

ГОВАРД ПАЙЛ

OTTO OF THE
SILVER HAND

Говард Пайл

Otto of the Silver Hand

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Howard Pyle

Otto of the Silver Hand

FOREWORD

Between the far away past history of the world, and that which lies near to us; in the time when the wisdom of the ancient times was dead and had passed away, and our own days of light had not yet come, there lay a great black gulf in human history, a gulf of ignorance, of superstition, of cruelty, and of wickedness.

That time we call the dark or middle ages.

Few records remain to us of that dreadful period in our world's history, and we only know of it through broken and disjointed fragments that have been handed down to us through the generations.

Yet, though the world's life then was so wicked and black, there yet remained a few good men and women here and there (mostly in peaceful and quiet monasteries, far from the thunder and the glare of the worlds bloody battle), who knew the right and the truth and lived according to what they knew; who preserved and tenderly cared for the truths that the dear Christ taught, and lived and died for in Palestine so long ago.

This tale that I am about to tell is of a little boy who lived and suffered in those dark middle ages; of how he saw both the good and the bad of men, and of how, by gentleness and love and not by strife and hatred, he came at last to stand above other men and to be looked up to by all. And should you follow the story to the end, I hope you may find it a pleasure, as I have done, to ramble through those dark ancient castles, to lie with little Otto and Brother John in the high belfry-tower, or to sit with them in the peaceful quiet of the sunny old monastery garden, for, of all the story, I love best those early peaceful years that little Otto spent in the dear old White Cross on the Hill.

Poor little Otto's life was a stony and a thorny pathway, and it is well for all of us nowadays that we walk it in fancy and not in truth.

I. The Dragon's House

Up from the gray rocks, rising sheer and bold and bare, stood the walls and towers of Castle Drachenhausen. A great gate-way, with a heavy iron-pointed portcullis hanging suspended in the dim arch above, yawned blackly upon the bascule or falling drawbridge that spanned a chasm between the blank stone walls and the roadway that winding down the steep rocky slope to the little valley just beneath. There in the lap of the hills around stood the wretched straw-thatched huts of the peasants belonging to the castle – miserable serfs who, half timid, half fierce, tilled their poor patches of ground, wrenching from the hard soil barely enough to keep body and soul together. Among those vile hovels played the little children like foxes about their dens, their wild, fierce eyes peering out from under a mat of tangled yellow hair.

Beyond these squalid huts lay the rushing, foaming river, spanned by a high, rude, stone bridge where the road from the castle crossed it, and beyond the river stretched the great, black forest, within whose gloomy depths the savage wild beasts made their lair, and where in winter time the howling wolves coursed their flying prey across the moonlit snow and under the net-work of the black shadows from the naked boughs above.

The watchman in the cold, windy bartizan or watch-tower that clung to the gray walls above the castle gateway, looked from his narrow window, where the wind piped and hummed, across the tree-tops that rolled in endless billows of green, over hill and over valley to the blue and distant slope of the Keiserberg, where, on the mountain side, glimmered far away the walls of Castle Trutz-Drachen.

Within the massive stone walls through which the gaping gateway led, three great cheerless brick buildings, so forbidding that even the yellow sunlight could not light them into brightness, looked down, with row upon row of windows, upon three sides of the bleak, stone courtyard. Back of and above them clustered a jumble of other buildings, tower and turret, one high-peaked roof overtopping another.

The great house in the centre was the Baron's Hall, the part to the left was called the Roderhausen; between the two stood a huge square pile, rising dizzily up into the clear air high above the rest – the great Melchior Tower.

At the top clustered a jumble of buildings hanging high aloft in the windy space a crooked wooden belfry, a tall, narrow watch-tower, and a rude wooden house that clung partly to the roof of the great tower and partly to the walls.

From the chimney of this crazy hut a thin thread of smoke would now and then rise into the air, for there were folk living far up in that empty, airy desert, and oftentimes wild, uncouth little children were seen playing on the edge of the dizzy height, or sitting with their bare legs hanging down over the sheer depths, as they gazed below at what was going on in the court-yard. There they sat, just as little children in the town might sit upon their father's door-step; and as the sparrows might fly around the feet of the little town children, so the circling flocks of rooks and daws flew around the feet of these air-born creatures.

It was Schwartz Carl and his wife and little ones who lived far up there in the Melchior Tower, for it overlooked the top of the hill behind the castle and so down into the valley upon the further side. There, day after day, Schwartz Carl kept watch upon the gray road that ran like a ribbon through the valley, from the rich town of Gruenstaldt to the rich town of Staffenburgen, where passed merchant caravans from the one to the other – for the lord of Drachenhausen was a robber baron.

Dong! Dong! The great alarm bell would suddenly ring out from the belfry high up upon the Melchior Tower. Dong! Dong! Till the rooks and daws whirled clamoring and screaming. Dong! Dong! Till the fierce wolf-hounds in the rocky kennels behind the castle stables howled dismally in answer. Dong! Dong! – Dong! Dong!

Then would follow a great noise and uproar and hurry in the castle court-yard below; men shouting and calling to one another, the ringing of armor, and the clatter of horses' hoofs upon the hard stone. With the creaking and groaning of the windlass the iron-pointed portcullis would be slowly raised, and with a clank and rattle and clash of iron chains the drawbridge would fall crashing. Then over it would thunder horse and man, clattering away down the winding, stony pathway, until the great forest would swallow them, and they would be gone.

Then for a while peace would fall upon the castle courtyard, the cock would crow, the cook would scold a lazy maid, and Gretchen, leaning out of a window, would sing a snatch of a song, just as though it were a peaceful farm-house, instead of a den of robbers.

Maybe it would be evening before the men would return once more. Perhaps one would have a bloody cloth bound about his head, perhaps one would carry his arm in a sling; perhaps one – maybe more than one – would be left behind, never to return again, and soon forgotten by all excepting some poor woman who would weep silently in the loneliness of her daily work.

Nearly always the adventurers would bring back with them pack-horses laden with bales of goods. Sometimes, besides these, they would return with a poor soul, his hands tied behind his back and his feet beneath the horse's body, his fur cloak and his flat cap wofully awry. A while he would disappear in some gloomy cell of the dungeon-keep, until an envoy would come from the town with a fat purse, when his ransom would be paid, the dungeon would disgorge him, and he would be allowed to go upon his way again.

One man always rode beside Baron Conrad in his expeditions and adventures a short, deep-chested, broad-shouldered man, with sinewy arms so long that when he stood his hands hung nearly to his knees.

His coarse, close-clipped hair came so low upon his brow that only a strip of forehead showed between it and his bushy, black eyebrows. One eye was blind; the other twinkled and gleamed like a spark under the penthouse of his brows. Many folk said that the one-eyed Hans had drunk beer with the Hill-man, who had given him the strength of ten, for he could bend an iron spit like a hazel twig, and could lift a barrel of wine from the floor to his head as easily as though it were a basket of eggs.

As for the one-eyed Hans he never said that he had not drunk beer with the Hill-man, for he liked the credit that such reports gave him with the other folk. And so, like a half savage mastiff, faithful to death to his master, but to him alone, he went his sullen way and lived his sullen life within the castle walls, half respected, half feared by the other inmates, for it was dangerous trifling with the one-eyed Hans.

II. How the Baron went Forth to Shear

Baron Conrad and Baroness Matilda sat together at their morning meal below their raised seats stretched the long, heavy wooden table, loaded with coarse food – black bread, boiled cabbage, bacon, eggs, a great chine from a wild boar, sausages, such as we eat nowadays, and flagons and jars of beer and wine. Along the board sat ranged in the order of the household the followers and retainers. Four or five slatternly women and girls served the others as they fed noisily at the table, moving here and there behind the men with wooden or pewter dishes of food, now and then laughing at the jests that passed or joining in the talk. A huge fire blazed and crackled and roared in the great open fireplace, before which were stretched two fierce, shaggy, wolfish-looking hounds. Outside, the rain beat upon the roof or ran trickling from the eaves, and every now and then a chill draught of wind would breathe through the open windows of the great black dining-hall and set the fire roaring.

Along the dull-gray wall of stone hung pieces of armor, and swords and lances, and great branching antlers of the stag. Overhead arched the rude, heavy, oaken beams, blackened with age and smoke, and underfoot was a chill pavement of stone.

Upon Baron Conrad's shoulder leaned the pale, slender, yellow-haired Baroness, the only one in all the world with whom the fierce lord of Drachenhausen softened to gentleness, the only one upon whom his savage brows looked kindly, and to whom his harsh voice softened with love.

The Baroness was talking to her husband in a low voice, as he looked down into her pale face, with its gentle blue eyes.

"And wilt thou not, then," said she, "do that one thing for me?"

"Nay," he growled, in his deep voice, "I cannot promise thee never more to attack the townspeople in the valley over yonder. How else could I live an' I did not take from the fat town hogs to fill our own larder?"

"Nay," said the Baroness, "thou couldst live as some others do, for all do not rob the burgher folk as thou dost. Alas! mishap will come upon thee some day, and if thou shouldst be slain, what then would come of me?"

"Prut," said the Baron, "thy foolish fears" But he laid his rough, hairy hand softly upon the Baroness' head and stroked her yellow hair.

"For my sake, Conrad," whispered the Baroness.

A pause followed. The Baron sat looking thoughtfully down into the Baroness' face. A moment more, and he might have promised what she besought; a moment more, and he might have been saved all the bitter trouble that was to follow. But it was not to be.

Suddenly a harsh sound broke the quietness of all into a confusion of noises. Dong! Dong! – it was the great alarm-bell from Melchior's Tower.

The Baron started at the sound. He sat for a moment or two with his hand clinched upon the arm of his seat as though about to rise, then he sunk back into his chair again.

All the others had risen tumultuously from the table, and now stood looking at him, awaiting his orders.

"For my sake, Conrad," said the Baroness again.

Dong! Dong! rang the alarm-bell. The Baron sat with his eyes bent upon the floor, scowling blackly.

The Baroness took his hand in both of hers. "For my sake," she pleaded, and the tears filled her blue eyes as she looked up at him, "do not go this time."

From the courtyard without came the sound of horses' hoofs clashing against the stone pavement, and those in the hall stood watching and wondering at this strange delay of the Lord Baron. Just then the door opened and one came pushing past the rest; it was the one-eyed Hans. He came straight to where the Baron sat, and, leaning over, whispered something into his master's ear.

“For my sake,” implored the Baroness again; but the scale was turned. The Baron pushed back his chair heavily and rose to his feet. “Forward!” he roared, in a voice of thunder, and a great shout went up in answer as he strode clanking down the hall and out of the open door.

The Baroness covered her face with her hands and wept.

“Never mind, little bird,” said old Ursela, the nurse, soothingly; “he will come back to thee again as he has come back to thee before.”

But the poor young Baroness continued weeping with her face buried in her hands, because he had not done that thing she had asked.

A white young face framed in yellow hair looked out into the courtyard from a window above; but if Baron Conrad of Drachenhausen saw it from beneath the bars of his shining helmet, he made no sign.

“Forward,” he cried again.

Down thundered the drawbridge, and away they rode with clashing hoofs and ringing armor through the gray shroud of drilling rain.

The day had passed and the evening had come, and the Baroness and her women sat beside a roaring fire. All were chattering and talking and laughing but two – the fair young Baroness and old Ursela; the one sat listening, listening, listening, the other sat with her chin resting in the palm of her hand, silently watching her young mistress. The night was falling gray and chill, when suddenly the clear notes of a bugle rang from without the castle walls. The young Baroness started, and the rosy light flashed up into her pale cheeks.

“Yes, good,” said old Ursela; “the red fox has come back to his den again, and I warrant he brings a fat town goose in his mouth; now we’ll have fine clothes to wear, and thou another gold chain to hang about thy pretty neck.”

The young Baroness laughed merrily at the old woman’s speech. “This time,” said she, “I will choose a string of pearls like that one my aunt used to wear, and which I had about my neck when Conrad first saw me.”

Minute after minute passed; the Baroness sat nervously playing with a bracelet of golden beads about her wrist. “How long he stays,” said she.

“Yes,” said Ursela; “but it is not cousin wish that holds him by the coat.”

As she spoke, a door banged in the passageway without, and the ring of iron footsteps sounded upon the stone floor. Clank! Clank! Clank!

The Baroness rose to her feet, her face all alight. The door opened; then the flush of joy faded away and the face grew white, white, white. One hand clutched the back of the bench whereon she had been sitting, the other hand pressed tightly against her side.

It was Hans the one-eyed who stood in the doorway, and black trouble sat on his brow; all were looking at him waiting.

“Conrad,” whispered the Baroness, at last. “Where is Conrad? Where is your master?” and even her lips were white as she spoke.

The one-eyed Hans said nothing.

Just then came the noise of men’s voices in the corridor and the shuffle and scuffle of feet carrying a heavy load. Nearer and nearer they came, and one-eyed Hans stood aside. Six men came struggling through the doorway, carrying a litter, and on the litter lay the great Baron Conrad. The flaming torch thrust into the iron bracket against the wall flashed up with the draught of air from the open door, and the light fell upon the white face and the closed eyes, and showed upon his body armor a great red stain that was not the stain of rust.

Suddenly Ursela cried out in a sharp, shrill voice, “Catch her, she falls!”

It was the Baroness.

Then the old crone turned fiercely upon the one-eyed Hans. “Thou fool!” she cried, “why didst thou bring him here? Thou hast killed thy lady!”

“I did not know,” said the one-eyed Hans, stupidly.

III. How the Baron came Home Shorn

But Baron Conrad was not dead. For days he lay upon his hard bed, now muttering incoherent words beneath his red beard, now raving fiercely with the fever of his wound. But one day he woke again to the things about him.

He turned his head first to the one side and then to the other; there sat Schwartz Carl and the one-eyed Hans. Two or three other retainers stood by a great window that looked out into the courtyard beneath, jesting and laughing together in low tones, and one lay upon the heavy oaken bench that stood along by the wall snoring in his sleep.

"Where is your lady?" said the Baron, presently; "and why is she not with me at this time?"

The man that lay upon the bench started up at the sound of his voice, and those at the window came hurrying to his bedside. But Schwartz Carl and the one-eyed Hans looked at one another, and neither of them spoke. The Baron saw the look and in it read a certain meaning that brought him to his elbow, though only to sink back upon his pillow again with a groan.

"Why do you not answer me?" said he at last, in a hollow voice; then to the one-eyed Hans, "Hast no tongue, fool, that thou standest gaping there like a fish? Answer me, where is thy mistress?"

"I – I do not know," stammered poor Hans.

For a while the Baron lay silently looking from one face to the other, then he spoke again. "How long have I been lying here?" said he.

"A sennight, my lord," said Master Rudolph, the steward, who had come into the room and who now stood among the others at the bedside.

"A sennight," repeated the Baron, in a low voice, and then to Master Rudolph, "And has the Baroness been often beside me in that time?" Master Rudolph hesitated. "Answer me," said the Baron, harshly.

"Not – not often," said Master Rudolph, hesitatingly.

The Baron lay silent for a long time. At last he passed his hands over his face and held them there for a minute, then of a sudden, before anyone knew what he was about to do, he rose upon his elbow and then sat upright upon the bed. The green wound broke out afresh and a dark red spot grew and spread upon the linen wrappings; his face was drawn and haggard with the pain of his moving, and his eyes wild and bloodshot. Great drops of sweat gathered and stood upon his forehead as he sat there swaying slightly from side to side.

"My shoes," said he, hoarsely.

Master Rudolph stepped forward. "But, my Lord Baron," he began and then stopped short, for the Baron shot him such a look that his tongue stood still in his head.

Hans saw that look out of his one eye. Down he dropped upon his knees and, fumbling under the bed, brought forth a pair of soft leathern shoes, which he slipped upon the Baron's feet and then laced the thongs above the instep.

"Your shoulder," said the Baron. He rose slowly to his feet, gripping Hans in the stress of his agony until the fellow winced again. For a moment he stood as though gathering strength, then doggedly started forth upon that quest which he had set upon himself.

At the door he stopped for a moment as though overcome by his weakness, and there Master Nicholas, his cousin, met him; for the steward had sent one of the retainers to tell the old man what the Baron was about to do.

"Thou must go back again, Conrad," said Master Nicholas; "thou art not fit to be abroad."

The Baron answered him never a word, but he glared at him from out of his bloodshot eyes and ground his teeth together. Then he started forth again upon his way.

Down the long hall he went, slowly and laboriously, the others following silently behind him, then up the steep winding stairs, step by step, now and then stopping to lean against the wall. So he reached a long and gloomy passageway lit only by the light of a little window at the further end.

He stopped at the door of one of the rooms that opened into this passage-way, stood for a moment, then he pushed it open.

No one was within but old Ursela, who sat crooning over a fire with a bundle upon her knees. She did not see the Baron or know that he was there.

“Where is your lady?” said he, in a hollow voice.

Then the old nurse looked up with a start. “Jesu bless us,” cried she, and crossed herself.

“Where is your lady?” said the Baron again, in the same hoarse voice; and then, not waiting for an answer, “Is she dead?”

The old woman looked at him for a minute blinking her watery eyes, and then suddenly broke into a shrill, long-drawn wail. The Baron needed to hear no more.

As though in answer to the old woman’s cry, a thin piping complaint came from the bundle in her lap.

At the sound the red blood flashed up into the Baron’s face. “What is that you have there?” said he, pointing to the bundle upon the old woman’s knees.

She drew back the coverings and there lay a poor, weak, little baby, that once again raised its faint reedy pipe.

“It is your son,” said Ursela, “that the dear Baroness left behind her when the holy angels took her to Paradise. She blessed him and called him Otto before she left us.”

IV. The White Cross on the Hill

Here the glassy waters of the River Rhine, holding upon its bosom a mimic picture of the blue sky and white clouds floating above, runs smoothly around a jutting point of land, St. Michaelsburg, rising from the reedy banks of the stream, sweeps up with a smooth swell until it cuts sharp and clear against the sky. Stubby vineyards covered its earthy breast, and field and garden and orchard crowned its brow, where lay the Monastery of St. Michaelsburg – “The White Cross on the Hill.” There within the white walls, where the warm yellow sunlight slept, all was peaceful quietness, broken only now and then by the crowing of the cock or the clamorous cackle of a hen, the lowing of kine or the bleating of goats, a solitary voice in prayer, the faint accord of distant singing, or the resonant toll of the monastery bell from the high-peaked belfry that overlooked the hill and valley and the smooth, far-winding stream. No other sounds broke the stillness, for in this peaceful haven was never heard the clash of armor, the ring of iron-shod hoofs, or the hoarse call to arms.

All men were not wicked and cruel and fierce in that dark, far-away age; all were not robbers and terror-spreading tyrants, even in that time when men’s hands were against their neighbors, and war and rapine dwelt in place of peace and justice.

Abbot Otto, of St. Michaelsburg, was a gentle, patient, pale-faced old man; his white hands were soft and smooth, and no one would have thought that they could have known the harsh touch of sword-hilt and lance. And yet, in the days of the Emperor Frederick – the grandson of the great Red-beard – no one stood higher in the prowess of arms than he. But all at once – for why, no man could tell – a change came over him, and in the flower of his youth and fame and growing power he gave up everything in life and entered the quiet sanctuary of that white monastery on the hill-side, so far away from the tumult and the conflict of the world in which he had lived.

Some said that it was because the lady he had loved had loved his brother, and that when they were married Otto of Wolbergen had left the church with a broken heart.

But such stories are old songs that have been sung before.

Clatter! clatter! Jingle! jingle! It was a full-armed knight that came riding up the steep hill road that wound from left to right and right to left amid the vineyards on the slopes of St. Michaelsburg. Polished helm and corselet blazed in the noon sunlight, for no knight in those days dared to ride the roads except in full armor. In front of him the solitary knight carried a bundle wrapped in the folds of his coarse gray cloak.

It was a sorely sick man that rode up the heights of St. Michaelsburg. His head hung upon his breast through the faintness of weariness and pain; for it was the Baron Conrad.

He had left his bed of sickness that morning, had saddled his horse in the gray dawn with his own hands, and had ridden away into the misty twilight of the forest without the knowledge of anyone excepting the porter, who, winking and blinking in the bewilderment of his broken slumber, had opened the gates to the sick man, hardly knowing what he was doing, until he beheld his master far away, clattering down the steep bridle-path.

Eight leagues had he ridden that day with neither a stop nor a stay; but now at last the end of his journey had come, and he drew rein under the shade of the great wooden gateway of St. Michaelsburg.

He reached up to the knotted rope and gave it a pull, and from within sounded the answering ring of the porter’s bell. By and by a little wicket opened in the great wooden portals, and the gentle, wrinkled face of old Brother Benedict, the porter, peeped out at the strange iron-clad visitor and the great black war-horse, streaked and wet with the sweat of the journey, flecked and dappled with flakes of foam. A few words passed between them, and then the little window was closed again; and within, the shuffling pat of the sandalled feet sounded fainter and fainter, as Brother Benedict bore the message from Baron Conrad to Abbot Otto, and the mail-clad figure was left alone, sitting there as silent as a statue.

By and by the footsteps sounded again; there came a noise of clattering chains and the rattle of the key in the lock, and the rasping of the bolts dragged back. Then the gate swung slowly open, and Baron Conrad rode into the shelter of the White Cross, and as the hoofs of his war-horse clashed upon the stones of the courtyard within, the wooden gate swung slowly to behind him.

Abbot Otto stood by the table when Baron Conrad entered the high-vaulted room from the farther end. The light from the oriel window behind the old man shed broken rays of light upon him, and seemed to frame his thin gray hairs with a golden glory. His white, delicate hand rested upon the table beside him, and upon some sheets of parchment covered with rows of ancient Greek writing which he had been engaged in deciphering.

Clank! clank! clank! Baron Conrad strode across the stone floor, and then stopped short in front of the good old man.

“What dost thou seek here, my son?” said the Abbot.

“I seek sanctuary for my son and thy brother’s grandson,” said the Baron Conrad, and he flung back the folds of his cloak and showed the face of the sleeping babe.

For a while the Abbot said nothing, but stood gazing dreamily at the baby. After a while he looked up. “And the child’s mother,” said he – “what hath she to say at this?”

“She hath naught to say,” said Baron Conrad, hoarsely, and then stopped short in his speech. “She is dead,” said he, at last, in a husky voice, “and is with God’s angels in paradise.”

The Abbot looked intently in the Baron’s face. “So!” said he, under his breath, and then for the first time noticed how white and drawn was the Baron’s face. “Art sick thyself?” he asked.

“Ay,” said the Baron, “I have come from death’s door. But that is no matter. Wilt thou take this little babe into sanctuary? My house is a vile, rough place, and not fit for such as he, and his mother with the blessed saints in heaven.” And once more Conrad of Drachenhausen’s face began twitching with the pain of his thoughts.

“Yes,” said the old man, gently, “he shall live here,” and he stretched out his hands and took the babe. “Would,” said he, “that all the little children in these dark times might be thus brought to the house of God, and there learn mercy and peace, instead of rapine and war.”

For a while he stood looking down in silence at the baby in his arms, but with his mind far away upon other things. At last he roused himself with a start. “And thou,” said he to the Baron Conrad – “hath not thy heart been chastened and softened by this? Surely thou wilt not go back to thy old life of rapine and extortion?”

“Nay,” said Baron Conrad, gruffly, “I will rob the city swine no longer, for that was the last thing that my dear one asked of me.”

The old Abbot’s face lit up with a smile. “I am right glad that thy heart was softened, and that thou art willing at last to cease from war and violence.”

“Nay,” cried the Baron, roughly, “I said nothing of ceasing from war. By heaven, no! I will have revenge!” And he clashed his iron foot upon the floor and clinched his fists and ground his teeth together. “Listen,” said he, “and I will tell thee how my troubles happened. A fortnight ago I rode out upon an expedition against a caravan of fat burghers in the valley of Gruenhoffen. They outnumbered us many to one, but city swine such as they are not of the stuff to stand against our kind for a long time. Nevertheless, while the men-at-arms who guarded the caravan were staying us with pike and cross-bow from behind a tree which they had felled in front of a high bridge the others had driven the pack-horses off, so that by the time we had forced the bridge they were a league or more away. We pushed after them as hard as we were able, but when we came up with them we found that they had been joined by Baron Frederick of Trutz-Drachen, to whom for three years and more the burghers of Gruenstadt have been paying a tribute for his protection against others. Then again they made a stand, and this time the Baron Frederick himself was with them. But though the dogs fought well, we were forcing them back, and might have got the better of them, had not my horse stumbled upon a sloping stone, and so fell and rolled over upon me. While I lay there with my horse upon me, Baron

Frederick ran me down with his lance, and gave me that foul wound that came so near to slaying me – and did slay my dear wife. Nevertheless, my men were able to bring me out from that press and away, and we had bitten the Trutz-Drachen dogs so deep that they were too sore to follow us, and so let us go our way in peace. But when those fools of mine brought me to my castle they bore me lying upon a litter to my wife's chamber. There she beheld me, and, thinking me dead, swooned a death-swoon, so that she only lived long enough to bless her new-born babe and name it Otto, for you, her father's brother. But, by heavens! I will have revenge, root and branch, upon that vile tribe, the Roderburgs of Trutz-Drachen. Their great-grandsire built that castle in scorn of Baron Casper in the old days; their grandsire slew my father's grandsire; Baron Nicholas slew two of our kindred; and now this Baron Frederick gives me that foul wound and kills my dear wife through my body." Here the Baron stopped short; then of a sudden, shaking his fist above his head, he cried out in his hoarse voice: "I swear by all the saints in heaven, either the red cock shall crow over the roof of Trutz-Drachen or else it shall crow over my house! The black dog shall sit on Baron Frederick's shoulders or else he shall sit on mine!" Again he stopped, and fixing his blazing eyes upon the old man, "Hearest thou that, priest?" said he, and broke into a great boisterous laugh.

Abbot Otto sighed heavily, but he tried no further to persuade the other into different thoughts.

"Thou art wounded," said he, at last, in a gentle voice; "at least stay here with us until thou art healed."

"Nay," said the Baron, roughly, "I will tarry no longer than to hear thee promise to care for my child."

"I promise," said the Abbot; "but lay aside thy armor, and rest."

"Nay," said the Baron, "I go back again to-day."

At this the Abbot cried out in amazement: "Sure thou, wounded man, would not take that long journey without a due stay for resting! Think! Night will be upon thee before thou canst reach home again, and the forests are beset with wolves."

The Baron laughed. "Those are not the wolves I fear," said he. "Urge me no further, I must return to-night; yet if thou hast a mind to do me a kindness thou canst give me some food to eat and a flask of your golden Michaelsburg; beyond these, I ask no further favor of any man, be he priest or layman."

"What comfort I can give thee thou shalt have," said the Abbot, in his patient voice, and so left the room to give the needful orders, bearing the babe with him.

V. How Otto Dwelt at St. Michaelsburg

So the poor, little, motherless waif lived among the old monks at the White Cross on the hill, thriving and growing apace until he had reached eleven or twelve years of age; a slender, fair-haired little fellow, with a strange, quiet serious manner.

“Poor little child!” Old Brother Benedict would sometimes say to the others, “poor little child! The troubles in which he was born must have broken his wits like a glass cup. What think ye he said to me to-day? ‘Dear Brother Benedict,’ said he, ‘dost thou shave the hair off of the top of thy head so that the dear God may see thy thoughts the better?’ Think of that now!” and the good old man shook with silent laughter.

When such talk came to the good Father Abbot’s ears, he smiled quietly to himself. “It may be,” said he, “that the wisdom of little children flies higher than our heavy wits can follow.”

At least Otto was not slow with his studies, and Brother Emmanuel, who taught him his lessons, said more than once that, if his wits were cracked in other ways, they were sound enough in Latin.

Otto, in a quaint, simple way which belonged to him, was gentle and obedient to all. But there was one among the Brethren of St. Michaelsburg whom he loved far above all the rest – Brother John, a poor half-witted fellow, of some twenty-five or thirty years of age. When a very little child, he had fallen from his nurse’s arms and hurt his head, and as he grew up into boyhood, and showed that his wits had been addled by his fall, his family knew not what else to do with him, and so sent him off to the Monastery of St. Michaelsburg, where he lived his simple, witless life upon a sort of sufferance, as though he were a tame, harmless animal.

While Otto was still a little baby, he had been given into Brother John’s care. Thereafter, and until Otto had grown old enough to care for himself, poor Brother John never left his little charge, night or day. Oftentimes the good Father Abbot, coming into the garden, where he loved to walk alone in his meditations, would find the poor, simple Brother sitting under the shade of the pear-tree, close to the bee-hives, rocking the little baby in his arms, singing strange, crazy songs to it, and gazing far away into the blue, empty sky with his curious, pale eyes.

Although, as Otto grew up into boyhood, his lessons and his tasks separated him from Brother John, the bond between them seemed to grow stronger rather than weaker. During the hours that Otto had for his own they were scarcely ever apart. Down in the vineyard, where the monks were gathering the grapes for the vintage, in the garden, or in the fields, the two were always seen together, either wandering hand in hand, or seated in some shady nook or corner.

But most of all they loved to lie up in the airy wooden belfry; the great gaping bell hanging darkly above them, the mouldering cross-beams glimmering far up under the dim shadows of the roof, where dwelt a great brown owl that, unfrightened at their familiar presence, stared down at them with his round, solemn eyes. Below them stretched the white walls of the garden, beyond them the vineyard, and beyond that again the far shining river, that seemed to Otto’s mind to lead into wonderland. There the two would lie upon the belfry floor by the hour, talking together of the strangest things.

“I saw the dear Angel Gabriel again yester morn,” said Brother John.

“So!” says Otto, seriously; “and where was that?”

“It was out in the garden, in the old apple-tree,” said Brother John. “I was walking there, and my wits were running around in the grass like a mouse. What heard I but a wonderful sound of singing, and it was like the hum of a great bee, only sweeter than honey. So I looked up into the tree, and there I saw two sparks. I thought at first that they were two stars that had fallen out of heaven; but what think you they were, little child?”

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