

The old dame, according to report, was killed by many snakes and above all, was well acquainted with the healing powers of herbs and roots—she was respected by some and feared by all, may even have wild beasts of the forest. For they not only offered her no injury, but seemed to obey her voice. Her whole property and in fact her only source of subsistence in a few white hens of extraordinary size and beauty, which were accustomed to their food in the woods and to perch by night on the head of her lonely

THE
WHITE HEN OF WOLFSHAG.

One day, however, she was surprised to find that the narrow track, leading from the mountain road. They appeared weary and sorrowful and when doing descended the steep path to the castle. The crone after examining them for a moment, beheld their friendly welcome and offered them refreshments of bread and milk. The younger of the two, a boy of thirteen, joyfully accepted her offer, but

At no great distance from the castle of Windeck, there exists a farm, called the "Hennegraben" (Hen's ditch). Between its smiling vineyards and dark and lofty chesnut groves, traces may still be seen of a moat which surrounds one of the outworks of the castle. About the time we allude to the Bishop of Strasburg was held prisoner at Windeck, and an aged crone, who was called by the surrounding inhabitants "*the woman of the Wood,*" lived in a small hut of moss near the adjacent Wolfshag.

The old dame, according to report, was skilled in many secret arts and above all, was well acquainted with the healing powers of herbs and roots. She was respected by some and feared by all, nay even by the wild beasts of the forest. For they not only offered her no injury, but seemed to obey her voice. Her whole property and in fact her only secret consisted in a few white hens of extraordinary size and beauty, which were accustomed to seek their food in the woods and to perch by night at the head of her lonely couch.

One day, as the old woman was sitting before her hut, she beheld two boys of exceeding beauty approaching by the narrow track, leading from the mountain-road. They appeared weary and sorrowful and upon seeing her demanded the shortest path to the castle. The crone after scrutinizing them for a moment bade them a friendly welcome and offered them refreshments of bread and fruits. The younger of the two, a boy of thirteen, joyfully accepted her offer, but the elder, who might have been between sixteen and seventeen, held his apple in his hand with a dejected air, whilst his eyes were filled with tears. But he endeavoured nevertheless to conceal his sorrow by going to the little well, hewn in the neighbouring rock, where he washed his face in the fresh and crystal water. As the rose is refreshed by the morning dew, so were his cheeks now restored to the ruddy glow of health; whereupon the old woman of the wood regarded him awhile with a look of unwonted

kindness, and then exclaimed. "Come, come, strip-ling, thou canst not deceive me ! Thou art no boy, but a gentle maiden, clad in mans attire. Confide in me therefore, my children, and tell me where your parents live and what you seek at the castle of Windeck?"

The children both began to weep, but at length the elder of the two answered :

"Thou hast spoken truly, mother. I am indeed a maiden, my name is Imma von Erstein and this is my brother. We are orphans—Our uncle the Bishop of Strasburg reared us with more than paternal care, but he now lingers a prisoner in yonder castle and we are on our road to implore its lord to liberate our second father."

"Have ye then brought his ransom?" demanded the old woman.

"Alas!" replied the maiden, drawing a diamond-cross from her bosom, "I have nothing else but this to offer, but we will beg the Lord of Windeck to detain us as hostages, until our uncle shall have paid the ransom."

"Fear not," said the old woman of the wood, smiling at this pious answer, "Your devotion shall not go unrewarded, I will release the Bishop myself," and she parted the curls from the maidens forehead and kissed her brow. "Listen to me, my children!" continued she "The Strasburghers will shortly advance upon the castle and besiege it. Last night I met two spies, who had concealed themselves

in this thicket. After thoroughly reconnoitring the defences of the fortress they discovered its weak side, which is near yonder wood of firs, where the stone cross stands. Hasten therefore to the castle, demand an audience of Sir Reinhard, the young knight of Windeck and tell him, if he values his safety, he must forthwith throw up an entrenchment upon that spot, and that it must be finished before sun set, for, I fear the enemy will be here this very night."

"But will the knight restore our uncle to liberty?" demanded Imma.

"I will intrust you with a ransom that shall insure his freedom," answered the old woman. Thereupon she clapped her hands and instantly her white fowls came flying and running towards her from all sides. Having selected one of the finest, she gave it to Imma saying; "Carry this bird to Sir Reinhard of Windeck and say, in my name, that he must release the Bishop of Strasburg; that will be sufficient."

The children looked at her with astonishment, and thought that she was making sport of their distress. But she again exclaimed. "Do as I bid ye; as soon as the sun has sunk behind the distant hills, the knight must place this hen near the holy cross, where the enemy will make their attack and let him leave the rest to me. He has not sufficient hands in his castle to make the trench broad and deep enough, but my good hen will soon finish it for him."

Having said this she caressed the bird and chanted

in a soft and scarcely audible voice the following mysterious and irregular rhymes.

List! list! to what I say
And, at the fall of day,
When all but owls do sleep
Dig, dig—both wide and deep;
The earth thou must scrape
Until the grave doth gape
And discover a hero's brand
Which doth the rust withstand.
Go! and ere midnight strike,
Finish the magic dyke."

Imma took the hen, but not without a thrill of terror. However, the open-hearted and friendly manner of the old woman somewhat restored her confidence and gave her courage, though she could not imagine, that a hen could throw up an entrenchment, which was considered impracticable for a body of soldiers. Her brother did not show the slightest signs of fear, but rather rejoiced at the wonderful sight, which the hen would afford him. They then took their leave and set out towards the castle.

Scarcely, however, had they ascended half way up the mountain, on the summit of which stood the fortress, ere they saw the young knight coming towards them. He was of a noble form and although his calm and serious demeanour somewhat terrified the maiden, yet the gentle tone of his voice entirely dispelled her apprehensions.

To his questions, who they were, and what they sought at the castle, Imma answered.

“ Noble knight, my uncle the Bishop of Strasburg, is detained a prisoner in your dungeons. He is our father, for alas ! we have no parents, we therefore humbly implore you to set him at liberty and to keep us as hostages, in his stead. ”

The knight who could not conceal his emotion examined the children, one after the other, until his eyes rested accidentally upon the hen, which Imma carried. She blushed and related in incoherent sentences all the circumstances connected with it.

The Lord of Windeck listened to her attentively and cast on her such a penetrating look, that she was sorely embarrassed, so that she hesitated and could make no answer until her brother stood forward and exclaimed.

“ Imma, that is not what the woman said. ”

At these words, Imma felt as if a flame of fire was burning in her countenance. “ Noble maiden, ” said the knight “ you have come hither under the direction of God and you shall remain here and return home again under the protection of my arm, whenever it shall so please you. Come then and prepare an agreeable surprise for your uncle. ”

Whilst Imma and her brother were engaged with the Bishop, the knight proceeded with the preparations for the defence of his castle. He was well aware of the weak part of the fortifications near the fir-wood and had been at work for some days excavating a ditch at that place. — But the time was too short and therefore the message from the woman of

the Wood was very welcome to him, and when he considered all the circumstances, he felt himself inclined to place the greatest confidence in her commands.

When the first stars twinkled in the heavens, he carried the hen to the cross, where his grand father had fallen and had been buried. At the hour of midnight he returned to the spot and found to his utmost astonishment, a deep and broad trench, with a breast-work and by the bright star-light he saw his grand father's sword, which had been laid by his side in the grave, glittering before him. He then turned to look for the magic hen but she had disappeared.

Towards morning the Strasburghers approached in three columns and prepared to storm the battlements, but the trench, made by the hen, defeated their purpose and they were driven back with great slaughter.

In the mean time Imma made a deep impression on the heart of the knight of Windeck, nor was she indifferent to his chivalrous gallantry and noble virtues. But the Bishop who was still detained prisoner would not hear of their union, until he at length obtained his liberty and granted his consent. Imma then became the wife of the Lord of Windeck and the Bishop joined their hands, in the cathedral of Strasburg.

The "hen's ditch" has retained its name, but the tradition, like all other memorials of the olden time, is gradually dying away and would perish altogether were it not for the researches of the traveller and lover of antiquity.