LUDWIG TIECK

THE RECONCILIATION

TWILIGHT was already gathering, when a young knight, mounted on his charger, trotted through a lonely vale: the clouds grew gradually darker, and the glow of evening paler: a little brook murmured softly along, concealed by the mountain bushes that overhung it.

The knight sighed, and surrendered himself to thought; the bridle hung loose on the horse's neck; the steed itself no longer felt the rider's spur, and now paced slowly along the narrow path that wound round the precipitous rock.

The noise of the little brook waxed louder; the clang of the hoof rung through the solitude; the shades of evening grew deeper, and the ruins of an old castle lay wondrously poised on the precipice of the opposite mountain. The knight became more and more absorbed in thought; he gazed fixedly and vacantly on the darkness, scarcely noticing the objects that environed him.

Now the moon rose behind him: her splendour tipped tree and shrub with gold: the valley narrowed apace, and the shadow of the knight reached to the opposite hill: the streamlet went foaming, all silver, over the broken rocks, and a nightingale began her ravishing song, till it soon sounded clearer from the forest. The knight now saw a crooked-grown willow before him, that fell over the brook, while the water flowed through its weeping branches. On a nearer approach, its dark outline assumed a more decided form, and he now distinctly descried the figure of a monk, bending low over the stream. He let the faint ripple flow through the hollow of his hand, while a low and plaintive voice exclaimed, "She comes not, she comes not! ah, in an eternity she'll not float by!"

The steed shied: a sudden dread took possession of the rider: he struck both spurs into his charger's flanks, and loudly neighing, it galloped away with him.

The narrow path now grew wider, and led into a thick wood of oak, through whose densely woven branches the moon could but sparely shoot her beams. The knight soon stood before a cave, from which a small fire shone invitation towards him: he alighted, tied his horse to a tree, and entered the hollow.

Before a wooden crucifix kneeled an aged hermit in deep devotion; he was not aware of the knight's entrance, but still continued in fervent prayer. A long white beard flowed down over his breast: years had ploughed deep furrows in his brow: his eyes were dim: he had the seeming of a saint. The knight took his stand at some distance

from him, folded his hands across his breast, and repeated some Ave-Marias. Then the old man arose, dried a tear in his eye, and observed the stranger in his dwelling.

"Welcome to thee!" cried he, and offered the stranger a hand trembling with age.

The knight pressed it warmly; he felt his soul yearn towards him, and his reverence was transmuted into love.

"You did right to turn in here," continued the hermit, "for you will not find a village or a hostelry for many a league. But why so silent? Draw near to the fire and rest, and I will serve up such a little meal as this cave of mine can best supply."

The knight took the helmet from his head: his brown locks fell adown his neck: the old man gazed on him with a searching glance.

"Why does your eye wander so shily and unfixedly about?" he resumed, in a friendly tone.

The knight seemed to be collecting his thoughts. "A strange feeling of awe," replied he, "has seized on me since riding through that valley. Explain to me, if you can, the singular phenomenon which I there beheld: or perhaps it is not a spirit, but an inhabitant of these parts: and yet that is impossible; I saw him wave to and fro like the misty vapour in the gleam of the rising moon; and a cold thrill of fear drove me this way. Explain to me the riddle and the words which I heard through the whispering of the bushes."

"You saw the apparition?" said the hermit inquiringly, in a tone which betrayed a warm interest in the event; "well, be seated at the fire, and I will tell you the unhappy tale."

Both took their places. The old man appeared lost in thought. The knight was all attention; and after a short silence the hermit began:

"It is now thirty years since I roamed the land in quest of adventures and strife, just as you do now; since my locks flowed, just as yours do, over my shoulders, and my glance with equal boldness confronted danger. Grief has made me a decrepit old man before my time; not a trace can you now discover of the lusty warrior, who at that time won the respect of knighthood and the hearts of lovely girls. All is as a dream to me now, and my joys and sorrows are shrouded in the twilight distance. Farewell, ye happy days! scarce a faint glimmer from you now can reach my cold worn heart.

"I had a brother, who was only two years older than myself. We were like each other in form and feeling, except that he was more impetuous and stormy, and more especially inclined to be passionate. We loved each other fondly; we shared no pleasure apart; in every conflict he fought at my side; we seemed to live but for one another.

"He became acquainted with a lady, whose love soon formed him to an accomplished man. Her tenderness tempered his boisterous spirit; she taught him that gentleness which is essential to every man who will appear amiable in the eye of his friend. Clara became his wife; and after the lapse of a year, the mother of a boy. Nothing now seemed wanting to his happiness.

"About this time the signal of the cross was again raised against the infidels. Fired with holy zeal he girt on the sword, took the sign of the Redeemer on his cloak, and marched forth with the enthusiast throng to peril and to fame. My entreaties and his wife's tears were too weak to detain him; the fervour of his enthusiasm tore him from our arms. Ah, heavens! I still hoped at that time that we should have the delight of seeing him once more: I foreboded dangers for him, but not those sad events which have beguiled my life of every joy.

"We now looked in vain for news: our anxious impatience suggested to us a thousand mishaps, and fed us again with increased hope. Week after week, and month after month passed away without our expectation being in the smallest degree satisfied. To be sure, we heard that on their march to the Holy Land discomforts of a thousand kinds had befallen the crusaders; that they had been attacked by savage hordes, and given up to misery and want; that the greater part of them had been scattered in the woods, there to become a prey to hunger or the wild beasts. But we had no special news of my brother, and we were obliged to accustom ourselves to the thought that he too belonged to the greater number of those unfortunates. His desolate widow wept for him daily, and gave little ear to the weak grounds of consolation that issued from the dejected heart of a suffering brother.

"Five long sorrowful years were thus passed in lamentation and tears, when I beheld at a tournament the daughter of William of Orlaburg. Oh, sir knight, let me dwell for a moment on this brilliant epoch of my life, and refresh my soul on the beautiful past. Ah, a rapturous spring rose upon me, but winter returned all the colder to my heart: not a flower remains to me of all those sunny days; a spiteful hurricane has snapt them all away. Ida of Orlaburg was the most charming creature of her sex: graceful and full of majesty, her lofty figure claimed respect of every one, and her charitable temper won every heart. She united the loveliness of woman with the nobility of manly strength.

"At a tournament given by her father, she saw Clara; her soul was interested by the deep sorrow which spoke in the features of the desolate wife. In misfortune, friendships are the most quickly and the most lastingly formed. They saw each other very often; they loved each other like two sisters, that had grown up together and shared each other's every thought; and on the death of Ida's father, Clara had her friend a constant guest at her castle. Ida it was who at last dried the tears from eyes that were dim with weeping; who taught her to smile again at the rising of the sun,

and who, as I saw her so often, at last robbed me of my heart and of my peace.

"I experienced all the torments and all the ecstacies of love; my nights were sleepless, my days without repose; the world lay extended more beautifully before me; a charm and a loveliness sprang up every where beneath my footsteps; an impetuous longing hurried me to her; and yet in her presence my heart beat still more madly.

"Am I not a child to speak to you so diffusely of my folly? In a few months I disclosed to her my love; with an angel voice she assured me of her attachment; we were betrothed, and—oh, who could participate in my sense of happiness!—in two months we were to be married. How did I reckon up every day and every hour! The tide of time flowed past me in vexatious dilatoriness; I wanted to see it roll along in a foaming torrent at my feet.

"At last a messenger reached us with news of my brother. It was a knight from Spain who had seen him in Africa. Corsairs had taken the vessel in which he sailed, and sold him as a slave in Tunis. A very high price was set on his liberty.

"We were more pleased than saddened by this news, because we had already taken his death for certain. Clara now dried her tears, and surrendered herself to her joy. She got together the required sum as quickly as possible, and made preparations to travel to her husband.

"The stranger knight was in fact returning to Spain, and Clara proposed setting out in his company; while Ida, who found it impossible to part from her friend, resolved to accompany her in knightly costume.

"My most urgent expostulations were in vain, and I was at last obliged to yield to their united entreaties. My brother's infant son was consigned to the protection of a convent. They took their departure, and, full of foreboding, my weeping eye followed them.

"How I burned with desire to accompany them! but I was entangled in a feud, in which I had promised a friend my succour, and my pledged word bound me to Germany. Ah! in an ill-fated hour they departed; I never beheld them more.

"From that moment begins the dark period of my life. I was successful in the feud. Oh, that I had fallen beneath the sword of an enemy, to have escaped long years of torture, and the frightful hours in which I first—oh, forgive me these tears! they still often flow at the remembrance of Ida and my brother: age cannot so blunt our sympathies that pain may not sometimes return with new force to our bosoms.

"On their journey Ida was seized with the unhappy fancy of not discovering herself to my brother till they all should have reached their native country again, in order that

she might then surprise him the more joyfully as my bride. They arrived in Spain, and sent the required sum to Tunis. The prisoner was liberated; on the wings of affection he hastened over the sea, and forgot on Clara's bosom, in one moment of rapture, the sufferings which he had endured for years.

"Ida was soon presented to him as a friend; he received her kindly, and enjoyed for some days in the society of his spouse that happiness which he had so long been deprived of. But his eyes were soon rivetted on Ida: he observed the tender connexion subsisting between her and his wife, and suspicion kindled in his soul. 'She is untrue to me,' cried he when alone; 'she divides her heart between me and this hateful stranger!'

"He now watched them both more closely than before, and soon thought his suspicions justified; he thought he could discover a tenderness which neither of them even took pains to conceal. By degrees he became colder towards his wife, hiding the wound she had inflicted; whilst she on her part, unconstrainedly and without the shadow of fear, shared her affections with her consort and her friend.

"Jealousy raged in my brother's bosom; he began to hate Clara and her companion; he imputed a significancy to every look and every gesture; the rancour within him robbed him of his sleep, or suspicion appalled him in hideous dreams.

"'For this, then, I came across the sea,' said he to himself; 'these are the joys of meeting; these, then, are the delights of my love. I am come to be the prey of racking torture. I find my home again at the side of a faithless wife, and she herself meets me only that she may the earlier proclaim to me her effrontery and her broken vows.'

"He made an old squire the confidant of his chagrin: both now watched the two friends with an indefatigable vigilance; they beheld a thousand proofs of the supposed infidelity, without in the least conjecturing the true posture of affairs; my brother's fury rose more and more, and a dark resolve at last began to ripen in his breast.

"It happened that he was with them and a faithful servant in a small boat. The moon was up, and the shallop drifted slowly down the gentle stream; he sat in cold unconsciousness by Clara, who had laid her hand in his. He caught her eye with a searching glance; her husband seemed strange to her, and abashed she sunk her head. Ida had seized her other hand.

"'Traitress!' cried he of a sudden; 'impostor! who sport with the peace of a man, with truth, and truth's best vows!' Ah! at that moment his good genius forsook him!—gnashing his teeth, he plunged his dagger into Clara's bosom: Ida sank lifeless at the side of her friend; he grasped the bloody poniard, raised the reeking blade, and smote my Ida to the heart.

"The dying Clara discovered to him his error. Her blood floated down the stream. The film gathered in her eye. For a long time he stood like one entranced; then sprang into the river, swam unconsciously to land, and, deaf and dumb, without sensation or words of woe, he set out on his return to Germany.

"Thus, then, an ill-starred jest was the wreck of my every hope and joy. In the mean time, I stood at a window of the castle, anxiously awaiting the return of those I loved. Often was I aroused from my musing mood by the hoof-tramp of horses: my eye wandered vacantly over field and hill, while a joyful thrill passed through me at the sight of a female figure.

"At length came a knight dashing up on a black charger: it was my brother. But ah, my joy was vain; his countenance was haggard, his eyes rolled wildly, his heart beat impetuously.

"'Where are Ida and Clara?' cried I.

"A tear was the answer; he hung speechless on my neck.

"'In the grave,' said he at length, violently sobbing.

"O heavens! those were fearful hours that I then went through! My fist trembled, my heart throbbed convulsively; a low voice whispered murder and vengeance in my ears: but I saw my brother's wretchedness—I forgave him; and well it is for me that I did so.

"Oh, that he could have forgiven himself! But his misery and his crime were present day and night to his soul. Clara came back to him in his dreams, and shewed him the dagger reeking with her heart's warm blood. From that hour he never smiled again.

"'I am condemned to the most ghastly misery,' cried he, as he grasped me by the hand; 'nor on the other side of the grave shall I be at rest; my spirit will wander still in quest of Clara, and still never find her: a fearful future drags its slow length in review before me. Ah, my brother! even in death there is no more hope for me.'

"My heart was broken; but my life seemed now granted that I might console him. We left the castle, and laid aside our knightly garb; we shrouded ourselves in holy weeds, and thus we went wayfaring through the dark woods and over the desert plains, till this cavern at last received us.

"Often would my brother stand for long, long days by that rivulet, gazing vacantly on the waters; even in the night he was sometimes there; and then he would sit on a sundered fragment of the rock, while his tears trickled down into the stream. My efforts to console him were all in vain.

"At last he revealed to me that Clara had appeared to him in a dream; but she never could be reconciled, she said, till her blood should float down that little brook; and for this reason he sat on the bank, counting and watching the waves, in the eager hope of again finding the drops that had gushed from her heart in that fatal hour.

"I wept at the sight of my brother's madness; I tried to rid him of the thought, but it was impossible. 'Ah!' cried he, 'and in distant Spain her blood was shed; it flowed down the stream into the sea: how long will it be before it returns hitherward to the springs?'

"Now he scarcely ever left the brook—his sorrow and his delusion increased with every day: at last he died of a broken heart. I buried him by my cave.

"Since then I have often seen his ghost sitting beside the stream: it was always watching the passing ripple, and softly sighing, 'She comes not—she comes not.' A thrill of horror runs through me every time, and I pray till midnight for the peace of his soul."

The hermit ended; he cast down his eyes and silently counted his beads. The knight had listened to the tale with anxious interest, and after a few moments he inquired—

"And where was your brother's son left?"

"We sought him in the convent," replied the old man, "but he had clandestinely made his escape from the monks."

"Your name?"

"Why do you so fix your gaze upon me?—Ulfo of Waldburg."

"O my uncle!" cried the knight, and threw himself on the bosom of the astonished hermit. "Doubt not," cried he; "ah! that unhappy shade by the rivulet is the spirit of my father."

"Your father! his name was"—

"Charles of Waldburg. I ran away from the monks because their lonely cloisters appeared a prison to me. I took service with a knight; and now for some years I have been seeking you and my father."

"O my son!" cried the old man, and locked him more fervently in his arms; "yes, you are he: I know you by that sparkling eye; those are your father's features and his chestnut locks."

"O my unhappy father!" sighed the youth; "would that I could procure his wandering spirit peace! would that my prayers could conciliate Heaven and my mother's shade!"

He stood in a musing mood, with his hands folded: "Uncle," cried he, "what, if I have read aright the import of the dream? what, if my mother's spirit had wished to direct the wretched man to me? Oh, come now!"

They left the cave. Clouds shrouded the moon; a hallowed stillness spread its mantle over the world; they went into the lonely forest as into a temple. Charles kneeled down on his father's grave.

"Spirit of my father," said he in fervent prayer, "oh, hear thy son! hearken to thy son, O my mother! and, gracious Heaven, let me not implore thee in vain! Give rest to the unhappy one, and let the dread pilgrim find a lodging in the grave. Oh, let me hear from thee, spirit of my father, whether I conceived aright the sense of the prophecy! Oh, grant me some sign that thou art reconciled with my mother's ghost!"

Like the soft echo of a flute came a breathing through the tree-tops: two bright apparitions floated downwards in closely-wound embrace. They came nearer. "We are reconciled," whispered a more than earthly voice. Two hands were stretched forth over the kneeling one; and like a light zephyr the words passed over him, "Be true to knighthood!"

A cloud glided away from before the moon; and the phantoms dissolved in her silver radiance. In glad amazement the two mortals gazed long and lingeringly after them.