a moment earlier dies instantly. No longer does it live, but neither do the men, the ships, the navies that lately sailed upon the bosom of the waters.

'Mid all that I have seen and known, – peoples and thrones, loves, glories, sorrows, virtues – what have I ever loved? Nothing – except the mantling shroud that covers me!

My horse! ah, yes! my horse! I love thee too! How thou rushest o'er the world! thy hoofs of steel resounding on the heads bruised by thy speeding feet. Thy tail is straight and crisp, thine eyes dart flames, the mane upon thy neck flies in the wind, as on we dash upon our maddened course. Never art thou weary! Never do we rest! Never do we sleep! Thy neighing portends war; thy smoking nostrils spread a pestilence that, mist-like, hovers over earth. Where'er my arrows fly, thou overturnest pyramids and empires, trampling crowns beneath thy hoofs; All men respect thee; nay, adore thee! To invoke thy favour, popes offer thee their triple crowns, and kings their sceptres; peoples, their secret sorrows; poets, their renown. All cringe and kneel before thee, yet thou rushest on over their prostrate forms.

Ah, noble steed! Sole gift from heaven! Thy tendons are of iron, thy head is of bronze. Thou canst pursue thy course for centuries as swiftly as if borne up by eagle's wings; and when, once in a thousand years, resistless hunger comes, thy food is human flesh, thy drink, men's tears. My steed! I love thee as Pale Death alone can love!

* * * * *

Ah! I have lived so long! How many things I know! How many mysteries of the universe are shut within my breast!

Sometimes, after I have hurled a myriad of darts, and, after coursing o'er the world on my pale horse, have gathered many lives, a weariness assails me, and I long to rest.

But on my work must go; my path I must pursue; it leads through infinite space and all the worlds. I sweep away men's plans together with their triumphs, their loves together with their crimes, their very all.

I rend my winding-sheet; a frightful craving tortures me incessantly, as if some serpent stung continually within.

I throw a backward glance, and see the smoke of fiery ruins left behind; the darkness of the night; the agony of the world. I see the graves that are the work of these, my hands; I see the background of the past – 'tis nothingness! My weary body, heavy head, and tired feet, sink, seeking rest. My eyes turn towards a glowing horizon, boundless, immense, seeming to grow increasingly in height and depth. I shall devour it, as I have devoured all else.

When, O God! shall I sleep in my turn? When wilt Thou cease creating? When may I, digging my own grave, stretch myself out within my tomb, and, swinging thus upon the world, list the last breath, the death-gasp, of expiring nature?

When that time comes, away my darts and shroud I'll hurl. Then shall I free my horse, and he shall graze upon the grass that grows upon the Pyramids, sleep in the palaces of emperors, drink the last drop of water from the sea, and snuff the odour of the last slow drop of blood! By day, by night, through the countless ages, he shall roam through fields eternal as the fancy takes him; shall leap with one great bound from Atlas to the Himalayas; shall course, in his insolent pride, from heaven to earth; disport himself by caracoling in the dust of crumbled empires; shall speed across the beds of dried-up oceans; shall bound o'er ruins of enormous cities; inhale the void with swelling chest, and roll and stretch at ease.

Then haply, faithful one, weary as I, thou finally shalt seek some precipice from which to cast thyself; shalt halt, panting before the mysterious ocean of infinity; and then, with foaming mouth, dilated nostrils, and extended neck turned towards the horizon, thou shalt, as I, pray for eternal sleep; for repose for thy fiery feet; for a bed of green leaves, whereon reclining thou canst close thy burning eyes forever. There, waiting motionless upon the brink, thou shalt desire a power stronger than thyself to kill thee at a single blow – shalt pray for union with the dying storm, the faded flower, the shrunken corpse. Thou shalt seek sleep, because eternal life is torture, and the tomb is peace.

Why are we here? What hurricane has hurled us into this abyss? What tempest soon shall bear us away towards the forgotten planets whence we came?

Till then, my glorious steed, thou shalt run thy course; thou mayst please thine ear with the crunching of the heads crushed under thy feet. Thy course is long, but courage! Long time hast thou carried me: but longer time still must elapse, and yet we shall not age.

Stars may be quenched, the mountains crumble, the earth finally wear away its diamond axis; but we two, we alone are immortal, for the impalpable lives forever!

But to-day them canst lie at my feet, and polish thy teeth against the moss-grown tombs, for Satan has abandoned me, and a power unknown compels me to obey his will. Lo! the dead seek to rise from their graves.

* * * * *

Satan, I love thee! Thou alone canst comprehend my joys and my deliriums. But, more fortunate than I, thou wilt some day, when earth shall be no more, recline and sleep within the realms of space.

But I, who have lived so long, have worked so ceaselessly, with only virtuous loves and solemn thoughts, – I must endure immortality. Man has his tomb, and glory its oblivion; the day dies into night but I – !

And I am doomed to lasting solitude upon my way, strewn with the bones of men and marked by ruins. Angels have fellow-angels; demons their companions of darkness; but I hear only sounds of a clanking scythe, my whistling arrows, and my speeding horse. Always the echo of the surging billows that sweep over and engulf mankind!

SATAN.

Dost thou complain, – thou, the most fortunate creature under heaven? The only, splendid, great, unchangeable, eternal one – like God, who is the only Being that equals thee! Dost thou repine, who some day in thy turn shalt disappear forever, after thou hast crushed the universe beneath thy horse's feet?

When God's work of creating has ceased; when the heavens have disappeared and the stars are quenched; when spirits rise from their retreats and wander in the depths with sighs and groans; then, what unpicturable delight for thee! Then shalt thou sit on the eternal thrones of heaven and of hell – shalt overthrow the planets, stars, and worlds – shalt loose thy steed in fields of emeralds and diamonds – shalt make his litter of the wings torn from the angels, – shalt cover him with the robe of righteousness! Thy saddle shall be brodered with the stars of the empyrean, – and then thou wilt destroy it! After thou hast annihilated everything, – when naught remains but empty space, – thy coffin shattered and thine arrows broken, then make thyself a crown of stone from heaven's highest mount, and cast thyself into the abyss of oblivion. Thy fall may last a million aeons, but thou shalt die at last. Because the world must end; all, all must die, – except Satan! Immortal more than God! I live to bring chaos into other worlds!

DEATH.

But thou hast not, as I, this vista of eternal nothingness before thee; thou dost not suffer with this death-like cold, as I.

SATAN.

Nay, but I quiver under fierce and unrelaxing hearts of molten lava, which burn the doomed and which e'en I cannot escape.

For thou, at least, hast only to destroy. But I bring birth and I give life. I direct empires and govern the affairs of States and of hearts.

I must be everywhere. The precious metals flow, the diamonds glitter, and men's names resound at my command. I whisper in the ears of women, of poets, and of statesmen, words of love, of glory, of ambition. With Messalina and Nero, at Paris and at Babylon, within the self-same moment do I dwell. Let a new island be discovered, I fly to it ere man can set foot there; though it be but a rock encircled by the sea, I am there in advance of men who will dispute for its possession. I lounge, at the same instant, on a courtesan's couch and on the perfumed beds of emperors. Hatred and envy, pride and wrath, pour from my lips in simultaneous utterance. By night and day I work. While men ate burning Christians, I luxuriate voluptuously in baths perfumed with roses; I race in chariots; yield to deep despair; or boast aloud in pride.

At times I have believed that I embodied the whole world, and all that I have seen took place, in verity, within my being.

Sometimes I weary, lose my reason, and indulge in such mad follies that the most worthless of my minions ridicule me while they pity me.

No creature cares for me; nowhere am I loved, – neither in heaven, of which I am a son, nor yet in hell, where I am lord, nor upon earth, where men deem me a god. Naught do I see but paroxysms of rage, rivers of blood, or maddened frenzy. Ne'er shall my eyelids close in slumber, never my spirit find repose, whilst thou, at least, canst rest thy head upon the cool, green freshness of the grave. Yea, I must ever dwell amid the glare of palaces, must listen to the curses of the starving, or inhale the stench of crimes that cry aloud to heaven.

God, whom I hate, has punished me indeed! But my soul is greater even than His wrath; in one deep sigh I could the whole world draw into my breast, where it would burn eternally, even as I.

When, Lord, shall thy great trumpet sound? Then a great harmony shall hover over sea and hill. Ah! would that I could suffer with humanity; their cries and sobs should drown the sound of mine!

[Innumerable skeletons, riding in chariots, advance at a rapid pace, with cries of joy and triumph. They drag broken branches and crowns of laurel, from which the dried and yellow leaves fall continually in the wind and the dust.]

Lo, a triumphal throng from Rome, the Eternal City! Her Coliseum and her Capitol are now two grains of sands that served once as a pedestal; but Death has swung his scythe: the monuments have fallen. Behold! At their head comes Nero, pride of my heart, the greatest poet earth has known!

[Nero advances in a chariot drawn by twelve skeleton horses. With the sceptre in his hand, he strikes the bony backs of his steeds. He stands erect, his shroud flapping behind him in billowy folds. He turns, as if upon a racecourse; his eyes are flaming and he cries loudly:]

NERO.

Quick! Quick! And faster still, until your feet dash fire from the flinty stones and your nostrils fleck your breasts with foam. What! do not the wheels smoke yet? Hear ye the fanfares, whose sound reached even to Ostia; the clapping of the hands, the cries of joy? See how the populace shower saffron on my head! See how my pathway is already damp with sprayed perfume! My chariot whirls on; the pace is swifter than the wind as I shake the golden reins! Faster and faster! The dust clouds rise; my mantle floats upon the breeze, which in my ears sings "Triumph! triumph!" Faster and faster! Harken to the shouts of joy, list to the stamping feet and the plaudits of the multitude. Jupiter himself looks down on us from heaven. Faster! yea, faster still!

[Nero's chariot now seems to be drawn by demons: a black cloud of dust and smoke envelops him; in his erratic course he crashes into tombs, and the re-awakened corpses are crushed under the wheels of the chariot, which now turns, comes forward, and stops.]

NERO.

Now, let six hundred of my women dance the Grecian Dances silently before me, the while I lave myself with roses in a bath of porphyry. Then let them circle me, with interlacing arms, that I may see on all sides alabaster forms in graceful evolution, swaying like tall reeds bending over an amorous pool.

And I will give the empire and the sea, the Senate, the Olympus, the Capitol, to her who shall embrace me the most ardently; to her whose heart shall throb beneath my own; to her who shall enmesh me in her flowing hair, smile on me sweetest, and enfold me in the warmest clasp; to her who soothing me with songs of love shall waken me to joy and heights of rapture! Rome shall be still this night; no barque shall cleave the waters of the Tiber, since 'tis my wish to see the mirrored moon on its untroubled face and hear the voice of woman floating over it. Let perfumed breezes pass through all my draperies! Ah, I would die, voluptuously intoxicated.

Then, while I eat of some rare meat, that only I may taste, let some one sing, while damsels, lightly draped, serve me from plates of gold and watch my rest. One slave shall cut her sister's throat, because it is my pleasure – a favourite with the gods – to mingle the perfume of blood with that of food, and cries of victims soothe my nerves.

This night I shall burn Rome. The flames shall light up heaven, and Tiber shall roll in waves of fire!

Then, I shall build of aloes wood a stage to float upon the Italian sea, and the Roman populace shall throng thereto chanting my praise. Its draperies shall be of purple, and on it I shall have a bed of eagles' plumage. There I shall sit, and at my side shall be the loveliest woman in the empire, while all the universe applauds the achievements of a god! And though the tempest roar round me, its rage shall be extinguished 'neath my feet, and sounds of music shall o'ercome the clamor of the waves!

* * * * *

What didst thou say? Vindex revolts, my legions fly, my women flee in terror? Silence and tears alone remain, and I hear naught but the rolling of thunder. Must I die, now?

DEATH.

Instantly!

NERO.

Must I give up my days of feasting and delight, my spectacles, my triumphs, my chariots and the applause of multitudes?

DEATH.

All! All!

SATAN.

Haste, Master of the World! One comes – One who will put thee to the sword. An emperor knows how to die!

NERO.

Die! I have scarce begun to live! Oh, what great deeds I should accomplish – deeds that should make Olympus tremble! I would fill up the bed of hoary ocean and speed across it in a triumphal car. I would still live – would see the sun once more, the Tiber, the Campagna, the Circus on the golden sands. Ah! let me live!

DEATH.

I will give thee a mantle for the tomb, and an eternal bed that shall be softer and more peaceful than the Imperial couch.

NERO.

Yet, I am loth to die.

DEATH.

Die, then!

[He gathers up the shroud, lying beside him on the ground, and bears away Nero – wrapped in its folds.]

THE LEGEND OF SAINT JULIAN THE HOSPITALLER

CHAPTER I THE CURSE

Julian's father and mother dwelt in a castle built on the slope of a hill, in the heart of the woods.

The towers at its four corners had pointed roofs covered with leaden tiles, and the foundation rested upon solid rocks, which descended abruptly to the bottom of the moat.

In the courtyard, the stone flagging was as immaculate as the floor of a church. Long rain-spouts, representing dragons with yawning jaws, directed the water towards the cistern, and on each window-sill of the castle a basil or a heliotrope bush bloomed, in painted flower-pots.

A second enclosure, surrounded by a fence, comprised a fruit-orchard, a garden decorated with figures wrought in bright-hued flowers, an arbour with several bowers, and a mall for the diversion of the pages. On the other side were the kennel, the stables, the bakery, the wine-press and the barns. Around these spread a pasture, also enclosed by a strong hedge.

Peace had reigned so long that the portcullis was never lowered; the moats were filled with water; swallows built their nests in the cracks of the battlements, and as soon as the sun shone too strongly, the archer who all day long paced to and fro on the curtain, withdrew to the watch-tower and slept soundly.

Inside the castle, the locks on the doors shone brightly; costly tapestries hung in the apartments to keep out the cold; the closets overflowed with linen, the cellar was filled with casks of wine, and the oak chests fairly groaned under the weight of money-bags.

In the armoury could be seen, between banners and the heads of wild beasts, weapons of all nations and of all ages, from the slings of the Amalekites and the javelins of the Garamantes, to the broad-swords of the Saracens and the coats of mail of the Normans.

The largest spit in the kitchen could hold an ox; the chapel was as gorgeous as a king's oratory. There was even a Roman bath in a secluded part of the castle, though the good lord of the manor refrained from using it, as he deemed it a heathenish practice.

Wrapped always in a cape made of fox-skins, he wandered about the castle, rendered justice among his vassals and settled his neighbours' quarrels. In the winter, he gazed dreamily at the falling snow, or had stories read aloud to him. But as soon as the fine weather returned, he would mount his mule and sally forth into the country roads, edged with ripening wheat, to talk with the peasants, to whom he distributed advice. After a number of adventures he took unto himself a wife of high lineage.

She was pale and serious, and a trifle haughty. The horns of her head-dress touched the top of the doors and the hem of her gown trailed far behind her. She conducted her household like a cloister. Every morning she distributed work to the maids, supervised the making of preserves and unguents, and afterwards passed her time in spinning, or in embroidering altar-cloths. In response to her fervent prayers, God granted her a son!

Then there was great rejoicing; and they gave a feast which lasted three days and four nights, with illuminations and soft music. Chickens as large as sheep, and the rarest spices were served; for the entertainment of the guests, a dwarf crept out of a pie; and when the bowls were too few, for the crowd swelled continuously, the wine was drunk from helmets and hunting-horns.

The young mother did not appear at the feast. She was quietly resting in bed. One night she awoke, and beheld in a moonbeam that crept through the window something that looked like a moving shadow. It was an old man clad in sackcloth, who resembled a hermit. A rosary dangled at his side and

he carried a beggar's sack on his shoulder. He approached the foot of the bed, and without opening his lips said: "Rejoice, O mother! Thy son shall be a saint."

She would have cried out, but the old man, gliding along the moonbeam, rose through the air and disappeared. The songs of the banqueters grew louder. She could hear angels' voices, and her head sank back on the pillow, which was surmounted by the bone of a martyr, framed in precious stones.

The following day, the servants, upon being questioned, declared, to a man, that they had seen no hermit. Then, whether dream or fact, this must certainly have been a communication from heaven; but she took care not to speak of it, lest she should be accused of presumption.

The guests departed at daybreak, and Julian's father stood at the castle gate, where he had just bidden farewell to the last one, when a beggar suddenly emerged from the mist and confronted him. He was a gipsy – for he had a braided beard and wore silver bracelets on each arm. His eyes burned and, in an inspired way, he muttered some disconnected words: "Ah! Ah! thy son! – great bloodshed – great glory – happy always – an emperor's family."

Then he stooped to pick up the alms thrown to him, and disappeared in the tall grass.

The lord of the manor looked up and down the road and called as loudly as he could. But no one answered him! The wind only howled and the morning mists were fast dissolving.

He attributed his vision to a dullness of the brain resulting from too much sleep. "If I should speak of it," quoth he, "people would laugh at me." Still, the glory that was to be his son's dazzled him, albeit the meaning of the prophecy was not clear to him, and he even doubted that he had heard it.

The parents kept their secret from each other. But both cherished the child with equal devotion, and as they considered him marked by God, they had great regard for his person. His cradle was lined with the softest feathers, and lamp representing a dove burned continually over it; three nurses rocked him night and day, and with his pink cheeks and blue eyes, brocaded cloak and embroidered cap he looked like a little Jesus. He cut all his teeth without even a whimper.

When he was seven years old his mother taught him to sing, and his father lifted him upon a tall horse, to inspire him with courage. The child smiled with delight, and soon became familiar with everything pertaining to chargers. An old and very learned monk taught him the Gospel, the Arabic numerals, the Latin letters, and the art of painting delicate designs on vellum. They worked in the top of a tower, away from all noise and disturbance.

When the lesson was over, they would go down into the garden and study the flowers.

Sometimes a herd of cattle passed through the valley below, in charge of a man in Oriental dress. The lord of the manor, recognising him as a merchant, would despatch a servant after him. The stranger, becoming confident, would stop on his way and after being ushered into the castle-hall, would display pieces of velvet and silk, trinkets and strange objects whose use was unknown in those parts. Then, in due time, he would take leave, without having been molested and with a handsome profit.

At other times, a band of pilgrims would knock at the door. Their wet garments would be hung in front of the hearth and after they had been refreshed by food they would relate their travels, and discuss the uncertainty of vessels on the high seas, their long journeys across burning sands, the ferocity of the infidels, the caves of Syria, the Manger and the Holy Sepulchre. They made presents to the young heir of beautiful shells, which they carried in their cloaks.

The lord of the manor very often feasted his brothers-at-arms, and over the wine the old warriors would talk of battles and attacks, of war-machines and of the frightful wounds they had received, so that Julian, who was a listener, would scream with excitement; then his father felt convinced that some day he would be a conqueror. But in the evening, after the Angelus, when he passed through the crowd of beggars who clustered about the church-door, he distributed his alms with so much modesty and nobility that his mother fully expected to see him become an archbishop in time.

His seat in the chapel was next to his parents, and no matter how long the services lasted, he remained kneeling on his *prie-dieu*, with folded hands and his velvet cap lying close beside him on the floor.

One day, during mass, he raised his head and beheld a little white mouse crawling out of a hole in the wall. It scrambled to the first altar-step and then, after a few gambols, ran back in the same direction. On the following Sunday, the idea of seeing the mouse again worried him. It returned; and every Sunday after that he watched for it; and it annoyed him so much that he grew to hate it and resolved to do away with it.

So, having closed the door and strewn some crumbs on the steps of the altar, he placed himself in front of the hole with a stick. After a long while a pink snout appeared, and then whole mouse crept out. He struck it lightly with his stick and stood stunned at the sight of the little, lifeless body. A drop of blood stained the floor. He wiped it away hastily with his sleeve, and picking up the mouse, threw it away, without saying a word about it to anyone.

All sorts of birds pecked at the seeds in the garden. He put some peas in a hollow reed, and when he heard birds chirping in a tree, he would approach cautiously, lift the tube and swell his cheeks; then, when the little creatures dropped about him in multitudes, he could not refrain from laughing and being delighted with his own cleverness.

One morning, as he was returning by way of the curtain, he beheld a fat pigeon sunning itself on the top of the wall. He paused to gaze at it; where he stood the rampart was cracked and a piece of stone was near at hand; he gave his arm a jerk and the well-aimed missile struck the bird squarely, sending it straight into the moat below.

He sprang after it, unmindful of the brambles, and ferreted around the bushes with the litheness of a young dog.

The pigeon hung with broken wings in the branches of a privet hedge.

The persistence of its life irritated the boy. He began to strangle it, and its convulsions made his heart beat quicker, and filled him with a wild, tumultuous voluptuousness, the last throb of its heart making him feel like fainting.

At supper that night, his father declared that at his age a boy should begin to hunt; and he arose and brought forth an old writing-book which contained, in questions and answers, everything pertaining to the pastime. In it, a master showed a supposed pupil how to train dogs and falcons, lay traps, recognise a stag by its fumets, and a fox or a wolf by footprints. He also taught the best way of discovering their tracks, how to start them, where their refuges are usually to be found, what winds are the most favourable, and further enumerated the various cries, and the rules of the quarry.

When Julian was able to recite all these things by heart, his father made up a pack of hounds for him. There were twenty-four greyhounds of Barbary, speedier than gazelles, but liable to get out of temper; seventeen couples of Breton dogs, great barkers, with broad chests and russet coats flecked with white. For wild-boar hunting and perilous doublings, there were forty boarhounds as hairy as bears.

The red mastiffs of Tartary, almost as large as donkeys, with broad backs and straight legs, were destined for the pursuit of the wild bull. The black coats of the spaniels shone like satin; the barking of the setters equalled that of the beagles. In a special enclosure were eight growling bloodhounds that tugged at their chains and rolled their eyes, and these dogs leaped at men's throats and were not afraid even of lions.

All ate wheat bread, drank from marble troughs, and had high-sounding names.

Perhaps the falconry surpassed the pack; for the master of the castle, by paying great sums of money, had secured Caucasian hawks, Babylonian sakers, German gerfalcons, and pilgrim falcons captured on the cliffs edging the cold seas, in distant lands. They were housed in a thatched shed and were chained to the perch in the order of size. In front of them was a little grass-plot where, from time to time, they were allowed to disport themselves.

Bag-nets, baits, traps and all sorts of snares were manufactured.

Often they would take out pointers who would set almost immediately; then the whippers-in, advancing step by step, would cautiously spread a huge net over their motionless bodies. At the command, the dogs would bark and arouse the quails; and the ladies of the neighbourhood, with their husbands, children and hand-maids, would fall upon them and capture them with ease.

At other times they used a drum to start hares; and frequently foxes fell into the ditches prepared for them, while wolves caught their paws in the traps.

But Julian scorned these convenient contrivances; he preferred to hunt away from the crowd, alone with his steed and his falcon. It was almost always a large, snow-white, Scythian bird. His leather hood was ornamented with a plume, and on his blue feet were bells; and he perched firmly on his master's arm while they galloped across the plains. Then Julian would suddenly untie his tether and let him fly, and the bold bird would dart through the air like an arrow, One might perceive two spots circle around, unite, and then disappear in the blue heights. Presently the falcon would return with a mutilated bird, and perch again on his master's gauntlet with trembling wings.

Julian loved to sound his trumpet and follow his dogs over hills and streams, into the woods; and when the stag began to moan under their teeth, he would kill it deftly, and delight in the fury of the brutes, which would devour the pieces spread out on the warm hide.

On foggy days, he would hide in the marshes to watch for wild geese, otters and wild ducks.

At daybreak, three equerries waited for him at the foot of the steps; and though the old monk leaned out of the dormer-window and made signs to him to return, Julian would not look around.

He heeded neither the broiling sun, the rain nor the storm; he drank spring water and ate wild berries, and when he was tired, he lay down under a tree; and he would come home at night covered with earth and blood, with thistles in his hair and smelling of wild beasts. He grew to be like them. And when his mother kissed him, he responded coldly to her caress and seemed to be thinking of deep and serious things.

He killed bears with a knife, bulls with a hatchet, and wild boars with a spear; and once, with nothing but a stick, he defended himself against some wolves, which were gnawing corpses at the foot of a gibbet.

* * * * *

One winter morning he set out before daybreak, with a bow slung across his shoulder and a quiver of arrows attached to the pommel of his saddle. The hoofs of his steed beat the ground with regularity and his two beagles trotted close behind. The wind was blowing hard and icicles clung to his cloak. A part of the horizon cleared, and he beheld some rabbits playing around their burrows. In an instant, the two dogs were upon them, and seizing as many as they could, they broke their backs in the twinkling of an eye.

Soon he came to a forest. A woodcock, paralysed by the cold, perched on a branch, with its head hidden under its wing. Julian, with a lunge of his sword, cut off its feet, and without stopping to pick it up, rode away.

Three hours later he found himself on the top of a mountain so high that the sky seemed almost black. In front of him, a long, flat rock hung over a precipice, and at the end two wild goats stood gazing down into the abyss. As he had no arrows (for he had left his steed behind), he thought he would climb down to where they stood; and with bare feet and bent back he at last reached the first goat and thrust his dagger below its ribs. But the second animal, in its terror, leaped into the precipice. Julian threw himself forward to strike it, but his right foot slipped, and he fell, face downward and with outstretched arms, over the body of the first goat.

After he returned to the plains, he followed a stream bordered by willows. From time to time, some cranes, flying low, passed over his head. He killed them with his whip, never missing a bird.

He beheld in the distance the gleam of a lake which appeared to be of lead, and in the middle of it was an animal he had never seen before, a beaver with a black muzzle. Notwithstanding the distance that separated them, an arrow ended its life and Julian only regretted that he was not able to carry the skin home with him.

Then he entered an avenue of tall trees, the tops of which formed a triumphal arch to the entrance of a forest. A deer sprang out of the thicket and a badger crawled out of its hole, a stag appeared in the road, and a peacock spread its fan-shaped tail on the grass – and after he had slain them all, other deer, other stags, other badgers, other peacocks, and jays, blackbirds, foxes, porcupines, polecats, and lynxes, appeared; in fact, a host of beasts that grew more and more numerous with every step he took. Trembling, and with a look of appeal in their eyes, they gathered around Julian, but he did not stop slaying them; and so intent was he on stretching his bow, drawing his sword and whipping out his knife, that he had little thought for aught else. He knew that he was hunting in some country since an indefinite time, through the very fact of his existence, as everything seemed to occur with the ease one experiences in dreams. But presently an extraordinary sight made him pause.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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