PART I

"For facts are stubborn things."--SMOLLETT.

"Silberbach! What in the name of everything that is eccentric should you go there for? The most uninteresting, out-of-the-way, altogether unattractive little hole in all Germany? What can have put Silberbach in your head?"

"I really don't know," I answered, rather tired, to tell the truth, of the discussion. "There doesn't seem any particular reason why anybody ever should go to Silberbach, except that Goethe and the Duke of Weimar are supposed to have gone there to dance with the peasant maidens. I certainly don't see that that is any reason why I should go there. Still, on the other hand, I don't see that it is any reason why I should not? I only want to find some thoroughly country place where the children and I can do as we like for a fortnight or so. It is really too hot to stay in a town, even a little town like this."

"Yes, that is true," said my friend. "It is a pity you took up your quarters in the town. You might have taken a little villa outside, and then you would not have needed to go away at all."

"I wanted a rest from housekeeping, and our queer old inn is very comfortable," I said. "Besides, being here, would it not be a pity to go away without seeing anything of the far-famed Thuringian Forest?"

"Yes, certainly it would. I quite agree with you about everything except about Silberbach. That is what I cannot get over. You have not enough self-assertion, my dear. I am certain Silberbach is some freak of Herr von Walden's--most unpractical man. Why, I really am not at all sure that you will get anything to eat there."

"I am not afraid of that part of it," I replied philosophically. "With plenty of milk, fresh eggs, and bread and butter, we can always get on. And those I suppose we are sure to find."

"Milk and eggs--yes, I suppose so. Butter is doubtful once you leave the tourist track, and the bread will be the sour bread of the country."

"I don't mind that--nor do the children. But if the worst comes to the worst we need not stay at Silberbach--we can always get away."

"That is certainly true; if one can get there, one can, I suppose, always get away," answered Fräulein Otilia with a smile, "though I confess it is a curious inducement to name for going to a place--that one can get away from it! However, we need not say any more about it. I see your heart is set on Silberbach, and I am quite sure I shall have the satisfaction of hearing you own I was right in trying to dissuade you from it, when you come back again," she added, rather maliciously.
"Perhaps so. But it is not only Silberbach we are going to. We shall see lots of other places. Herr von Walden has planned it all. The first three days we shall travel mostly on foot. I think it will be great fun. Nora and Reggie are enchanted. Of course I would not travel on foot alone with them; it would hardly be safe, I suppose?"

"Safe? oh yes, safe enough. The peasants are very quiet, civil people--honest and kindly, though generally desperately poor! But you would be safe enough anywhere in Thuringia. It is not like Alsace, where now and then one does meet with rather queer customers in the forests. So good-bye, then, my dear, for the next two or three weeks--and may you enjoy yourself."

"Especially at Silberbach?"

"Even at Silberbach--that is to say, even if I have to own you were right and I wrong. Yes, my dear, I am unselfish enough to hope you will return having found Silberbach an earthly paradise."

And waving her hand in adieu, kind Fräulein Ottilia stood at her garden-gate watching me make my way down the dusty road.

"She is a little prejudiced, I daresay," I thought to myself. "Prejudiced against Herr von Walden's choice, for I notice every one here has their pet places and their special aversions. I daresay we shall like Silberbach, and if not, we need not stay there after the Waldens leave us. Anyway, I shall be thankful to get out of this heat into the real country."

I was spending the summer in a part of Germany hitherto new ground to me. We had--the "we" meaning myself and my two younger children, Nora of twelve and Reggie of nine--settled down for the greater part of the time in a small town on the borders of the Thuringian Forest. Small, but not in its own estimation unimportant, for it was a "Residenz," with a fortress of sufficiently ancient date to be well worth visiting, even had the view from its ramparts been far less beautiful than it was. And had the little town possessed no attractions of its own, natural or artificial, the extreme cordiality and kindness of its most hospitable inhabitants would have left the pleasantest impression on my mind. I was sorry to leave my friends even for two or three weeks, but it was too hot! Nora was pale and Reggie's noble appetite gave signs of flagging. Besides--as I had said to Ottilia--it would be too absurd to have come so far and not see the lions of the neighbourhood.

So we were to start the next morning for an excursion in the so-called "Forest," in the company of Herr von Walden, his wife and son, and two young men, friends of the latter. We were to travel by rail over the first part of the ground, uninteresting enough, till we reached a point where we could make our way on foot through the woods for a considerable distance. Then, after spending the night in a village whose beautiful situation had tempted some enterprising speculator to build a good hotel, we proposed the next day to plunge still deeper into the real recesses of the forest, walking and driving by turns, in accordance with our inclination and the resources of the country in respect of Einspänner--the light carriage with the horse invariably yoked at one side of the pole instead of between shafts, in which one gets about more speedily and safely than might be imagined. And at the end of three or four days of this, weather permitting, agreeably nomad life, our friends the Waldens, obliged to return to their home in the town from which we started, were to leave my children and me for a fortnight's country air in this same village of Silberbach which Ottilia so vehemently objected to. I did not then, I do not now, know--and I am pretty sure he himself could not say--why our guide, Herr von Walden, had chosen Silberbach from among the dozens of other villages which could quite as well--as events proved, indeed, infinitely better--have served our very simple purpose. It was a chance, as such things often are, but a chance which, as you will see, left its mark in a manner which can never be altogether effaced from my memory.

The programme was successfully carried out. The weather was magnificent. Nobody fell ill or footsore, or turned out unexpectedly bad-tempered. And it was hot enough, even in the forest shades, which we kept to as much as possible, to have excused some amount of irritability. But we were all sound and strong, and had entered into a tacit compact of making the best of things and enjoying ourselves as much as we could. Nora and Reggie perhaps, by the end of the second day, began to have doubts as to the delights of indefinitely continued walking excursions; and though they would not have owned to it, they were not, I think, sorry to hear that the greater part of the fourth day's travels was to
be on wheels. But they were very well off. Lutz von Walden and his two friends--a young baron, rather the typical "German student" in appearance, though in reality as hearty and unsentimental as any John Bull of his age and rank--and George Norman, an English boy of seventeen or eighteen, "getting up" German for an army examination--were all three only too ready to carry my little boy on their backs on any sign of over-fatigue. And, indeed, more than one hint reached me that they would willingly have done the same by Nora, had the dignity of her twelve years allowed of such a thing. She scarcely looked her age at that time, but she was very conscious of having entered "on her teens," and the struggle between this new importance and her hitherto almost boyish tastes was amusing to watch. She was strong and healthy in the extreme, intelligent though not precocious, observant but rather matter-of-fact, with no undue development of the imagination, nothing that by any kind of misapprehension or exaggeration could have been called "morbid" about her. It was a legend in the family that the word "nerves" existed not for Nora: she did not know the meaning of fear, physical or moral. I could sometimes wish she had never learnt otherwise. But we must take the bad with the good, the shadow inseparable from the light. The first perception of things not dreamt of in her simple childish philosophy came to Nora as I would not have chosen it; but so, I must believe, it had to be.

"Where are we to sleep to-night, Herr von Walden, please?" asked Reggie from the heights of Lutz's broad shoulders, late that third afternoon, when we were all, not the children only, beginning to think that a rest even in the barest of inn parlours, and a dinner even of the most modest description, would be very welcome.

"Don't tease so, Reggie," said Nora. "I'm sure Herr von Walden has told you the name twenty times already."

"Yes, but I forget it," urged the child; and good-natured Herr von Walden, nowise loath to do so again, took up the tale of our projected doings and destinations.

"To-night, my dear child, we sleep at the pretty little town--yes, town I may almost call it--of Seeberg. It stands in what I may call an oasis of the forest, which stops abruptly, and begins again some miles beyond Seeberg. We should be there in another hour or so," he went on, consulting his watch. "I have, of course, written for rooms there, as I have done to all the places where we mean to halt. And so far I have not proved a bad courier, I flatter myself?"

He paused, and looked round him complacently.

"No, indeed," replied everybody. "The very contrary. We have got on capitally."

At which the beaming face of our commander-in-chief beamed still more graciously.

"And to-morrow," continued Reggie in his funny German, pounding away vigorously at Lutz's shoulders meanwhile, "what do we do to-morrow? We must have an Einspänner--is it not so? not that we are tired, but you said we had far to go."

"Yes, an Einspänner for the ladies--your amiable mother, Miss Nora, and my wife, and you, Reggie, will find a corner beside the driver. Myself and these young fellows," indicating the three friends by a wave of the hand, "will start from Seeberg betimes, giving you rendez vous at Ulrichsthal, where there are some famous ruins. And you must not forget," he added, turning to his wife and me, "to stop at Grünstein as you pass, and spend a quarter of an hour in the china manufactory there."

"Just what I wanted," said Frau von Walden. "I have a tea-service from there, and I am in hopes of matching it. I had a good many breakages last winter with a dreadfully careless servant, and there is a good deal to replace."

"I don't think I know the Grünstein china," I said. "Is it very pretty?"

"It is very like the blue-and-white that one sees so much of with us," said Frau von Walden. "That, the ordinary blue-and-white, is made at Blauenstein. But there is more variety of colours at Grünstein. They are rather more enterprising there, I fancy, and perhaps there is a finer quality of china clay, or whatever they call it, in that neighbourhood. I often wonder the Thuringian china is not more used in England, where you are so fond of novelties."
"And where nothing is so appreciated as what comes from a distance," said George Norman. "By Jove! isn't that a pretty picture!" he broke off suddenly, and we all stood still to admire.

It was the month of August; already the subdued evening lights were replacing the brilliant sunshine and blue sky of the glowing summer day. We were in the forest, through which at this part ran the main road which we were following to Seeberg. At one side of the road the ground descended abruptly to a considerable depth, and there in the defile far beneath us ran a stream, on one bank of which the trees had been for some distance cleared away, leaving a strip of pasture of the most vivid green imaginable. And just below where we stood, a goatherd, in what—thanks possibly to the enchantment of the distance—appeared a picturesque costume, was slowly making his way along, piping as he went, and his flock, of some fifteen or twenty goats of every colour and size, following him according to their own eccentric fashion, some scrambling on the bits of rock a little way up the ascending ground, others quietly browsing here and there on their way—the tinkling of their collar-bells reaching us with a far-away, silvery sound through the still softer and fainter notes of the pipe. There was something strangely fascinating about it all—something pathetic in the goatherd's music, simple, barbaric even as it was, and in the distant, uncertain tinkling, which impressed us all, and for a moment or two no one spoke.

"What is it that it reminds me of?" said Lutz suddenly. "I seem to have seen and heard it all before."

"Yes, I know exactly how you mean," I replied. "It is like a dream;" and as I said so, I walked on again a little in advance of the others with Lutz and his rider. For I thought I saw a philosophical or metaphysical dissertation preparing in Herr von Walden's bent brows and general look of absorption, and somehow, just then, it would have spoilt it all. Lutz seemed instinctively to understand, for he too for a moment or so was silent, when suddenly a joyful cry arose.

"Seeberg!" exclaimed several voices; for the first sight of our temporary destination broke upon the view all at once, as is often the case in these more or less wooded districts. One travels for hours together as if in an enchanted land of changeless monotony; trees, trees everywhere and nothing but trees—one could fancy late in the afternoon that one was back at the early morning's starting-point—when suddenly the forest stops, sharply and completely, where the hand of man has decreed that it should, not by gradual degrees as when things have been left to the gentler management of nature and time.

So our satisfaction was the greater from not having known the goal of that day's journey to be so near. We began to allow to each other for the first time that we were "a little tired," and with far less hesitation that we were "very hungry." Still we were not a very dilapidated-looking party when the inhabitants of Seeberg turned out at doors and windows to inspect us. Reggie, of course, whom no consideration could induce to make his entry on Lutz's shoulders, looking the freshest of all, and eliciting many complimentary remarks from the matrons and maidens of the place as we passed.

Our quarters at Seeberg met with the approval of everybody. The supper was excellent, our rooms as clean and comfortable as could be wished.

"So far," I could not help saying to my friends, "I have seen no signs of the 'roughing it' for which you prepared me. I call this luxurious."

"Yes, this is very comfortable," said Herr von Walden. "At Silberbach, which we shall reach to-morrow evening, all will be much more homely."

"But that is what I like," I maintained stoutly. "I assure you I am not at all difficile, as the French say."

"Still," began Frau von Walden, "are you sure that you know what 'roughing it' means? One has such romantic, unpractical ideas till one really tries it. For me, I confess, there is something very depressing in being without all the hundred and one little comforts, not to say luxuries, that have become second nature to us, and yet I do not think I am a self-indulgent woman."
"Certainly not," I said, and with sincerity.

"If it were necessary," she went on, "I hope I should be quite ready to live in a cottage and make the best of it cheerfully. But when it is not necessary? Don't you think, my dear friend, it would perhaps be wiser for you to arrange to spend your two or three weeks here, and not go on to Silberbach? You might return here to-morrow from Ulrichsthal while we make our way home, by Silberbach, if my husband really wishes to see it."

I looked at her in some surprise. What possessed everybody to caution me so against Silberbach? Everybody, that is to say, except Herr von Walden himself. A spice of contradiction began to influence me. Perhaps the worthy Herr had himself been influenced in the same way more than he realised.

"I don't see why I should do so," I said. "We expect really to enjoy ourselves at Silberbach. You have no reason for advising me to give it up?"

"No, oh no--none in particular," she replied. "I have only a feeling that it is rather out of the way and lonely for you. Supposing, for instance, one of the children got ill there?"

"Oh, my dear, you are too fanciful," said her husband. "Why should the children get ill there more than anywhere else? If one thought of all these possibilities one would never stir from home."

"And you know my maid is ready to follow me as soon as I quite settle where we shall stay," I said. "I shall not be alone more than four-and-twenty hours. Of course it would have been nonsense to bring Lina with us; she would have been quite out of her element during our walking expeditions."

"And I have a very civil note from the inn at Silberbach, the 'Katze,'" said Herr von Walden, pulling a mass of heterogeneous-looking papers out of his pocket. "Where can it be? Not that it matters; he will have supper and beds ready for us to-morrow night. And then," he went on to me, "if you like it you can make some arrangement for the time you wish to stay, if not you can return here, or go on to any place that takes your fancy. We, my wife and I and these boys, must be home by Saturday afternoon, so we can only stay the one night at Silberbach," for this was Thursday. And so it was settled.

The next day dawned as bright and cloudless as its predecessors. The gentlemen had started--I should be afraid to say how early--meaning to be overtaken by us at Ulrichsthal. Reggie had gone to bed with the firm intention of accompanying them, but as it was not easy to wake him and get him up in time to eat his breakfast, and be ready when the Einspänner came round to the door, my predictions that he would be too sleepy for so early a start proved true.

It was pleasant in the early morning--pleasanter than it would be later in the day. I noticed an unusual amount of blue haze on the distant mountain-tops, for the road along which we were driving was open on all sides for some distance, and the view was extensive.

"That betokens great heat, I suppose," I said, pointing out the appearance I observed to my companion.

"I suppose so. That bluish mist probably increases in hot and sultry weather," she said. "But it is always to be seen more or less in this country, and is, I believe, peculiar to some of the German hill and forest districts. I don't know what it comes from--whether it has to do with the immense number of pines in the forests, perhaps. Some one, I think, once told me that it indicates the presence of a great deal of electricity in the air, but I am far too ignorant to know if that is true or not."

"And I am far too ignorant to know what the effect would be if it were so," I said. "It is a very healthy country, is it not?"

"For strangers it certainly is. Doctors send their patients here from all parts of Germany. But the inhabitants themselves do not seem strong or healthy. One sees a good many deformed people, and they all look pale and thin--much less
robust than the people of the Black Forest. But that may come from their poverty—the peasants of the Black Forest are proverbially well off."

A distant, very distant, peal of thunder was heard at this moment.

"I hope the weather is not going to break up just yet," I said. "Are there often bad thunderstorms here?"

"Yes; I think we do have a good many in this part of the world," she replied. "But I do not think there are any signs of one at present."

And then, still a little sleepy and tired from our unusual exertions of the last three days, we all three, Frau von Walden, Nora, and myself, sat very still for some time, though the sound of Reggie's voice persistently endeavouring to make the driver understand his inquiries, showed that he was as lively as ever.

He turned round after a while in triumph.

"Mamma, Frau von Walden," he exclaimed, "we are close to that place where they make the cups and saucers. Herr von Walden said we weren't to forget to go there—and you all would have forgotten, you see, if it hadn't been for me," he added complacently.

"Grünstein," said Frau von Walden. "Well, tell the driver to stop there, he can rest his horses for half an hour or so; and thank you for reminding us, Reggie, for I should have been sorry to lose the opportunity of matching my service."

The china manufactory was not of any very remarkable interest, at least not for those who had visited such places before. But the people were exceedingly civil, and evidently very pleased to have visitors; and while my friend was looking out the things she was specially in search of—a business which promised to take some little time—a good-natured sub-manager, or functionary of some kind, proposed to take the children to see the sheds where the first mixing and kneading took place, the moulding rooms, the painting rooms, the ovens—in short, the whole process. They accepted his offer with delight, and I wandered about the various pattern or show rooms, examining and admiring all that was to be seen, poking into corners where any specially pretty bit of china caught my eye. But there was no great variety in design or colour, though both were good of their kind, the Grünsteiners, like their rivals of Blauenstein, seeming content to follow in the steps of their fathers without seeking for new inspirations. Suddenly, however, all but hidden in a corner, far away back on a shelf, a flash of richer tints made me start forward eagerly. There was no one near to apply to at the moment, so I carefully drew out my treasure trove. It was a cup and saucer, evidently of the finest quality of china, though pretty similar in shape to the regular Grünstein ware, but in colouring infinitely richer—really beautiful, with an almost Oriental cleverness in the blending of the many shades, and yet decidedly more striking and uncommon than any of the modern Oriental with which of late years the facilities of trade with the East make us so familiar. I stood with the cup in my hand, turning it around and admiring it, when Frau von Walden and the woman who had been attending to her orders came forward to where I was.

"See here," I exclaimed; "here is a lovely cup! Now a service like that would be tempting! Have you more of it?" I inquired of the woman.

She shook her head.

"That is all that remains," she said. "We have never kept it in stock; it is far too expensive. Of course it can be made to order, though it would take some months, and cost a good deal."

"I wish I could order a service of it," I said; but when I heard how much it would probably cost it was my turn to shake my head. "No, I must consider about it," I decided; "but I really have never seen anything prettier. Can I buy this cup?"

The woman hesitated.

"It is the only one left," she said; "but I think—oh yes, I feel sure—we have the pattern among the painting designs. This
cup belonged to, or rather was an extra one of, a tea-service made expressly for the Duchess of T----, on her marriage, now some years ago. And it is curious, we sold the other one--there were two too many--to a compatriot of yours (the gracious lady is English?) two or three years ago. He admired them so much, and felt sure his mother would send an order if he took it home to show her. A tall, handsome young man he was. I remember it so well; just about this time of the year, and hot, sultry weather like this. He was travelling on foot--for pleasure, no doubt--for he had quite the air of a milord. And he bought the cup, and took it with him. But he has never written! I made sure he would have done so."

"He did not leave his name or address?" I said; for the world is a small place: it was just possible I might have known him, and the little coincidence would have been curious.

"Oh no," said the woman. "But I have often wondered why he changed his mind. He seemed so sure about sending the order. It was not the price that made him hesitate; but he wished his lady mother to make out the list herself."

"Well, I confess the price does make me hesitate," I said, smiling. "However, if you will let me buy this cup, I have great hopes of proving a better customer than my faithless compatriot."

"I am sure he meant to send the order," said the woman. She spoke quite civilly, but I was not sure that she liked my calling him "faithless."

"It is evident," I said to Frau von Walden, "that the good-looking young Englishman made a great impression on her. I rather think she gave him the fellow cup for nothing."

But after all I had no reason to be jealous, for just then the woman returned, after consulting the manager, to tell me I might have the cup and saucer, and for a less sum than their real worth, seeing that I was taking it, in a sense, as a pattern.

Then she wrapped it up for me, carefully and in several papers, of which the outside one was bright blue; and, very proud of my acquisition, I followed Frau von Walden to the other side of the building containing the workrooms, where we found the two children full of interest about all they had seen.

I should here, perhaps, apologise for entering into so much and apparently trifling detail. But as will, I think, be seen when I have told all I have to tell, it would be difficult to give the main facts fairly, and so as to avoid all danger of any mistaken impression, without relating the whole of the surroundings. If I tried to condense, to pick out the salient points, to enter into no particulars but such as directly and unmistakably lead up to the central interest, I might unintentionally omit what those wiser than I would consider as bearing on it. So, like a patient adjured by his doctor, or a client urged by his lawyer, to tell the whole at the risk of long-windedness, I prefer to run that risk, while claiming my readers' forgiveness for so doing, rather than that of relating my story incompletely.

And what I would here beg to have specially observed is that not one word about the young Englishman had been heard by Nora. She was, in fact, in a distant part of the building at the time the saleswoman was telling us about him. And, furthermore, I am equally certain, and so is Frau von Walden, that neither she nor I, then or afterwards, mentioned the subject to, or in the presence of, the children. I did not show her the cup and saucer, as it would have been a pity to undo its careful wrappings. All she knew about it will be told in due course.

We had delayed longer than we intended at the china manufactory, and in consequence we were somewhat late at the meeting-place--Ulrichsthal. The gentlemen had arrived there quite an hour before; so they had ordered luncheon, or dinner rather, at the inn, and thoroughly explored the ruins. But dinner discussed, and neither Frau von Walden nor I objecting to pipes, our cavaliers were amiably willing to show us all there was to be seen.

The ruins were those of an ancient monastery, one of the most ancient in Germany, I believe. They covered a very large piece of ground, and had they been in somewhat better preservation, they would have greatly impressed us; as it was they were undoubtedly, even to the unlearned in archeological lore, very interesting. The position of the monastery had been well and carefully chosen, for on one side it commanded a view of surpassing beauty over the valley through which
we had travelled from Seeberg, while on the other arose still higher ground, richly wooded, for the irrepressible forest here, as it were, broke out again.

"It is a most lovely spot!" I said with some enthusiasm, as we sat in the shade of the ruined cloisters, the sunshine flecking the sward in eccentric patches as it made its way through what had evidently been richly-sculptured windows. "How one wishes it were possible to see it as it must have been--how many?--three or four hundred years ago, I suppose!"

Lutz grunted.

"What did you say, Lutz?" asked his mother.

"Nothing particular," he sighed. "I was only thinking of what I read in the guide-book, that the monastery was destroyed--partly by lightning, I believe, all the same--by order of the authorities, in consequence of the really awful wickedness of the monks who inhabited it. So I am not sure that it would have been a very nice place to visit at the time you speak of, gracious lady, begging your pardon."

"What a pity!" I said, with a little shudder. "I do not like to think of it. And I was going to say how beautiful it must be here in the moonlight! But now that you have disenchanted me, Lutz, I should not like it at all," and I arose as I spoke.

"Why not, mamma?" said Reggie curiously. I had not noticed that he and his sister were listening to us. "They're not here now--not those naughty monks."

"No, of course not," agreed practical Nora. "Mamma only means that it is a pity such a beautiful big house as this must have been had to be pulled down--such a waste when there are so many poor people in the world with miserable, little, stuffy houses, or none at all even! That was what you meant; wasn't it, mamma?"

"It is always a pity--the worst of pities--when people are wicked, wherever they are," I replied.

"But all monks are not bad," remarked Nora consolingly. "Think of the Great St. Bernard ones, with their dogs."

And on Reggie's inquiring mind demanding further particulars on the subject, she walked on with him somewhat in front of the rest of us, a happy little pair in the sunshine.

"Lutz," said his father, "you cannot be too careful what you say before children; they are often shocked or frightened by so little. Though yours are such healthy-minded little people," he added, turning to me, "it is not likely anything undesirable would make any impression on them."

I particularly remember this little incident.

It turned out a long walk to Silberbach, the longest we had yet attempted. Hitherto Herr von Walden had been on known ground, and thoroughly acquainted with the roads, the distances, and all necessary particulars; but it was the first time he had explored beyond Seeberg, and before we had accomplished more than half the journey, he began to feel a little alarm at the information given us by the travellers we came across at long intervals "coming from," not "going to St. Ives!" For the farther we went the greater seemed to be the distance we had to go!

"An hour or thereabouts," grew into "two," or even "three" hours; and at last, on a peculiarly stupid countryman assuring us we would scarcely reach our destination before nightfall, our conductor's patience broke down altogether.

"Idiots!" he exclaimed. "But I cannot stand this any longer. I will hasten on and see for myself; and if, as I expect, we are really not very far from Silberbach, it will be all the better for me to find out the 'Katze,' and see that everything is ready for your arrival."

Frau von Walden seemed a little inclined to protest, but I begged her not to do so, seeing that three able-bodied protectors still remained to us, and that it probably was really tiresome for a remarkably good and trained pedestrian
like her husband to have to adapt his vigorous steps to ours. And comfort came from an unexpected quarter. The old peasant woman, strong and muscular as any English labourer, whom we had hired at Seeberg to carry our bags and shawls through the forest, overheard the discussion, and for the first time broke silence to assure "the gracious ladies" that Silberbach was at no great distance; in half an hour or so we should come upon the first of its houses.

"Though as for the 'Katze,'" she added, "that was farther off--at the other end of the village;" and she went on muttering something about "if she had known we were going to the 'Katze,'" which we did not understand, but which afterwards, "being translated," proved to mean that she would have stood out for more pay.

Sure enough, at the end of not more than three-quarters of an hour we came upon one or two outlying houses. Then the trees gradually here grew sparser, and soon ceased, except in occasional patches. It was growing dusk; but as we emerged from the wood we found that we were on a height, the forest road having been a steady, though almost imperceptible, ascent. Far below gleamed already some twinkling cottage lights, and the silvery reflection of a small piece of water.

"To be sure," said young von Trachenfels, "there is a lake at Silberbach. Here we are at last! But where is the 'Katze'?"

He might well ask. Never was there so tantalising a place as Silberbach. Instead of one compact, sensible village, it was more like three or four--nay, five or six--wretched hamlets, each at several minutes' distance from all the others. And the "Katze," of course, was at the farther end of the farthest off from where we stood of these miserable little ragged ends of village! Climbing is tiring work, but it seemed to me it would have been preferable to what lay before us,--a continual descent, by the ruggedest of hill-paths, of nearly two miles, stumbling along in the half light, tired, footsore past description, yet--to our everlasting credit be it recorded--laughing, or trying to laugh, determined at all costs to make the best of it.

"I have no feet left," said poor Frau von Walden. "I am only conscious of two red-hot balls attached somehow to my ankles. I daresay they will drop off soon."

How thankful we were at last to attain to what bore some faint resemblance to a village street! How we gazed on every side to discover anything like an inn! How we stared at each other in bewilderment when at last, from we could not see where, came the well-known voice of Herr von Walden, shouting to us to stop.

"It is here--here, I say. You are going too far."

"Here," judging by the direction whence came the words, seemed to be a piled-up mass of hay, of proportions, exaggerated perhaps by the uncertain light, truly enormous. Was our friend buried in the middle of it? Not so. By degrees we made out his sunburnt face, beaming as ever, from out of a window behind the hay--cartful or stack, we were not sure which; and by still further degrees we discovered that the hay was being unloaded before a little house which it had almost entirely hidden from view, and inside which it was being carried, apparently by the front door, for there was no other door to be seen; but as we stood in perplexity, Herr von Walden, whose face had disappeared, emerged in some mysterious way.

"You can come through the kitchen, ladies; or by the window, if you please." But though the boys and Nora were got, or got themselves, in through the window, Frau von Walden and I preferred the kitchen; and I remember nothing more till we found ourselves all assembled--the original eight as we had started--in a very low-roofed, sandy-floored, tobacco-impregnated sort of cabin which, it appeared, was the salle-à-manger of the renowned hostelry "zur Katze" of Silberbach!

Herr von Walden was vigorously mopping his face. It was very red, and naturally so, considering the weather and the want of ventilation peculiar to the "Katze"; but it struck me there was something slightly forced about the beamingness.

"So, so," he began; "all's well that ends well! But I must explain," and he mopped still more vigorously, "that--there has been a slight, in short, a little, mistake about the accommodation I wish to secure. The supper I have seen to, and it
will be served directly. But as to the beds," and here he could not help laughing, "our worthy host has beds enough"--we found afterwards that every available mattress and pillow in the village had been levied--"but there is but one bedroom, or two, I may say." For the poor Herr had not lost his time since his arrival. Appalled by the want of resources, he had suggested the levy of beds, and had got the host to spread them on the floor of a granary for himself, the three young men, and Reggie; while his wife, Nora, and I were to occupy the one bedroom, which luckily contained two small beds and a sort of settee, such as one sees in old farmhouses all over the world.

So it was decided; and, after all, for one night, what did it matter? For one night? that was for me the question! The supper was really not bad; but the look, and still worse the smell, of the room where it was served, joined no doubt to our excessive fatigue, made it impossible for me to eat anything. My friends were sorry, and I felt ashamed of myself for being so easily knocked up or knocked down. How thoroughly I entered into Frau von Walden's honestly-expressed dislike to "roughing it"! Yet it was not only the uncivilised look of the place, nor the coarse food, nor the want of comfort that made me feel that one night of Silberbach would indeed be enough for me. A sort of depression, of fear almost, came over me when I pictured the two children and myself alone in that strange, out-of-the-world place, where it really seemed to me we might all three be made an end of without any one being the wiser of it! There was a general look of squalor and stolid depression about the people too: the landlord was a black-browed, surlily silent sort of man, his wife and the one maid-servant looked frightened and anxious, and the only voices to be heard were those of half-tipsy peasants drinking and quarrelling at the bar.

To say the least, it was not enlivening. Yet my pride was aroused. I did not like to own myself already beaten. After supper I sat apart, reflecting rather gloomily as to what I could or should do, while the young men and the children amused themselves with the one piece of luxury with which the poorest inn in Thuringia is sure to be provided. For, anomalous as it may seem, there was a piano, and by no means an altogether decrepit one, in the sandy-floored parlour!

Herr von Walden was smoking his pipe outside, the hay being by this time housed somewhere or other. His wife, who had been speaking to him, came in and sat down beside me.

"My dear," she said, "you must not be vexed with me for renewing the subject, but I cannot help it; I feel a responsibility. You must not, you really must not, think of staying here alone with those two children. It is not fit for you."

Oh, how I blessed her for breaking the ice! I could hardly help hugging her as I replied--diplomatically--

"You really think so?"

"Certainly I do; and so, though perhaps he won't say so as frankly--so does my husband. He says I am foolish and fanciful; but I confess to feeling a kind of dislike to the place that I cannot explain. Perhaps there is thunder in the air--that always affects my nerves--but I just feel that I cannot agree to your staying on here."

"Very well, I am quite willing to go back to Seeberg to-morrow," I replied meekly. "Of course we can't judge of the place by what we have seen of it to-night, but no doubt, as far as the inn is concerned, Seeberg is much nicer. I daresay we can see all we want by noon to-morrow, and get back to Seeberg in the afternoon."

Kind Frau von Walden kissed me rapturously on both cheeks.

"You don't know, my dear, the relief to my mind of hearing you say so! And now I think the best thing we can do is to go to bed. For we must start at six."

"So early!" I exclaimed, with a fresh feeling of dismay.

"Yes, indeed; and I must bid you good-bye to-night, for after all I am not to sleep in your room, which is much better, as I should have had to disturb you so early. My husband has found a tidy room next door in a cottage, and we shall do very well there."
What sort of a place she euphemistically described as "a tidy room" I never discovered. But it would have been useless to remonstrate, the kind creature was so afraid of incommoding us that she would have listened to no objections.

Herr von Walden came in just as we were about to wish each other good-night.

"So!" he said, with a tone of amiable indulgence, "so! And what do you think of Silberbach? My wife feels sure you will not like it after all."

"I think I shall see as much as I care to see of it in an hour or two to-morrow morning," I replied quietly. "And by the afternoon the children and I will go back to our comfortable quarters at Seeberg."

"Ah, indeed! Yes, I daresay it will be as well," he said airily, as if he had nothing at all to do with decoying us to the place. "Then good-night and pleasant dreams, and----"

"But," I interrupted, "I want to know how we are to get back to Seeberg. Can I get an Einspänner here?"

"To be sure, to be sure. You have only to speak to the landlord in the morning, and tell him at what hour you want it," he answered so confidently that I felt no sort of misgiving, and I turned with a smile to finish my good-nights.

The young men were standing close beside us. I shook hands with Trachenfels and Lutz, the latter of whom, though he replied as heartily as usual, looked, I thought, annoyed. George Norman followed me to the door of the room. In front of us was the ladder-like staircase leading to the upper regions.

"What a hole of a place!" said the boy. "I don't mind quite a cottage if it's clean and cheerful, but this place is so grim and squalid. I can't tell you how glad I am you're not going to stay on here alone. It really isn't fit for you."

"Well, you may be easy, as we shall only be here a few hours after you leave."

"Yes; so much the better. I wish I could have stayed, but I must be back at Kronberg to-morrow. Lutz could have stayed and seen you back to Seeberg, but his father won't let him. Herr von Walden is so queer once he takes an idea in his head--and he won't allow this place isn't all right."

"But I daresay there would be nothing to hurt us! Anyway, I will write to reassure you that we have not fallen into a nest of cut-throats or brigands," I said laughingly.

Certainly it never occurred to me or to my friends what would be the nature of the "experience" which would stamp Silberbach indelibly on our memory.

We must have been really very tired, for, quite contrary to our habit, the children and I slept late the next morning, undisturbed by the departure of our friends at the early hour arranged by them.

The sun was shining, and Silberbach, like every other place, appeared all the better for it. But the view from the window of our room was not encouraging. It looked out upon the village street--a rough, unkempt sort of track--and on its other side the ground rose abruptly to some height, but treeless and grassless. It seemed more like the remains of a quarry of some kind, for there was nothing to be seen but stones and broken pieces of rock.

"We must go out after our breakfast and look about us a little before we start," I said. "But how glad I shall be to get back to that bright, cheerful Seeberg!"

"Yes, indeed," said Nora. "I think this is the ugliest place I ever was at in my life." And she was not inclined to like it any better when Reggie, whom we sent down to reconnoitre, came back to report that we must have our breakfast in our own room.

"There are a lot of rough-looking men down there, smoking and drinking beer. You couldn't eat there," said the child.
But, after all, it was to be our last meal there, and we did not complain. The root coffee was not too unpalatable with plenty of good milk; the bread was sour and the butter dubious, as Ottilia had foretold, so we soaked the bread in the coffee, like French peasants.

"Mamma," said Nora gravely, "it makes me sorry for poor people. I daresay many never have anything nicer to eat than this."

"Not nicer than this!" I exclaimed. "Why, my dear child, thousands, not in Germany only, but in France and England, never taste anything as good."

The little girl opened her eyes. There are salutary lessons to be learnt from even the mildest experience of "roughing it."

Suddenly Nora's eyes fell on a little parcel in blue paper. It was lying on one of the shelves of the stove, which, as in most German rooms, stood out a little from the wall, and in its summer idleness was a convenient receptacle for odds and ends. This stove was a high one, of black-leaded iron; it stood between the door and the wall, on the same side as the door, and was the most conspicuous object in the room.

"Mamma," she exclaimed, "there is the parcel you brought away from the china place. What is it? I wish you would show it me."

I gave a little exclamation of annoyance.

"Frau von Walden has forgotten it," I said; for my friend, returning straight to Kronberg, had offered to take it home for me in her bag for fear of accidents. "It does not matter," I added, "I will pack it among our soft things. It is a very pretty cup and saucer, but I will show it to you at Kronberg, for it is so nicely wrapped up. Now I am going downstairs to order the Einspänner and we can walk about for an hour or two."

The children came with me. I had some trouble in disinterring the landlord, but at last I found him, of course with a pipe in his mouth, hanging about the premises. He listened to me civilly enough, but when I waited for his reply as to whether the Einspänner would be ready about twelve o'clock, he calmly regarded me without speaking. I repeated my inquiry.

"At twelve?" he said calmly. "Yes, no doubt the gracious lady might as well fix twelve as any other hour, for there was no such thing as a horse, much less an Einspänner to be had at Silberbach."

I stared at him in my turn.

"No horse, no carriage to be had! How do people ever get away from here then?" I said.

"They don't get away--that is to say, if they come at all, they go as they came, in the carriage that brought them; otherwise they neither come nor go. The lady came on foot: she can go on foot; otherwise she can stay."

There seemed something sinister in his words. A horrible, ridiculous feeling came over me that we were caught in a net, as it were, and doomed to stay at Silberbach for the rest of our lives. But I looked at the man. He was simply stolid and indifferent. I did not believe then, nor do I now, that he was anything worse than sulky and uncivilised. He did not even care to have us as his visitors: he had no wish to retain us nor to speed us on our way. Had we remained at the "Katze" from that day to this, I don't believe he would have ever inquired what we stayed for!

"I cannot walk back to Seeberg," I said half indignantly, "we are too tired; nor would it be safe through the forest alone with two children."

The landlord knocked some ashes off his pipe.

"There may be an ox-cart going that way next week," he observed.
"Next week!" I repeated. Then a sudden idea struck me. "Is there a post-office here?" I said.

Of course there was a post-office; where can one go in Germany where there is not a post and telegraph office?

"The telegraph officials must be sadly overworked here," I said to myself. But as far as mine host was concerned, I satisfied myself with obtaining the locality of the post-office, and with something like a ray of hope I turned to look for the children. They had been amusing themselves with the piano in the now empty room, but as I called to them, Reggie ran out with a very red face.

"I wish I were a man, mamma. Fancy! a peasant--one of those men who were drinking beer--came and put his arm around Nora as she was playing. 'Du spielst schön' he said, and I do believe he meant to kiss her, if I hadn't shaken my fist at him."

"Yes, indeed, mamma," said Nora, equally but more calmly indignant. "I certainly think the sooner we get away the better."

I had to tell them of my discomfiture, but ended with my new idea.

"If there is a post-office," I said, "the mail must stop there, and the mail takes passengers."

But, arrived at the neat little post-house--to reach which without a most tremendous round we had to climb up a really precipitous path, so called, over the stones and rocks in front of the inn--new dismay awaited us. The postmaster was a very old man, but of a very different type from our host. He was sorry to disappoint us, but the mail only stopped here for letters--all passengers must begin their journey at--I forget where--leagues off on the other side from Silberbach. We wanted to get away? He was not surprised. What had we come for? No one ever came here. Were we Americans! Staying at the "Katze"! Good heavens! "A rough place." "I should rather think so."

And this last piece of information fairly overcame him. He evidently felt he must come to the rescue of these poor Babes in the wood.

"Come up when the mail passes from Seeberg this evening at seven, and I will see what I can do with the conductor. If he happens to have no passengers to-morrow, he may stretch a point and take you in. No one will be the wiser."

"Oh, thanks, thanks," I cried. "Of course I will pay anything he likes to ask."

"No need for that. He is a braver Mann, and will not cheat you."

"We shall be here at seven, then. I would rather have started to walk than stayed here indefinitely."

"Not to-day anyway. We shall have a storm," he said, looking up to the sky. "Adieu. Auf Wiedersehen!"

"I wish we had not to stay another night here," I said. "Still, to-morrow morning will soon come."

We spent the day as best we could. There was literally nothing to see, nowhere to go, except back into the forest whence we had come. Nor dared we go far, for the day grew more and more sultry; the strange, ominous silence that precedes a storm came on, adding to our feelings of restlessness and depression. And by about two o'clock, having ventured out again after "dinner," we were driven in by the first great drops. Huddled together in our cheerless little room we watched the breaking loose of the storm demons. I am not affected by thunder and lightning, nor do I dread them. But what a storm that was! Thunder, lightning, howling wind, and rain like no rain I had ever seen before, all mingled together. An hour after it began, a cart, standing high and dry in the steep village street, was hidden by water to above the top of the wheels--a little more and it would have floated like a boat. But by about five, things calmed down; the few stupid-looking peasants came out of their houses, and gazed about them as if to see what damage had been done. Perhaps it was not much after all--they seemed to take it quietly enough; and by six all special signs of disturbance had disappeared--the torrents melted away as if by magic. Only a strange, heavy mist began to rise,
enveloping everything, so that we could hardly believe the evening was yet so early. I looked at my watch.

"Half-past six. We must, mist or no mist, go up to the post-house. But I don't mind going alone, dears."

"No, no, mamma; I must go with you, to take care of you," said Reggie; "but Nora needn't."

"Perhaps it would be as well," said the little girl. "I have one or two buttons to sew on, and I am still rather tired."

And, knowing she was never timid about being left alone, thinking we should be absent half an hour at most, I agreed. But the half hour lengthened into an hour, then into an hour and a half, before the weary mail made its appearance. The road through the forest must be all but impassable, our old friend told us. But oh, how tired Reggie and I were of waiting! though all the time never a thought of uneasiness with regard to Nora crossed my mind. And when the mail did come, delayed, as the postmaster had suspected, the good result of his negotiations made us forget all our troubles; for the conductor all but promised to take us the next morning, in consideration of a very reasonable extra payment. It was most unlikely he would have any, certainly not many passengers. We must be there, at the post-house, by nine o'clock, baggage and all, for he dared not wait a moment, and he would do his best. Through the evening dusk, now fast replacing the scattered mist, Reggie and I, light of heart, stumbled down the rocky path.

"How pleased Nora will be! She will be wondering what has come over us," I said as the "Katze" came in view. "But what is that, Reggie, running up and down in front of the house? Is it a sheep, or a big white dog? or--or a child? Can it be Nora, and no cloak or hat? and so damp and chilly as it is? How can she be so foolish?"

And with a vague uneasiness I hurried on.

Yes, it was Nora. There was light enough to see her face. What had happened to my little girl? She was white--no, not white, ghastly. Her eyes looked glassy, and yet as if drawn into her head; her whole bright, fearless bearing was gone. She clutched me convulsively as if she would never again let me go. Her voice was so hoarse that I could scarcely distinguish what she said.

"Send Reggie in--he must not hear," were her first words--of rare unselfishness and presence of mind.

"Reggie," I said, "tell the maid to take candles up to our room, and take off your wet boots at once."

My children are obedient; he was off instantly.

Then Nora went on, still in a strained, painful whisper--

"Mamma, there has been a man in our room, and----"

"Did that peasant frighten you again, dear? Oh, I am so sorry I left you;" for my mind at once reverted to the man whom Reggie had shaken his fist at that morning.

"No, no; not that. I would not have minded. But, mamma, Reggie must never know it--he is so little, he could not bear it--mamma, it was not a man. It was--oh, mamma, I have seen a ghost!"

PART II

"A ghost," I repeated, holding the poor trembling little thing more closely. I think my first sensation was a sort of rage at whomever or whatever--ghost or living being--had frightened her so terribly. "Oh, Nora darling, it couldn't be a ghost. Tell me about it, and I will try to find out what it was. Or would you rather try to forget about it just now, and tell me afterwards? You are shivering so dreadfully. I must get you warm first of all."
"But let me tell you, mamma--I must tell you," she entreated piteously. "If you could explain it, I should be so glad, but I am afraid you can't," and again a shudder passed through her.

I saw it was better to let her tell it. I had by this time drawn her inside; a door in front stood open, and a bright fire caught my eyes. It was the kitchen, and the most inviting-looking room in the house. I peeped in--there was no one there, but from an inner room we heard the voice of the landlady hushing her baby to sleep.

"Come to the fire, Nora," I said. Just then Reggie came clattering downstairs, followed by Lieschen, the taciturn "maid of the inn."

"She has taken a candle upstairs, mamma, but I've not taken off my boots, for there's a little calf, she says, in the stable, and she's going to show it me. May I go?"

"Yes, but don't stay long," I said, my opinion of the sombre Lieschen improving considerably; and when they were out of hearing, "Now, Nora dear, tell me what frightened you so."

"Mamma," she said, a little less white and shivering by now, but still with the strange strained look in her eyes that I could not bear to see, "it couldn't have been a real man. Listen, mamma. When you and Reggie went, I got out a needle and thread--out of your little bag--and first I mended a hole in my glove, and then I took off one of my boots--the buttoning-up-the-side ones, you know--to sew a button on. I soon finished it, and then, without putting my boot on, I sat there, looking out of the window and wondering if you and Reggie would soon be back. Then I thought perhaps I could see if you were coming, better from the window of the place outside our room, where the hay and bags of flour are." (I think I forgot to say that to get to our room we had to cross at the top of the stair a sort of landing, along one side of which, as Nora said, great bags of flour or grain and trusses of hay were ranged; this place had a window with a somewhat more extended view than that of our room.) "I went there, still without my boot, and I knelt in front of the window some time, looking up the rough path, and wishing you would come. But I was not the least dull or lonely. I was only a little tired. At last I got tired of watching there, and I thought I would come back to our room and look for something to do. The door was not closed, but I think I had half drawn it to as I came out. I pushed it open and went in, and then--I seemed to feel there was something that had not been there before, and I looked up; and just beside the stove--the door opens against the stove, you know, and so it had hidden it for a moment as it were--there, mamma, stood a man! I saw him as plainly as I see you. He was staring at the stove, afterwards I saw it must have been at your little blue paper parcel. He was a gentleman, mamma--quite young. I saw his coat, it was cut like George Norman's. I think he must have been an Englishman. His coat was dark, and bound with a little very narrow ribbon binding. I have seen coats like that. He had a dark blue neck-tie, his dress all looked neat and careful--like what all gentlemen are; I saw all that, mamma, before I clearly saw his face. He was tall and had fair hair--I saw that at once. But I was not frightened; just at first I did not even wonder how he could have got into the room--now I see he couldn't without my knowing. My first thought, it seems so silly," and Nora here smiled a little, "my first thought was, 'Oh, he will see I have no boot on,,'

"My first thought, it seems so silly," and Nora here smiled a little, "my first thought was, 'Oh, he will see I have no boot on,'--which was very characteristic of the child, for Nora was a very "proper" little girl,--"and just as I thought that, he seemed to know I was there, for he slowly turned his head from the stove and looked at me, and then I saw his face. Oh, mamma!"

"Was there anything frightening about it?" I said.

"I don't know," the child went on. "It was not like any face I ever saw, and yet it does not sound strange. He had nice, rather wavy fair hair, and I think he must have been nice-looking. His eyes were blue, and he had a little fair moustache. But he was so fearfully pale, and a look over all that I can't describe. And his eyes when he looked at me seemed not to see me, and yet they turned on me. They looked dreadfully sad, and though they were so close to me, as if they were miles and miles away. Then his lips parted slightly, very slightly, as if he were going to speak. Mamma," Nora went on impressively, "they would have spoken if I had said the least word--I felt they would. But just then--and remember, mamma, it couldn't have been yet two seconds since I came in, I hadn't yet had time to get frightened--just then there came over me the most awful feeling. I knew it was not a real man, and I seemed to hear myself saying inside my mind, 'It is a ghost,' and while I seemed to be saying it--I had not moved my eyes--while I looked at him----"
"He disappeared?"

"No, mamma, he did not even disappear. He was just no longer there. I was staring at nothing! Then came a sort of wild fear. I turned and rushed downstairs, even without my boot, and all the way the horrible feeling was that even though he was no longer there he might still be coming after me. I should not have cared if there had been twenty tipsy peasants downstairs! But I found Lieschen. Of course I said nothing to her; I only asked her to come up with a light to help me to find my boot, and as soon as I had put it on I came outside, and ran up and down--it was a long time, I think--till you and Reggie came at last. Mamma, can you explain it?"

How I longed to be able to do so! But I would not deceive the child. Besides, it would have been useless.

"No, dear. As yet I cannot. But I will try to understand it. There are several ways it may be explained. Have you ever heard of optical delusions, Nora?"

"I am not sure. You must tell me;" and she looked at me so appealingly, and with such readiness to believe whatever I told her, that I felt I would give anything to restore her to her former happy fearlessness.

But just then Reggie came in from the stable.

"We must go upstairs," I said; "and Lieschen," turning to her, "bring up our supper at once. We are leaving very early to-morrow morning, and we will go early to bed."

"Oh, mamma," whispered Nora, "if only we had not to stay all night in that room!"

But there was no help for it, and she was thankful to hear of the success of our expedition to the post-office. During supper we, of course, on Reggie's account, said nothing of Nora's fright, but as soon as it was over, Reggie declaring himself very sleepy, we got him undressed and put to bed on the settee originally intended for Nora. He was asleep in five minutes, and then Nora and I did our utmost to arrive at the explanation we so longed for. We thoroughly examined the room; there was no other entrance, no cupboard of any kind even. I tried to imagine that some of our travelling cloaks or shawls hanging on the back of a chair might, in the uncertain light, have taken imaginary proportions; that the stove itself might have cast a shadow we had not before observed; I suggested everything, but in vain. Nothing shook Nora's conviction that she had seen something not to be explained.

"For the light was not uncertain just then," she maintained; "the mist had gone and it had not begun to get dark. And then I saw him so plainly! If it had been a fancy ghost it wouldn't have looked like that--it would have had a long white thing floating over it, and a face like a skeleton perhaps. But to see somebody just like a regular gentleman--I could never have fancied that!"

There was a good deal in what she said. I had to give up my suggestions, and I tried to give Nora some idea of what are called "optical delusions," though my own comprehension of the theory was of the vaguest. She listened, but I don't think my words had much weight. And at last I told her I thought she had better go to bed and try to sleep. I saw she shrank from the idea, but it had to be.

"We can't sit up all night, I suppose," she said, "but I wish we could. I am so dreadfully afraid of waking in the night, and--and--seeing him there again."

"Would you like to sleep in my bed? though it is so tiny, I could make room and put you inside," I said.

Nora looked wistfully at the haven of refuge, but her good sense and considerateness for me came to the front.

"No," she said, "neither of us would sleep, and you would be so tired to-morrow. I will get into my own bed, and I will try to sleep, mamma."

"And listen, Nora; if you are the least frightened in the night, or if you can't sleep, call out to me without hesitation. I
am sure to wake often, and I will speak to you from time to time."

That was the longest night of my life! The first part was not the worst. By what I really thought a fortunate chance it was a club night of some kind at Silberbach--a musical club, of course; and all the musically-gifted peasants of the countryside assembled in the sanded parlour of the "Katze." The noise was something indescribable, for though there may have been some good voices among them, they were drowned in the din. But though it prevented us from sleeping, it also fairly drove away all ghostly alarms. By twelve o'clock or thereabouts the party seemed to disperse, and all grew still. Then came some hours I can never forget. There was faint moonlight by fits and starts, and I not only found it impossible to sleep, I found it impossible to keep my eyes shut. Some irresistible fascination seemed to force them open, and obliged me ever and anon to turn in the direction of the stove, from which, however, before going to bed, I had removed the blue paper parcel. And each time I did so I said to myself, "Am I going to see that figure standing there as Nora saw it? Shall I remain sane if I do? Shall I scream out? Will it look at me, in turn, with its sad unearthly eyes? Will it speak? If it moves across the room and comes near me, or if I see it going towards Nora, or leaning over my Reggie sleeping there in his innocence, misdoubting of no fateful presence near, what, oh! what shall I do?"

For in my heart of hearts, though I would not own it to Nora, I felt convinced that what she had seen was no living human being--whence it had come, or why, I could not tell. But in the quiet of the night I had thought of what the woman at the china factory had told us, of the young Englishman who had bought the other cup, who had promised to write and never done so! What had become of him? "If," I said to myself, "if I had the slightest reason to doubt his being at this moment alive and well in his own country, as he pretty certainly is, I should really begin to think he had been robbed and murdered by our surly landlord, and that his spirit had appeared to us--the first compatriots who have passed this way since, most likely--to tell the story."

I really think I must have been a little light-headed some part of that night. My poor Nora, I am certain, never slept, but I can only hope her imagination was less wildly at work than mine. From time to time I spoke to her, and every time she was awake, for she always answered without hesitation.

"I am quite comfortable, dear mamma, and I don't think I am very frightened;" or else, "I have not slept much, but I have said my prayers a great many times, and all the hymns I could remember. Don't mind about me, mamma, and do try to sleep."

I watched the dawn slowly breaking. From where I lay I could see through the window the high mound of rough stones and fragments of rock that I have described. At its foot there was a low wall loosely constructed of these same unhewn blocks, and the shapes that evolved themselves out of this wall, beside which grew two or three stunted trees, were more grotesque and extraordinary than I could describe. They varied like the colours in a kaleidoscope with the wavering and increasing light. At one time it seemed to me that one of the trees was a gipsy woman enveloped in a cloak, extending her arm towards me threateningly; at another, two weird dogs seemed to be fighting together; but however fantastic and fearsome had been these strange effects of light and fancy mingled together, I should not have minded--I knew what they were; it was a relief to have anything to look at which could keep my eyes from constantly turning in the direction of that black iron stove.

I fell asleep at last, though not for long. When I woke it was bright morning-- fresher and brighter, I felt, as I threw open the window, than the day before. With the greatest thankfulness that the night was over at last, as soon as I was dressed I began to put our little belongings together, and then turned to awake the children. Nora was sleeping quietly; it seemed a pity to arouse her, for it was not much past six, but I heard the people stirring about downstairs, and I had a feverish desire to get away; for though the daylight had dispersed much of the "eerie" impression of Nora's fright, there was a feeling of uneasiness, almost of insecurity, left in my mind since recalling the incident of the young man who had visited the china factory. How did I know but that some harm had really come to him in this very place? There was certainly nothing about the landlord to inspire confidence. At best it was a strange and unpleasant coincidence. The evening before I had half thought of inquiring of the landlord or his wife, or even of Lieschen, if any English had ever before stayed at the "Katze." If assured by them that we were the first, or at least the first "in their time," it would, I thought, help to assure Nora that the ghost had really been a delusion of some kind. But then, again, supposing the
people of the inn hesitated to reply—supposing the landlord to be really in any way guilty, and my inquiries were to rouse his suspicions, would I not be risking dangerous enmity, besides strengthening the painful impression left on my own mind, and this corroboration of her own fear might be instinctively suspected by Nora, even if I told her nothing?

"No," I decided; "better leave it a mystery, in any case, till we are safely away from here." For, allowing that these people are perfectly innocent and harmless, their even telling me simply, like the woman at Grünstein, that such a person had been here, that he had fallen ill, possibly died here—I would rather not know it. It is certainly not probable that it was so; they would have been pretty sure to gossip about any occurrence of the kind, taciturn though they are. The wife would have talked of it to me--she is more genial than the others—for I had had a little kindly chat with her the day before, _à propos of what every mother, of her class at least, is ready to talk about—the baby! A pretty baby too, though the last, she informed me with a sort of melancholy pride, of four she had "buried"—using the same expression in her rough German as a Lancashire factory hand or an Irish peasant woman—one after the other. Certainly Silberbach was not a cheerful or cheering spot. "No, no," I made up my mind, "I would rather at present know nothing, even if there is anything to know. I can the more honestly endeavour to remove the impression left on Nora."

The little girl was so easily awakened that I was half inclined to doubt if she had not been "shamming" out of filial devotion. She looked ill still, but infinitely better than the night before, and she so eagerly agreed with me in my wish to leave the house as soon as possible, that I felt sure it was the best thing to do. Reggie woke up rosy and beaming—evidently no ghosts had troubled his night's repose. There was something consoling and satisfactory in seeing him quite as happy and hearty as in his own English nursery. But though he had no uncanny reasons like us for disliking Silberbach, he was quite as cordial in his readiness to leave it. We got hold of Lieschen, and asked for our breakfast at once. As I had told the landlady the night before that we were leaving very early, our bill came up with the coffee. It was, I must say, moderate in the extreme—ten or twelve marks, if I remember rightly, for two nights' lodging and almost two days' board for three people. And such as it was, they had given us of their best. I felt a little twinge of conscience, when I said good-bye to the poor woman, for having harboured any doubts of the establishment. But when the gruff landlord, standing outside the door, smoking of course, nodded a surly "adieu" in return to our parting greeting, my feeling of unutterable thankfulness that we were not to spend another night under his roof regained the ascendant.

"Perhaps he is offended at my not having told him how I mean to get away, notwithstanding his stupidity about it," I said to myself, as we passed him. But no, there was no look of vindictiveness, of malice, of even annoyance on his dark face. Nay, more, I could almost have fancied there was the shadow of a smile as Reggie tugged at his Tam o' Shanter by way of a final salute. That landlord was really one of the most incomprehensible human beings it has ever been my fate to come across, in fact or fiction.

We had retained Lieschen to carry our modest baggage to the post-house, and having deposited it at the side of the road just where the coach stopped, she took her leave, apparently more than satisfied with the small sum of money I gave her, and civilly wishing us a pleasant journey. But though less gruff, she was quite as impassive as the landlord. She never asked where we were going, if we were likely ever to return again, and like her master, as I said, had we been staying there still, I do not believe she would ever have made an inquiry or expressed the slightest astonishment.

"There is really something very queer about Silberbach," I could not help saying to Nora, "both about the place and the people. They almost give one the feeling that they are half-witted, and yet they evidently are not. This last day or two I seem to have been living in a sort of dream or nightmare, and I shall not get over it altogether till we are fairly out of the place;" and though she said little, I felt sure the child understood me.

We were of course far, far too early for the post. The old man came out of his house, and seemed amused at our haste to be gone.

"I am afraid Silberbach has not taken your fancy," he said. "Well, no wonder. I think it is the dreariest place I ever saw."

"Then you do not belong to it? Have you not been here long?" I asked.
He shook his head.

"Only a few months, and I hope to get removed soon," he said. So he could have told me nothing, evidently! "It is too lonely here. There is not a creature in the place who ever touches a book--they are all as dull and stupid as they can be. But then they are very poor, and they live on here from year's end to year's end, barely able to earn their daily bread. Poverty degrades--there is no doubt of it, whatever the wise men may say. A few generations of it makes men little better than----" He stopped.

"Than?" I asked.

"Than," the old philosopher of the post-house went on, "pardon the expression--than pigs."

There were two or three of the fraternity grubbing about at the side of the road; they may have suggested the comparison. I could hardly help smiling.

"But I have travelled a good deal in Germany," I said, "and I have never anywhere found the people so stupid and stolid and ungenial as here."

"Perhaps not," he said. "Still there are many places like this, only naturally they are not the places strangers visit. It is never so bad where there are a few country houses near, for nowadays it must be allowed it is seldom but that the gentry take some interest in the people."

"It is a pity no rich man takes a fancy to Silberbach," I said.

"That day will never come. The best thing would be for a railway to be cut through the place, but that, too, is not likely."

Then the old postmaster turned into his garden, inviting us civilly to wait there or in the office if we preferred. But we liked better to stay outside, for just above the post-house there was a rather tempting little wood, much prettier than anything to be seen on the other side of the village. And Nora and I sat there quietly on the stumps of some old trees, while Reggie found a pleasing distraction in alternately chasing and making friends with a party of ducks, which, for reasons best known to themselves, had deserted their native element and come for a stroll in the woods.

From where we sat we looked down on our late habitation; we could almost distinguish the landlord's slouching figure and poor Lieschen with a pail of water slung at each side as she came in from the well.

"What a life!" I could not help saying. "Day after day nothing but work. I suppose it is not to be wondered at if they grow dull and stolid, poor things." Then my thoughts reverted to what up here in the sunshine and the fresh morning air and with the pleasant excitement of going away I had a little forgotten--the strange experience of the evening before. It was difficult for me now to realise that I had been so affected by it. I felt now as if I wished I could see the poor ghost for myself, and learn if there was aught we could do to serve or satisfy him! For in the old orthodox ghost-stories there is always some reason for these eerie wanderers returning to the world they have left. But when I turned to Nora and saw her dear little face still white and drawn, and with an expression half-subdued, half-startled, that it had never worn before, I felt thankful that the unbidden visitor had attempted no communication.

"It might have sent her out of her mind," I thought. "Why, if he had anything to say, did he appear to her, poor child, and not to me?--though, after all, I am not at all sure that I should not have gone out of my mind in such a case."

Before long the post-horn made itself heard in the distance; we hurried down, our hearts beating with the fear of possible disappointment. It was all right, however, there were no passengers, and nodding adieu to our old friend, we joyfully mounted into our places, and were bowled away to Seeberg.

There and at other spots in its pretty neighbourhood we pleasantly enough spent two or three weeks. Nora by degrees recovered her roses and her good spirits. Still, her strange experience left its mark on her. She was never again quite the
merry, thoughtless, utterly fearless child she had been. I tried, however, to take the good with the ill, remembering that thorough-going childhood cannot last for ever, that the shock possibly helped to soften and modify a nature that might have been too daring for perfect womanliness--still more, wanting perhaps in tenderness and sympathy for the weaknesses and tremors of feeble temperaments.

At Kronberg, on our return, we found that Herr von Walden was off on a tour to the Italian lakes, Lutz and young Trachenfels had returned to their studies at Heidelberg, George Norman had gone home to England. All the members of our little party were dispersed except Frau von Walden.

To her and to Ottilia I told the story, sitting together one afternoon over our coffee, when Nora was not with us. It impressed them both. Ottilia could not resist an "I told you so."

"I knew, I felt," she said, "that something disagreeable would happen to you there. I never will forget," she went on naively, "the dreary, dismal impression the place left on me the only time I was there--pouring rain and universal gloom and discomfort. We had to wait there a few hours to get one of the horses shod, once when I was driving with my father from Seeberg to Marsfeldt."

Frau von Walden and I could not help smiling at her. Still there was no smiling at my story, though both agreed that, viewed in the light of unexaggerated common sense, it was most improbable that there was any tragedy mixed up with the disappearance of the young man we had heard of at Grünstein.

"And indeed why we should speak of his 'disappearance' I don't know," said Frau von Walden. "He did not write to send the order he had spoken of--that was all. No doubt he is very happy at his own home. When you are back in England, my dear, you must try to find him out--perhaps by means of the cup. And then when Nora sees him, and finds he is not at all like the 'ghost,' it will make her the more ready to think it was really only some very strange, I must admit, kind of optical delusion."

"But Nora has never heard the Grünstein story, and is not to hear it," said Ottilia.

"And England is a wide place, small as it is in one sense," I said. "Still, if I did come across the young man, I half think I would tell Nora the whole, and by showing her how my imagination had dressed it up, I think I could perhaps lessen the effect on her of what she thought she saw. It would prove to her better than anything, the tricks that fancy may play us.

"And in the meantime, if you take my advice, you will allude to it as little as possible," said practical Ottilia. "Don't seem to avoid the subject, but manage to do so in reality."

"Shall you order the tea-service?" asked Frau von Walden.

"I hardly think so. I am out of conceit of it somehow," I said. "And it might remind Nora of the blue paper parcel. I think I shall give the cup and saucer to my sister."

And on my return to England I did so.

* * * * *

Two years later. A very different scene from quaint old Kronberg, or still more from the dreary "Katze" at Silberbach. We are in England now, though not at our own home. We are staying, my children and I--two older girls than little Nora, and Nora herself, though hardly now to be described as "little"--with my sister. Reggie is there too, but naturally not much heard of, for it is the summer holidays, and the weather is delightful. It is August again--a typical August afternoon--though a trifle too hot perhaps for some people.

"This time two years ago, mamma," said Margaret, my eldest daughter, "you were in Germany with Nora and Reggie. What a long summer that seemed! It is so much nicer to be all together."
"I should like to go to Kronberg and all those queer places," said Lily, the second girl; "especially to the place where Nora saw the ghost."

"I am quite sure you would not wish to stay there," I replied. "It is curious that you should speak of it just now. I was thinking of it this morning. It was just two years yesterday that it happened."

We were sitting at afternoon tea on the lawn outside the drawing-room window--my sister, her husband, Margaret, Lily, and I. Nora was with the schoolroom party inside.

"How queer!" said Lily.

"You don't think Nora has thought of it?" I asked.

"Oh no, I am sure she hasn't," said Margaret. "I think it has grown vague to her now. You know she spoke about it to us when she first came home. You had prepared us, you remember, mamma, and told us not to make too much of it. The first year after, she did think of it. She told me she was dreadfully frightened all that day for fear he should appear again. But since then I think she has gradually forgotten it."

"She is a very sensible child," said my sister. "And she is especially kind and sympathising with any of the little ones who seem timid. I found her sitting beside Charlie the other night for ever so long because he heard an owl hooting outside, and was frightened."

Just then a servant came out of the house, and said something to my brother-in-law. He got up at once.

"It is Mr. Grenfell," he said to his wife, "and a friend with him. Shall I bring them out here?"

"Yes, it would really be a pity to go into the house again--it is so nice out here," she replied. And her husband went to meet his guests.

He appeared again in a minute or two, stepping out through the low window of the drawing-room, accompanied by the two gentlemen.

Mr. Grenfell was a young man living in the neighbourhood, whom we had known from his boyhood; the stranger he introduced to us as Sir Robert Masters. He was a middle-aged man, with a quiet, gentle bearing and expression.

"You will have some tea?" said my sister, after the first few words of greeting had passed. Mr. Grenfell declined. His friend accepted.

"Go into the drawing-room, Lily, please, and ring for a cup and saucer," said her aunt, noting the deficiency. "There was an extra one, but some one has poured milk into the saucer. It surely can't have been you, Mark, for Tiny?" she went on, turning to her husband. "You shouldn't let a dog drink out of anything we drink out of ourselves."

My brother-in-law looked rather comically penitent; he did not attempt to deny the charge.

"Only, my dear, you must allow," he pleaded, "that we do not drink our tea out of the saucers."

On what trifling links hang sometimes important results! Had it not been for Mark's transgressing in the matter of Tiny's milk we should never have learnt the circumstances which give to this simple relation of facts--valueless in itself--such interest, speculative and suggestive only, I am aware, as it may be found to possess.

Lily, in the meantime, had disappeared. But more quickly than it would have taken her to ring the bell, and await the servant's response to the summons, she was back again, carrying something carefully in her hand.

"Aunt," she said, "is it not a good idea? As you have a tea-spoon--I don't suppose Tiny used the spoon, did he?--I thought, instead of ringing for another, I would bring out the ghost-cup for Sir Robert. It is only fair to use it for once,
poor thing, and just as we have been speaking about it. Oh, I assure you it is not dusty," as my sister regarded it dubiously. "It was inside the cabinet."

"Still, all the same, a little hot water will do it no harm," said her aunt--"provided, that is to say, that Sir Robert has no objection to drink out of a cup with such a name attached to it?"

"On the contrary," replied he, "I shall think it an honour. But you will, I trust, explain the meaning of the name to me? It puzzles me more than if it were a piece of ancient china--a great-great-grandmother's cup, for instance. For I see it is not old, though it is very pretty, and, I suppose, uncommon?"

There was a slight tone of hesitation about the last word which struck me.

"I have no doubt my sister will be ready to tell you all there is to tell. It was she who gave me the cup," replied the lady of the house.

Then Sir Robert turned to me. Looking at him full in the face I saw that there was a thoughtful, far-seeing look in his eyes, which redeemed his whole appearance from the somewhat commonplace gentlemanliness which was all I had before observed about him.

"I am greatly interested in these subjects," he said. "It would be very kind of you to tell me the whole."

I did so, more rapidly and succinctly of course than I have done here. It is not easy to play the part of narrator, with five or six pairs of eyes fixed upon you, more especially when the owners of several of them have heard the story a good many times before, and are quick to observe the slightest discrepancy, however unintentional. "There is, you see, very little to tell," I said in conclusion, "only there is always a certain amount of impressiveness about any experience of the kind when related at first hand."

"Undoubtedly so," Sir Robert replied. "Thank you very much indeed for telling it me."

He spoke with perfect courtesy, but with a slight absence of manner, his eyes fixed rather dreamily on the cup in his hand. He seemed as if trying to recall or recollect something.

"There should be a sequel to that story," said Mr. Grenfell.

"That's what I say," said Margaret eagerly. "It will be too stupid if we never hear any more. But that is always the way with modern ghost stories--there is no sense or meaning in them. The ghosts appear to people who never knew them, who take no interest in them, as it were, and then they have nothing to say--there is no dénouement, it is all purposeless."

Sir Robert looked at her thoughtfully.

"There is a good deal in what you say," he replied. "But I think there is a good deal also to be deduced from the very fact you speak of, for it is a fact. I believe what you call the meaninglessness and purposelessness--the arbitrariness, one may say, of modern experiences of the kind are the surest proofs of their authenticity. Long ago people mixed up fact and fiction, their imaginations ran riot and on some very slight foundation--often, no doubt, genuine, though slight--they built up a very complete and thrilling 'ghost story.' Nowadays we consider and philosophise, we want to get to the root and reason of things, and we are more wary of exaggeration. The result is that the only genuine ghosts are most unsatisfactory beings; they appear without purpose, and seem to be what, in fact, I believe they almost always are, irresponsible, purposeless will-o'-the-wisps. But from these I would separate the class of ghost stories the best attested and most impressive--those that have to do with the moment of death; any vision that appears just at or about that time has generally more meaning in it, I think you will find. Such ghosts appear for a reason, if no other than that of intense affection, which draws them near those from whom they are to be separated."

We listened attentively to this long explanation, though by no means fully understanding it.
"I have often heard," I said, "that the class of ghost stories you speak of are the only thoroughly authenticated ones, and I think one is naturally more inclined to believe in them than in any others. But I confess I do not in the least understand what you mean by speaking of other ghosts as 'will-o'-the-wisps.' You don't mean that though at the moment of death there is a real being--the soul, in fact, as distinct from the body, in which all but materialists believe--that this has no permanent existence, but melts away by degrees till it becomes an irresponsible, purposeless nothing--a will-o'-the-wisp in fact? I think I heard of some theory of the kind lately in a French book, but it shocked and repelled me so that I tried to forget it. Just as well, better, believe that we are nothing but our bodies, and that all is over when we die. Surely you don't mean what I say?"

"God forbid," said Sir Robert, with a fervency which startled while it reassured me. "It is my profound belief that not only we are something more than our bodies, but that our bodies are the merest outer dress of the real ourselves. It is also my profound belief that at death we--the real we--either enter at once into a state of rest temporarily, or, in some cases--for I do not believe in any cut-and-dry rule independently of individual considerations--are privileged at once to enter upon a sphere of nobler and purer labour," and here the speaker's eyes glowed with a light that was not of this world. "Is it then the least probable, is it not altogether discordant with our 'common sense'--a Divine gift which we may employ fearlessly--to suppose that these real 'selves,' freed from the weight of their discarded garments, would leave either their blissful repose, or, still less, their new activities, to come back to wander about, purposelessly and aimlessly, in this world, at best only perplexing and alarming such as may perceive them? Is it not contrary to all we find of the wisdom and reasonableness of such laws as we do know something about?"

"I have often thought so," I said, "and hitherto this has led me to be very sceptical about all ghost stories."

"But they are often true--so far as they go," he replied. "Our natures are much more complex than we ourselves understand or realise. I cannot now go at all thoroughly into the subject, but to give you a rough idea of my will-o'-the-wisp theory--can you not imagine a sort of shadow, or echo of ourselves, lingering about the scenes we have frequented on this earth, which under certain very rare conditions--the state of the atmosphere among others--may be perceptible to those still 'clothed upon' with this present body? To attempt a simile, I might suggest the perfume that lingers when the flowers are thrown away, the smoke that gradually dissolves after the lamp is extinguished! This is very, very loosely and roughly the sort of thing I mean by my 'will-o'-the-wisps."

"I don't like it at all," said Margaret, though she smiled a little. "I think I should be more frightened if I saw that kind of ghost--I mean if I thought it that kind--than by a good, honest, old-fashioned one, who knew what it was about and meant to come."

"But you have just said," he objected, "that they never do seem to know what they are about. Besides, why should you be frightened?--our fears, ourselves in fact--are the only thing we really need be frightened of--our weaknesses and ignorances and folly. There was great truth in that rather ghastly story of Calderra's, allegory though it is, about the man whose evil genius was himself; have you read it?"

We all shook our heads.

"It is ignorance that frightens us," he went on. "In this instance think of the appearances we are speaking of as almost of the nature of a photograph, or the reflection in a looking-glass. I daresay we should have been terrified by these, had we not grown used to them, did we not know what they are. Somebody said lately what appalling things we should think our own shadows, if we had suddenly for the first time become aware of them."

"I don't mind so much," said Margaret, "when you speak of ghosts as a sort of photograph. But----" she hesitated.

"Pray say what you are thinking."

"Just now when you said how incredible it was that real souls should return to this earth, you only spoke of good people, did you not?"
In his turn Sir Robert hesitated.

"It is difficult to draw a line even in thought between good and bad people," he said, "and, thank God, it is not for us to do so. 'To my Maker alone I stand or I fall.' There is evil in the best; there is, I would fain hope," but here his face grew grave and sad, "good in the worst. But even allowing that we could draw the line, is it likely that the bad, even those who have all but lost the last spark, who don't want to be good, is it likely that they, if, as we must believe, under Divine control, would be allowed to leave their new life of punishment--punishment in the sense of correction, mind you--to come back here, wasting their time, one may say, to frighten perfectly innocent people for no purpose? No, I think I am quite consistent. Only try to get rid of all fears--that is what we can all do. But really I should apologise for all this lecture;" and he was turning to me with a smile, when his eyes fell on the cup which he had replaced on the table.

"I cannot get over the impression that I have seen that cup--no, not that cup, but one just like it, before. Not long ago, I fancy," he said.

"Oh, you must let us know if you find out anything," we all exclaimed.

"I certainly shall do so," he said, and a few minutes afterwards he and Mr. Grenfell took their leave.

But I had time for a word or two with the latter out of hearing of the others.

"Who is Sir Robert Masters?" I asked. "Have you known him long? He is a very uncommon and impressive sort of man."

"Yes, I thought you would like him. I have not personally known him long, but he is an old friend of friends of ours. He is of good family, an old baronetcy, but he is not much known in fashionable society. He travels a great deal, or has done so rather, and people say he has 'peculiar ideas,' though that would not go against him in the world. Peculiar ideas, or the cant of them, are rather the fashion it seems to me! But there is no cant about him. And whatever his ideas are," went on young Grenfell warmly, "he is one of the best men I ever knew. He has settled down for some years, and devotes his whole life to doing good, but so quietly and unostentatiously that no one knows how much he does, and others get the credit of it very often."

That was all I heard.

I have never seen Sir Robert again. Still I have by no means arrived yet at the end of my so-called ghost story.

The cup and saucer were carefully washed and replaced in the glass-doored cabinet. The summer gradually waned, and we all returned to our own home. It was at a considerable distance from my sister's, and we met each other principally in the summer time. So, though I did not forget Sir Robert Masters, or his somewhat strange conversation, amid the crowd of daily interests and pleasures, duties and cares, none of the incidents I have here recorded were much in my mind, and but that I had while still in Germany carefully noted the details of all bearing directly or indirectly on "Nora's ghost," as we had come to call it--though it was but rarely alluded to before the child herself--I should not now have been able to give them with circumstantiality.

Fully fifteen months after the visit to my sister, during which we had met Sir Robert, the whole was suddenly and unexpectedly recalled to my memory. Mark and Nora the elder--my sister, that is,--were in their turn staying with us, when one morning at breakfast the post brought for the latter an unusually bulky and important-looking letter. She opened it, glanced at an outer sheet enclosing several pages in a different handwriting, and passed it on to me.

"We must read the rest together," she said in a low voice, glancing at the children, who were at the table. "How interesting it will be!"

The sheet she had handed to me was a short note from Mr. Grenfell. It was dated from some place in Norway where he was fishing, and from whence he had addressed the whole packet to my sister's own home, not knowing of her absence.
"MY DEAR MRS. DAVENTRY"—it began—"The enclosed will have been a long time of reaching its real destination, for it is, as you will see, really intended for your sister. No doubt it will interest you too, as it has done me, though I am too matter-of-fact and prosaic to enter into such things much. Still it is curious. Please keep the letter; I am sure my friend intends you to do so.

"Yours very truly,
"RALPH GRENFELL."

The manuscript enclosed was, of course, from Sir Robert himself. It was in the form of a letter to young Grenfell; and after explaining that he thought it better to write to him, not having my address, he plunged into the real object of his communication.

"You will not," he said, "have forgotten the incident of the 'ghost-cup,' in the summer of last year, and the curious story your friend was so good as to tell us about it. You may remember--Mrs. ---- will, I am sure, do so--my strong impression that I had recently seen one like it. After I left you I could not get this feeling out of my head. It is always irritating not to be able, figuratively speaking, 'to lay your hand' on a recollection, and in this instance I really wanted to get the clue, as it might lead to some sort of 'explanation' of the little girl's strange experience. I cudgelled my brains, but all to no purpose; I went over in memory all the houses at which I had visited within a certain space of time; I made lists of all the people I knew interested in 'china,' ancient or modern, and likely to possess specimens of it. But all in vain. All I got for my pains was that people began to think I was developing a new crotchet, or, as I heard one lady say to another, not knowing I was within earshot, 'the poor man must be a little off his head, though till now I have always denied it. But the revulsion from benevolent schemes to china-collecting shows it only too plainly.' So I thought I had better leave off cross-questioning my 'collecting' friends about porcelain and faïence, German ware in particular. And after a while I thought no more about it. Two months ago I had occasion to make a journey to the north--the same journey and to stay at the same house where I have been four or five times since I saw the 'ghost-cup.' But this was what happened this time. There is a junction by which one must pass on this journey. I generally manage to suit my trains so as to avoid waiting there, but this is not always feasible. This time I found that an hour at the junction was inevitable. There is a very good refreshment room there, kept by very civil, decent people. They knew me by sight, and after I had had a cup of tea they proposed to me, as they have done before, to wait in their little parlour just off the public room. 'It would be quieter and more comfortable,' said either the mother or the daughter who manage the concern. I thanked them, and settled myself in an arm-chair with my book, when, looking up--there on the mantelpiece stood the fellow cup--the identical shape, pattern, and colour! It all flashed into my mind then. I had made this journey just before going into your neighbourhood last year, and had waited in this little parlour just as this time.

"Where did you get that cup, Mrs. Smith?" I asked.

"There were two or three rather pretty bits of china about. The good woman was pleased at my noticing it.

"Yes, sir. Isn't it pretty? I've rather a fancy for china. That cup was sent me by my niece. She said she'd picked it up somewhere--at a sale, I think. It's foreign, sir; isn't it?"

"Yes, German. But can't you find out where your niece got it?" for at the word 'sale' my hopes fell.

"I can ask her. I shall be writing to her this week,' she replied; and she promised to get any information she could for me within a fortnight, by which time I expected to pass that way again. I did so, and Mrs. Smith proved as good as her word. The niece had got the cup from a friend of hers, an auctioneer, and he, not she, had got it at a sale. But he was away from home--she could hear nothing more at present. She gave his address, however, and assurances that he was very good-natured and would gladly put the gentleman in the way of getting china like it, if it was to be got. He would be home by the middle of the month. It was now the middle of the month. The auctioneer's town was not above a couple of hours off my line. Perhaps you will all laugh at me when I tell you that I went those two hours out of my way, arriving at the town late that night and putting up at a queer old inn--worth going to see for itself--on purpose to find the
man of the hammer. I found him. He was very civil, though rather mystified. He remembered the cup perfectly, but there was no chance of getting any like it where it came from!

"And where was that?" I asked eagerly.

"At a sale some miles from here, about four years ago,' he replied. 'It was the sale of the furniture and plate, and everything, in fact, of a widow lady. She had some pretty china, for she had a fancy for it. That cup was not of much value; it was quite modern. I bought it in for a trifle. I gave it to Miss Cross, and she sent it to her aunt, as you know. As for getting any like it----'

"But I interrupted him by assuring him I did not wish that, but that I had reasons for wanting some information about the person who, I believed, had bought the cup. 'Nothing to do any harm to any one,' I said; 'a matter of feeling. A similar cup had been bought by a person I was interested in, and I feared that person was dead.'

"The auctioneer's face cleared. He fancied he began to understand me.

"'I am afraid you are right, sir, if the person you mean was young Mr. Paulet, the lady's son. You may have met him on his travels? His death was very sad, I believe. It killed his mother, they say--she never looked up after; and as she had no near relative to follow her, everything was sold. I remember I was told all that, at the sale, and it seemed to me particularly sad, even though one comes across many sad things in our line of business.'

"'Do you remember the particulars of Mr. Paulet's death?' I asked.

"'Only that it happened suddenly--somewhere in foreign parts. I did not know the family till I was asked to take charge of the sale,' he replied.

"'Could you possibly get any details for me? I feel sure it is the same Mr. Paulet,' I said boldly.

"'The auctioneer considered.

"'Perhaps I can. I rather think a former servant of theirs is still in the neighbourhood,' he replied.

"I thanked him and left him my address, to which he promised to write. I felt it was perhaps better not to pursue my inquiries further in person; it might lead to annoyance, or possibly to gossip about the dead, which I detest. I jotted down some particulars for the auctioneer's guidance, and went on my way. That was a fortnight ago. To-day I have his answer, which I transcribe:--

"SIR--The servant I spoke of could not tell me very much, as she was not long in the late Mrs. Paulet's service. To hear more, she says, you must apply to the relations of the family. Young Mr. Paulet was tall and fair and very nice-looking. His mother and he were deeply attached to each other. He travelled a good deal and used to bring her home lots of pretty things. He met his death in some part of Germany where there are forests, for though it was thought at first he had died of heart disease, the doctors proved he had been struck by lightning, and his body was found in the forest, and the papers on him showed who he was. The body was sent home to be buried, and all that was found with it; a knapsack and its contents, among which was the cup I bought at the sale. His death was about the middle of August 18--. I shall be glad if this information is of any service.'

"This," continued Sir Robert's own letter, "is all I have been able to learn. There does not seem to have been the very slightest suspicion of foul play, nor do I think it the least likely there was any ground for such. Young Paulet probably died some way farther in the forest than Silberbach, and it is even possible the surly landlord never heard of it. It might be worth while to inquire about it should your friends ever be there again. If I should be in the neighbourhood I certainly should do so; the whole coincidences are very striking."
Then followed apologies for the length of his letter which he had been betrayed into by his anxiety to tell all there was
to tell. In return he asked Mr. Grenfell to obtain from me certain dates and particulars as he wished to note them down. It was the 18th of August on which "Nora's ghost" had appeared--just two years after the August of the poor young man's death!

There was also a postscript to Sir Robert's letter, in which he said, "I think, in Mrs. ----'s place, I would say nothing to the little girl of what we have discovered."

And I have never done so.

This is all I have to tell. I offer no suggestions, no theories in explanation of the facts. Those who, like Sir Robert Masters, are able and desirous to treat such subjects scientifically or philosophically will doubtless form their own. I cannot say that I find his theory a perfectly satisfactory one, perhaps I do not sufficiently understand it, but I have tried to give it in his own words. Should this matter-of-fact relation of a curious experience meet his eyes, I am sure he will forgive my having brought him into it. Besides, it is not likely that he would be recognised; men, and women too, of "peculiar ideas," sincere investigators and honest searchers after truth, as well as their superficial plagiarists, being by no means rare in these days.

(The end)
Mary Louisa Molesworth's short story: Unexplained

By Mary Louisa Molesworth