

THE

CASTLE OF STOLZENBURG.

Upon approaching the fruitful valley of the Urft, on the road from Call to Dahlbenden, the traveller beholds a dark and gloomy wood, from amidst whose foliage huge masses of rock, decaying masonry and half-sunk walls still rear their heads. These are the ruins of an ancient fortress, where in olden times there dwelt a knight, the pest of the neighbourhood and the terror of all travellers. His occupations were drinking, robbing and plundering — his amusements, tormenting and oppressing his vassals. Universally hated and feared, even his companions in wickedness execrated him in their hearts and cherished towards

him a secret detestation, from his wanton and cruel oppression of the poor. These miserable wretches, rendered desperate by starvation, would sometimes seek the castle for relief, but were invariably driven from its inhospitable walls with blows and mockery, or hunted out by dogs.

The Stolzenburger, thus was the tyrant called, for until the tenth or twelfth century the knights were wont to derive their family-names from their castles, led so evil a life, that the pious might well have lamented over it with tears of blood.

Possessed by avarice and urged on by covetousness, he gathered treasures by the most atrocious sins; and disregarded the words of his pious chaplain, who said that “unrighteous gain profiteth not, and that justice and righteousness can alone bring help in the day of eternal wrath.”

The affrighted merchant lingered not in the lovely though solitary valley that led to the robber's nest, but hurried with fear and trembling from the neighbourhood, where the monster was ever lurking in order to surprise the unwary traveller and to despoil him of his wealth, leaving him in poverty and wretchedness to pursue his journey, grateful to have escaped with life.

When he returned from robbery and murder, he amused himself with tormenting his vassals, whose miserable lives hung upon the mere wink of their tyrant. Innocence and matrimonial fidelity he derided as empty names. Even the ministers of the divine

word found no protection in their holy profession from his persecutions.

The hounds of the Stolzenburger were more valued by him than his serfs, whom he considered as created for his amusement and for no other purposes than to be tormented by him. Tradition has handed down to us many of the crimes of this monster; a few of the most common will suffice to give an idea of the character of this God-abandoned man.

Opposite the castle, there lived a knight of the name of Wielsteiner, with whom he vied in mockery of God and man. Tradition recounts, that they built a bridge across the Urft to bowl thereon with loaves of bread, while their vassals were perishing around them and in vain supplicating a morsel for their famishing offspring. The children of these worthies were amused with carriages drawn upon enormous loaves, while the starving poor with longing eyes greedily followed the bread, thus wantonly trodden under foot. With a merry heart, the barbarian feasted his eyes upon the emaciated forms of the wretched mothers who saw their infants expiring upon their bosoms for want of the nourishment they were unable to bestow, while he caused them to be cruelly beaten, if driven by famine, they convulsively swallowed a morsel of the crushed bread. Thus lived the Stolzenburger in his rocky nest, heaping crime upon crime, loved by none, feared and execrated by all, and daily ripening for that destruction, which he was wantonly provoking and which at length overtook him in a dreadful man-

ner. In the midst of his evil career, while life was yet strong within him, he was called upon to give an account of his deeds.

One evening, after a day spent in various inventions to annoy the villagers, as the tyrant sat at his banquet carousing, laughing at the dogs of men and scoffing at the divine omnipotence, suddenly unearthly shrieks and rushing noises were borne upon the wind. The silver-light of the beautiful moon was obscured and a flock of ravens flew screaming through the air. Darkness overspread the country; men hid themselves in fear and the animals groaned in anguish. The Stolzenburger turned pale; well might he forebode that this war of nature portended him no good. It was indeed his grave-song. He arose to pray — for the first time to pray. But ere he could utter a single word, a dreadful crash was heard, the distant mountains bowed their heads, and the Stolzenburger was no more.

Early in the following morning the inhabitants of the surrounding country, having recovered from the supernatural occurrence of the night, hastened to the castle, but all traces of it had disappeared; the summits of the battlements alone were seen projecting from an enormous gulf. The fortress, with all it contained had sunk into the abyss.

The knight has often since been seen in various forms hovering around the ruins, but most frequently does he appear in the shape of a black hound, guarding, it is supposed, the treasures that lie buried in

the halls of the castle; the fame of which, in later times, has drawn many persons from distant lands, but who all have returned satisfied that they were the dupes of their own avarice and credulity.