

THE STONE RIDER!

A SHORT STORY OF THE WEIRD.

By NELLIE K. BLISSETT; ILLUSTRATED BY MAX COWPER.

IT was a dull day in early spring, and the wind in the pine forest behind the Castle of Salitz was making a melancholy moaning. In one of the deep window-seats of the castle I sat, with a book in my hand, looking down at the drowned landscape and the swollen river. I had come to visit that mysterious personage, Count Siebach von Salitz, whose extraordinary powers of thought-reading and prophecy would have brought him in several fortunes had he chosen to use them professionally. As it was, he was the object of much interest, and not a little awe, in half the capitals of Europe; and it was with some curiosity that I accepted his invitation to his Hungarian estate.

So far nothing in the least peculiar had occurred to me—a disappointment I was rather inclined to resent.

Siebach's step disturbed my meditations. I turned and saw him coming down the passage—a tall, gaunt man, with a haggard face and evil eyes. But if Siebach's personal appearance was not prepossessing, his charm of manner was so great that when you knew him well you forgot the small, cruel eyes, the sneering mouth, the curious mixture of power and cunning which characterized his countenance. His voice, too, was singularly beautiful, and atoned for many things.

He smiled as he came up and seated himself beside me.

"If you admire the view, you shouldn't look so solemn, Bazarac," he said; "and if you don't, and are bored, shall we go for a ride? Or will you come and look at my study?—you haven't seen it yet, and it is worth seeing."

"Everything here is," I answered, as I rose and followed him downstairs.

He laughed.

"That is the disadvantage of being born a Siebach of Salitz—there is no merit in possessing perfection. It is merely inherited property. Don't knock your head against this doorway—it is low. That's right!"

We had passed under a low archway into a long room panelled with black oak. There was a table, littered with papers, near the window, and over the hearth hung the portrait of a young man whose countenance, particularly about the mouth, distinctly resembled that of Siebach.

"How like you that portrait is!" I exclaimed.

He looked at it for a moment as though weighing my remark carefully in his mind.

"Do you think so?" he said at last. "It is my poor cousin Franz."

"I didn't know you had one."

"He is dead. He was drowned whilst we were bathing in the river beneath. I was with him at the time, but I could not save him. His body was never recovered—it was an awful affair. He

was only seven and twenty."

"Younger than you?"

"Oh, no—older. He was the heir. Poor Franz!"

I looked at the portrait with increased interest, and Siebach gazed at it too. There was a disagreeable expression on his face.

"It is a fine portrait," I said.

"Very—an Auberthal. You know Auberthal, of course? A splendid painter. Singular, now, I forgot that he will arrive here to-day. He has a long-standing engagement to visit me."



"HAGGARD FACE AND EVIL EYES."

I was very glad to hear it, for I had known Auberthal when he was a mere boy, studying in Garcia's "Atelier Espagnol." We had seen a great deal of each other, and I had liked him exceedingly. Although Siebach was very entertaining, I did not altogether trust him; a solitude only relieved by his presence did not at the moment appear alluring.

I expressed my pleasure, and began to walk about the study, admiring the family portraits, of which there were a great number. Under one of them I noticed a curtain drawn across the wall, and, supposing it to conceal a picture or a cabinet,



TALKING TOGETHER IN THE FOREST."

I very innocently put out my hand as if to draw it on one side.

A sharp exclamation from Siebach stopped me. I dropped the curtain and turned to him.

"What is the matter?"

He recovered his self-possession immediately.

"Nothing. I was cutting a pencil and the knife slipped. Oh, it is only a scratch!"

"What is behind this curtain?" I asked, returning to my former occupation.

He did not answer at once. Then he laughed, a trifle uneasily.

"A family superstition—nonsense if you like. You can look."

I drew it accordingly. The curtain covered a large recess, and in this recess stood the life-sized statue of a horse in white marble, bearing a man in armour upon his back. The singular part about this equestrian group was, that whilst the horse was stone, the trappings and the man's armour were real.

"That is an odd idea," I remarked.

"What, the armour? Oh, it belonged to an ancestor of mine. Of course there is a stone figure underneath to match the horse."

"The vizor of his helmet is down. Why don't you raise it? It would be far more effective."

He laughed again more uneasily than ever.

"My dear Bazarac, 'Let sleeping men lie' is an excellent transposition of the old proverb. This gentleman is supposed to 'walk'—or rather ride. In other words, he is the family apparition. He is supposed to ride about the castle at night."

"What a very unpleasant idea!"

"Do you think so? Well, it is sufficiently ghastly, I admit."

"Have you ever seen him?"

"No, but I have often fancied I heard a horse snorting and trampling about the passages. At this time of year he is often heard. The servants tell odd stories about him, but I have never encountered him myself."

"It would be an interesting encounter."

Siebach shuddered visibly.

"I think not," he said, in an altered tone.

I looked up at him. His face was very pale, and his shifty glance avoided mine.

"You are afraid of him," I said, laughing.

An odd light blazed for a second in his eyes. He had a pair of gloves in his hand, having just come in from a walk. Suddenly, without any warning, he flung one glove full at the mailed face of the Stone Rider. The armour rattled, and the

glove fell back at Siebach's feet. He picked it up and looked me in the face.

"You see whether I am afraid," he said, haughtily.

I did not understand his manner, but I saw that it would be better to change the subject at once, and avoid it for the future. So I asked him at what time Auberthal would arrive, and we talked of other things.

Auberthal came in time for dinner—a little round man with a face all brown skin and black beard, and extraordinarily bright eyes. I should never have recognized in him the slip of a boy whose genius had electrified the "Atelier Espagnol," but he was as pleasant as ever. We passed a very enjoyable evening, and retired in due course to bed.

From the moment I had dropped the curtain across the recess in the study, I had never given another thought to the Stone Rider. Auberthal's arrival had successfully banished reflection on that somewhat peculiar incident. I undressed, and got into bed, and, as I was not sleepy, began to read. I suppose this was at about half-past eleven, and I went on reading steadily for over half an hour, at the end of which period I laid down my book and prepared to blow out my candles, when a sound arrested my attention, and I paused to listen. The castle had long been silent, and everyone had retired to rest. Yet there was a distinct sound as of someone moving about the corridors under me.

My room was in the second story of the building, at the head of the grand staircase—an immensely broad and imposing affair of beautifully inlaid marble. The corridors, too, were all marble paved, so that the slightest sound was noticeable in them. I listened, and distinctly heard the noise, whatever its cause, approach the foot of the staircase. Then it paused for a moment, and there followed a curious sound of scrambling, as of a large and somewhat unwieldy object coming up the stairs.

By this time my curiosity was thoroughly excited. I got out of bed and went to the door. As the room was very long, and the door at the farther end of it, this was a decidedly better post for listening purposes. I had not been there a second before I heard the unmistakable rattle of armour, and the snuffing sound a horse would make after any unusual exertion. A wild

idea flashed across my mind, and I pressed closer to the door.

This was the Stone Rider!

The sounds came nearer and nearer until they were just outside. Then came another pause, and a heavy sigh—almost a groan—but whether from horse, or rider, I could not decide. Then the horse was turned round, and clattered and rattled down the shallow steps of the staircase, and away down the corridors, until all was silent once more.

All this time, though greatly excited, I had not felt the slightest sensation of fear; but now that all was still such a feeling of terror came over me that I lay awake for hours scarcely able to breathe, listening for the return of this midnight visitant.

But he did not come, and towards morning I fell asleep.

At breakfast I observed that Auberthal, who had been very lively the previous evening, seemed silent and depressed. Siebach, too, looked rather yellow and thinner than usual. I enquired if they had not slept well.

"Oh, yes," answered Siebach, hastily, "I have slept very well indeed, thank you."

Auberthal said nothing for a moment.

"You don't look particularly brilliant yourself, Bazarac," he remarked presently.

"Somebody was racketing about the staircase last night and disturbed me," I replied carelessly. "Didn't you hear it, Auberthal? Your room is next mine. I wondered whether the noise would keep you awake."

Siebach looked up at me sharply and seemed about to speak. But he thought better of it, and returned to his breakfast.



"IT IS GOING DOWN THE CORRIDOR TOWARDS THE STUDY."

"Yes," said Auberthal, quietly. "Something certainly kept me awake. That family ghost of yours, Siebach, I expect—the Stone Rider."

"I heard nothing," returned the Count, stolidly.

But Auberthal was not to be silenced.

"No? That is odd. I heard him distinctly. He stopped outside my door; and something groaned. It gave me a peculiar sensation. What makes him walk, Siebach—I suppose there's a legend?"

"Oh, there are lots of legends," answered Siebach, offhandedly. "One says that the Ritter von Salitz in the thirteenth century caused a statue of himself, on his favourite charger, to be set up in the courtyard of the castle, and when he took prisoners of war, he chained them to the Stone Rider and flogged them to death. When he was about sixty he married for the second time. His wife was very young and very beautiful, and had been betrothed to his eldest son, whom he hated, and banished from the castle. One day he found his son and his wife talking together in the forest. He seized them, had them lashed to the statue, and directed his men to flog them to death, whilst he himself stood by and derided them. However, that was the last atrocity he perpetrated, for he soon after went mad, and died. And his spirit is doomed to ride the stone horse for ever."

"A sufficiently horrible story, at any rate," remarked Auberthal, composedly. "Is the horse in your study the original of the courtyard?"

"Yes. It has been most carefully preserved, and handed down from generation to generation."

"No wonder it roams about the castle at night," I said.

"That is mere nonsense," returned Siebach, irritably.

I said nothing more; but after breakfast

I found an opportunity of speaking to Auberthal alone.

"I should like to investigate this matter," I said. "Will you help me, Auberthal?"

He laughed.

"Certainly; but I don't believe in ghosts, you know, Bazarac. I trust you don't?"



"FOR A FEW MOMENTS THE RIDER REMAINED MOTIONLESS."

"I have seen some very strange things in connection with ghosts; at all events, will you keep up to-night, and follow the Stone Rider with me?"

"If it will afford you any amusement."

"Don't speak to Siebach about it, then. He evidently does not care for the subject," and I related to him the incident of the glove.

He looked rather grave.

"I am sorry to hear it," he said, when I had finished. "There is insanity in his family, you know—I don't think his brain is what it was. And once he went off his head altogether."

"When?"

"Soon after his cousin was drowned. He saw it happen. That was enough to drive anyone mad, perhaps. But he was always queer."

"Then, to-night—?"

"Yes. When he gets to the bottom of the staircase again we will follow him."

The day passed off very quietly, and nothing more was said about the statue. We went to our rooms at the usual time, and I sat down to wait. At a few minutes past twelve I heard the noise beginning. It came up the staircase as it had done before, and paused for a moment outside the door. Then I again heard the sigh, or groan, and the clattering down the stairs. I opened my door and found Aubertal already on the landing.

"Make haste," he said. "It is going down the corridor towards the study."

We rushed down, and along the passage, the rattling going in front of us. But we were too slow. When we reached the study, the green baize curtain was drawn, and everything was perfectly still. After a moment's hesitation I pushed back the curtain. There sat the Stone Rider, immovable as ever, mailed and erect.

"He looks quite harmless," I said, doubtfully.

Aubertal bent down and held the candle closer. On the side of the horse were great dark stains, and the armour glimmered redly in the flame. The painter put his hand on one big patch, and drew back quickly.

"I could swear it was wet," he whispered.

"Let us go!"

We returned, and I drew him into my room.

"It's very odd!"

"Very!" He held up his hand. "Do you see?"

"Good Heavens!" I gasped, "it's all red!"

"With blood," he said, solemnly.

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For some days neither Aubertal nor I spoke of our adventure with the Stone Rider. But at last, one evening before dinner he came to me in my room.

"I shall go down into the study to-night," he said, "and see what really happens."

"Will you come too?"

"Yes. The noise at night still goes on?"

"Regularly every night. Bazarac, I mean to get to the bottom of this mystery."

"All right. I shall be charmed if you can prove the whole thing a hoax, but——"

"But what?"

"I don't think you will."

He considered for a moment.

"I don't think I shall either," he said, as he left me.

Siebach was unusually brilliant and amusing at dinner. He kept us at table long after our usual hour,

and when we at last got away to our rooms there was barely time to let the castle become quiet, and get back to the study, before twelve o'clock. However, we accomplished the feat, seated ourselves near together, blew out the candle, and waited for the ghost to move.

For some time everything was silent. Then, all at once, the room became strangely illuminated. One after another the chairs, and tables, and pictures grew out of the gloom, lit up with a pale, peculiar light. And at last the curtain was drawn aside—the horse shook himself, and snorted—the armour rattled—and the Stone Rider rode slowly out into the middle of the room.

The supernatural radiance streamed from him—it issued from the closed bars of his helmet, from the steel breastplate, from the joints of the rusted gorget. It seemed to grow brighter every moment, till, almost dazzled, I turned my attention to the horse.

I did not at first notice the stain on his



"HE GRIPPED MY ARM."

side which Auberthal had observed. But as I looked at him, I saw that a dark stream began to trickle down the whiteness of the marble. It dripped from a great dent in the breastplate of the Rider—dripped slowly and steadily over the horse's neck, and rolled down to the floor.

For a few moments the rider remained motionless; then struck his spurs into the marble flanks of his steed, and they moved away. The light went with them through the open door, and Auberthal sprang up and rushed after them.

I saw the Stone Rider turn in his saddle and look back as we raced after him; and a flash of flame seemed to shoot out from between the helmet-bars. On they went—clattering, clashing, rattling through the stone passages, and we after them. They reached the staircase—the Rider rose in his stirrups and urged the horse up. The pace was too fast—the horse slipped, plunged—and finally recovered himself, just as an ordinary horse might do, and halted.

But the Rider's balance was destroyed. He swayed in the high saddle—his arms went wildly into the air—and he crashed forward, and fell, with a horrible rattling sound, at our feet. The clasps that fastened the gorget and breastplate burst—the helmet rolled away—and on the pavement before us lay a skeleton!

For a time we were too stunned to speak. Then Auberthal uttered an exclamation of horror and looked up.

Half way up the staircase stood Siebach von Salitz. His face was ghastly white—his eyes were widened with an expression of awful terror—his hands were stretched out as though grasping the air. He stood motionless for some moments, staring into vacancy; then his rigid expression relaxed, his arms dropped to his sides, and he came down the stairs.

"What has happened?" he enquired.

"That!" said Auberthal, bluntly, pointing to the skeleton.

Siebach bent over it for a moment. Then he kicked it contemptuously aside.

"Somebody has been playing a practical joke," he remarked.

Auberthal coughed.

"I have not, nor has Bazarac. Who could have done it?"

"Do you suppose I have?"

Siebach seemed indignant. Auberthal looked at him very quietly.

"I do not suppose anything," he said, "but there is the skeleton, and there is—"

He turned to look for the horse, but it was gone.

"There was the horse," he concluded, "and to-morrow morning I leave for Paris. Good-night!"

He disappeared up the staircase, leaving me face to face with Siebach.

"What does he mean?"



"I RECOGNISED ONE OF SIEBACH'S SERVANTS."

"I really don't know, Siebach."

"Do you intend to leave for Paris, too?"

"I am very sorry," I said, "but my nerves are really not equal to this sort of thing. Good-night, Siebach!"

He surveyed me with an odd expression; then, suddenly, he gripped my arm.

"Do you think—" he almost gasped in my ear—"do you think that he suspects anything?"

I shook him off.

"Good heavens, Siebach! What should he suspect? Can't you explain this horrible thing?"

He recovered his self-command almost immediately, and smiled feebly.

"No. I can't," he said. "Am I to explain all my family skeletons, Bazarac?"

"Not if you do not wish."

And I left him standing by the skeleton of the Stone Rider.



"HIS EYES BLAZED WITH FEVERISH LIGHT."

For some years I did not come across Count Siebach von Salitz—neither, I am afraid, did I wish to do so. Of the Stone Rider—who had proved to be no stone at all—I often thought, but at last I hardly regarded the incident as anything more than the recollection of a bad dream. Auberthal and I met frequently, and often discussed our adventure; and I believed that he had suspicions concerning Siebach which I did not care to share. But one evening as we sat in the "Atelier Espagnol"—Auberthal and myself—someone knocked at the door and came hastily in. I recognised one of Siebach's servants.

"What is it?" I asked.

"Will M. Bazarac or M. Auberthal

come to my master at once? He is very ill at the Hôtel —."

We both rose and looked at each other, and Auberthal slipped his arm through mine.

"We had better go together."

So we went. The Hôtel — was close by. In ten minutes we were in Siebach's bedroom.

He lay in bed, looking thinner and more haggard than ever. His eyes blazed with feverish light, and he beckoned us eagerly to approach.

"There is not much time," he said, speaking in a weak, strained voice; "I sent for you to tell you—what is that?"

His eyes dilated with fear, and he glanced round the room.

"It is nothing," said Auberthal, gently.

He laughed—a short, bitter laugh.

"He is not far off—he never is. Don't you hear the horse breathing outside the door? I can. I always hear it now. Don't let it come in—don't—don't, Auberthal!"

His voice rose to a shriek.

"Nothing shall come in."

"Thank you. I am so foolish to mind! I—I wanted to tell you. I—I murdered him."

He fell back exhausted.

"Whom?" asked Auberthal, aghast.

"My cousin Franz. He was the heir."

"But he was drowned."

Siebach struggled up on his elbow.

"No, I told them that. I shot him; and I knew if they found the body they would accuse me, so I hid it. And when his father died, and I got the castle, I dug him up—and—you know. I could not hide the skeleton, so I put it on the horse. Don't you think that was a good idea?"

He laughed, and Auberthal looked at me with a shudder.

"The armour hid it," went on Siebach, "and I knew they were all so superstitious they wouldn't touch it. And then you came—you and Auberthal."

At that moment the doctor came in. When he left the room he called me out.

"Count Siebach is mad?" I questioned,

"He is not responsible for what he says. Are you a friend of his?"

"In a way."

"Then you had better stay with him. Send for me if he gets worse. I shall do no good by stopping."

I went back to Auberthal. Siebach was obviously too ill to be left. I agreed to sit up with him half the night, whilst Auberthal rested.

Siebach was exhausted, and for some hours lay quite still. I think he was insensible. But about 12 o'clock I heard a sound from the bed, and went to him. He was sitting up, looking straight before him into space.

"Don't you hear it?" he asked.

I listened, to appease him.

"No."

"Not the horse?"

I listened more attentively.

Yes—the old rattle—the old sound of a horse's hoofs. It was coming up the stairs.

Slowly the door opened—slowly the light I had seen before grew in the darkened air—and into the room rode the Stone Rider, rigid, erect, with the unearthly radiance all around him.

He came up to the foot of the bed, and slowly lifted the vizor of his helmet, disclosing a glistening skull—and, as I looked, the skull became the face in the portrait over the mantelpiece of the study at Salitz. It was too evident that Siebach recognised it. His eyes were fixed on the apparition; his thin features were grey, and drawn with fear. For a moment he remained motionless, staring at it; then he threw up his arms with an awful cry, and fell back.

Slowly the Stone Rider drew the mailed gauntlet from his right hand. For a moment he poised it deliberately in the air, then flung it full in Siebach's face.

A shudder ran through the prostrate figure, but it did not move again; and the Stone Rider turned his horse and rode from the room. The light followed him, and we were again in semi-darkness.

Then I lit a candle and rang for Auberthal and the servants.

Whether the story of the murder was correct or not, I cannot say. It may have

been the madness of a diseased imagination, or it may have been the late remorse of a criminal. At any rate, it is not for me to throw suspicion on the name of a dead man. I can only relate what I myself saw and heard. The doctor declared, and maintains to this day, that his patient was insane; and, being a doctor, he very naturally has the world on his side. But,



"I . . . FOUND COUNT SIEBACH VON SALITZ LYING DEAD."

say what he will, there is one thing he can never explain. When I lit the candle that night, and found Count Siebach von Salitz lying dead, I found also that on his forehead was the distinct print—purple and bruised—of a clenched fist. The doctor cannot explain this; perhaps I can. For what could it be if it was not left by the gauntlet of the Stone Rider?