A GENTLE SPIRIT IN A WORLD OF IRON.

OTTO OF THE SILVER HAND

HOWARD PYLE

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by

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IN THE BELFRY.

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FOREWORD.

BETWEEN the far away past history of the world, and that which lies near to us; in the time when the wisdom of the ancient times was dead and had passed away, and our own days of light had not yet come, there lay a great black gulf in human history, a gulf of ignorance, of superstition, of cruelty, and of wickedness.

That time we call the dark or middle ages.

Few records remain to us of that dreadful period in our world's history, and we only know of it through broken and disjointed fragments that have been handed down to us through the generations.

Yet, though the world's life then was so wicked and black, there yet remained a few good men and women here and there (mostly in peaceful and quiet monasteries, far from the thunder and the glare of the worlds bloody battle),

who knew the right and the truth and lived according to what they knew; who preserved and tenderly cared for the truths that the dear Christ taught, and lived and died for in Palestine so long ago.

This tale that I am about to tell is of a little boy who lived and suffered in those dark middle ages; of how he saw both the good and the bad of men, and of how, by gentleness and love and not by strife and hatred, he came at last to stand above other men and to be looked up to by all. And should you follow the story to the end, I hope you may find it a pleasure, as I have done, to ramble through those dark ancient castles, to lie with little Otto and Brother John in the high belfry-tower, or to sit with them in the peaceful quiet of the sunny old monastery garden, for, of all the story, I love best those early peaceful years that little Otto spent in the dear old White Cross on the Hill.

Poor little Otto's life was a stony and a thorny pathway, and it is well for all of us nowadays that we walk it in fancy and not in truth.

I.

The Dragon's House.

UP FROM the gray rocks, rising sheer and bold and bare, stood the walls and towers of Castle Drachenhausen. A great gate-way, with a heavy iron-pointed portcullis hanging suspended in the dim arch above, yawned blackly upon the bascule or falling drawbridge that spanned a chasm between the blank stone walls and the roadway that winding down the steep rocky slope to the little valley just beneath. There in the lap of the hills around stood the wretched straw-thatched huts of the peasants belonging to the castle—miserable serfs who, half timid, half fierce, tilled their poor patches of

ground, wrenching from the hard soil barely enough to keep body and soul together. Among those vile hovels played the little children like foxes about their dens, their wild, fierce eyes peering out from under a mat of tangled yellow hair.

Beyond these squalid huts lay the rushing, foaming river, spanned by a high, rude, stone bridge where the road from the castle crossed it, and beyond the river stretched the great, black forest, within whose gloomy depths the savage wild beasts made their lair, and where in winter time the howling wolves coursed their flying prey across the moonlit snow and under the net-work of the black shadows from the naked boughs above.

The watchman in the cold, windy bartizan or watch-tower that clung to the gray walls above the castle gate-way, looked from his narrow window, where the wind piped and hummed, across the tree-tops that rolled in endless billows of green, over hill and over valley to the blue and distant slope of the Keiserberg, where, on the mountain side, glimmered far away the walls of Castle Trutz-Drachen.

Within the massive stone walls through which the gaping gateway led, three great cheerless brick buildings, so forbidding that even the yellow sunlight could not light them into brightness, looked down, with row upon row of windows, upon three sides of the bleak, stone courtyard. Back of and

above them clustered a jumble of other buildings, tower and turret, one high-peaked roof overtopping another.

The great house in the centre was the Baron's Hall, the part to the left was called the Roderhausen; between the two stood a huge square pile, rising dizzily up into the clear air high above the rest—the great Melchior Tower.

At the top clustered a jumble of buildings hanging high aloft in the windy space a crooked wooden belfry, a tall, narrow watch-tower, and a rude wooden house that clung partly to the roof of the great tower and partly to the walls.

From the chimney of this crazy hut a thin thread of smoke would now and then rise into the air, for there were folk living far up in that empty, airy desert, and oftentimes wild, uncouth little children were seen playing on the edge of the dizzy height, or sitting with their bare legs hanging down over the sheer depths, as they gazed below at what was going on in the court-yard. There they sat, just as little children in the town might sit upon their father's door-step; and as the sparrows might fly around the feet of the little town children, so the circling flocks of rooks and daws flew around the feet of these air-born creatures.

It was Schwartz Carl and his wife and little ones who lived far up there in the Melchior Tower, for it overlooked the top of the hill behind the castle and so down into the

THERE THEY SAT, JUST AS LITTLE CHILDREN IN THE TOWN MIGHT SIT UPON THEIR FATHER'S DOOR-STEP.

valley upon the further side. There, day after day, Schwartz Carl kept watch upon the gray road that ran like a ribbon through the valley, from the rich town of Gruenstaldt to the rich town of Staffenburgen, where passed merchant caravans from the one to the other—for the lord of Drachenhausen was a robber baron.

Dong! Dong! The great alarm bell would suddenly ring out from the belfry high up upon the Melchior Tower. Dong! Dong! Till the rooks and daws whirled clamoring and screaming. Dong! Dong! Till the fierce wolf-hounds in the rocky kennels behind the castle stables howled dismally in answer. Dong! Dong!—Dong! Dong!

Then would follow a great noise and uproar and hurry in the castle court-yard below; men shouting and calling to one another, the ringing of armor, and the clatter of horses' hoofs upon the hard stone. With the creaking and groaning of the windlass the iron-pointed portcullis would be slowly raised, and with a clank and rattle and clash of iron chains the drawbridge would fall crashing. Then over it would thunder horse and man, clattering away down the winding, stony pathway, until the great forest would swallow them, and they would be gone.

Then for a while peace would fall upon the castle court-yard, the cock would crow, the cook would scold a lazy maid, and Gretchen, leaning out of a window, would sing

a snatch of a song, just as though it were a peaceful farmhouse, instead of a den of robbers.

Maybe it would be evening before the men would return once more. Perhaps one would have a bloody cloth bound about his head, perhaps one would carry his arm in a sling; perhaps one—maybe more than one—would be left behind, never to return again, and soon forgotten by all excepting some poor woman who would weep silently in the loneliness of her daily work.

Nearly always the adventurers would bring back with them pack-horses laden with bales of goods. Sometimes, besides these, they would return with a poor soul, his hands tied behind his back and his feet beneath the horse's body, his fur cloak and his flat cap wofully awry. A while he would disappear in some gloomy cell of the dungeon-keep, until an envoy would come from the town with a fat purse, when his ransom would be paid, the dungeon would disgorge him, and he would be allowed to go upon his way again.

One man always rode beside Baron Conrad in his expeditions and adventures—a short, deep-chested, broad-shouldered man, with sinewy arms so long that when he stood his hands hung nearly to his knees.

His coarse, close-clipped hair came so low upon his brow that only a strip of forehead showed between it and his bushy, black eyebrows. One eye was blind; the other twinkled and

gleamed like a spark under the penthouse of his brows. Many folk said that the one-eyed Hans had drunk beer with the Hill-man, who had given him the strength of ten, for he could bend an iron spit like a hazel twig, and could lift a barrel of wine from the floor to his head as easily as though it were a basket of eggs.

As for the one-eyed Hans he never said that he had not drunk beer with the Hill-man, for he liked the credit that such reports gave him with the other folk. And so, like a half savage mastiff, faithful to death to his master, but to him alone, he went his sullen way and lived his sullen life within the castle walls, half respected, half feared by the other inmates, for it was dangerous trifling with the one-eyed Hans.

II.

How the Baron went Forth to Shear.

BARON Conrad and Baroness Matilda sat together at their morning meal. Below their raised seats stretched the long, heavy wooden table, loaded with coarse food—black bread, boiled cabbage, bacon, eggs, a great chine from a wild boar, sausages such as we eat nowadays, and flagons and jars of beer and wine. Along the board sat ranged, in the order of the household, the followers and retainers. Four or five slatternly women and girls served the others as they fed noisily at the table, moving here and there behind the

men with wooden or pewter dishes of food, now and then laughing at the jests that passed, or joining in the talk. A huge fire blazed and crackled and roared in the great open fireplace, before which were stretched two fierce, shaggy, wolfish-looking hounds. Outside, the rain beat upon the roof or ran trickling from the eaves, and every now and then a chill draught of wind would breathe through the open windows of the great black dining-hall and set the fire roaring.

Along the dull-gray wall of stone hung pieces of armor, and swords and lances, and great branching antlers of the stag. Overhead arched the rude, heavy, oaken beams, blackened with age and smoke, and underfoot was a chill pavement of stone.

Upon Baron Conrad's shoulder leaned the pale, slender, yellow-haired Baroness, the only one in all the world with whom the fierce lord of Drachenhausen softened to gentleness, the only one upon whom his savage brows looked kindly, and to whom his harsh voice softened with love.

The Baroness was talking to her husband in a low voice, as he looked down into her pale face, with its gentle blue eyes.

"And wilt thou not, then," said she, "do that one thing for me?"

"Nay," he growled, in his deep voice, "I cannot promise

thee never more to attack the towns-people in the valley over yonder. How else could I live an' I did not take from the fat town hogs to fill our own larder?"

"Nay," said the Baroness, "thou couldst live as some others do, for all do not rob the burgher folk as thou dost. Alas! mishap will come upon thee some day, and if thou shouldst be slain, what then would come of me?"

"Prut," said the Baron, "thy foolish fears!" But he laid his rough, hairy hand softly upon the Baroness's head and stroked her yellow hair.

"For my sake, Conrad," whispered the Baroness.

A pause followed. The Baron sat looking thoughtfully down into the Baroness' face. A moment more, and he might have promised what she besought; a moment more, and he might have been saved all the bitter trouble that was to follow. But it was not to be.

Suddenly a harsh sound broke the quietness of all into a confusion of noises. Dong! Dong!—it was the great alarm-bell from Melchior's Tower.

The Baron started at the sound. He sat for a moment or two with his hand clinched upon the arm of his seat as though about to rise, then he sunk back into his chair again.

All the others had risen tumultuously from the table, and now stood looking at him, awaiting his orders.

"For my sake, Conrad," said the Baroness again.

Dong! Dong! rang the alarm-bell. The Baron sat with his eyes bent upon the floor, scowling blackly.

The Baroness took his hand in both of hers. "For my sake," she pleaded, and the tears filled her blue eyes as she looked up at him, "do not go this time."

From the courtyard without came the sound of horses' hoofs clashing against the stone pavement, and those in the hall stood watching and wondering at this strange delay of the Lord Baron. Just then the door opened and one came pushing past the rest; it was the one-eyed Hans. He came straight to where the Baron sat, and, leaning over, whispered something into his master's ear.

"For my sake," implored the Baroness again; but the scale was turned. The Baron pushed back his chair heavily and rose to his feet. "Forward!" he roared, in a voice of thunder, and a great shout went up in answer as he strode clanking down the hall and out of the open door.

The Baroness covered her face with her hands and wept.

"Never mind, little bird," said old Ursela, the nurse, soothingly; "he will come back to thee again as he has come back to thee before."

But the poor young Baroness continued weeping with her face buried in her hands, because he had not done that thing she had asked.

A white young face framed in yellow hair looked out into

the courtyard from a window above; but if Baron Conrad of Drachenhausen saw it from beneath the bars of his shining helmet, he made no sign.

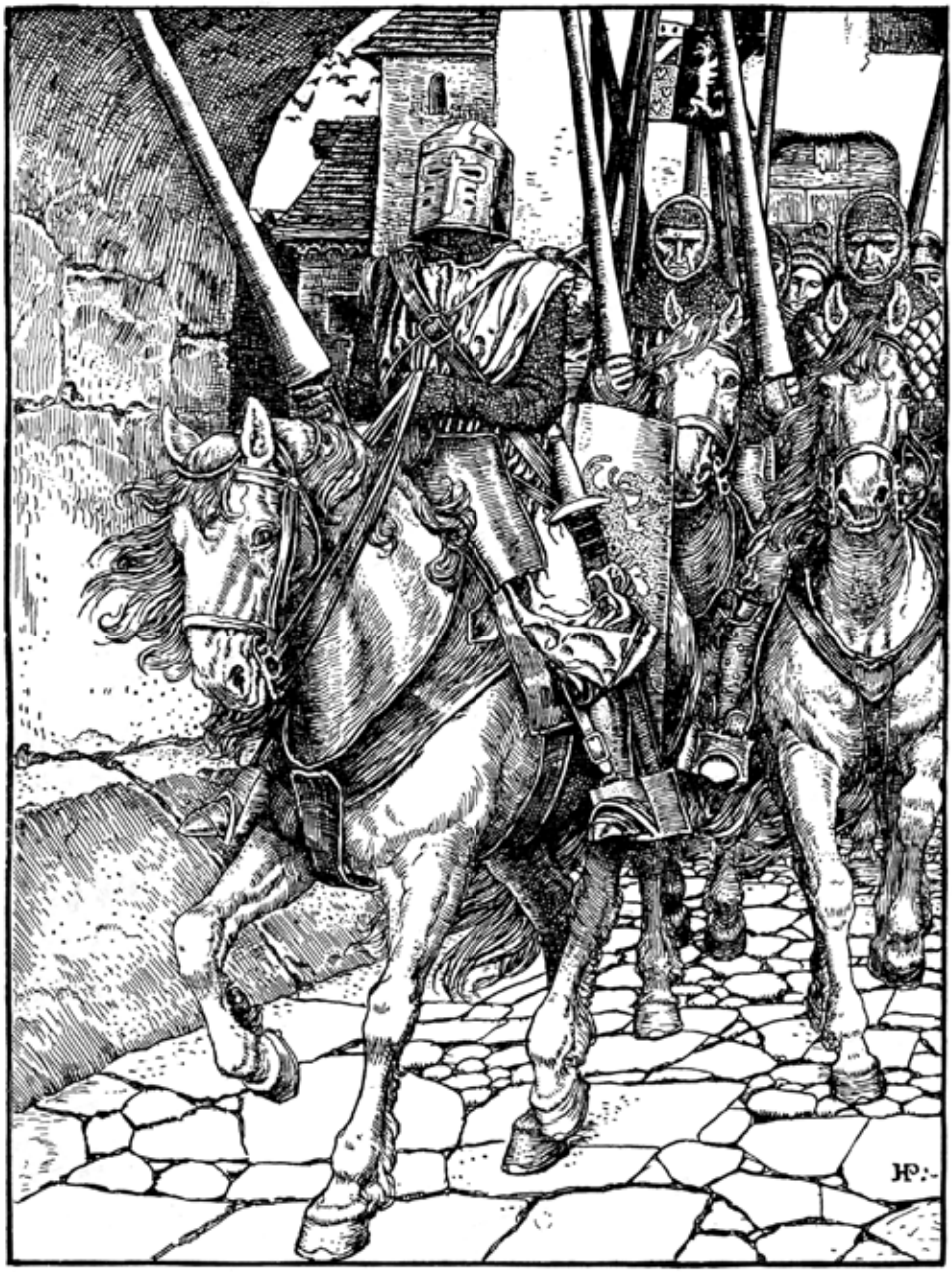
"Forward," he cried again.

Down thundered the drawbridge, and away they rode with clashing hoofs and ringing armor through the gray shroud of drilling rain.

The day had passed and the evening had come, and the Baroness and her women sat beside a roaring fire. All were chattering and talking and laughing but two—the fair young Baroness and old Ursela; the one sat listening, listening, listening, the other sat with her chin resting in the palm of her hand, silently watching her young mistress. The night was falling gray and chill, when suddenly the clear notes of a bugle rang from without the castle walls. The young Baroness started, and the rosy light flashed up into her pale cheeks.

"Yes, good," said old Ursela; "the red fox has come back to his den again, and I warrant he brings a fat town goose in his mouth; now we'll have fine clothes to wear, and thou another gold chain to hang about thy pretty neck."

The young Baroness laughed merrily at the old woman's speech. "This time," said she, "I will choose a string of pearls like that one my aunt used to wear, and which I had about my neck when Conrad first saw me."



AWAY THEY RODE WITH CLASHING HOOFS AND RINGING ARMOR.

Minute after minute passed; the Baroness sat nervously playing with a bracelet of golden beads about her wrist. "How long he stays," said she.

"Yes," said Ursela; "but it is not cousin wish that holds him by the coat."

As she spoke, a door banged in the passageway without, and the ring of iron footsteps sounded upon the stone floor. Clank! Clank! Clank!

The Baroness rose to her feet, her face all alight. The door opened; then the flush of joy faded away and the face grew white, white, white. One hand clutched the back of the bench whereon she had been sitting, the other hand pressed tightly against her side.

It was Hans the one-eyed who stood in the doorway, and black trouble sat on his brow; all were looking at him waiting.

"Conrad," whispered the Baroness, at last. "Where is Conrad? Where is your master?" and even her lips were white as she spoke.

The one-eyed Hans said nothing.

Just then came the noise of men's voices in the corridor and the shuffle and scuffle of feet carrying a heavy load. Nearer and nearer they came, and one-eyed Hans stood aside. Six men came struggling through the doorway, carrying a litter, and on the litter lay the great Baron Conrad.

The flaming torch thrust into the iron bracket against the wall flashed up with the draught of air from the open door, and the light fell upon the white face and the closed eyes, and showed upon his body armor a great red stain that was not the stain of rust.

Suddenly Ursela cried out in a sharp, shrill voice, "Catch her, she falls!"

It was the Baroness.

Then the old crone turned fiercely upon the one-eyed Hans. "Thou fool!" she cried, "why didst thou bring him here? Thou hast killed thy lady!"

"I did not know," said the one-eyed Hans, stupidly.

III.

How the Baron came Home Shorn.

BUT Baron Conrad was not dead. For days he lay upon his hard bed, now muttering incoherent words beneath his red beard, now raving fiercely with the fever of his wound. But one day he woke again to the things about him.

He turned his head first to the one side and then to the other; there sat Schwartz Carl and the one-eyed Hans. Two or three other retainers stood by a great window that looked out into the courtyard beneath, jesting and laughing together

in low tones, and one lay upon the heavy oaken bench that stood along by the wall snoring in his sleep.

"Where is your lady?" said the Baron, presently; "and why is she not with me at this time?"

The man that lay upon the bench started up at the sound of his voice, and those at the window came hurrying to his bedside. But Schwartz Carl and the one-eyed Hans looked at one another, and neither of them spoke. The Baron saw the look and in it read a certain meaning that brought him to his elbow, though only to sink back upon his pillow again with a groan.

"Why do you not answer me?" said he at last, in a hollow voice; then to the one-eyed Hans, "Hast no tongue, fool, that thou standest gaping there like a fish? Answer me, where is thy mistress?"

"I—I do not know," stammered poor Hans.

For a while the Baron lay silently looking from one face to the other, then he spoke again. "How long have I been lying here?" said he.

"A sennight, my lord," said Master Rudolph, the steward, who had come into the room and who now stood among the others at the bedside.

"A sennight," repeated the Baron, in a low voice, and then to Master Rudolph, "And has the Baroness been often beside me in that time?" Master Rudolph hesitated. "Answer me," said the Baron, harshly.