

A Mysterious Sketch

Nearly opposite the church of St. Sebald in Nuremberg, stands an ancient inn, narrow and lofty, with an indented gable, small dusty casements, and the roof surmounted by a plaster image of the Virgin. Many years ago, when beginning the world as a young artist, I took up my abode in this quaint hostelry. I had come to Nuremberg in order to study the works of the old masters; but, my funds running short, I was obliged to take portraits—and such portraits! Stout old ladies, each with her cat on her lap; rosy burgomasters, wigged and cocked-hatted, all plentifully and partially illuminated with ochre and vermillion.

At length this resource began to fail; and mine host, who at first had been all civility, began to importune me in a somewhat insolent manner for the amount of my bill.—One evening as I was passing up stairs to my attic, Master Rapp called after me: “Hallo! youngster, when are you going to pay me? Your bill now amounts to one hundred and sixty florins, ten kreutzers.—Pray, when am I likely to see the color of your money?”

I muttered some sort of indistinct reply, and hastening to my room, locked the door, and threw myself, dressed as I was, on my bed. Revolving my miserable position in my mind, all the genuine feeling for art, all the high aspirations after excellence which had hitherto buoyed me up, seemed to forsake me, and a sordid, hungry craving for money took their place. At length my eyes grew heavy, and my thoughts confused and I slept profoundly for some hours.—About two o’clock I awoke in a strange sort of excitement. Having lighted my candle I seized a piece of paper and a crayon, and drew a rapid sketch, in the Dutch style, feeling all the time as if the composition was not mine, but as if each stroke was suggested by some one, who merely used my hand and pencil as unconscious and unresisting instruments. The sketch thus traced represented a gloomy court, surrounded by lofty but crumbling walls, which were furnished with large hooks at the height of seven or eight feet from the ground. On the left was a trellis of laths, through which one saw an ox cut in quarters, suspended by strong pulleys from the roof of a shed, streams of blood flowed across the pavement and met in a trench filled with refuse and rubbish. At one end of the court was a house, through the open door of which were seen a pile of wood, and some bundles of straw. Pieces of ragged rope, an old hen-coop, and a broken rabbit-hutch littered the foreground. On the right, one corner of the sketch remaining blank, I hesitated what to put there; something seemed to move, to hover around it. Suddenly a foot turned up, and detached from the ground appeared to my mind’s eye. Following the inspiration, I sketched on rapidly, and beneath my crayon grew a leg joined to the foot, then a floating garment, at length the entire figure of an old woman, pale, emaciated, with dishevelled hair, thrown down against the low parapet of a well, and struggling against a hand which clutched her throat.

I was drawing the scene of a murder; the crayon fell from my hand. I shuddered as I looked at the woman’s face, contracted by terror, while both her hands convulsively grasped the arm of her murderer. But *his* face, I saw it not, it was hidden from me as if by some veiling shadow—I could not finish the sketch.

“I am fatigued,” I said, passing my hand over my damp forehead; “to-morrow I will finish the design; there remains but that one figure to put in.”

Hastily undressing, I went to bed, and before five minutes elapsed I was sunk in a profound slumber. When I awoke it was broad daylight. I hastened to dress, and was preparing to resume my task, when I heard two knocks at the door.

“Come in!”

The door opened, and a tall old man, dressed in black, stood at the threshold.

“Herr Heinrich Kapff, the painter?” said he.

“At your service, sir.”

He bowed his head, and said, introducing himself; “Baron Frederick von Spreckdahl.”

That the rich amateur Von Spreckdahl, who was also judge of the Criminal Tribunal, should condescend to visit my poor attic, was indeed an unlooked for event. I cast an embarrassed glance at the mean, scanty furniture, the low ceiling and the worm-eaten flooring; but my visitor seemed to pay no attention to these details. Seating himself near my small table; “Herr Kapff,” he said, “I come—”

At this moment his eye fell on the unfinished sketch, and he gazed at it fixedly for several moments.

“Are you the author of this drawing?” he asked, looking on me with the same attention which he had bestowed on my work.

“I am, sir.”

“What is its price?”

“I do not sell my sketches; it is merely a design for a painting.”

“Ah!” said he, taking up the paper delicately with the tips of his long sallow fingers; and with the aid of his eye-glass he studied the sketch closely.

A ray of sunshine entered obliquely through the small dormer window. Von Spreckdahl’s long nose became more hooked and his thick eyelashes contracted, lending a sinister expression to his lean wrinkled face. The silence was so profound that I heard distinctly the plaintive buzzing of a fly caught in a spider’s web.

“And the dimensions of the painting, Herr Kapff?” said he at last, without looking up.

“Four feet by three.”

“Its price.”

“Fifty ducats.”

My visitor laid the sketch on the table, and drew from his pocket a long, well filled purse of green silk. “Fifty ducats,” he repeated; “there they are.”

And throwing down the pieces, the baron saluted me, and was gone before I had sufficiently recovered from my amazement to utter a word of thanks. I heard his walking stick strike on each stair as he descended, and I ran down quickly after him. But when I reached the door of the inn, he was already gone. I looked up and down the street, but he was not to be seen.

“Well, this is odd enough,” I muttered; and having remounted the five flight of stairs, I sat down at the table brightened by the unwonted gleam of gold, and resolved to finish the sketch without delay; a few more touches of the crayon were all that was required. But these few touches, try as I would, I *could not* give them. I had lost the clue to the design, the mysterious personage would not come out of the limbe of my brain. It was no use to draw and efface, and draw again, and retouch; the creature of my pencil was as discordant with his surroundings as one of Raphael’s figures would be in a village alehouse by Teniers. I threw down my crayon in despair, and the perspiration stood in large drops on my forehead. At that moment Rapp opened the door, and entered abruptly; he stood transfixed at the sight of the pile of ducats.

“Ha! ha! I have caught you master-painter,” he cried; “tell me again that you no money!”

Enraged at the man’s insolent look and inopportune entrance, I suddenly seized him by the shoulders, and pushed him violently outside the door. The landing place was very narrow; he missed his footing, and rolled down several stairs, shouting as he bumped along; “My money, you rascal—my money!”

Retreating into my room, I locked and double locked the door, while bursts of laughter from the other lodger’s sainted Herr Rapp’s downward progress. This little adventure roused me, I resumed my crayon, and was in the act of making another attempt on the impracticable corner of the sketch, when a clash of arms grounded on the pavement opposite caught my ear. I looked out of the window, and saw several policemen fully armed, stationed, and keeping guard outside.

“That old villain, Rapp,” I thought—“can he have met any serious injury?”

Confused voices, and heavy steps mounting the stairs; my door was violently shaken.

“In the name of the law, open!”

Trembling, though I scarce knew why, I obeyed. Two muscular hands instantly grasped my collar, and a fat little man in green uniform, who smelt strongly of beer, came close to me, and said “Henrich Kapff, I arrest you.”

“For what crime?” I inquired, as I recognized the chief of police.

“Come along,” he cried roughly, and made a sign to one of his men to handcuff me.

Resistance of course was useless. I was effectually secured, and conveyed down stairs by some of the party; while the others ransacked my room in every corner, prodding the furniture, and turning over on the floor my poor wardrobe and other scanty possessions. My captors thrust me into a covered carriage, and two of them entered after me, and took their places one at each side.

“What have I done?” I inquired again.

“Hans,” said one of them to the other, with a sour smile, “he asks what he has done?”

Soon a dark shadow enveloped us, as the carriage rolled under the gloomy archway which leads to the Raspel Haus, or city prison. The jailer, with a gray woolen cap on his head, and a short pipe between his lips, received me from my conductors, and having silently introduced me into a cell, locked and barred the door, and left me to my reflections.

The room was small, but tolerably clean, and the walls being newly whitewashed, presented no inscriptions or drawings, save a rude sketch of a gibbet, probably executed by my predecessor. It was lighted by a small window, nine or ten feet from the ground and the furniture consisted of a bundle of straw and a bucket.

I seated myself on the straw, and remained, I know not how long, plunged in a gloomy reverie. What if the fall down stairs had inflicted some mortal injury on my landlord! The fellow was a miser and insolent; but, after all he had done nothing to justify his receiving such rough treatment at my hands. What would be the upshot of it all? While revolving this uncomfortable question, the door grated on its hinges, my jailor appeared, and desired me to follow him. Two turnkeys placed themselves one at each side of me, and we walked on. We traversed gloomy corridors, feebly lighted by interior windows. I saw behind a grating a noted robber and assassin, who was sentenced to be executed on the following morning. He wore a strait-waistcoat, and was singing with a hoarse voice, “I am King of these Mountains?”

As I passed, he shouted after me: “Ha! comrade, I’ll keep a place for you to-morrow on my right!”

The turnkeys looked at each other with a sinister smile, and my flesh crept with horror.

I was conducted into a gloomy sort of judgement hall, at the upper end of which were seated two judges, one of them being my late visitor, Von Spreckdahl. A clerk employed in tickling his ear with the feather of his pen, sat before a table.

Von Spreckdahl raising his voice, addressed me; “Heinrich Kapff, how did you become possessed of this drawing?”

He showed me the [nocturnal] sketch; I examined it and replied:

“It was done by me.”

There was a silence, and the clerk wrote down my reply.

I thought within myself, “What is the meaning of this? What connection can the sketch have with my pushing Rapp down stairs?”

“It was done by you,” repeated Von Spreckdahl. “What is the subject of it?”

“It was a fancy sketch.”

“You have not copied the details from any painting or engraving?”

“No, sir; I invented them all.”

“Prisoner,” said the judge in a severe tone, “I advise you to reflect. Do not lie.”

I reddened with anger and said emphatically: “I have spoken the truth.”

“Write, clerk,” said Von Spreckdahl.

“And this woman,” continued he, “who is being assassinated at the edge of a well, have you imagined her figure also?”

“Certainly.”

“You never saw her?”

“Never.”

With an indignant gesture, Von Spreckdahl rose from his chair, then resuming his seat, he appeared to consult in a low tone with his colleague.

“What can it be all about? What have I done?” murmured I to myself.

Addressing my guards, Von Spreckdahl said: “Conduct the prisoner to the carriage. We are going to the Metzger Strasse—Heinrich Kapff,” he continued, “you are pursuing a deplorable path. Consider that if the justice of man is inflexible, the mercy of God may yet be obtained by a full confession of your crime.”

I could not reply; I felt as if under the influence of some frightful dream, and prepared to follow my guard in silence.

Two policemen and I entered the carriage, which rolled along through several streets. One of my guards took out his snuff-box, and offered a pinch to his companion. Mechanically, I also extended my finger and thumb towards the box, but its owner drew it back with a gesture of aversion, and quickly replaced it in his pocket.

I felt the hot tingling blood mount to my forehead, but before I could speak, the carriage stopped. One of the policemen got out while the other held me, fettered as I was, by the collar, until, seeing his comrade ready to receive me, he thrust me rudely out.

All these precautions to secure my person argued no good, but just then I was given no time for reflection. My guards hurried me along a narrow, filthy alley, bounded by high walls, and through which trickled a stream of some thick dark liquid. Arrived at the end, they opened a door, and pushed me before them into a square court. During our progress, a strange horror had taken possession of me, not arising from the uncertainty and mystery of my position, but rather like the effect of nightmare. I seemed to be walking in a frightful dream, seeing and acting without my own volition, and under a haunting conviction of the unreality of all the objects around. But this horror became very tangible and real when I looked around the place where I now found myself. There was the very identical court, which I had drawn the night before—the walls furnished with hooks, the broken hen-coops, the rabbit-hutch; not a single detail, not even the most trifling, was wanting!

Beside the wall stood the two judges, Von Spreckdahl and Richter. At their feet lay the corpse of the old woman, her long grey hair disheveled, her face livid, her eyes starting from her head, and her tongue protruding from between her clenched teeth. It was a horrid spectacle.

“Prisoner!” said Von Spreckdahl, in a solemn voice, “have you anything to say?”

I made no answer.

“Do you acknowledge that you threw this woman, Theresa Becker, into this well, after having strangled her and taken possession of her money?”

“No,” I cried— “no! I do not know this woman. I never saw her until now. May God help me!”

“It is enough,” said he in a dry tone; and then, without adding another word, he and his colleague took their departure.

My guards conducted me back to the Raspel Haus, and left me alone in my cell. I fell into a profound stupor, and when but half aroused from it, my conscience awoke to a sort of morbid activity, and I began to ask myself if I had not really assassinated the old woman! Ah! the horrors of that night in prison! Seated on my bundle of straw, I watched a moonbeam struggling through the narrow window, and lighting up the sinister outline of the gibbet on the opposite wall. I heard the watchman crying through the silence of the night: “Sleep, inhabitants of Nuremberg: the Lord watches over you! One o’clock—two o’clock—three o’clock!” People say that it is better to suffer death as an innocent man than as a guilty one, and as regards the soul it certainly is; but the poor injured body, suffering unjustly, rebels, and its transports of recoiling horror at its undeserved, inevitable fate are terrible.

Day dawned and slowly lighted up my gloomy prison. The window looked on the street. It was a market day, and I heard the rolling of the carts, laden with fruits and vegetables. I could distinguish the cackling of live poultry, and the animated discourse of the butter-women. As the

morning advanced, the din became greater, and the buzz and movement of life around me seemed to restore courage to my heart. I felt an irresistible desire to see what was going on around me, and to look once more on the faces of my fellow men.

My predecessors in the cell, animated, no doubt, by a like desire, had scooped holes in the wall, to facilitate their mounting to the window. I climbed up, and holding the bars, managed to seat myself on the narrow ledge. Once there, I gazed entranced on the crowd, the life, the movement: tears flowed down my cheeks; I felt an intense longing for life as life; simply to breathe, and move, and feel the sun— “Ah!” I exclaimed, “to live—only to live! Let them sentence me to hard labor; let them attach a weight to my leg. What does it matter, provided only that I live!”

The quaint old market on which I looked offered a gay and animated spectacle. The peasant women in their Bavarian costumes, were seated behind their baskets of eggs, fruit and vegetables, and their cages filled with poultry; butchers with naked arms were chopping meat on their blocks; peasants with their large brimmed felt hats set far back on their heads, leaned on their stout holly sticks, and smoked their pipes. The changing, animated scene captivated my attention, and, in spite of me, distracted my thoughts from my sad situation. As I continued to gaze on the crowd, a butcher passed by, his back bent under the weight of an enormous quarter of beef which he had bore on his shoulders. His arms were bare, his elbows raised, his head bent down in front. His hair falling down in a measure concealed his face, and yet at the first glance I shuddered. “It is he!” I exclaimed inwardly.

All my blood flew back to my heart. I leaped from the window down into my prison, shivering, my teeth chattering, while the rebellious blood flowed back again, and mounted hotly to my cheeks and forehead.

“It is he! He is there—*there*—and I—I must die to expiate his crime! O my God, help me! What am I to do?”

A sudden idea, an inspiration, as I believe, from heaven, darted through my mind. I put my hand into my coat pocket, and found my case of crayons. Rushing to the clean whitewashed wall, I sketched the scene of the murder with marvellous force and rapidity. No more uncertainty, no more wavering attempts. I knew the man who grasped the luckless woman’s throat; I saw him, as if he were sitting to me for his portrait. At ten o’clock the jailer entered my cell.

“What is this?” he said, looking with surprise at my sketch.

“Go, ask my judges to come hither,” I cried, still pursuing my work with feverish ardor.

“They await you in the Hall of Judgement,” he replied.

“Tell them to come; I have a disclosure to make,” said I, as I put the finishing touch to the murderer’s figure. It looked as if it lived and breathed; foreshadowed on the wall, the features stood out with wonderful force and reality.

The jailer went out and in a few minutes the two judges appeared. With my hand extended, and trembling in every limb, I said to them: "Behold the assassin!"

Von Spreckdahl carefully and quietly examined the sketch. "His name?" he inquired.

"I know it not," I replied; "but at this moment he is in the market, cutting up meat at the third stall on the left, as you enter from the Traubauten Strasse."

"What do you advise?" said my judge to his colleague.

"That we should instantly send for the man," replied he in a grave tone.

Stepping out into the corridor, he gave his orders to the policemen stationed there. During their absence the two judges remained standing contemplating the sketch. Suffering from strong reaction, I sank on the ground and buried my head between my knees.

Soon steps sounded from afar along the vaulted passages. Those who have not waited for the hour of deliverance, and counted the minutes, to them as long as centuries—those who have not felt the poignant emotions of suspense, terror, hope and doubt—they cannot conceive the sharp agony of that moment. I could have distinguished the footsteps of the murderer, marching between his guard from a thousand others. They approached; the judges themselves appeared moved. I raised my head, and my heart felt though as it were grasped by an iron hand. My eyes were fixed on the closed door; it opened—the man entered. His cheeks were red and swollen; his large jaws were contracted, causing his muscles to stand out even up to his ears; and his small, restless, tawny-colored eyes sparkled beneath a pair of thick reddish eyebrows.

Von Spreckdahl silently showed him the sketch. Then this powerful, sanguine-complexioned man turned pale—pale as death. Uttering a roar which startled us all, he opened his immense arms, and bounding backwards, succeeded in overthrowing two of his guards. There was a terrific struggle in the corridor; we could hear the panting respiration of the butcher, deep imprecations, broken words, and the stamping and shuffling of many feet. At length, the assassin was led in, his head sunk on his breast, his eyes bloodshot, his limbs firmly fettered. Again he looked fixedly at the drawing on the wall, seemed to reflect, and muttered, as if to himself: "Who, then, could have seen me—at midnight?"

I was saved.

Many years have gone by since that terrible adventure. Thank Heaven, I have no longer occasion to dread the importunities of creditors, or to draw the portraits of burgomasters. I have gained for myself a recognized place in the great world of art. But the recollection of that strange [nocturnal] sketch has never become less vivid; sometimes I lay aside my brush and pallet, and muse on for hours together.

How was it that a crime committed by a man whom I did not know, in a place which I had never seen, was reproduced by my pencil, even in its minutest details? Was it by chance? No. And yet, after all, what is chance but the effect of some cause which escapes us? Perhaps Schiller was right when he said, “This immortal soul does not share the exhaustion of matter during the sleep of the body; she unfolds her radiant wings, and flies forth, God knows whither! What she then does, none can tell, but inspiration now and then betrays the secret of her [nocturnal] wanderings.”—Who knows? Nature is more daring in her realities than Imagination in her fancies.

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