

A MAGAZINE OF THE BIZARRE AND UNUSUAL

Weird Tales

REGISTERED IN U. S. PATENT OFFICE

Volume
34

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NOVEMBER, 1939

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Published monthly by Weird Tales, 9 Rockefeller Plaza, New York, N. Y. Entered as second class matter September 24, 1938, at the Post Office at New York, N. Y. Single copies, 15 cents. *Subscription rates:* One year in the United States and possessions, Cuba, Mexico, South America, Spain, \$1.50; Canada, \$1.75; elsewhere, \$2.00. English Office: Charles Lawell, Limited, 4 Clements Inn, Strand, London W.C.2, England. The publishers are not responsible for the loss of unsolicited manuscripts, although every care will be taken of such material while in their possession. The contents of this magazine are fully protected by copyright and must not be reproduced either wholly or in part without permission from the publishers.

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FARNSWORTH WRIGHT, Editor. 173



WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH

Uncanonized

By SEABURY QUINN

A tale of werewolfery and a weird romance—an enthralling story of the horror that struck by night

GRAY-BLUE and pungent-sweet, the scent of leaf smoke floated on the breeze that wandered lazily across the valley; from the larches growing on the farther hills the cuckoo's call, a little sad, a little mocking, drifted softly as the echo of a half-heard echo. Little animals, too insignificant to merit chase, looked startled-eyed from the long roadside grass as young Graf Otho Hohenschuh rode through the gathering dusk with his companions. They had been hawking since the cock had trumpeted his salutation to the morning; now, with game bags filled and palates dry with thirst, they sought the comfort of the Pulitzberg, the slippery, thirst-annihilating Reingau and the roasted joints of venison and brawn. With Otho rode his saddlemates and cup-comrades, Hans Richnau, Emil von Dessaur and Werther von der Plücher, free-landed, towered *junkers* like himself, gallant riders and good swordsmen, mighty workers with the trencher or the flagon, and ruthless and acquisitive as the hooded hawks which they had coursed that day.

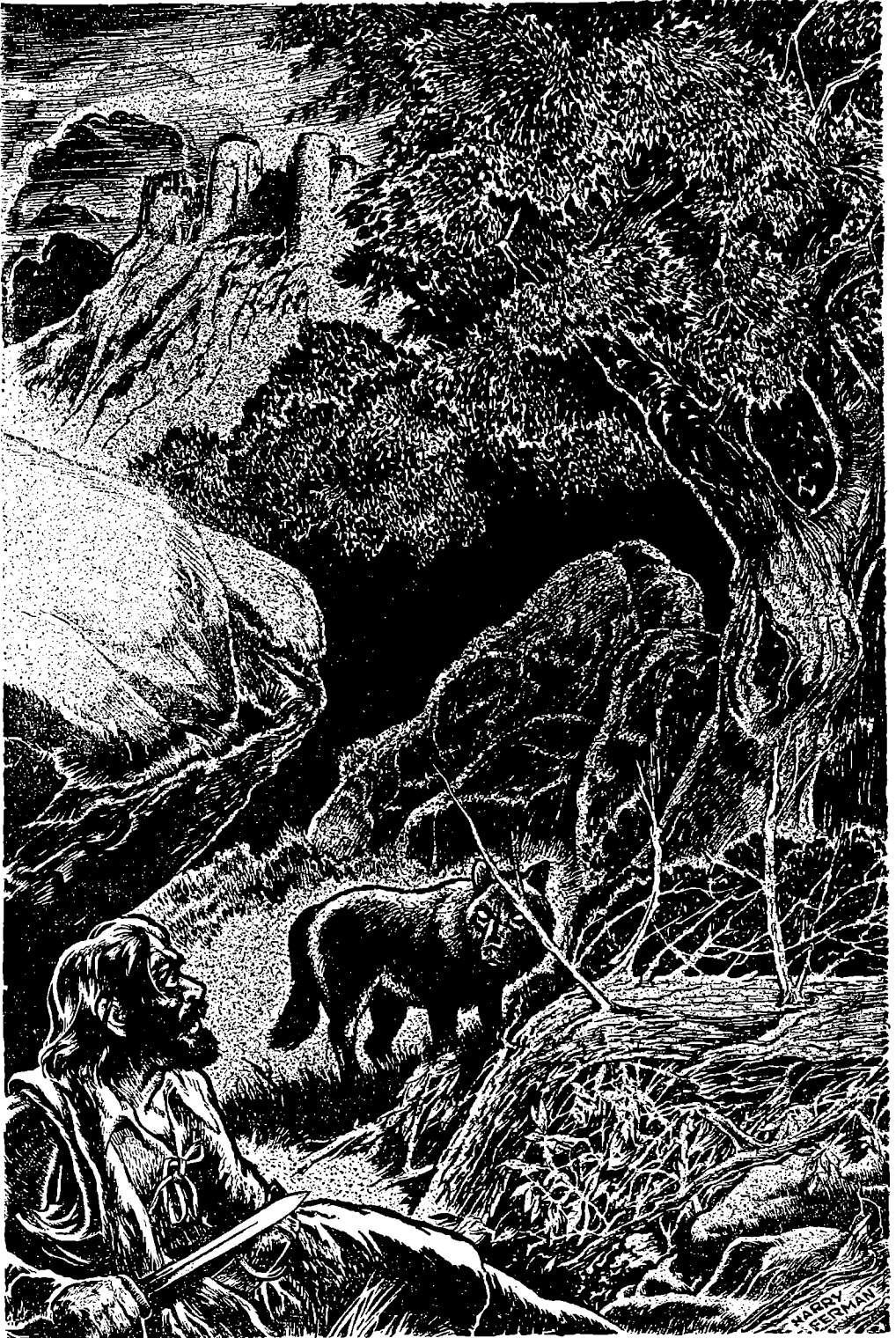
"Fore God," exclaimed von Dessaur as they cantered toward the cleared lands, "meseems this road grows longer as we wend it! I am thirsted till I scarce can speak——"

"Then husband thy breath," laughed von Hohenschuh. "'Tis nigh three leagues until we reach the Berg, and thou'lt be choked to the death ere then. Now, if thy dainty throat could forgo wine and be content with home-brewed ale——"

"Mary Mother, I would e'en take milk and pull no face on tasting it!" the other interrupted. "Stretch forth thy rod and smite the rock whence small beer floweth, oh, Moses!"

Graf Otho turned into a lane that crossed the ancient Roman road and led directly to the valley. "The farmerers make Harvest Home," he threw across his shoulder. "'Twill be a shame and a reproach if they've not beer and bread to give us."

THE countryside was out in force. Farmerers, crofters, freedmen, carls and villeins had turned out like an army for the gathering-in of corn; now, the wheat-heads gleaned and straw in ordered stacks, they made a feast of Harvest Home at the grange of Wolfgang the franklin. All day, from sun-up to late twilight, the mowers had weaved back and forth across the fields of standing wheat and rye, and after labor came refreshment. Whole-roasted pigs and sheep and oxen, chickens, ducks and geese, long loaves of wheaten and rye bread and cauldronfuls of cabbage boiled with fat-back disappeared almost as if by magic, and barrel after barreland of ale and spice-tanged cider foamed and frothed into the pewter pots and earthen steins as the women made their rounds from group to group of feasting peasants; for Wolfgang the franklin spread the feast for his tenants and neighbors and it would be a shame to him if any left his farmstead able to look at a bite of food or sup of



"It gave him a long look that made the scalp creep on his skull."

ale or cider other than with feelings of disgust.

He had been cast in a heroic mold, this Wolfgang. Six feet three inches he stood in woolen hosen, and his weight was fourteen stone; yet nowhere on him was an ounce of fat, and though he scarce could form the letters of his name, his was the best hand with the scythe or quarter-staff or grisarme in all the countryside.

Beside him on the oaken bancal sat his bride-betrothed, Gertruda, daughter of Humboldt the crofter, and next to them was stout Friar Hilderbrandt who when the feast was done should make them man and wife.

Hilderbrandt was godly, though not saintly. Saints were woven of a tougher fiber, better able to resist the promptings of the flesh. As one who trod the common ways of common men and shared their joys and sorrows he was ever aware of the world, and he did not disdain it. He was a mighty worker at the table, his girdle spanned a waist an ell in compass, and he could toss pots with the strongest-headed drinker in the parish and still be thirsty and sure-footed when his cup-companion snored beneath the table. Now, as befitted one who knew not only the Four Gospels intimately, but the savor of good fare as well, he occupied the seat of master of the revels.

"*Laus Deo!*" he exclaimed with pious fervor, emptying his pint-cup at a draft and sighing gustily as he wiped his foam-flecked lips upon his cassock cuff. "*Laus Deo, amen!* Nay, wench, be not so hasty—" as the girl cup-bearer was about to move along with laden tray. "Another cup to keep the first one company, and then a third in honor of the blessed Trinity. Wot ye not what good Aquinas saith, *videlicet—in nomine Domini*, here be noble visitors!"

The peasants' shouting merriment ceased abruptly as Otho and his comrades clat-

tered into the barn court, and every feaster rose and stood respectfully to hear the young graf's pleasure.

"*Ach Gott*, are we a pestilence that ye leave off pleasuring at sight of us?" the Count demanded testily. "Nay, Wolfgang," as the franklin left his place and came to hold his liege lord's stirrup, "let merriment proceed. We be four thirsty-throated men come for a stoup of ale. Ye would not give a beggar less, methinks.

"Ho, musickers," he waved a gloved hand to the knot of rustics who with viol and flute and tambour gathered at the barn door, "to work! Let's see the harvest dance and hear the strain of your sweet instruments!"

A peasant maiden hurried forward with a tray of pewter mugs and Richnau, von Dessaur and von der Plücher tossed bottoms up and belched with gusty relish, but Hohenschuh waved the cup aside. "Am I to be served by a field wench?" he asked, his dark eyes on Wolfgang's affianced bride. "Will not the mistress of the revels deign to bring me drink in her fair hands?"

A blush swept up Gertruda's slim pale throat and mounted to her cheeks and brow as with downcast eyes she left her place and bore a foaming ale mug to von Hohenschuh. "Will not your lordship dismount and take place at table?" she asked in a low voice. "It is not fitting that——"

"Nay, *mädchen*, I have but time for this"—he interrupted as he took the ale mug from between her hands and drained it at a single long-drawn draft—"and this!" He tossed the empty pot away so that it rang and bounced and clanged against the kidney stones of the barn court, and bending from his saddle set a bent forefinger underneath her chin and kissed her on the upturned lips.

And as he laughed again to see the quick blood burning in her face the music started, and to the rhythm of the tambour

and the tune of viol and flute and flageolet the youths and maidens took their places for the dance.

"By the bones of good Saint Hubert, patron of the chase, I'll stop to tread a measure!" declared Hohenschuh and swung down from the saddle.

THEY made a gallant couple with the torchlight and the bonfires' flickering beams upon them. Hohenschuh was tall and dark and handsome as the Devil's self with his sleek hair, his tiny black mustache and the little tuft of black hair on his nether lip. His doublet was of Saxon green, cinctured tightly at the waist by a broad leathern belt, and falling almost to the knees in heavy pleats cross-stitched with gold; on his legs were high-laced boots of soft brown hide which came up to the chausses of green fustian that encased his thighs. He wore no sword, but at his belt there hung a heavy dirk-knife in a scabbard of brown leather set with gold.

Gertruda, daughter of the crofter Humboldt, was lovely as the lily-spear from which she took her name. Her hair was fair with the bright sheen that ripened wheat stalks have at harvest time, and as the harvest queen she wore it unbound and unplaited, save for the wreath of corn-flowers bound about her brow. Underneath the blossom fillet looked two deep blue eyes with a sweet, trusting frankness that proclaimed her spirit pure and virginal as her slim young body. Faint responsive roses bloomed in either cheek and seemed to cast a shadow of their color down her slender, graceful neck. In her gown of deep-blue linen, touched with bands of white at throat and wrist, with the glory of the firelight burnishing her unbound hair, she seemed as chaste and other-wordly as a carven angel set in a carven niche.

"*Kreuzsakrament*," Graf Otho swore as he completed the dance and turned to

mount his charger while Wolfgang, as was meet, stood by to hold his stirrup, "thou art the lucky one, my Wolfgang! Would that I might bide here to see thee wed this flower-maid"—Gertruda's lashes dropped demurely, and a deeper flush dyed her flushed cheeks as his dark eyes locked down into her blue ones—"but business at the Berg impels my presence thither. Howbeit, see thou to it that thou bring'st the molmen and thy bride into the castle hall ere thou hast smelled the flowers of the bride-bed."

"Tonight, my lord? Certes, thou knowest well I will not fail to bring the silver, but we wed within the hour, and the Pultzberg is three leagues distant——"

"Tonight, my Wolfgang," broke in young Graf Otho. "It is my pleasure that I have the forfeit ere thou hast the maid."

Now it was the law, and had been since the days of Charlemagne the Great, that when a vassal wed, the lord of Pultzberg, if he desired, might occupy the bridal chamber in the husband's stead upon the wedding night, and this was called the *droit du seigneur*, or lord's right. Not in the memory of living man had any lord of Pultzberg exacted payment of the *droit* in kind. Graf Otho's father and grandfather and great-grandsire had compromised their claims for silver, and for more than ninety years a bag of thalers had been offered and accepted as a quit-claim settlement.

So Wolfgang louted low and bent his head in assent to his lord's command. "The silver shall be in thy hand before the castle horologe strikes ten, my liege," he promised.

AGAINST the purple backdrop of the night the Pultzberg loomed like a darker shadow in the midst of shadows. Here and there a lighted window showed like an orange point pricked in the sky above the towering rim of the great rock on which the castle stood. From the ravine

where a rill ran brawling past the Berg's base rose the evening mist, whorl swirling lazily on whorl until the valley and the great trees growing on the lower slopes were shrouded like the sheeted dead, and through the thickening brume the harvest moon shone faintly, its golden light transmuted into faded silver by the gathering haze. The broad-flanked palfrey's hooves made rhythmic music on the roadway flints as Wolfgang with Gertruda on the pillion at his back rode at easy gait toward the castle.

Up from the ravine came a faint halloo as villeins' brats called back and forth across the rock-spiked gulch while they sought mollusks by the flare of rushlight torches. Gertruda clutched her husband's arm between convulsive hands and shuddered against the rough stuff of his jerkin.

"Art chilled, my sweetling?" he asked with a bridegroom's solicitude. "The mist is rising from the valley, but we shall be there eftsoons——"

"Nay, husband," came her whispered interruption, "it was no chill of night that shook me. I felt a sudden inward tremor, such as the old wives say we feel when one steps on the spot where we shall die. Oh, Wolfgang"—her hold upon his great arm tightened—"if I should die this night, upon my wedding eve—meseems this joy is too great to endure. What if it proves to be like fairy gold that turns to withered leaves and ashes in the holder's hand——"

"Tush, little silly one, what is there to be feared of? Am I not with thee——"

"Nathless, husband, I am frightened. The way the young graf looked at us ere we were wed——"

"Graf Otho, quotha?" Wolfgang's laugh drowned out her frightened, half-articulated words. "If we need fear no other more than him our path of life will be a smooth one, little bride o' mine. We be more than lord and liegeman, he and I. We be true friends and comrades, and have

been since our youth. I am beholden to him for my lands, but he is debtor to me for his life. Think ye he would do us wrong?"

"His life? How sayest thou, Wolfgang?"

Again his chuckle answered her. "'Twas when we were but lads scarce breeched that he and I went hunting in the woods beyond the Tanneberg. It was forbidden ground to us, for there were bears and wolves—aye, robbers, too—among those trees, but danger ever was more lure than warning to us. Eh, we had not gone far when we heard a crackling in the brush, and on the trail before us stood a monster old he-bear with yellow fangs and little eyes that glared with rage and hate. He was a roamer of the woods, that one, an outcast from his kind who mated not and killed whatever crossed his path. He had been searching for a honey-tree, but now he sought no honey.

"Graf Otho was a step before me, and when the bruin rushed at him he thrust out bravely with his boar-spear, but the monster struck the shaft aside as if it had been a reed, and towered over him a moment ere it dropped to rend him. But in that instant I let out a shout of mingled rage and fear and hurled a stone which struck the beast square on its tender snout so that it turned on me instead."

Gertruda snuggled closer to her bridegroom's massive shoulder and laid her cheek against the rough frieze of his jerkin. Her frightening premonitions were forgotten; surely she was safe with such a man for husband. "And wert thou not afeared?" she whispered breathlessly.

"Aye, more than ever I have been before or since, *weibchen*. When the brute turned on me I felt as if I had been stuffed with naught but water, and that aleak so sorely I must collapse like a burst wine-skin, but those who act the quickest live the longest in the wildwood, and, *Gott sei*

dank, I had the wit to act. So I drave with my grisarme straight at his hairy breast, and he did not snap my spear as he had lashed away Count Otho's; so the iron fleshed itself clear to the haft in him, and when he struck at me he stumbled over Otho's prostrate body so he fell upon the spire and broke the shaft, but drove the blade clear through him so it thrust out of his back. So he fell upon his side and kicked and moaned his life away.

"Then Otho and I named ourselves great huntsmen and the conquerors of monsters, and made shift to skin the brute and take its pelt and head for trophies. But ere we did this Otho thanked me graciously for my part in the work, and sware that from that day he was my true friend and companion, and that when we were men grown and he had reached his heritage there was nothing which I might ask that he would not give me freely. Think'st thou that we have aught to fear from him, my sweet? 'Tis but a whim that prompts him to exact the silver molmen on our bridal night instead of waiting for the payment as was the wont of his sire and grandsire."

GRAF OTHO sat at late meat with his cronies of the chase. The remnants of a roasted pig's face garnished with stewed plums, part of a haunch of venison and the remains of a cast of bread were on the table, and by the Count's hand stood a *cruye* of wine from which he replenished the silver rummers of himself and guests.

"Body o' Judas," swore von Dessaur between hiccups as his host renewed the ruby liquid in his flagon, "this is no Reingau, no vintage of our valleys. 'Tis sherris, as I'm a sinner hoping for the Lord His pardon, a very heading cup to steal the senses and befog the brain!"

Graf Otho smiled, a thin slow smile that raised his black mustaches at the cor-

ners of his mouth and showed a hard white line of teeth between his lips. "Mayhap 'tis conscience who is doomed to lay her neck upon the block tonight," he answered cryptically, his eyes upon a bear's head mounted on the wall. Then, to von Plücher: "What say'st thou, Ludwig, can promises be binding on a man of *gens* if made by him to a churl?"

Von der Plücher drew a deep draft from his rummer and considered gravely. "The churl and villein know not faith and honor," he decided at length. "Unless they take an oath upon the rood they cannot be bound to a promise. Meseems a man of gentle blood need not fulfill a promise made a carl unless he too hath sworn upon the cross or taken value for its giving." The others nodded solemn agreement as Hohenschuh refilled the cups.

"It was an old, decrepit beast," he muttered. "Belike I could have slain him unaided——"

"What say'st thou?" von Dessaur asked. "What beast, my Otho?"

"Eh? I did but mutter in my cup," returned Graf Otho. "Forgive me, friends, but I would be alone. I have somewhat to attend to ere the horologe strikes ten, and we must ride betimes upon the morrow."

One by one they rose and made unsteady bows and left him sitting in his oaken chair before the oaken table with the orange glare of rushlights brightening the blood-red of the spilled wine on its polished top.

WOLFGANG made a leg and Gertruda dropped a low, respectful curtsy when they came into the wide hall where Graf Otho sat alone before the broken meats and spattered wine.

"Here is the molmen, good my lord," the franklin announced as he slipped the thongs that held the leathern sack of silver to his girdle. "A hundred and fifty and

two broad thalers, minted with the picture of the angel Gabriel on 'em, as was paid by my sire to your sire and my grandsire to yours."

"Put by thy money, Wolfgang," ordered the Count with a smile. "Use it to buy a prettying for thy sweet bride; mayhap I shall give thee a like sum on the morrow or the day after——"

"Thou wert ever generous, my lord," Wolfgang's wide face broke into a smile as he put a hand out to retrieve the silver. But both the gesture and the smile were halted as Graf Otho finished speaking.

"——after I have had my marriage-rights as thy liege lord."

Wolfgang licked dry lips with a tongue that seemed to have gone dry all suddenly. "My lord is pleased to jest," he stammered thickly. His heavy fingers twisted and untwisted on each other; there was about him the air of a bewildered child.

"Nay, in good sadness, I am minded to assert my right and demand payment of the *droit* in kind," the Count returned, almost patiently. "Get thee to thy cot, good Wolfgang, and tomorrow when the cock hath crowed three times come thou to the castle gate for thy fair Gertruda. I can promise thee——"

"Aye, as thou didst promise long ago, when I saved thee from the ravening bear!" Wolfgang interrupted hotly. "On that day thou swore to be to me like any brother, and declared that whatsoever I might ask thee should be granted me. I claim thy promise now, Otho Hohenschuh. By the memory of our boyhood friendship, by the service which I did thee; by the sacredness of thy pledged word I conjure thee to let us go in peace, unscathed and undefiled. Take thy tale of silver as thy sire and grandsire did aforetime, and——" In his excess of emotion Wolfgang laid his hand upon the heavy hanger belted to his waist, and:

"Ho, guard, there!" cried Count Otho.

"Seize me this varlet who hath offered violence in mine own hall. Set him in the inner dungeon and lock his feet fast in the stocks until I bid ye loose him!"

Surprised, but obedient, twenty men-at-arms came rushing to perform their master's bidding, and Wolfgang went down beneath an overpowering weight of burly armored bodies and the flailing of a score of fists.

Bound with a length of rope they set him on his feet and dragged him to the door, but ere they hustled him down to the dungeon cell he turned to shout: "Oath-breaker, perjurer, accursed of God and man; the doom of Judas be upon thee; may thou go to thy death unshriven and in fear——" A guardsman's gauntlet stopped his mouth, and, silenced and raging, but as helpless as a rabbit in a snare, they hurried him into the oubillette.

GERTRUDA faced the Count across the littered dining-board. Her pulses jumped like frightened hares with every quick-drawn breath, her heart was quivering and jerking like something in its death-throes. There was a dreadful, paralyzing weakness spreading through her, as if her insides were becoming unfastened. Her lower lip began to quiver and she caught it savagely between her teeth to hold it steady. The urge to pray rose in her, but she had no words to frame a prayer. God seemed terribly unreal . . . perhaps there was no God! Surely He would not let such things happen if He existed . . . what harm had she or Wolfgang ever done, what had they ever asked of Heaven but each other and a little time to enjoy life and love together?

Graf Otho's softly uttered, suave words called her from the trance of horror that enchained her. He spoke gently, with a sort of soft persuasion, as to a frightened child: "——the bridal couch is decked with flowers and a bedgown of the softest

silk from far Cathay waits to caress thy gentle form——”

She beat her breast with her left fist to still the frantic feeling which seemed spreading like a blood-stain in the sand to smother the wild palpitation of her heart. With her right hand she sawed a cross-sign in the air between them.

“Aroint thee, perjurer and foresworn friend,” she gasped. “Come not near nor touch me——”

Graf Otho drew his breath in with a sibilating hiss. Her tense, pale face was set and immobile as the marble visage of a sculptured saint in the Cathedral at Cologne, but the glow of rushlights gleaming at her back shone through her wheat-blond hair and made it shine like minted gold, and the shadows of her brows gave added depth and luster to the deep blue of her eyes. The wench was fairer, even, than he'd thought.

“Nay, lovely ”Truda,” he began to wheedle, “flee not from me in affright, I beseech thee. See, I will be thy tiring-woman——” He passed around the table and laid a hand upon her bodice, but she shook the lethargy of terror off and ran on faltering, stumbling feet to the wide windows overlooking the ravine that served the Pultzberg in place of a moat.

“Back—back!” she panted as she halted by the casement. “Come but another step and I will throw myself——”

His laughter drowned her threat. “Not thou, my ”Truda—and mine thou art, as surely as the horse I stride or hound I course,” he denied. “Look thou out and see what lies beyond that window, then say if thou'lt choose it instead of Otho Hohenschuh, his arms and lips.”

Gertruda cast a timorous glance across the two-foot stone sill of the window-place. Two hundred feet and more below, the mountain rill, high-swollen by a steady week of rain that fell before the harvest period, ran clattering and bawling on the

needle-points of rock, and at the edges of the flood the white foam steamed and glistened as if the very force of friction of the water on the boulders set it boiling. She drew away with a gasp, for the chasm seemed to call and beckon to her, but even as she shuddered back she felt his touch upon her shoulder.

“Hast made thy choice, Gertruda mine?” he asked so softly that she scarce could hear his words above the clamor of the water shouting on the rocks below.

“I thine?” she answered in a voice gone hoarse with loathing and disgust. “Thine, Otho Hohenschuh? Sooner would I give myself to Barran-Sathanas! Hear me, thou who perjured thy true word and requited the savior of thy life with perfidy—look in mine eyes and read in them thy doom—*heilige Maria!*” As Graf Otho's fingers tightened on her shoulder and he made to draw her into his embrace she thrust him back with all her feeble might, leapt to the window-sill and dropped herself into the abyss.

Out into the night she launched, a glimmer of white face and gleaming hair, pale hands clutching at the empty air, then turning slowly over as she fell.

Otho looked across the casement sill, his black eyes wide, his midriff twitching with incipient sickness. She lay face down upon the rocks that rimmed the swirling spray-plumed fall of a small cataract, her arms outstretched like those of a diver, her fair bright hair around her like an aureole and her head bent at an utterly impossible angle. He saw one of her slim hands move a little, as if to reach another with its clasp. Then the fingers opened slowly, like the petals of a wilting flower—and moved no more.

THEY buried her slight, broken body in a grave dug at the crossroads. Coffinless and shroudless they put her in the earth, garbed in the blood-stained gown

she wore upon her bridal night, with nothing but her bright hair for a winding-sheet. No linen bandages bound her chin, no cincture held her pale hands crossed upon her breast; there was neither bell nor book nor prayer nor perfumed incense at her burial, for as one self-slain she died outside the pale of religion, and might not have the holy office read for her, nor lie in consecrated ground. Her father and her mother stood afar off, weeping. Wolfgang labored in his fields, and took no more account of her burial than if it had been a stray dog they tumbled into the hole scooped out of the leaf-mold underneath the mighty oak that grew beside the crossways.

But in the dark of night when honest men lay snug abed with fires covered, prayers said and doors barred fast, there came one to the crossroads grave who knelt and clasped his hands and besought pardon for the wife-maid who had forfeited her soul to save her body from defilement, and, rising, made the sacred sign above the dark, unhallowed earth in which they had laid the suicide.

A kindly man was Friar Hilderbrandt, and, according to his lights, a godly one; but no saint. Saints were knitted of a tougher fiber; their love of God was all-exclusive. Hilderbrandt's love of his fellow creatures had more of earthiness than Paradise about it.

FROM the dark shadows of the Tanneberg to the sun-washed valleys of the farm lands spread the dreadful word: A werewolf was abroad!

Flocks were set upon and decimated, the stoutest-hearted sheep dogs ran with lowered tails and craven whines to the shelter of the farmhouse and the strongest bars were powerless to keep the monster from the folds.

A forester had met the devil-beast at night-fall as he hurried homeward through the Schwarzwald. Though he hewed at it

with his short sword it overbore him with a mighty pounce and put its monstrous fore-paws on his arms and pinned him helpless to the earth.

Then as he gave up hope and was commending himself to Heaven it took its muzzle from his throat and its great paws from his arms and trotted off into the bush. But ere it vanished it turned back and gave him a long look that made the scalp creep on his skull and turned the hot blood in his veins to ice; for its eyes were like a woman's, big and blue and fringed with long, dark lashes, and in their depths he read a ridicule more dreadful than the bitterest hatred, and when it opened its dark lips and bared its gleaming fangs it did not howl or growl or whine, but laughed a scornful, mocking laugh, sweet as the music of a jonglar's bells, but terrible to hear.

Graf Otho had been to the Emperor's court at Warzburg to pay his devoir to his sovereign and take the Lady Margareta von Orselm to wife. The Lady Margareta was not highly favored as to looks, being somewhat wider than her height required, and inclined to be thick of wrist and ankle—some said head, as well. Her teeth were large, her mouth was small, her hair was scanty and of an uncertain color. Her age was also far from certain. But her dower was four pack-mules' load of gold and silver coin, her family was an ancient one, and of much influence at court, and her brother was Count Werther von Orselm, one of the foremost knights in all the Empire's ritterdom.

When the graf returned to Pultzberg with his newly married wife and all the store of gold and silver which she brought him, the first news that he heard was of the werewolf's ravings, and when they told him that his game preserves were ravaged by the demon he swore deep-throated German oaths and sent out invitations to his friends and neighbors to assist him in

exterminating this stray hound from Satan's kennels.

The junkers came from far and wide in gleeful response to the summons. The sport should prove diverting; a wolf hunt ever tried the mettle of the staunchest men and dogs. Also, Otho's cellars had few equals in the choiceness of their contents, and—there was the fair Margareta to be seen. Hohenschuh was ever noted for his nice appreciation of a woman, a horse or a hound, and had wooed, but never offered marriage to, some of the fairest ladies of the Rhineland. Had he, as the vulgar proverb put it, "walked through the woods and come out with a crooked stick?"

They made great feast and holiday at the Pultitzberg. Horses were groomed for the chase, weapons honed and polished, leather garments oiled and softened, and the great hounds from Hibernia which were so fierce that none except the kennel master and his aides dared approach them, and then only with a dish of meat for shield, were starved until their bays and howls of savage hunger rent the air like the clamoring of lost souls at hell's gate.

Dinner had been long since served and the guests had gone unsteadily to bed with more than enough wine to make their sleep devoid of dreams, but Otho lingered in the bower of his lady. It was the same room whence Gertruda, Wolfgang's bride, had hurled herself to death and damnation, but it had been transformed. Tapestries from the bride's home decked the walls, Eastern carpets brought by merchants of Venetia from the Holy Land hid the stone tiles of the floor, and lamps with glass shades fancifully wrought in shapes of birds and beasts and monsters of antiquity replaced the rushlights which had lighted it aforetime.

THE Countess sate in her high chair of gilded oak with cushions of soft Spanish leather and smiled with bovine pride

and affection upon her husband. Her tiring-women had prepared her for the night and she wore a bedgown of fine linen under a loose coat of tabby silk. Her hair, of which she had no very great amount, was neatly plaited round her head and covered with a cap of linen lawn; her broad bare feet rested on the silky back of a small spaniel which was curled up on the floor before her, and her bright, unintelligent eyes were on the Count who, half dressed, had paused to try the weight of the Damascus iron sword he purposed wearing on the morrow's hunt. One of the lady's far from slender hands was winding the string of her rosary.

"And art thou not afeared to take the trail against this devil's dog, my husband?" she asked timorously. "Will spear or brand prevail against it unless blessed by Holy Church?"

"By Friar Hilderbrandt, perchance?" he answered with a laugh. "Meseems that tansured glutton would not be too sorrowful if I were bested by the werewolf. 'Fore heaven, he looks at me as he might look at Satan since——"

He checked himself in mid-word. Gossip traveled fast enow; let his lady learn about Gertruda when she must, and from other lips than his.

"Aye, but the man counts not; his office is the thing of import," she persisted. "Let him be the veriest glutton and wine-bibber in the Reichland, if he hath divine authority he hath power to loose or retain sins, to bless or curse——"

"Power? Bah!" the Count cut in. "What power hath a mumbled Latin phrase compared to this keen iron?" He swung the beautifully tempered blade in a long arc, so that it whistled through the lamplit air. "I tell thee, Margareta, thou art superstitious as a villein's wench."

"Oh, speak not thus disdainfully of holy things!" she implored. "These werewolves be a fearsome breed of demon-

beasts. By night they go all stealthily on silent feet, and when the fires burn low or the lights flicker—*Sancta Maria!*” There was no breath of breeze through the wide-open casements, but as she spoke the shaded lamp wicks suddenly burnt low, as if a man—or woman—had breathed on them, not quite enough to put them out, but gently, as if trying them.

Graf Otho laughed again — a short, sharp, chiding laugh. “Anon thou’lt tell me that the werewolf may be in this very guarded house of mine,” he scoffed.

She nodded solemnly. “In sooth. When lights burn low and blue by night, and thou hear’st a gentle tapping as of fingers at the door or window-bars——”

Like a stage sound timed to meet its cue there came a light, persistent scratching at the iron-strapped panels of the oaken door.

The Countess broke off with a scream and Otho’s dark face flushed with anger.

“Do not open, husband!” she called in a still, faint voice. “Leave the door-bolts set and join me in a prayer for our deliverance——”

“Pray thou, then, till thy silly marrow-bones are softened by the stone!” he stormed as he strode toward the door. “By Saint Sebastian his arrows, I’ll have the chuckle-headed lout hanged from the highest turret of the—*ha?*”

With anger-quickened fingers he had snapped the heavy triple bolts back and jerked the iron ring that served the door in lieu of a knob. As the oaken frame swung back, the lamplight streamed out in the darkened corridor, straight into the shaggy face of a great she-wolf. The hair of her ruff bristled as though blown upon by some blast of hell-heat; her black lips were curled back, showing rows of glinting teeth and fangs as hard and sharp as sabers. Across her muzzle was a smear of red, fresh blood.

The aspect of the beast was terrible enough, but fear merged into mounting

horror as Otho looked into her eyes. No beast’s eyes, these, but woman’s eyes, long, blue and fringed with dark and curling lashes—the empty, luster-lacking eyes of a dead woman who walks up and down the earth by night, a truant from her un-blessed grave.

Otho thrust his sword straight at the great gray head that reared higher than his waist. The beast-thing moved a little, moved so slightly that it hardly seemed to move at all, and the blade passed harmlessly beside its shaggy jowl.

Now panic seized him and he rained a perfect storm of sword-strokes at the monster, yet not once did his steel strike home, and the blue, lack-luster eyes held his with a dead, winkless stare as dreadful and unnerving as the accusations of a guilty conscience.

Cursing, flailing blow on ineffectual blow at the great she-wolf, he gave ground. And inch by inch the wolf advanced on him, not menacingly, but with the steady pressure of relentless fate. Now he stood beside the open casement, and through it he could hear the clamor of the water on the rocks two hundred feet and more below. Dimly, but with terrible insistence, he could hear a woman’s voice:

“Look in mine eyes . . . see in them thy doom——”

Then the she-wolf sprang.

The “*Jesu-Mary!*” of his scream was cut short by the snapping of her jaws upon his neck, and out the window hurtled man and beast—if beast it were. Their bodies flew apart—save for the horrid point of contact where her fangs locked in his throat—whirling like the arms of a child’s pinwheel through the blackness of the chasm, till they fell upon the jagged rocks beside the shouting water of the torrent.

THEY found the Countess mad with fear next morning, and on the rock-toothed bottom of the ravine they found!

Otho's body, battered almost beyond recognition. But there was neither sign nor token of a wolf's carcass. So they set the story of the wolf down to the ravings of the maddened woman, and said her madness came upon her when she saw her husband fall to death. Could a wolf—even with passports signed by Satan—penetrate the cordon of two hundred fully-armed retainers who kept ward at Pulitzberg?

The Lady Margaretta bore a daughter six months later, but foster parents reared the girl, for her reason never came back and she died a gibbering idiot in the Convent of Our Lady of Eternal Pity without knowing that the Emperor, as was his right by law, took guardianship of her child, and possession of her splendid dowry and the castle of Pulitzberg and all the lands appurtenant thereto.

Sister Clarisse of the Angels was on watch in the infirmary on the night the Countess died, and she affirmed with sobs and trembling that as the poor, afflicted creature breathed her last there came a scratching at the window-bars, and when she looked up sore afraid she saw the face of a great shaggy wolf beyond the mullions.

She also swore, and would not be denied, that it had blue eyes, woman's eyes, the eyes of a dead woman who walks up and down the earth by night, a truant from her unblessed grave.

But Sister Clarisse of the Angels was a very old nun. No one in the convent remembered when she came, but there were stories of her youth, how she had greatly loved a young man from across the Alps, and how he, having been denied her hand in marriage, took poison in her presence, and died writhing horribly before her. They said it had unhinged her mind. At any rate she saw things which no other of the sisterhood could see, and much of what she said was taken with a liberal dose

of salt. Besides, the Convent of Our Lady of Eternal Pity was a very holy place. How could any demon-wolf, no matter how malignant, dare set its foot within the sacred confines of the convent close?

THE wolf's raids ceased for some time after Otho's death; then they began again, and now it was the flock of Wolfgang the franklin which suffered most.

A dour, silent man was Wolfgang, and cruel. No beggar ever had an alms at his door, no tenant crofter had a day's grace for the payment of his rent. He gave no greeting when he passed a neighbor on the road, and returned none. He mortified the flesh as if he were a Carmelite, tasting neither wine nor beer, and eating flesh but rarely. When the neighbors sought his aid to hunt the wolf-thing down he drove them from his land with bitter words and curses, but when the beast struck at his own flocks he took his grisarme down from the wall, strapped his long sword on his thigh, and set forth to track the monster by himself.

The fields were silver-plated in the flood of argent moonlight, from the little lakes that gathered in the hollows, jewel-bright flashes scintillated; the sky was filled to the brim with big, cool, untroubled stars. In the coppices of yew and hemlock purple shadows, shot with pleats of moonlight, seemed to shift and change position as if they were a company of elfmen dancing to the music of the night wind in the boughs.

Wolfgang strode across the fields unmindful of the beauty of the scene. What lure has beauty for a man who has no loved face to which he can compare it? Can a cracked bell peal a joy-pæan, or a broken heart beat high?

Far away, so faint that it was scarcely audible, yet swelling, heightening slowly in a quavering crescendo, came a long-drawn, howling bay—the belling of a questing wolf! He gripped the ash stave

of his spear as if it were a walking-staff and hurried toward the sound.

"Beast or devil, traitor hound or goblin damned, I come to grips with it tonight!" he swore savagely.

Now against the rim of a far hilltop he saw something moving. The moonlight picked it out against the sun-bleached stubble of the mowed field and he recognized the lazy, tireless lope. In sooth, it was a wolf. But what a wolf! Higher than the largest mastiff it stood, almost great as a calf, and from the freedom of its gait he knew that it was young and vigorous, not beset with age like most beasts which were lone hunters and attacked sheep flocks instead of deer or cattle.

Almost as he saw it the great beast seemed to descry him, and as if it welcomed an ordeal by battle, changed its course, coming toward him in a swift, unhurried run, leaping hedges and stone walls as easily as if they had been lines of shadow on the moon-besilvered fields. Down the long slope of the hill he watched it charge, and his fingers tightened on his spear shaft. Soon they would be in striking distance of each other. Soon . . .

Abruptly as if it had run into a barrier of steel bars the wolf halted in its course. He saw it straighten its forelegs, dig its hind feet in the turf, as it checked itself in mid-stride. Then he saw, and realized the reason for its sudden, almost panic-stricken halt. Cutting through the meadow, so fringed with rank-grown grass and cress that it was hardly visible a dozen feet away, was a small, swift-running rivulet.

"*Herr Gott!*" His throat closed with a quick, instinctive fear. Witches, warlocks, sprites and goblins cannot cross a living stream. This wolf, this beast that towered over all beasts of its kind that he had ever seen, balked at the little brooklet's rim. . . .

But the fear that gripped his throat never

reached his stomach-pit to paralyze him. As the wolf-thing changed its course and ran toward the old Roman road he wheeled and followed in its trail. Two miles away the post road crossed another . . . witches were confused by crossroads, too. If he could drive the demon to the intersection . . .

Now the goblin-beast seemed fleeing. It stretched its long legs in a longer stride, and though the man ran till his breath came in quick, gasping sobs, his quarry distanced him, and disappeared into the shadows of the woods that lay between the farmland and the high road.

Nathless, he would follow. If so be he met the wolf-thing they would join in battle. Accumulated hatred boiled up in his veins like scum upon the surface in a brewing-kettle. What if death betide? Must not the long, long silence of the grave be pleasant to a man whose heart had died within his breast upon his wedding night?

HE EMERGED from the wood and hurried toward the crossroads. A great oak tree stood at the thwarting of the ways, and round it reached a disk of shadow. Was that the movement of a body by the black bole? It might have been a trick of light and shade fused and confused by the wind in the branches, yet if the witch-wolf had sought covert he might come to weapon-reach of it. He paused a moment, spat upon his hands, then hastened toward the tree with grisarme advanced.

A wisp of cloud, leaden-gray, with frayed-out, tattered edges, swept across the bleached disk of the moon. A strange, eery twilight crept over the landscape, and objects seemed to lose their outlines, blending into one another as if they had been patterns in a colorless kaleidoscope.

Savage as the beast he sought, Wolfgang bared his teeth as he rushed at the dark-

ness. "Have I found thee at last, O thou creature of the night——"

The partizan fell clattering to the roadway flints and he staggered back as from a blow, for in answer to his hail a voice replied: "Aye, thou hast found me. Here am I."

She came slowly from the dimness of the shadows, garbed in her linen wedding robe, a chaplet of cornflowers wound around her bright fair hair, and in her eyes the *liebeslicht*—the lovelight—shone as if reflected from the far bright stars that light the gates of Paradise.

"Gertruda—*liebchen!*"

"Husband!"

He shook his head and shut his eyes and passed his hand across them. This was a troll-inspired vision. Gertruda moldered in her grave, her unmarked, solitary grave . . . the spirits of the blessed come not to earth again . . . *ha*, but was she blessed? She who threw herself to death unshriven . . .

Through the confusion of his thoughts he heard her soft words, "——thou wouldst not come to me, and come to thee in this form I could not. Here I am vulnerable to thy steel; wilt thou choose to kill me now, or wilt thou bide with me and become even as I——"

"Be thou spirit damned or soul that bends from Paradise to knit the fragments of my broken heart, thou art my one and only love, my flesh, my blood, my life, and I will be as thou art!" he answered hoarsely as he took her in his arms.

A wild, fierce light of elation blazed suddenly in her blue eyes. "Together!" she exclaimed as her lips sought his with avid hunger. "Come, lie with me in my dark-sodded bed by day, and sleep through sunshine and through rain until the moon assumes dominion of the sky; then—ah, then we'll range the hills and fields together——"

"Though the pathway lead to lowest

Niffeheim—together!" he responded, and pressed his lips against her red mouth.

"Together, yea," a third voice spoke, "but not in sin or defiance of heaven!"

A dreadful pain pierced Wolfgang's back beneath the shoulder blade; he felt the pang of it drive through his heart, his breast . . . "Gertruda—beloved!" he gasped, then choked and died.

"Ah, it is done—thanks, kindly Father—Wolfgang, husband—lover!" Blood stopped her words as the sharp sword point drove into her heart.

FRIAR HILDERBRANDT had been praying by Gertruda's grave. Tales of the werewolf ravaging the countryside had come to him, but he had less fear of the goblin brute than he had of the Devil; which was none at all. For despite his gluttony and fondness for the tankard, Friar Hilderbrandt was a man of faith, believing with implicit confidence in the goodness of his God, and regarding Him much as a child regards his father. God was his shield and buckler in assaults by the enemy, his ever-present help in time of trouble, and would not forsake him if he came in conflict with a demon member of that demon host not yet made fast in hell. So Friar Hilderbrandt walked serenely—albeit with somewhat of a waddle—alone through wood and field and darksome, stone-locked mountain pass, and never was molested by man or beast or devil.

All through the night he had been watching at the bed of one who passed from transient life to life eternal, and the silver pallor that betokens coming dawn was spreading in the east ere he reached Gertruda's sepulcher. Now, as he finished his orisons and with some effort got up from his knees, far away, but drawing nearer by the second, came the hunting-call of a lone wolf.

"*Laus Deo!*" said Friar Hilderbrandt, and crossed himself. Then he set off down

the road toward the village. He did not hurry, nor did he glance back. He had commended himself to divine protection. The affair was Heaven's, not his.

But the howling grew nearer. Across the field he saw the wolf come charging, and stopped in his tracks. He could not outrun a puppy, much less a full-grown wolf. Let whatever was to come betide him here and save him the exertion of a useless flight.

Nor had he long to wait. Moving swiftly as the shadows of a scudding cloud he saw the monstrous beast approaching, leaping lightly over hedgerow and stone fence, eating up the distance with a long-limbed, tireless lope. Now he saw the gleam of its great eyes, the flashing of its monstrous fangs, the lolling of its pink tongue dripping slaver. He heard its panting, quick-drawn breath, and steadied himself for its attack, for it was less than fifty feet away, and traveling faster than a wind-blown leaf.

But it passed him as if he had not been there, and rushed straight for the shelter of the oak tree. The beast was straining against time, as if it ran a race with the fast-spreading brightness in the east.

Friar Hilderbrandt was schooled in demonology. Imps, werewolves, ghosts and goblins, all things of evil and the darkness were bounden by the shades of night, he knew. The werewolf hastened to its lair or place of metamorphosis before the cock crowed greeting to the rising day-star, else it must remain in lupine form until the next sunrise.* He knew the werewolf's habit. By day it was not recognizable, forasmuch as it might be a man of favored looks, or a fair and smiling woman, who with the onset of the night became a foul, misshapen beast with blood-bedabbled jaws. . . . Who in the neighborhood would this night-prowler be? Mayhap some member of his very congregation. . . .

The racing wolf had reached the shadow of the oak tree, paused a moment, sunk down on the verdure. Now it seemed to writhe and twist in a death-agony; now it rose upon its knees, stood upright—"Conjuro te, abire ad tuum locum, in nomine—" Friar Hilderbrandt stopped the words of exorcism half intoned, for he recognized the slight, straight form in the blue linen gown.

"Gertruda—*thou?*" he exclaimed as he saw the long, unplaited hair, the pale sweet face and glowing blue eyes of the girl for whose redemption he prayed nightly.

"I," she answered, with a little wanton laugh. "Even I, good Father. Behold the thing I am become. Outcast from Heaven, yet not meriting eternal punishment, I am doomed to roam the earth by night, a thing undead, yet not alive until release comes through—"

THE shrilling of a cock's crow split the morning silence, and her words ceased as a candle's flicker ceases when the snuff-ers close on it. Where the lissome blue-gowned form had stood there were only the blue shadows of the early morning; where the deep-toned voice had spoken there was only the sigh of the dawning-wind among the branches.

Twice more Friar Hilderbrandt had seen the werewolf racing for the shelter of the crossroads grave, but always the cock's crow had come ere he could question further. "I am doomed to roam the earth by night until release comes," she had said. *Ergo*, release was possible. But how? Would ashen stake and sexton's spade suffice? These were potent weapons against vampires, but Gertruda was no vampire. She had sucked no blood from living man, threatened none with the infection of her earthbound state. True, she had battened on the flocks when she assumed wolfshood, but sheep were bred for slaughter.

Graf Otho—was it she who mauled the

porter at the castle gate, then forced herself into the Countess' bower to hurl him to his death in the ravine where she had died herself? It took no schoolman's casuistry to construe that killing—if she did it—as an execution rather than a murder. She had spared the forester in the Schwarzwald—time enough to resort to the stake and spade when she showed signs of menacing men's souls and bodies.

Tonight he had come early to the grave. He would accost her, force her to reveal the means of her deliverance. . . . The moon sailed high across the cloud-surf of the sky, the night was coolly pleasant, and he was very tired. He had dined with noble amplitude, and washed his dinner down with many a frothing tankard of the strong brown home-brewed ale. The grass grew lush and soft; here was a little hillock thick-beset with buttercups for pillow. . . .

The sound of voices startled him. Wolfgang's voice—and Gertruda's. Hers: "I am vulnerable to thy steel here . . . wilt thou come to me and become as I am?" His: "I will be as thou art!"

Softly Friar Hilderbrandt rose from his grassy couch. More quietly than pussy steals on an unwary mouse he stepped across the turf and paused behind the two who clung and kissed and, mouth to mouth, swore their two destinies should be as one, whether bliss or torment everlasting.

He snatched Wolfgang's long sword from its scabbard, drew the gleaming blade back and with the full weight of his great bulk drove the keen steel home. "In God his name, my children. Better that the body perish than the soul!"

They fell together, still locked in each other's arms, and after he had said the prayers ordained for those who die, the old man bent and kissed them both upon the brow.

Weeping, but with exultation in his heart, he left them, trudging down the dusty road that led to the village and the little hut that served him for a rectory.

Gertruda now was truly dead, no more an earthbound thing of menace. She had thanked him ere she breathed her last. Wolfgang had escaped her fate. They were with each other; they were safe. How beautiful they looked as they lay on the cool, green turf . . . wedded. Aye, wedded twice, once with a golden ring, once with a sword's sharp steel.

"*Absolvo te*, Gertruda; *te absolvo*, Wolfgang," he repeated between sobs.

THE Emperor's masked justicer did the sentence of the law upon him, for he confessed the murder freely. Indeed, he had confessed a double murder, but when they went to the crossroads they found only Wolfgang, with the wound of a great sword agape in back and breast. Of the body of Gertruda there was neither sign nor trace, and when they dug into her grave they found nothing but a few bones and some shreds of rotting linen.

When they brought him out to die he smiled upon the headsman and his varlets and put the heading cup of strong, sweet Moselle wine up to his mouth as if it were a tankard to be drained in joy, and smacked his lips with hearty relish as he tossed it away empty. Then he laid his neck upon the block and murmured: "Wolfgang, Gertruda, my dear children, comes now one who loved you very dearly. I am an old man and a weary. Stretch forth thy hands, lend me of thy strength and youth to pass this darksome valley."

There were those who wept to see his head fall at the ax-stroke, for he had ever been a kindly man, and a godly one, according to his lights; but certainly no saint.