

RODENSTEIN.

“Hold strict watch over the castle during my absence—draw up the bridge, let the sentinels be vigilant and see that the men at arms remain steadfast at their post. In a few days I shall return.”

Thus spoke Hans von Rodenstein to his old and faithful senechal, as he mounted his steed in the court yard of his stately castle which derived its name from the red stone of which it was built. For a short time he might be seen descending the gentle slope of the hill, accompanied by a train of horsemen and sumpter beasts, but ere long he disappeared, concealed by the sombre foliage of the forest paths.

The Elector Palatine, Rupert, called "the Old," did not neglect chivalrous exercises, although he devoted much of his time and treasure to science. For the university of Heidelberg, which vied with the most celebrated schools of Italy and France was founded by him in 1386, and his faithful and wise counsellor, Marsilius von Jugher, was appointed its first rector.

In order therefore to gratify the numerous chivalry of the Palatinate, the Elector had proclaimed a tournament at his magnificent castle of Heidelberg which, both at that period as well as in later times, was remarkable amongst the most splendid palaces of the surrounding Princes, on account of its agreeable situation, its beauty and the extent of its buildings, which were for the most part erected by the Elector himself.

No sooner was this proclamation made known than knights thronged from all quarters; scarcely in fact did a single inhabitant of the numerous castles, whose ruins still continue to adorn the valleys of the Neckar, of the Odenwald and of the trans-rhenane Palatinate, decline the chivalrous appeal. Indeed there were few who did not deem themselves sufficiently strong of arm and sure of eye to gain a prize. Many dames and maidens also of noble birth were seen entering the Prince's hospitable palace, mounted on their richly caparisoned palfreys.

Hans von Rodenstein was not the last to present himself at the festival. There had been a long interval of peace and he was weary of the tedious life he

led in his secluded castle, which lay buried in a woody nook in the Odenwald, where his only diversion by day consisted in chasing the stags and boars that abounded in the mighty forests, which stretch as far as Krumbach and Erbach to Reichelsheim and the Malchenberg, and in drowning the hours of night by drinking and carousing with his wild companions. The knight was of a reckless and violent character, he had been reared amid feuds and the excitements of war. Huntsmen and warriors had been his only companions since the premature loss of his parents; and he now drew towards the close of an uncontrolled and irregular youth without ever having experienced the influence of gentler feelings.

To few therefore were the news from Heidelberg more welcome than to him. On the morning after receiving the notice, he set out and before evening he reached the bridge thrown over the Neckar and found the little city filled with knights and squires, who were attracted thither by the same object. The lists were erected in the court yard of the castle, where many valiant nobles had already presented themselves and had suspended their shields in token of defiance.

The appointed day having arrived, crowds of beautiful women took their stations in the balconies surrounding the lists, in which a very sea of glittering armour, nodding plumes and flashing swords blended together and presented a most splendid and varied scene. The neighing of gallant steeds as they pawed the ground; the running to and fro

of squires, the clashing of knights armour joined to the cries of heralds and umpires and the shouts of the spectators formed a spectacle more gay and animated than any that had been witnessed since the peace.

Among the ladies, whom Rupert's noble consort had assembled round her, none was more fair than the Lady Maria von Hochberg. The eyes of all were attracted towards her and many secretly hoped to receive the prize of valour from her fair hands. Not one of the gallant nobles, however, bore her colours, for she was still disengaged and this was her first appearance in public. Blushes of modesty and embarrassment therefore tinged her cheeks, when she saw the multitude of admiring eyes that were directed towards her, than which none were more ardent than those of the Rodensteiner who experienced an unknown sensation at the sight of this beautiful creature. He had before paid but little regard to female beauty ; but he now felt its power in his rude breast, the more intensely from its having been steeled hitherto by indifference, as securely as by its case of plated mail.

The trumpets having sounded the note of preparation, Rodenstein started from the unwonted reverie into which he had sunk. A desire to distinguish himself above all his competitors burned in his bosom, for he knew that Maria would be a witness of the contest. This feeling nerved his arm with super-human strength, so that more than a dozen brave knights were successively hurled from their saddles by the force of

his unerring lance. At length the lists being exhausted and no one venturing to encounter his powerful arm, the first prize was awarded to him. This consisted of a Milan casque of rich and curious workmanship, which the Electress first received from the hands of a page and then presented it to Maria von Hochberg, requesting her to place it on the head of the victorious combatant. Maria performed this service with mingled grace and modest embarrassment. Hundreds envied the fortunate knight, when he rose from the kneeling position in which, according to custom, he had placed himself and approached the Elector, who greeted him in the most friendly and cordial manner.

From this day Hans von Rodenstein was an altered man. His former restless spirit seemed to have abandoned him. Those who had known him from childhood, were astonished at the change. He often absented himself from his castle during several days—but he did not lurk in the forest, as formerly, watching for foemen and wild deer, for his hours were passed in gentle dalliance in ladies bowers. In short it was not long before he entered the gates of Rodenstein, beneath arches of flowers and verdure and amidst the shouts of his vassals. For at his side rode the angelic form of his beautiful bride Maria von Hochberg, who gained the hearts of all who looked upon her.

Peace, happiness and festivity now reigned in the castle whose halls had formerly only resounded with

the din of war. No couple ever were more faithful or more tender. The man whose thoughts had been hitherto solely occupied with the sports of the field or those of the cup and banquet, seemed now to require and wish for nothing else than undisturbed domestic happiness. The gentle Maria congratulated herself in having effected so great a change in her husband and indignantly disbelieved the stories, which were related of Rodenstein's former dissipated life. But to her sorrow, she was soon destined to find that the demon of evil slumbered, but was not destroyed within him. By degrees he grew weary of passing his life inactively by the side of Maria, whose gentleness and soft caresses had lost their magic influence. His fondness for the chase gradually returned — his visits to the neighbouring castles became more frequent and his former dissipated companions, who had ridiculed and at length deserted him, again assembled within his halls.

Maria perceived that the influence she had formerly held over her husband daily decreased. At first she endeavoured to restrain him by caresses and tender reproaches, but both were ineffectual, so at length she abandoned herself entirely to the silent grief that overwhelmed her heart. She frequently sat whole evenings and even spent half the dreary night watching and wailing, whilst the sound of boisterous revellings rose to her lonely chamber from the vaulted halls below. There Rodenstein banqueted with his profligate companions. He had become in-

different to his lovely wife; her gentle spirit had lost all power over his rekindled and libertine passions.

In this manner Maria passed her tearful and joyless life. The only thing, which supported her sinking spirits was the prospect of soon becoming a mother. She comforted herself with the hope that this tie would be a means of recalling her husband's alienated affections and of reviving the better feelings of his heart. Alas! there is no gleam of hope, however feeble and languid, which is not hailed by the dejected and wretched spirit as a light of deliverance.

One evening as she waited in anxious expectation for her husband, for the day had passed without his having visited her chamber, her waiting maid entered and informed her, that he had ridden out early in the morning, attended by a numerous retinue. On a sudden she heard the clatter of hoofs and the barking of dogs in the court yard, and, in a moment more, the knight appeared before her armed *cap-a-pie*, shaking the very walls with his clanging sword and rattling spurs. Maria, quailed with terror at his appearance, for his eyes rolled wildly and his cheeks and forehead changed alternately from fiery red to deathlike paleness. "Maria," said he roughly, "Maria!" I must remain abroad to night. The knight of the Schnellert has dared to insult me in a manner that can only be washed out with blood. My brave followers stand ready in the court yard.—Nay—attempt not to dissuade me—farewell—I must depart."

The unhappy Lady threw herself despairingly upon

his neck, entreating and conjuring him not to expose his life, but to think of her and the child she bore in her bosom. With a voice half suffocated with emotion she reminded him of the blissful days which they had passed together in that castle and of her subsequent sorrow and solitude. But neither prayers or tears could make any impression upon his iron heart or alter his determination. Indeed when she clung to him in an agony of grief, throwing her arms round his neck and bedewing his armour with her scalding tears, he thrust her brutally from him and cast her senseless upon the floor.

Midnight approached and the Knight of Rodenstein lay concealed with his troop amidst the dense thickets, which surround the Schnellertsburg. He was anxiously awaiting the favourable moment for attacking the strong hold of his enemy, when of a sudden he saw the dark forest illuminated by a bright light, and a pale form, which bore the features of his ill-treated wife, appeared before him carrying a dead child in her arms and then vanished, casting upon him a mournful glance, which pierced his inmost soul and chilled the very marrow of his bones.

The awful vision not only announced the death of his once adored Maria but appeared before him as if to reproach him with having murdered both her and her innocent child. Stung with remorse, Rodenstein threw himself upon the ground and wept in bitter agony — but in another instant he was aroused by the clash of armour and by the battle cry of the ad-

vancing enemy. His adversary, the brave Lord of Schnellertsburg, had been apprized of his hostile intentions and had watched his movements. Having collected a powerful body of men at arms, he had availed himself of the darkness to surprize his foe, whom he thus surrounded and attacked with overwhelming numbers. Rodenstein and his vassals fought like lions at bay, but a blow, which he received in the forehead, at length laid him lifeless on the blood stained ground. Upon this his followers lost courage and taking to flight surrendered his castle to pillage.

The neighbouring convent bells had scarcely tolled twelve upon the following midnight, ere the inhabitants of the Odenwald were aroused from their slumbers and struck with consternation, by the most hideous and extraordinary apparitions. Frightful noises and howlings arose around and over the Rodenstein. A spectre horseman with a ghastly countenance, like that of the slaughtered knight, was seen scudding wildly through the air, mounted upon a coal black steed whose nostrils snorted fire and whose hoofs rung with the dire echo of rolling thunder. At his heels came a thousand hellish fiends of horrid and fantastic shapes, some half resembling men, some beasts, some dogs, who pursued him, until the crowing of the village cocks announced the approach of day.

Each night at the same hour did this awful vision invariably return and thus has it appeared ever and anon, leaving the miserable horseman neither rest or repose from his torments.

The peasants of the neighbourhood crossed themselves in terror as they listened to the infernal uproar of the wild chase, which is said to presage some dire misfortune to those who hear it. The history of Rodenstein and his inhuman conduct is still the subject of converse to the present day with the inhabitants of the Odenwald, who point out his fate as an example to their children.

Upon leaving the neighbourhood of Erbach, so rich in antiquities and works of art, the traveller will do well to pass through the village of Krumbach to visit divers wonders of nature, that abound in the vicinity. Amongst these are the granit-column and the Felsberg. There also he will find the ruins of Rodenstein embosomed in the deepest solitude of the forest and still crowning a low hill not far from Reichelsheim. It is nearly two centuries since the family to which it once belonged became extinct, but the story of the wild huntsman is still related by old and young, and causes this sequestered spot and its deserted ruins to be regarded with no ordinary sentiments of awe and curiosity.

FINIS.