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THE WISPERTHAL.

Upon the banks of the Wisper near Lorch, the traveller will meet with a wild and secluded glen, sprinkled here and there with a few miserable huts. This valley continued long uninhabited; for many who attempted to take up their abode within its solitary precincts, had been alarmed and harassed in various ways, by spirits and goblins, and some were even supposed to have been carried off, or, at all events, they disappeared in a very mysterious manner. Indeed, so great was the terror it excited in men's minds, that no traveller would venture to visit it. At length, however, three bold youths, who chanced

to be travelling on a tour of pleasure, along the banks of the Rhine, halted at the small hostelry of Lorch, where they were soon regaled with various tales respecting the dreaded valley. This piqued their curiosity and being three daring men, they resolved forthwith to visit the glen; and, if possible, to unravel the mystery. Having well plied themselves with the juice of the rich grapes, that grow in the neighbourhood and having girded on their arms, they soon left the valley behind them and made their way into the gloomy wilderness, where after half an hour's walk they arrived in front of an immense mass of rock, which had nearly the form of a castle. This resemblance to a building was the more remarkable from its being perforated with three apertures, representing the narrow pointed windows of a gothic cathedral and their observing three females of marvelous beauty, looking out of these three apertures, who greeted them with the extraordinary salutation of "Hark! Hark! Hark!" "It does not after all look so terrible as we have been told," said one of the three travellers. "By my holy faith," exclaimed another — "there are not three such faces from the Rhine to the Danube. I am in love already." "Let us mount, and introduce ourselves," added the third. "It is a pity that three such roses should thus waste their sweetness on the desert air."

The latter proposition was readily assented to by the two others, so they examined the way and soon discovered a narrow arch, half concealed by ivy and

brambles, through which they entered and having traversed a long dark gallery, they came to a rough staircase, or a mass of stones having that appearance. This led them into a lofty grotto, but they had almost repented of their rashness, for of a sudden they found themselves overtaken by darkness, so impenetrable, that they could not see their hands before them. After groping about for a long time, one of them, at last discovered a narrow passage, through which they squeezed their bodies and had no sooner done so, than their eyes were dazzled by the splendour of a thousand candles, which burst suddenly upon them. When they had somewhat recovered the effect of this rapid transition from darkness to blazing light, they perceived that they stood upon the threshold of a large hall, whose walls were covered from top to bottom with splendid mirrors formed of the purest crystal. Between the mirrors were countless candlesticks, with lighted tapers, beneath which burned vessels filled with rich perfumes. "Welcome, Welcome, Welcome, thrice Welcome!" exclaimed three enchanting voices; "Come to us!" Where upon three maidens stood before them and extended their hands. The youths were about to reply to this salutation in the most gallant manner, by imprinting a kiss on the ruby lips of the fair damsels, but they were strangely perplexed how to effect this; for instead of three, they now saw before, behind and above them, hundreds of beautiful women; three of whom seemed to peep through each of the mirrors and to extend their hands

towards them; laughing all the while at their embarrassment.

Whilst they stood gaping and astonished, one of the crystal slabs turned on its hinges, and a venerable old man clothed in black entered. He was tall and his beard was as white as the snow upon the Drachenfels. After a short pause he approached the youths and said: "There are my three daughters. You are perfectly welcome, to woo and win them if you can. You will not find me niggardly, for I am no Jew. I will give each of them a dowry of a thousand pounds weight of gold." Upon this, the three young girls burst into a loud fit of laughter, which rendered the young men so bewildered, that they knew not what to think or to say. Seeing them hesitate, the old man cried out at length, "Let each of you select one of my daughters." Although they began to repent of their rashness, and had little taste for so strange a union, the thought of the rich dowry of 5000 pounds of gold overcame their fears and consequently they advanced as they supposed towards the Ladies, but when they thought to seize their hands, their arms only came in contact with the cold mirror. At this the old man burst into a roar of laughter, which seemed to be repeated by a thousand echoes. Having enjoyed their confusion for a short time he exclaimed: "Come, come my gallant sons in law that are to be, since you are unable to find your way to the Ladies yourselves, I will assist you." And so saying, he led them one by one to each of the maidens, and it was not long ere the charms of the ladies

triumphed over their fears and they all became so desperately enamoured, that they implored the old gentleman to give his consent to their union. "With all my heart," replied he, "and moreover I will permit you a foretaste of your happiness. You may kiss your brides." As it may be well imagined, they did not wait for a second bidding, so they instantly imprinted, some hundred kisses on the rosy lips of their charmers, the effect of which was that they became quite intoxicated with delight. "Hear me, my sons," said the old man, interrupting them, "you must now give a trifling proof of the sincerity of your love, without which I cannot consent to the marriage ceremony." "Willingly, willingly," replied they, "ask for our lives and they are yours." "I admire your readiness," replied the father, "and will immediately put it to the test. The fact is this: My daughters lost their three favourite birds yesterday evening, one is a starling, the second a raven and the third a magpie. You will doubtless find them somewhere in the adjoining wood and you will know them by the following signs. The starling, if it be my eldest daughter's, will ask you a riddle, the raven, which is the property of my second child, will sing you a song and the magpie, which belongs to my youngest, will tell you a tale of her grandmother. If you are destined to become the husbands of their respective mistresses, they will hop upon your shoulders and follow you home. Go! may success attend you."

The three youths thought this rather a strange commission and that the old man was mad, but as the undertaking was not very perilous and the birds very tame, they instantly made their bows and sallied forth into the wood where they found the three birds sitting together upon a branch of withered oak about a quarter of a league from the rock-built castle.

“Starling,” exclaimed the first youth smiling; “if you belong to my beloved, tell me thy riddle.” The starling chattered screamed and after a few circles in the air, flew upon his shoulder and said in a very distinct voice.

“Say, what in thy face there be,
Which in the glass thou canst not see?”

“Come, old crow, sing thy song, and follow me to the bower of my beloved,” exclaimed the second.

The raven sang with rather a hoarse voice.

“Three priests into Utopia,
Once, on one horse did hie:
When three birds already roasted
Before their mouths did fly:
But vainly, they open’d their jaws full wide.
The birds were too large to fly inside.

The priests returned sore hungry,
To their country back from thence,
And swore that the Utopians
Had not a grain of sense.
For small must else their roasted birds have been
Or men have had much larger mouths, to let these birds fly in.”

No sooner had the raven finished his song, than he gave a sort of chuckling laugh and hopping down

from the tree perched upon the head of the second youth.

“My pie, my friend,” now exclaimed the third, “follow the example of thy companions and tell me the history of thy grand-mother.”

The pie began, saying :

“My grand-mother was a magpie, and lay eggs, and these eggs produced other magpies, and if she had not died, she would still be alive.— Ah! Ah! Ah!”

With these words she flapped her wings and laughed so like a human being, that all the three youths trembled and then she flew upon the hand of the third youth.

The young merchants not a little rejoiced, to have accomplished their task so easily, hastened back to the rocky castle, which they reached about nightfall. But who can depict their surprise and disappointment at finding that not a vestige remained of all the magnificence they had previously beheld. In vain they sought for the old man and his beautiful daughters; nothing remained but the cold grey walls and pillars dripping with water and covered with weeds and moss. They were just on the point of making their way out, when suddenly in the three niches, where the enchantresses had stood, there appeared three alabaster tables covered with sparkling wine and costly viands. They were exceedingly hungry, owing to their exercise, and were on the point of helping themselves to the good things spread out before them, when of a sudden three old toothless hags appeared