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The Pilgrims of the Rhine

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London, 1834

Chapter X.

[urn:nbn:de:bsz:31-120544](https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:bsz:31-120544)



CHAPTER X.

THE LEGEND OF ROLAND.—THE ADVENTURES OF NYMPHALIN ON THE ISLAND OF NONNEWORTH.—HER SONG.—THE DECAY OF THE FAIRY-FAITH IN ENGLAND.

ON the shore opposite the Drachenfels stand the RUINS OF ROLANDSECK, they are the shattered crown of a lofty and perpendicular mountain, consecrated to the memory of the brave Roland; below, the trees of an island to which the lady of Roland retired, rise thick and verdant from the smooth tide.

Nothing can exceed the wild and eloquent grandeur of the whole scene. That spot is the pride and beauty of the Rhine.

The legend that consecrates the tower and the island is briefly told; it belongs to a class so common to the Romaunts of Germany. Roland goes to the wars. A false report of his death reaches his betrothed. She retires to the convent in the isle of Nonneworth, and takes the irrevocable veil. Roland returns home, flushed with glory and hope, to find that the very fidelity of his affianced had placed an eternal barrier between them. He built the castle that bears his name, and which overlooks the monastery, and dwelt there till his death; happy in the power at least to gaze, even to the last, upon those walls which held the treasure he had lost.

The willows droop in mournful luxuriance along the island, and harmonise with the memory that, through the desert of a thousand years, love still keeps green and fresh. Nor hath it permitted even those additions of fiction which, like mosses, gather by time over the truth that they adorn, yet adorning conceal,—to mar the simple tenderness of the legend.

All was still in the island of Nonneworth; the lights shone through the trees from the house that contained our travellers. On one smooth spot, where the islet shelves into the Rhine, met the wandering fairies.

“Oh! Pipalee, how beautiful!” cried Nymphalin as she stood enraptured by the wave; a star-beam shining on her, with her yellow hair ‘dancing its ringlets in the whistling

wind.' For the first time since our departure I do not miss the green fields of England."

"Hist!" said Pipalee under her breath, "I hear fairy steps, they must be the steps of strangers."

"Let us retreat into this thicket of weeds," said Nymphalin, somewhat alarmed, "the good Lord Treasurer is already asleep there." They whisked into what to them was a forest, for the reeds were two feet high, and there, sure enough, they found the Lord Treasurer stretched beneath a bulrush, with his pipe beside him, for since he had been in Germany he had taken to smoking; and indeed wild thyme, properly dried, makes very good tobacco for a fairy. They also found Nip and Trip sitting very close together. Nip playing with her hair, which was exceedingly beautiful.

"What do you do here?" said Pipalee, shortly; for she was rather an old maid, and did not like fairies to be too close to each other.

"Watching my Lord's slumber," said Nip.

"Pshaw," said Pipalee.

"Nay," quoth Trip, blushing like a sea-shell; "there is no harm in *that*, I'm sure."

"Hush," said the Queen, peeping through the reeds.

And now forth from the green bosom of the earth came a tiny train; slowly two by two, hand in hand, they swept from a small aperture, shadowed with fragrant herbs, and formed themselves into a ring; then came other fairies, laden with dainties, and presently two beautiful white

mushrooms sprang up, on which their viands were placed, and lo there was a banquet! Oh! how merry they were; what gentle peals of laughter, loud as a virgin's sigh; what jests, what songs! Happy race! if mortals could see you as often as I do, in the soft nights of summer, they would never be at a loss for entertainment. But as our English fairies looked on, they saw that these foreign elves were of a different race from themselves; they were taller and less handsome, their hair was darker, they wore moustaches, and had something of a fiercer air. Poor Nymphalin was a little frightened; but presently soft music was heard floating along, something like the sound we suddenly hear of a still night when a light breeze steals through rushes, or wakes a ripple in some shallow brook dancing over pebbles. And lo, from the aperture of the earth came forth a fay, superbly dressed, and of a noble presence. The Queen started back, Pipalee rubbed her eyes, Trip looked over Pipalee's shoulder, and Nip, pinching her arm, cried out amazed, "By the last new star, that is Prince Von Fayzenheim!"

Poor Nymphalin gazed again, and her little heart beat under her bee's-wing boddice as if it would break. The Prince had a melancholy air, and he sate apart from the banquet, gazing abstractedly on the Rhine.

"Ah!" whispered Nymphalin to herself, "does he think of me?"

Presently the Prince drew forth a little flute, hollowed from a small reed, and began to play a mournful air.

Nymphalin listened with delight; it was one he had learnt in her dominions.

When the air was over, the Prince rose, and approaching the banqueters, despatched them on different errands; one to visit the dwarf of the Drachenfels, another to look after the grave of Musæus, and a whole detachment to puzzle the students of Heidelberg. A few launched themselves upon willow leaves on the Rhine, to cruise about in the starlight, and another band set out a hunting after the grey-legged moth. The Prince was left alone; and now Nymphalin, seeing the coast clear, wrapped herself up in a cloak made out of a withered leaf;—and only letting her eyes glow out from the hood, she glided from the reeds, and the Prince turning round saw a dark fairy figure by his side. He drew back, a little startled, and placed his hand on his sword, when Nymphalin circling round him, sung the following words:—

THE FAIRY'S REPROACH.

I.

By the glow-worm's lamp in the dewy brake;
 By the gossamer's airy net;
 By the shifting skin of the faithless snake;
 Oh teach me to forget;
 For none, ah none,
 Can teach so well that human spell
 As Thou, false one!

II.

By the fairy dance on the greensward smooth ;
 By the winds of the gentle west ;
 By the loving stars, when their soft looks soothe
 The waves on their mother's breast ;
 Teach me thy lore !
 By which, like withered flowers,
 The leaves of buried hours
 Blossom no more !

III.

By the tent in the violet's bell ;
 By the may on the scented bough ;
 By the lone green isle where my sisters dwell ;
 And thine own forgotten vow :
 Teach me to live,
 Nor turn with thoughts that pine
 For love so false as thine !
 —Teach me thy lore,
 And one thou lov'st no more
 Will bless thee and forgive !

“ Surely,” said Fayzenheim, faltering, “ surely I know that voice.”

And Nymphalin's cloak dropped off her shoulder. “ My English fairy !” and Fayzenheim knelt beside her.

I wish you had seen the fay kneel, for you would have sworn it was so like a human lover, that you would never

have sneered at love afterwards. Love is so fairy-like a part of us, that even a fairy cannot make it differently from us,—that is to say when we love truly.

There was great joy in the island that night among the elves. They conducted Nymphalin to their palace within the earth, and feasted her sumptuously, and Nip told their adventures with so much spirit, that he enchanted the merry foreigners. But Fayzenheim talked apart to Nymphalin, and told her how he was lord of that island, and how he had been obliged to return to his dominions by the law of his tribe, which allowed him to be absent only a certain time in every year; “but, my Queen, I always intended to revisit thee next spring.”

“Thou need’st not have left us so abruptly,” said Nymphalin, blushing.

“But do *thou* never leave me!” said the ardent fairy; “be mine, and let our nuptials be celebrated on these shores. Wouldst thou sigh for thy green island? No! for *there* the fairy altars are deserted, the faith is gone from the land, thou art among the last of an unhonoured and expiring race. Thy mortal poets are dumb, and Fancy, which was thy priestess, sleeps hushed in her last repose. New and hard creeds have succeeded to the fairy lore. Who steals through the starlit boughs on the nights of June to watch the roundels of thy tribe? The wheels of commerce, the din of trade, have silenced to mortal ear the music of thy subjects’ harps! And the noisy habitations of men, harsher

than their dreaming sires, are gathering round the dell and vale where thy co-mates linger—a few years, and where will be the green solitudes of England?”

The Queen sighed, and the Prince, perceiving that he was listened to, continued—

“ Who, in thy native shores, among the children of men, now claims the fairy’s care? What cradle wouldst thou tend? On what maid wouldst thou shower thy rosy gifts? What bard wouldst thou haunt in his dreams? Poesy is fled the island, why shouldst thou linger behind? Time hath brought dull customs, that laugh at thy gentle being. Puck is buried in the hare-bell, he has left no offspring, and none mourn for his loss; for night, which is the fairy season, is busy and garish as the day. What hearth is desolate after the curfew? What house bathed in stillness at the hour in which thy revels commence? Thine empire among men has past from thee, and thy race are vanishing from the crowded soil. For, despite our diviner nature, our existence is linked with man’s. Their neglect is our disease, their forgetfulness our death. Leave then those dull yet troubled scenes that are closing round the fairy rings of thy native isle. These mountains, this herbage, these gliding waves, these mouldering ruins, these starred rivulets, be they, O beautiful fairy! thy new domain. Yet in these lands our worship lingers; still can we fill the thought of the young bard, and mingle with his yearnings after the Beautiful, the Unseen. Hither come the pilgrims of the world,

anxious only to gather from these scenes the legends of Us; ages will pass away ere the Rhine shall be desecrated of our haunting presence. Come then, my Queen, let this palace be thine own, and the moon that glances over the shattered towers of the Dragon Rock witness our nuptials and our vows!"

In such words the Fairy Prince courted the young Queen, and while she sighed at their truth, she yielded to their charm. Oh! still may there be one spot on the earth where the fairy feet may press the legendary soil—still be there one land where the faith of The Bright Invisible hallows and inspires. Still glide thou, O majestic and solemn Rhine, among shades and valleys, from which the wisdom of belief can call the creations of the younger world!