

The Dance of the Dead

Founded on a Well-Known German Legend

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NEISSE is a small town in Silesia. At the period of this story it lay somewhat out of the beaten track, and its inhabitants led a simple, primitive sort of life, although bickerings and wranglings, cheating and knavery were not altogether unknown among them. On the whole, however, they were a fairly virtuous people, and the town earned an enviable reputation for hospitality, in spite of the fact that the mayor was far from being hospitable himself, but he did not hesitate to dispense hospitality with a lavish hand when he could do so out of the town funds.

This mayor, whose name was Hertzstein, was an exceedingly proud and ambitious man. He had been born in very humble circumstances indeed, his father having been a charcoal burner; but Rupert Hertzstein was endowed with more than average intelligence, though even as a lad he displayed a grasping, covetous disposition that made him many youthful enemies. As he grew in years he by no means changed, but he managed to make his way. Before he was fifteen he went to Saxony and apprenticed himself to a worker in precious metals, and showed so much intelligence that before he had completed the term of his apprenticeship he was master of his trade.

He was twenty-two when he returned to his native town, with a little money and a young wife. A daughter was born to him, and grew to be the most beautiful girl in Neisse. Her father prospered, made money, and became mayor. Indeed, he was a little king in his own way, but was tyrannical and exacting, and while everybody adored Brunhelda, his pretty daughter, he was far from being respected. When any of the young men of the village tried to win his favour in the hope of gaining the daughter's hand, he ordered them off with a peremptoriness that left no doubt about his determination.

'My girl,' he used to boast, 'shall marry a lord. My father was a charcoal burner, and in my youth I knew the curse of poverty. Now I am going to be the founder of a family, and rather than let Brunhelda marry a humble person I would carry her to her grave.'

Although he expressed himself thus forcibly and emphatically, he did not explain how he hoped to get a lord as a son-in-law, but that was a detail; and, being a deep, designing, and crafty man, he probably had some matured plan in his own mind.

Now it chanced that when Brunhelda was two-and-twenty a young artist came to Neisse, which was famed for a very ancient church and for marvellous views, which were to be obtained from different parts of the town, for it stood on an eminence in a very beautiful and fertile country. It was, therefore, no uncommon thing for artists to visit the place. This particular one became known as Robert Kuno, and he took up his quarters at the village inn. One day he was in the ancient church sketching a very picturesque archway, when Brunhelda entered with a number of other girls, laden with flowers, as they were going to decorate the church in honour of some festival.

Robert was at once attracted by Brunhelda's beauty, and, getting into conversation with her, he begged that she would pose for him while he made a drawing. She was by no means loth to do this. Indeed, she felt flattered, for she knew she was good-looking, and she would have been a strange woman if she had had no vanity. Robert placed her in the position he wanted near the archway, and produced a sketch, which he promised to turn into a painting, and he asked her to favour him again on the morrow, which she did, and the next day, and the day after that, and as a natural result the young artist began to talk to her in a way which by no means displeased her, although she knew that her father would be furious if he came to hear of it. And sure enough he did hear of it. Some envious jade went to him, and told him that Brunhelda was going day after day to the church to meet the artist.

The day following the mayor repaired to the church, and screened himself behind a pillar and witnessed the flirtation between Brunhelda and the artist, until at length, losing his self-control, he suddenly presented himself before them, and there was a scene. He used some very harsh terms to the young man, and, seizing the sketch he had been making of the girl, he stamped on it, and vowed if Robert did not leave Neisse within twelve hours he would have him arrested as a vagabond and confined in the stocks. Then he took his daughter home and lectured her on the monstrous wickedness of her conduct in allowing a 'vulgar, common artist fellow' to talk love to her.

As Robert failed to comply with the order to clear off, the mayor, true to his word, had him arrested as a vagabond, having no visible means of subsistence, and he was placed in the stocks which stood on the green opposite the mayor's house. The tyrannical magistrate thought that when his daughter saw her admirer in such an undignified position she would be disgusted, and think no more of him. But herein he was mistaken, for he caught her kissing her hand to him from her window, and manifesting every sign of sympathy. So Robert was at once set at liberty, on condition that he immediately left the place, which he consented to do, much to the joy and comfort of the mayor.

It was nearly a year after that an old bag-piper one day entered the town of Neisse. He was a strange, weird-looking old man, with great masses of white hair hanging about his shoulders, and heavy, beetling eyebrows screening his keen, grey eyes. His pipes, which seemed older than himself, were unlike any that had been seen before, and when the old piper tuned them up he awoke the most marvellous melody. Whence he came and whither he was going no one knew, and being by no means communicative, they were left in ignorance. But one thing he made clear—he did not lack money, and as there happened to be a very pretty little cottage to let, whose owner had recently died, the piper bargained for it and bought it, and soon after a young man came to live with him, and rumour soon had it that this young man was the strange piper's foster-son. Apparently the son was nearly blind, for he wore large blue goggle glasses, and always went about with a stick.

The son was very reserved and would not mix with the people, but the old piper became such a favourite owing to the sweet music he was able to discourse, that he was invited every evening, when the weather was fine, to repair to the village green, where the people were wont to dance. He was so wonderfully well-informed, too, and seemed to have travelled so extensively, that the old citizens invited him to their dinners, and he was petted and flattered. He played his pipes at christenings and wedding feasts, as well as pathetic and solemn airs when the dead were committed to the earth.

One marvellous tune that he played was known as 'Grandfather's Dance,' and so inspiriting was this, such a wild, mad, rhythmical jingle, that even the oldest of men and women who could move their limbs at all could not resist its strains, and fell to dancing. Indeed, the strains, it was averred, restored youth to the old, and even the paralytic and the rheumatic threw away their crutches when they heard

them.

Now, strangely enough, the effect of the old man's art on his foster son was nil. He remained silent and mournful at the most mirth-inspiring tunes the piper played to him; and at the balls, to which he was often invited, he rarely mingled with the gay, but would retire into a corner, and fix his eyes on the loveliest fair one that graced the room, neither daring to address, nor to offer her his hand. This one was Brunhelda, and occasionally he managed to get speech with her, and it was noted that she was by no means averse to talk to him. And at such times she easily read in his brightening face the eloquent gratitude of his heart; and although she turned blushing away, the fire on her cheeks, and the sparkling in her eyes, kindled new flames of love and hope in her lover's bosom, for this young man was none other than the artist who had resorted to this stratagem to woo her. And he was neither blind nor near sighted, but the goggles afforded him a disguise.

Willibald, such was the name of the piper, had for a long time promised to assist the love-sick youth in obtaining his soul's dearest object. Sometimes he intended, like the wizards of yore, to torment the mayor with an enchanted dance, and compel him by exhaustion to grant everything; sometimes, like a second Orpheus, he proposed to carry away, by the power of his harmony, the sweet bride from the Tartarian abode of her father. But Robert always had objections: he never would allow the parent of his fair one to be harmed by the slightest offence, and hoped to win him by perseverance and complacency.

Willibald said to him one day, 'You are an idiot, if you hope to win, by an open and honourable sentiment, the approbation of a rich and proud old fool. He will not surrender without some of the plagues of Egypt are put in force against him. When once Brunhelda is yours, and he no more can change what has happened, then you will find him friendly and kind. He will bow to the inevitable. I blame myself for having promised to do nothing against your will, but death acquits every death, and still I shall help you in my own way.'

Poor Robert was not the only one on the path of whose life the mayor strewed thorns and briars. The whole town had very little affection for their chief, and delighted to oppose him at every opportunity; for he was harsh and cruel, and punished severely the citizens for trifling and innocent mirth, unless they purchased pardon by the means of heavy penalties and bribes. After the yearly wine-fair in the

month of January he was in the habit of obliging them to pay all their earnings into his treasury, to make amends for their past merriments. One day the tyrant of Neisse had put their patience to too hard a trial, and broken the last tie of obedience from his oppressed townsmen. The malcontents had created a riot, and filled their persecutor with deadly fear; for they threatened nothing less than to set fire to his house, and to burn him, together with all the riches he had gathered by oppressing them.

At this critical moment, Robert went to Willibald, and said to him, 'Now, my old friend, is the time when you may help me with your art, as you frequently have offered to do. If your music be really so powerful as you say it is, go then and deliver the mayor by softening the enraged mob. As a reward he certainly will grant you anything you may request. Speak then a word for me and my love, and demand my beloved Brunhilda as the price of your assistance.'

The bag-piper laughed at this speech, and replied:

'We must satisfy the follies of children in order to prevent them crying.' And so he took his bag-pipe and walked slowly down to the town-house square, where the rioters, armed with pikes, lances, and lighted torches, were laying waste the mansion of the worshipful head of the town.

Willibald placed himself near a pillar, and began to play his 'Grandfather's Dance.' Scarcely were the first notes of this favourite tune heard, when the rage-distorted countenances became smiling and cheerful, the frowning brows lost their dark expression, pikes and torches fell out of the threatening fists, and the enraged assailants moved about marking with their steps the measure of the music. At last, the whole multitude began to dance, and the square, that was lately the scene of riot and confusion, bore now the appearance of a gay dancing assembly. The piper, with his magic bag-pipe, led on through the streets, all the people danced behind him, and each citizen returned jumping to his home, which shortly before he had left with very different feelings.

The mayor, saved from this imminent danger, knew not how to express his gratitude; he promised to Willibald everything he might demand, even were it half his property. But the bag-piper replied, smiling, saying his expectations were not so lofty, and that for himself he wanted no temporal goods whatever; but since his lordship, the mayor, had pledged his word to grant to him everything he might

demand, so he beseeched him, with due respect, to grant fair Brunhelda's hand for his foster-son.

The haughty mayor was highly displeased at this proposal. He made every possible excuse; and as Willibald repeatedly reminded him of his promise, he did what the despots of those dark times were in the habit of doing, and which those of our enlightened days still practise, he declared his dignity offended, pronounced Willibald to be a disturber of the peace, an enemy of the public security, and allowed him to forget in a prison the promises of his lord, the mayor. Not satisfied herewith, he accused him of witchcraft, caused him to be tried by pretending he was the very bag-piper and rat-catcher of Hameln, who was, at that time, and is still in so bad a repute in the German provinces, for having carried off by his infernal art all the children of that ill-fated town.

The only difference, said the wise mayor, between the two cases was, that at Hameln only the children had been made to dance to his pipe, but here young and old seemed under the same magical influence. By such artful delusions, the mayor turned every merciful heart from the prisoner. The dread of necromancy, and the example of the children of Hameln, worked so strongly, that sheriffs and clerks were writing day and night. The secretary calculated already the expense of the funeral pile, for necromancers, witches and wizards were burnt in those days; the sexton petitioned for a new rope to toll the dead-bell for the poor sinner; the carpenters prepared scaffolds for the spectators of the expected execution; and the judges rehearsed the grand scene, which they prepared to play at the condemnation of the famous bag-piper. But although justice was sharp, Willibald was still sharper; for as he laughed very heartily over the important preparations for his end, he now laid himself down upon his straw and died!

Shortly before his death, he sent for his beloved Robert, and addressed him for the last time.

'Young man,' said he, 'you seest that in your way of viewing mankind and the world I can render you no assistance. I am tired of the whims your folly has obliged me to perform. You have now acquired experience enough fully to comprehend that nobody should calculate, or at least ground, his designs on the goodness of human nature, even if he himself should be too good to lose entirely his belief in the goodness of others. I, for my own part, would not rely upon the fulfilment of my

last request to you, if your own interest would not induce you to its performance. When I am dead, be careful to see that my old bag-pipe is buried with me. To detain it would be of no use to you, but it may be the cause of your happiness, if it is laid underground with me.'

Robert promised to observe strictly the last commands of his old friend, who shortly after closed his eyes. Scarcely had the report of Willibald's sudden death spread, when old and young came to ascertain the truth. The mayor was more pleased with this turn of the affair than any other; for the indifference with which the prisoner had received the news of his approaching promotion to the funeral pile, induced his worship to suppose the old bag-piper might some fine day be found invisible in his prison, or rather be found not there at all; or the cunning wizard, being at the stake, might have caused a wisp of straw to burn instead of his person, to the eternal shame of the court of Neisse. He therefore ordered the corpse to be buried as speedily as possible, as no sentence to burn the body had yet been pronounced. An unhallowed corner of the churchyard, close to the wall, was the place assigned for poor Willibald's resting-place. The jailor, as the lawful heir of the deceased prisoner, having examined his property, asked what should become of the bag-pipe, as a *corpus delicti*.

Robert, who was present, was on the point to make his request, when the mayor, full of zeal, thus pronounced his sentence:

'To avoid every possible mischief, this wicked, worthless tool shall be buried together with its master.' So they put it into the coffin at the side of the corpse, and early in the morning pipe and piper were carried away and buried.

But strange things happened in the following night. The watchmen on the tower were looking out, according to the custom of the age, to give the alarm in case of fire in the surrounding country, when about midnight they saw, by the light of the moon, Willibald rising out of his tomb near the churchyard wall. He held his bag-pipe under his arm, and leaning against a high tombstone upon which the moon shed her brightest rays he began to blow, and fingered the pipes just as he was accustomed to do when he was alive.

While the watchmen, astonished at this sight, gazed wisely on one another, many other graves opened; their skeleton-inhabitants peeped out with their bare skulls, looked about, nodded to the measure, rose afterwards wholly out of their

coffins, and moved their rattling limbs into a nimble dance. At the church windows, and the grates of the vaults, other empty eye-holes stared on the dancing place: the withered arms began to shake the iron gates, till locks and bolts sprung off, and out came the skeletons, eager to mingle in the dance of the dead. Now the light dancers stilted about, over the hillocks and tombstones, and whirled around in a merry waltz, that the shrouds waved in the wind about the fleshless limbs, until the church clock struck twelve, when all the dancers, great and small, returned to their narrow cells; the player took his bag-pipe under his arm, and likewise returned to his vacant coffin.

Long before the dawn of the day, the watchmen awoke the mayor, and made to him, with trembling lips and knocking knees, the awful report of the horrid night scene. He enjoined strict secrecy on them, and promised to watch with them the following night on the tower. Nevertheless, the news soon spread through the town, and at the close of the evening, all the surrounding windows and roofs were lined with virtuosi and cognoscenti of the dark fine arts, who all beforehand were engaged in discussions on the possibility or impossibility of the events they expected to witness before midnight.

The bag-piper was not behind his time. At the first sound of the bell announcing the eleventh hour, he rose slowly, leaned against the tombstone, and began his tune. The ball guests seemed to have been waiting for the music, for at the very first notes they rushed forth out of the graves and vaults, through grass hills and heavy stones. Corpses and skeletons shrouded and bare, tall and small, men and women, all running to and fro, dancing and turning, wheedling and whirling round the player, quicker or more slowly according to the measure he played, till the clock tolled the hour of midnight. Then dancers and piper withdrew again to rest.

The living spectators, at their windows and on their roofs, now confessed that 'there are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in our philosophy.' The mayor had no sooner retired from the tower, than he ordered Robert to be cast into prison that very night, hoping to learn from his examination, or perhaps by putting him to the torture, how the magic nuisance of his foster-father might be removed.

Robert did not fail to remind the mayor of his ingratitude towards Willibald,

and maintained that the deceased troubled the town, bereft the dead of their rest and the living of their sleep, only because he had received, instead of the promised reward for the liberation of the mayor, a scornful refusal, and moreover had been thrown into prison most unjustly, and buried in a degrading manner. This speech made a very deep impression upon the minds of the magistrates; they instantly ordered the body of Willibald to be taken out of his tomb, and laid in a more respectable place.

The sexton, to show his penetration on the occasion, took the bag-pipe out of the coffin, and hung it over his bed. For he reasoned thus: if the enchanting or enchanted musician could not help following his profession even in the tomb, he at least would not be able to play to the dancers without his instrument.

But at night, after the clock had struck eleven, he heard distinctly a knock at his door; and when he opened it, with the expectation of some deadly and lucrative accident requiring his skill, he beheld the buried Willibald in *propria persona*.

'My bag-pipe,' said he, very composedly, and passing by the trembling sexton, he took it from the wall where it was hung up; then he returned to his tombstone, and began to blow. The guests, invited by the tune, came like the preceding night, and were preparing for their midnight dance in the churchyard. But this time the musician began to march forward, and proceeded with his numerous and ghastly suite through the gate of the churchyard to the town, and led his nightly parade through all the streets, till the clock struck twelve, when all returned again to their dark abodes.

The inhabitants of Neisse now began to fear lest the awful night wanderers might shortly enter their own houses. Some of the chief magistrates earnestly entreated the mayor to lay the charm by making good his word to the bag-piper. But the mayor would not listen to it; he even pretended that Robert shared in the infernal arts of the old piper, and added, 'The son deserves rather the funeral pile than the bridal bed.'

But in the following night the dancing spectres came again into the town, and although no music was heard, yet it was easily seen by their motions that the dancers went through the figure of the 'Grandfather's Dance.' This night they behaved much worse than before, for they stopped at the house wherein a

betrothed damsel lived, and here they turned in a wild whirling dance round a shadow, which resembled perfectly the spinster in whose honour they moved the nightly bridal dance. Next day the whole town was filled with mourning, for all the damsels whose shadows were seen dancing with the spectres had died suddenly. The same thing happened again the following night. The dancing skeletons turned before the houses, and wherever they had been, there was, next morning, a dead bride lying on the bier.

The citizens were determined no longer to expose their daughters and mistresses to such an imminent danger. They threatened the mayor to carry Brunhilda away by force and to lead her to Robert, unless the mayor would permit their union to be celebrated before the beginning of the night. The choice was a difficult one, for the mayor disliked the one just as much as the other, but as he found himself in the uncommon situation where a man may choose with perfect freedom, he, as a free being, declared freely his daughter to be Robert's bride.

Long before the spectre hour the guests sat at the wedding table. The first stroke of the bell sounded, and immediately the favourite tune of the well-known bridal dance was heard. The guests, frightened to death, and fearing the spell might still continue to work, hastened to the windows, and beheld the bag-piper, followed by a long row of figures in white shrouds, moving to the wedding-house. He remained at the door and played, but the procession went on slowly, and proceeded even to the festive hall. Here the strange pale guests rubbed their eyes, and looked about them full of astonishment, like sleep walkers just awakened. The wedding guests fled behind the chairs and tables; but soon the cheeks of the phantoms began to colour, their white lips became blooming like young rosebuds; they gazed at each other full of wonder and joy, and well-known voices called friendly names. They were soon known as revived corpses, now blooming in all the brightness of youth and health: and who should they be but the brides whose sudden death had filled the whole town with mourning, and who, now recovered from their enchanted slumber, had been led by Willibald with his magic pipe out of their graves to the merry wedding feast. The wonderful old man blew a last and cheerful farewell tune, and disappeared. He was never seen again.

Robert was of opinion, the bag-piper was no other than the famous Spirit of the Silesian Mountains. The young painter had originally met him once when he travelled through the hills, and acquired his goodwill by rendering him some

service, for the old man was, or pretended to be, in great distress, and Robert gave him wine and food, and housed him for many days. Then suddenly the strange piper disappeared, but shortly returned and promised the youth he would grant him anything he wished if he could, and he declared that with his magic pipes he could subdue anyone to his will. Then it was that Robert beseeched him to help him to win the consent of the Mayor of Neisse to wed his daughter. Willibald promised the youth to assist him in his love-suit, and he kept his word, although after his own jesting fashion.

Robert remained all his lifetime a favourite with the Spirit of the Mountains. He grew rich, and became celebrated. His dear wife brought him every year a handsome child, his pictures were sought after even in Italy and England; and the 'Dance of the Dead,' of which Basil, Antwerp, Dresden, Lubeck, and many other places boast, are only copies or imitations of Robert's original painting, which he had executed in memory of the real 'Dance of the Dead at Neisse!' But, alas! this picture is lost, and no collector of paintings has yet been able to discover it, for the gratification of the cognoscenti, and the benefit of the history of the art.

[NOTE: The Spirit of the Silesian Mountains plays a great part in the German Popular Tales. He always appears full of mirth and whims. The people know him best by his nickname Rubezahl, the turnip counter. The accident which gave rise to this nickname has been related in a masterly manner in Musäus's German Popular Tales.