

## The Chapel of Eckstein.

Fragment of a Day-Dream.

By the Author of „An Art-Student in Munich“.

Upon the first swelling ridge of the Noric Alps if you travel towards —, may be seen the white walls of an old monastery. As the winding road approaches the slope upon which stands this decaying building, the eye of the traveller generally rests with a passing interest upon the white tower of the church, surmounted with its small red-tiled cupola, upon the high pitched and red-tiled roofs and upon the glittering rows of windows which break the monotony of long weather-beaten walls. Ivy, pomegranate and vines fling their luxuriant masses over the crumbling walls of the cloister-garden, and here and there rises a cross, or crucifix, or statue of the Virgin.

Travelling along this road, my eyes had been especially attracted by this pile of buildings, not so much from its intrinsic picturesqueness as because I had heard a peculiar history attached to a little chapel moulding within its graveyard. In fact to visit this little chapel of Eckstein was the object of my somewhat long journey.

The sun was gradually sinking towards the west as the Eilwagen by which I travelled approached the monastery, flushing the snowy peaks of the most distant mountain chain with crimson and violet, whilst the intermediate range was cast into a dull haze, and the grass and flowers carpeting the gentle undulations of the near slopes, gleamed as if cast in molten gold and studded with precious gems. Descending from the dust-covered and heavy Eilwagen I quitted the road and, clambering up a stony path-way, soon reached the crumbling gate-way in the garden-wall. The bell from the red cupola tolled sweetly and solemnly through the pure mountain air, making the silence yet more perceptible when the rattle of the departing Eilwagen and the cracking of the Postillion's whip had died away in the distance.

A little meagre old monk replied to the summons I had given by the hoarse voice of the bell hanging in the gate-way; and upon my inquiry whether I might be permitted to see the frescoes of Caspar Hildebrandt in the grave-yard chapel, his thin old face flushed with sudden surprise. „Right willingly! right willingly,“ he exclaimed with an almost nervous eagerness, „seldom does a foreigner — for such I take you by your speech to be — inquire after the works of the Blessed Hildebrandt! A painter or two from Munich we now and then see — but by them even these works seem forgotten — aye, and by the Brothers too — by the Brothers, pity it should be so! sin that it should be so! Aye, aye!“ sighed the old monk, sinking his head mournfully upon his breast and nervously working his hands to and fro as he led the way rapidly before me, muttering all the time: „Who! who, when I am gone, will have the heart to love the works of the Blessed Hildebrandt and the works of the Saint Beata Commenda, my Saint Beata — who? — Who but I should have transcribed into a missal these words written in the colours of the flowers, in the colours of the clouds? — But He lives! — and so does the Blessed Hildebrandt and



the Blessed Beata! all live, all live! The mother of Life has appeared in the world — the Blessed Mother of Life — if but all saw this! if but all saw this! — it is not madness — this belief — if the Brothers but saw this!“ And thus strangely muttering, and hurrying on rapidly still working his hands to and from my singular conductor, who I began to fear was somewhat crazy, led the way through an old and rankly over-grown garden, till we approached the grave-yard. Two monks meeting us, slowly bowed their heads, then solemnly passed, and it seemed to me as though a glance of scornful and yet quiet merriment passed between the Brothers as they glanced at my conductor and then muttered to each other: „Brother Luke will be in one of his trances to-night“ „Aye but he lives, thou knowest, he is not dead!“

Drawing engerly from his bosom a quaint old key, with trembling and lean hands, the monk unlocked the door of a small gothic chapel, which rose amidst a heap of mouldering graves. Upon an old stone cross half fallen upon a grassy mound, to the right hand of the chapel door, I observed hanging two fresh garlands, one of ivy and moss, the other of the fairest Alpine flowers. As the little monk passed this grave, he muttered an Ave and devoutly crossed himself.

The exterior of the little chapel at the first glance appeared one intricate and wild mass of the large blue Alpine clematis, of honeysuckle, jessamine and pomegranate. Upon a more careful inspection, however, the eye discovered here and there some grey bits of graceful gothic tracery showing forth amidst the fresh leaves and blossoms. Here a slender pinnacle piercing the veil of clematis; there a narrow window rich with stems and leaves of stone. All told of a marvel of human love and skill, veiled by this yet more marvellous skill of Nature.

The old man stood eagerly beckoning to me on the worn steps leading up into the chapel, his lips quivered and a glow suffused his withered and hollow cheeks and gave a flickering of youth to his singular countenance, „Come, come!“ he said „that is beautiful — I love that — but this is more beautiful — here the hieroglyphics speak in rays of light — come!“ But I still lingered for a moment as my eye fell upon some lovely foliage chiselled in stone above the low portal. It was scarcely to be outrivalled by the blooming sprays of living honeysuckle which swept across it. All formed a lovely poetical picture which rivetted my eyes and for a few moments caused me to forget my excited and impatient guide. The honeysuckle, odorous with its richly tinted blossoms and filled with the soft and slumberous music of bees, having dropped its branches tenderly around the portal, revealed to its left, standing within a narrow niche, the mutilated figure of an angel. The angel was headless, yet filled with a strange grace; he stood in a commanding attitude, the sunset glow glimmered on his broad breast, while soft green shadows from swaying leaves trembled gently around his strong and naked feet. Campanula, columbine and the handsome acanthus-leaved thistle, common in South Germany, grew around the twisting stems of the honeysuckle and upon the low flight of steps leading up into the chapel.

My singular guide had already entered, and with arms crossed upon his breast, in deep devotion he stood within the chapel. Coming forth suddenly from the broad gush of evening sunlight into the gloom, it was some moments ere my eyes accustomed themselves to the green and solemn shadows which pervaded the place. Gradually, however, it appeared to me as though the altar-piece occupying the centre of three niches facing the entrance became instinct with an extraordinary brilliancy and life. The subject was the Crucifixion. The Saviour, however, was represented as spiritually triumphant, although en-



during bodily torture. Blood drops from his pale hands, feet, and brow as he hangs upon the cross, yet physical agony is forgotten by Him in a moment of intense love; the soul rejoices in the completion of its sublime mission. A gleam of celestial glory strikes upon the pallid divine countenance, and its transfiguration is completed. From the divine countenance radiates glory, falling upon the upraised brows of a group of martyrs triumphant, male and female, young and old. They raise their eyes beaming with love towards their adored Lord; they clasp each others hands with tenderest human sympathy as they encircle Him, their feet scornfully trampling upon the attributes of their bitter martyrdom, wheels, swords, axes and racks. And whilst I gazed, I beheld how, forth from the dim distance in the picture, poured onward, approaching the cross and its divine Blessing, a vast multitude. From all ends of the earth they came, beings of all nations, of all times — the Pagan as well as the Christian; all those human souls who, recognising the divine mission of suffering, have read in it the voice of the Divine Father, through faith in its awful tones have joyfully endured all anguish for the sake of Truth and the rights of Humanity. Here, too, were hosts who had not endured material martyrdom, had never felt the axe or the flame, but who had been scourged and scorched by martyrdom of the spirit and many of them showed under the tender forms of women and little children, and here were the poor and despised, here were poets, philosophers, patriots, and all swept on to swell the triumphant Hallelujah!

Whilst I gazed, my heart burnt within me „and shalt thou ever have strength to join this victorious multitude?“ rang through my spirit. „Shall we ever join this victorious multitude?“ murmured the little old monk as he eagerly pressed up to my side „shall we, shall we, thinkest thou? The Blessed Hildebrandt is there and Beata Commenda — there! there — dost thou not see them in the crowd? — that old man with the countenance bright as an Alpine peak at sunrise, and that girl who clings to his side — dost thou not see her with her crisp golden hair flying back from her faintly veined temples and her lips like streaks of sunsetlight, parted with a cry of triumph? Oh! thou must see her! She presses to her breast a palette — but it is stained with her blood!“ Eagerly and yet more urgently the little old monk pointed towards a distant portion of the picture, but though I strained my eyes and was strongly affected by the mysterious and passionate manner of the old man, I could discover no such figures. „Oh blind of heart“, said the poor old man mournfully shaking his head — „then canst not see them — but I do — and not now alone, but always, and in my missal pages where I have traced with unworthy hand these hieroglyphics, the whole world may see them; perhaps I will show them to thee, and I will tell thee this, that the crimson which stains my vellum page is crimson heart's blood. None other crimson was worthy.“

A strange and undefined terror came creeping over me, as I listened to the little monk's words. I turned towards the picture which filled the niche to the left of the altar-piece I longed to shake off a chill, which these strange crazy words had sent through me.

This fresco consisted but of two figures. The background was a wild, tropical wilderness, palms, palmetoes, and a vast undergrowth of rampant and poisonous weeds massed together; a terrible tornado was lowering over the scene, orange stretches of angry sky glowed beneath mountains of lurid cloud which rolled up from the desolate horizon. Stretched upon a rocky piece of ground studded with brilliant flowers lay the wan and lifeless body of Abel. Eve approaches it; she creeps along the earth, smitten down by the might of her undefined terror; the heavy waves of her golden hair sweeping the dust:



she gazes with petrified agony, with white, parted lips, and with eyes more fearful in their bewilderment than are the vacant, unclosed, dead orbs of the poor corpse fixed with a blank stare upon the leaden sky, which hangs like a pall over the mother and her murdered son.

„*The Mother of Death!*“ whispered the old monk mournfully and hoarsely — „do not pause so long there; I like not that picture; here is the truth and the life!“ and he would have dragged me towards the companion fresco. „*The Mother of Life!*“ he exclaimed, and devoutly knelt, and, crossing himself, remained sunk in a deep silence.

This picture also contained but two figures. The very faintest streaks of early dawn stretched across the horizon. At the mouth of the sepulchre knelt the Madonna pressing to her breast the revered head of her dear son. She has composed the stiff pale limbs, she has covered them with pure, white linen, she has prepared her beloved son for the tomb, yet within her soul has dawned the thought, „he is not dead, he only sleepeth. Death is no more!“ And the sublime joy proclaims itself in her solemn and upraised countenance.

The guide being still sunk in his reverie, I undisturbedly took a survey of the remaining works of art which this small chapel contained. The walls were one rich mosaic of gold and colour, of medallions and of arabesques, each design typical of the words „He lives!“ which, in golden letters, were repeated again and again upon the walls.

It would require hours faithfully to describe the rich and tender fancies, interwoven with a vast profusion in these decorations. All that in nature speaks of life, of sleep, of an awaking, of time, of an eternity and of suffering, of joy, of hope and of reward, and of all the epochs of human life were there wrought out with a rare and patient love. And this even into the remotest recesses of the building.

„Here must be the labour of an entire life-time!“ I exclaimed, turning at length to the monk who had again approached me, apparently somewhat calmed. „What is known of the life of the Painter Hildebrandt, and of this Beata of whom you speak so enthusiastically? their names have made but small noise in the external world; are there many traditions lingering in this cloister about them? when did they live, some centuries ago? or within the memory of men? I cannot test these works by the ordinary chronology of Art!“

„When? when?“ repeated the old man with some of his former irritability returning upon him „when they were here in the body? That I know not! — but here they are always in the spirit, I tell you they still live in the truest sense; I often see them. Yet to the world they have been dead these many years, aye centuries an thou wilt have it so. The day they passed forth from the body was a marvellous day; a day I shall ever remember. It was the blessed feast of Ascension. This chapel was completed in its beauty. Hildebrandt and Beata had laboured daily in it, till the previous evening. This festival of the Ascension their works should stand revealed before the world — I say they had laboured, but rather it was that sainted Beata who had laboured from earliest dawn till set of sun, who had strained her soul and every nerve to complete the work bequeathed to her young loving hand by her now feeble master. For twelve months, or more, the Blessed Hildebrandt had taken no pencil in his fingers, but watched and watched with care and lively joy the work growing beneath the younger hand. „Praise the Virgin, Beata“ he would often say, that now the labours of our lives will be accomplished. Praise her who led thee my child, to me, through such drear perils. Praises let thy soul and hands impress upon these walls — praises that we have passed through this vast and fearful wilderness; thou my child and I, and all men, guided by the pillar of cloud by day, by night by the pillar of flame.“



„But I was describing the grand feast of the Ascension,“ abruptly pursued the monk, — „aye it was a grand day. The Emperor and the beautiful Empress were guests in our holy house. In the early morning high mass was celebrated in the great chapel; nobles and peasants in crowds were there, and all the Brothers from the cloisters across the valley. From earliest dawn what streams of people had hastened hither, what a bristling of spears in the court-yard; what a glittering of gold brocade, what an ambling of ladies palfries, what a trampling of peasants'-feet! And the abbot had offered up the sacrifice, and the voices of the rejoicing quire had floated beneath the vaulted chapel roof, out into the sunny air and up towards the peaks draped in eternal snow. And then the Emperor and Empress and their grand array, and priests and peasants went forth towards the chapel in the grave-yard, that casket lined with gems, more precious than emerald and ruby and now first unclosed to the people's gaze. Incense breathed forth through the chapel. A silence as of death lay within it, for the priests, who had celebrated the holy offices within, had passed forth; only incense loading the air and tapers glimmering upon the altar told of the mass performed.

„The Emperor, leading the Empress by the hand, entered beneath the lowly portal and bowing their knees, acknowledged the presence of the image of the Divine: then gazed upon the pictured walls with a deep awe. „And where is the venerable painter, the good Caspar Hildebrandt?“ demanded the beautiful Empress in her deep voice from our Convent superior „and our faithful and unforgotten liege daughter, the maiden Beata Commenda? we would fain express our heartfelt wonderment; we would greet the precious maiden our well-beloved Beata Commenda we would remind of her the time, — would we not my lord? when alone on foot journeying to our court at Prague, she approached our presence and bespake our favour for this holy house in its time of need, and when, to aid her prayers, the milk-white dove from this her mountain home following her, flew through the open window of our chamber and nestled in her bosom, whilst she knelt pleading with eloquent words and unabashed countenance for this holy house — and we felt, did we not my royal consort? that crowned heads as well as simple birds must love the maiden. — Where is she, we demand, and where the pious Painter?“ No voice answered to the august command. But a murmur of voices was swelling into a mighty battle of tongues, then sank into a silent blank; then ran round in wild and unsteady whispers the words „dead! dead! both dead! oh holiest death!“ And there was a strange raising up from the marble pavement of lifeless forms into the trembling arms of men, and a solemn uneven tramp of feet, and a dull, dead silence; and the Emperor and the Empress had sunk upon their knees upon the bare marble of this chapel where we stand, and the nobles also; and with a wild amaze but solemn unsteady steps, the two corpses were borne forth into the sunshine where knelt hundreds of peasants amidst the rich grass and flowers of June. And with their calm transfigured faces gazing up into unclouded azure, the two were laid upon the turf where now stands the old cross garlanded with the wreaths.“

The aged man suddenly paused drawing a deep breath and fixed his weird eyes upon me. „Come out“, said I, „into the air, your story has made me breathless almost as yourself — come out into the air!“ — He followed me and seating himself amidst the gathering twilight upon the mossy grave of some old monk, resumed his history.

„You wonder how they died? The physician of the Emperor pronounced that the Blessed Hildebrandt had died through age, had fallen into the sleep of death sweetly as an infant sinks into slumber cradled in its mother's arms. His lullaby had been hymns



of full peace and complete joy. Beata's death, they said, was but one sharp pang, a sudden anguish at the death of this beloved, revered and loving father; her's was the already shattered frame which could weather no fresh tempest of the soul, one fiery, fierce pang at her heart when she felt the beloved brow fall with the leaden weight of death upon her shoulders, and then the momentarily parted were eternally united. The two had remained motionless when the imperial train had swept into the chapel, the old man with bowed head resting upon the shoulder of Beata, who knelt before him, her arms locked tightly around the beloved form. They both remained motionless although the words of the Empress resounded bell-like through the chapel. To my mind such a death was hallowed, but there were many voices which called it most terrible, most damnable; there were strange stories afloat about a curse clinging to the pious Hildebrandt; various declared it sacrilege to give him christian burial; believed him to be the young and learned clerk who, many years before, had secretly fled from this his convent, bringing upon himself the ban of his superior; of imprisonment within the dungeons of the Inquisition others spoke, and even of the long and bitter journey of Beata, who was guided hither by a vision which had appeared to her in sleep, others could alone surmise evil — aye, of that journey from the heart of Poland, and of her escape from the clutches of the cruel old Count her grandfather. And of her perils by the way in those times of bloody war and rapine, she a solitary young maiden, I could relate much.“ „And were the two father and daughter by the ties of blood?“ I suddenly demanded. „Of that I cannot speak — but —“

. . . . .







