

WHAT IS THE GAIN?

What is the gain? If one should die, And at the last with weary pace, Who to the goal, and find the years...

THE SPECTER BRIDEGROOM.

BY WASHINGTON IRVING.

On the summit of one of the heights of the Odenwald, a wild and romantic tract of upper Germany, that lies not far from the confluence of the Main and the Rhine...

The Baron was a dry branch of the great family of Katzenellenbogen, and inherited the relics of the property and all the pride of his ancestors.

The Baron had but one child, a daughter; but Nature, when she grants but one child, always compensates by making it prodigal; and so it was with the daughter of the Baron.

At the time of which my story treats there was a great family gathering at the castle, on an affair of the utmost importance. It was the wedding of the Baron's daughter.

The castle was in a tumult of preparation to give him a suitable welcome. The feast was laid with uncommon care. The two aunts had superintended her toilet, and quarreled the whole morning about every article of dress.

In the meantime the fatted calf had been killed; the forests had rung with the clamor of the huntmen; the kitchen was crowded with good cheer; the cellars had yielded up whole casks of Rhein-wine and Fenne-wine; and even the great Heidelberg tun had been laid under contribution.

When the old castle of Landshof was in this state of perplexity, a very interesting scene was transacting in a different part of the Odenwald.

The young Count Von Altenburg was tranquilly pursuing his route in that sober jog-trot way, in which a man travels towards matrimony when his friends have taken all the trouble and uncertainty of courtship off his hands, and a bride is waiting for him, as certainly as a dinner at the end of his journey.

As the route of the friends lay in the same direction, they agreed to perform the rest of their journey together; and that they might do so the more leisurely, and with less fatigue, at an early hour, the Count having given directions for his retinue to follow and overtake him.

They beguiled their wayfaring with recollections of their military scenes and adventures; and the Count was apt to be a little tedious, now and then, about the reputed charms of his bride, and the felicity that awaited him.

In this way they had entered among the mountains of the Odenwald, and were traversing one of its most lonely and thickly-wooded passes. It is well known that the forests of Germany have always been as much infested by robbers as its castles by specters.

Amidst all this revelry, the stranger guest maintained a most singular and unseasonable gravity. His countenance assumed a deeper cast of dejection as the evening advanced, and, strange as it may appear, even the Baron's jokes seemed only to render him the more melancholy.

The bridegroom listened to this tale with profound interest. He kept his eyes steadily fixed on the Baron, and, as the story drew to a close, grew gradually to rise from his seat, growing taller and taller, until, in the Baron's entranced eye, he seemed almost to tower into a giant.

Starkenfaust bestowed a sigh, and a soldier's tear, on the untimely fate of his comrade; and then pondered on the awful mission he had undertaken. His heart was heavy, and his head perplexed for he was to present himself an unbidden guest among hostile people, and to damp their festivity with tidings fatal to their hopes.

Previous to his departure he made all due arrangements with the holy fraternity of the convent for the funeral solemnities that should be performed in his honor; and the Count took charge of his remains.

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He told them so well, or with such great effect. If there was anything marvelous, his auditors were lost in astonishment; and if of a soberer nature, they were apt to laugh exactly in the right place. The Baron, it is true, like most great men, was so dignified to utter any joke but a dull one; it was always enforced, however, by a bumper, or excellent toast, and, as a rule, even a dull joke at one's own table, served up with jolly old wine, is irresistible.

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