

Hans Schnap's Spy-Glass

BY ERCKMANN-CHATRIAN

At one time I knew, at Mayence, a worthy apothecary named Hans Schnaps. The door of his shop opened on to the Thiermack, and was surmounted by a signboard, the panels of which are ornamented with the caduceus of Mercury and the serpentaria of Esculapius. As to Hans Schnaps himself, instead of attending to his business, he strolled about the streets, carrying a big spy-glass under his arm, and leaving his drugs to the care of a couple of youths in his employ.

He was a singular personage, with a long nose, grey eyes, and mocking lips. From the look of his wide-brimmed felt hat, his great coat of reddish drugget, and his beard trimmed into a point, you might have taken him for a Flemish painter.

I sometimes met him at the tavern of the Pot de Tabac, on the Zeil, where we played together a game of youcker, or chatted about the weather. Schnaps never felt called on to give me any information on the subject of his occupations, and I saw no necessity for enlightening him on the subject of mine; it was, in fact, a matter of little or no importance to either.

One day, Burgomaster Zacharias said to me—"Doctor Béné-dum, you associate with a certain Hans Schnaps."

"Quite true, burgomaster; we meet pretty frequently."

"That Schnaps is a madman."

"I have never noticed it."

"Nothing is more positive; instead of attending to his business, he goes gadding about, with a spy-glass under his arm, stopping here and there; in short, losing his time and his customers."

"That is his affair, burgomaster; what would you have me do in it?"

"But he makes his wife unhappy," urged the burgomaster.

"What! is he married?"

"Yes, to the daughter of a cloth merchant, a very worthy and well-to-do man."

"So much the better; Schnaps will come in for some of his father-in-law's money."

"Yes; but he'll soon see the end of it."

"With his spy-glass?"

"No; but with his experiments. Imagine, doctor—he has established himself in his cellar, and what he does there the deuce only knows. If, by chance, you cast a glance through the grating, you find his spy-glass levelled at you; Schnaps eyes you with a roar of laughter—and when noon comes, his wife is always obliged to call out to him at least four times, 'Hans! Hans! the soup is ready!'"

"Poor woman, she is very much to be pitied!"

The burgomaster suspected that I was making fun of him, but he pretended not to see it, and proposed that we should share a pot of beer together. I accepted his invitation, and we talked of other matters.

These odd revelations, however, puzzled me not a little. What was Schnaps about in his cellar? What was the meaning of the spy-glass levelled at the grating? Was it a joke, or really some serious experiment? All this kept running in my head, and, a few days later, I went to the shop for the express purpose of finding out what I could. It was about nine o'clock. Madame Schnaps, a dry, nervous little woman, with dull eyes, features generally insignificant and ill put together, and cap set awry upon her head—one of those beings who, without speaking a word, contrive to suggest the idea that they are victims—Madame Schnaps received me behind the counter.

"Dear madame," I said to her, bowing graciously, with lifted

hat—"dear madame, where can I find your husband, Monsieur Schnaps?"

"In the cellar," she answered, with a grim smile.

"Already!"

The excellent creature appeared charmed by my manner, and raising her eyes directed me to a door on the left.

I hastened along the passage, and succeeded, after a good deal of stumbling on the dark stairs, in reaching the stone-paved floor of the laboratory.

It was really a cellar, but high, wide, spacious, and perfectly dry; filled with gigantic telescopes, mirrors of all kinds—flat, spherical, parabolical—prisms, crystals, and lenses, mounted on tripod stands—in short, the whole apparatus of an optician.

Hans Schnaps turned in surprise on hearing me descending.

"Hal hal hal" he cried, "it's you, Dr. Bénédum! Glad to see you."

He came towards me with open arms. But, stretching forth my hand with a tragic gesture—

"Halt! halt!" I cried; "stop a moment before we indulge in familiarities! I come on behalf of the burgomaster to feel your pulse!"

He gravely held out his arm to me; I placed my thumb on the artery, and, speaking in a thoughtful tone and with pouted lip, I said—

"Ahal you are not so ill as they say."

"Ill!" he cried.

"No; you are not yet wholly out of your wits."

These words sent him off into such fits of laughter that Madame Schnaps leaned over the stairs, and peered down into the cellar with wondering eyes.

"Sophial! Sophial!" cried the apothecary, "hal hal hal! Do you know what they say of me? Hal hal ha! They say I am out of my wits!"

His wife made a grimace, and hurried away without answering.

Becoming a little more calm, Hans Schnaps said to me—

"Take a seat, Dr. Bénédum, and tell me what has procured me the honour of this visit?"

He placed an arm-chair for me, and seated himself on the box of a daguerreotype apparatus, his long grasshopper legs sprawled

wide apart, his elbows on his knees, and his pointed beard drawn out between his bony fingers.

His was truly a strange physiognomy, seen by the dim light admitted by the cellar-grating, and the vague gleams that faded into shadow amid the thousand optical instruments added to the singularity of the scene.

I simply related to him the conversation I had had with the burgomaster, and Schnaps, far from growing angry, burst into new peals of laughter.

"What a fool that burgomaster is," he cried, "for whom I have just invented a new kind of syringe—a superb discovery, doctor! And—ha! ha! Observe that spy-glass; it's the famous Schnaps' syringe, unique of its kind! With this wonderful instrument I am able to accomplish what has never before been possible—to syringe the brains of idiots, imbeciles, *crétins*, and burgomasters generally! I pour into the body of the pump a decoction of Voltaire, Shakspeare, or Father Malebranche; I delicately introduced into your eye the small end of the instrument—I press, and, crack!—you are filled with good sense, poetry, or metaphysics!"

Here Hans Schnaps made such contortions, threw himself about so violently, alternately plunging and drawing up his legs, that I expected to see him tumble off his box; but, fortunately, he preserved his equilibrium.

"Ahal my dear friend," I said, "an excellent joke."

"Joke!—not the least in the world. You are much too sensible, Doctor Bénédum, not to know that our opinions depend upon our point of view: a miserable beggar, without fire or shelter, covered with rags, and with only a dunghill to lie upon, sees things in a light very different from that in which a nabob looks on them; social order to him appears detestable, laws absurd."

"Doubtless, but—"

"But," interrupted Schnaps, "seat the fellow at a splendid table, in a beautiful house, surround him with odoriferous flowers and pretty women, dress him in magnificent dresses, feed him on the daintiest dishes, let him drink Johannisberg, and place behind his chair a dozen lacqueys, who call him monseigneur, highness, most eminent, &c., he'll think that all is for the best in this best of all possible worlds; social order will appear to him magnificent, and he will proclaim our laws masterpieces of human wisdom."

"Agreed, my dear Schnaps, agreed; what you now say is the

history of humanity; we all look at things through the great or small end of the spy-glass, as it may happen. But what the deuce are you driving at?"

"Ahl" cried the apothecary, "it's very simple. From the moment that all depends on our point of view, the question of happiness is reduced to always finding the point of view that is the most agreeable—and that is precisely the merit of my discovery. Judge for yourself."

He handed me his spy-glass; I applied it to my eye, and could not refrain from uttering a cry of admiration. I saw myself President of the Scientific Society of Berlin, plump, ruddy, and hearty, decorated with the Orders of Merit, of the Black Eagle, of the Brown Eagle, of the Red Eagle, of the Metidjé, of the Garter, and others besides. I held the bell, and called people to order. Through the windows of the amphitheatre I saw my two-horse calèche and my footman bedizened with lace. Further off, I saw my mistress, a premiere danseuse, captivated by my charms, walking under the lindens, a parasol in her hand—and I said to myself, "Bénédum! Bénédum!—fortunate being! sublime genius! great man!"

A burst of ironical laughter drew me from this profound contemplation. I put down the spy-glass and found myself in the cellar, opposite the apothecary, who was watching me, his little malicious eyes wrinkled up to his ears.

"Well, well," he said, "what do you think of that?"

"Oh, my dear Schnaps," I exclaimed, "let me have it!"

"A good joke!" he cried; "you forget that it cost me ten years' labour to make it. With this spy-glass the universe belongs to me, after a manner; I can see my wife, young, pretty, prepossessing; I am always gay, laughing, and contented. This spy-glass lifts me above the most powerful monarchs of the world; renders me richer than Cœsus, more omnipotent than Xerxes; I would not lose it for the world! That is not all: with this spy-glass I can give myself injected doses of good sense, poetry, or metaphysics, according to the requirements of my temperament."

"But, in the name of heaven, Schnaps," I replied, transported with enthusiasm, "how did you make this sublime discovery?"

"It is not so marvellous as you believe," he said, laughing; "it is nothing more nor less than a kaleidoscope, but a kaleidoscope of a new kind: instead of allowing flowers and bits of glass to fall at

hazard, it draws them together in a natural order. In other terms, it is a combination of the telescope and the daguerreotype, two instruments which Nature herself has united in our heads."

At this moment he took out of his pocket a small snuff-box, and slowly inhaled a pinch, as if to collect himself, and then continued—

"Three years ago I was trying to fix the solar spectrum on a copper-plate. To this end I employed chloride of silver, bitumen of Judea plunged in oil of lavender and petroleum, iodide of silver, bromide of lime, solid and fluid—in short, all imaginable chemical combinations, without obtaining any decisive result. One evening, under the influence of a more sensitive composition, red, orange, and violet light appeared to fix itself; the plate took, vaguely, the tints of the iris. I was forming the best opinion of it, when my dear spouse, according to her immemorial custom, cried out, 'Hans! the soup is getting cold! Hans! the soup is getting cold! Hans! Hans! Hans! the soup is getting cold! The soup is getting cold!' These cries rasped my nerves. Whether I would or not, I was obliged to interrupt my experiment. I placed the copper-plate on the jut of the wall you see over there, and which served me to stand a candle on; that done, I went upstairs and quietly seated myself at table."

"And what did you say to your wife?"

"Nothing."

"In your place, I should have wrung her neck."

The apothecary smiled slyly.

"That same night," he replied, "after supper, I went down again into the laboratory. Fatigue and weariness of mind forbade my continuing my labour; I sat down in that arm-chair and fell asleep. On awaking, at one o'clock in the morning, I saw that the candle had gone out; but the rays of a star broke through the grating, and reflected themselves on the metallic plate at the far end of the cellar. While my attention was fixed on this luminous spot, I was thinking of my wife; I felt impelled to correct her; a thousand little home discomforts passed through my head; but at length, tired of these reflections, I fell off to sleep again. The next day all was forgotten, till, happening to cast my eyes on the plate, I saw there—what?—my dream of the past night imprinted on it with striking truthfulness: my wife, the dining-room, the clock on the chimney, the windows at the back, the little yard beyond—

my household interior to the smallest details. Only fancy entered into the scene to a certain extent: I was administering sound correction to Madame Schnaps!

“Imagine my enthusiasm. I speedily conceived my spy-glass. I comprehended that the brain of man is like the eye of the fly, an optical instrument with a thousand facets; that whatever is reflected in it may come from it by refraction, and imprint itself upon a chemical substance, the secret of which I had discovered.

“Thus, dear doctor, all your passions, all your desires, all your thoughts, form themselves in this spy-glass. You improvise better by a look than by speech, you materialise instantaneously the intellectual world moving within your mind.”

This discovery appeared to me miraculous.

“Master Schnaps—extraordinary man!” I cried, “suffer me to embrace you. Greater than the pyramid of Cheops, your memory will descend through the coming ages, and shine in the future like a star of the first magnitude. But I beg of you to enlighten me on one point. How can you inject doses of philosophy, or of any other science?”

“In this manner,” replied Schnaps, highly flattered by my compliments—“but, first, allow me to place before you some general considerations of the highest interest. You may have remarked, Dr. Bénédum, that great philosophers, great mathematicians, great poets, and generally all great ideologists, end miserably. Scoffed at during their lives, dishonoured, despised, and sometimes even hunted like wild beasts, they become, after their death, the prey of a certain class of individuals known under the name of *practical men*. A great deal of beautiful sentiment has been written, during the last three thousand years, against this usage of genius by mediocrity; but that does not prevent things from going on, at the present time, exactly as they went on in the days of Homer, Pythagoras, Socrates, and many other celebrated ideologists—‘they persecute, they kill them,’ safe to make for themselves reputations, and to coin money out of their discoveries! All this is passably melancholy and distressing, I admit, doctor; but at bottom nothing is more simple, and I will even say more natural. For an idea to succeed in this world, it must have the support of the masses. Now the masses, who don’t know how to raise themselves to the light of the pure ideal, admirably understand the ideal materialised, that is to say, *fact*. This is the sole source of the pretended power of practical men over ideologists.

Those fellows are rich, powerful; they govern the world, statues are erected to them. Why?—because they put at the disposal of a number of ignoramuses the idea of some poor devil of a great man who died of hunger in a garret. Is that true, yes or no?"

"Perfectly true, Master Schnaps."

"Well," continued the apothecary, with an ironical smile, "my spy-glass will suppress the practical men and restore to the ideologists the superiority which is their due; it will materialise ideas, and put them in direct communication with the masses! Let us suppose, for example, that I wish to take an infusion of metaphysics; I apply my eye to the lens. You read Kant to me, and in the proportion and to the extent to which I hear you, and his reasoning enters my head, will it pass forth from my eyes, and print itself upon the prepared plate; it will materialise itself, take bodily form; I see it, it is real, positive; I can have no doubt of its existence, since it is recognised by my senses; and this result is obtained by my infusion."

While Schnaps was explaining to me this great mystery, a furious desire to possess the spy-glass seized on me.

"My dear friend," I said to him, "I hope you will make several of these spy-glasses. Such a discovery belongs to entire humanity."

"To humanity!" he cried; "I should like to know what humanity has done for me! It has treated me as a madman, it has compelled me to live with an insupportable wife, it would have left me to die of starvation, like so many other inventors, if I had not had the resource of selling it drugs."

"But you will obtain public consideration—universal esteem and admiration."

"What do I care for the admiration of a heap of idiots?" cried the apothecary. "Take away from them the discoveries of Guttenburg, Galileo, Newton, and Volta, and there would be nothing left but a troop of asses on their knees before a sword. The admiration of such people! No, no! Let humanity make spy-glasses for itself, I shall keep mine and use it for my own satisfaction."

I was indignant at such selfishness.

"Master Schnaps," I replied, repressing my anger, "permit me to tell you that your reasoning is absurd. You make sublime spy-glasses—very good; but others cultivate the land, sow, reap, grind the grain for us, and bring bread to our houses; others make

medicines, others clothes and shoes, others procure for us wine, beer, tobacco, none of which things you disdain. We are all bound one to the other, Master Schnaps; therefore——”

While I was developing this thesis, the apothecary looked at me through his spy-glass.

“Ahal!” he cried, interrupting me, “I see what you want. You care very little for humanity. What you want is my spy-glass; but you shan’t have it. Hal hal hal!”

On this he shut it up like a spring-hat, placed it in a box, which he carefully locked, then, turning to me with a bantering air, said—

“You’ll not look through that any more. It will be a lesson to you, and teach you, for the future, not to play the hypocrite and preach the Gospel for your own profit. You’re a sly dog, Dr. Bénédum—a philanthropist! I don’t like people of that kind. Oblige me by taking yourself off the way you came.”

The blood mounted to my face. I felt a terribly strong desire to chastise Hans Schnaps, who watched me with a cunning expression in his eyes, and insolently pointed to the door; but I all at once recollected that the two boys in the shop above were a pair of thick-set fellows, and prudently retired.

Since then I removed from Mayence to come and live in Nuremberg, and for nearly two years have not seen Hans Schnaps. I think he still goes about the streets in his rusty coat, with his spy-glass under his arm; at least, so Burgomaster Zacharias recently told me in a letter, and I have no doubt of the fact.

What a pity that such a magnificent secret should be in the hands of such a fool!

A thing strange and worthy of remark is, that men of good sense have never invented anything; it is the madmen who, up to the present time, have made all the great discoveries.