

The Demon of the Hartz

or, The Three Charcoal Burners

by Thomas Peckett Prest, 1810-1859

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THE solitudes of the Hartz forest in Germany, but especially the mountains called Blockberg, or rather Blockenberg, are the chosen scene for tales of witches, demons, and apparitions. The occupation of the inhabitants, who are either miners or foresters, is of a kind that renders them peculiarly prone to superstition, and the natural phenomena which they witness in pursuit of their solitary or subterraneous profession, are often set down by them to the interference of goblins or the power of magic. Among the various legends current in that wild country, there is a favourite one which supposes the Hartz to be haunted by a sort of tutelar demon, in the shape of a wild man, of huge stature, his head wreathed with oak leaves, and his middle tintured with the same, bearing in his hand a pine torn up by the root. It is certain that many persons profess to have seen such a man traversing, with huge strides, the

opposite ridge of a mountain, when divided from it by a narrow glen; and indeed the fact of the apparition is so generally admitted, that modern scepticism has only found refuge by ascribing it to optical deception.

In elder times, the intercourse of the demon with the inhabitants was more familiar, and, according to the traditions of the Hartz, he was wont, with the caprice usually ascribed to these earth-born powers to interfere with the affairs of mortals, sometimes for their welfare. But it was observed, that even his gifts often turned out, in the long run, fatal to those on whom they were bestowed, and it was no uncommon thing for the pastors, in their care for their flock, to compose long sermons the burthen whereof was a warning against having any intercourse, direct or indirect, with the Hartz demon. The fortunes of Martin Waldeck have been often quoted by the aged to their giddy children, when they were heard to scoff at a danger which appeared visionary.

A travelling capuchin had possessed himself of the pulpit of the thatched church at a little hamlet called Morgenbrodt, lying in the Hartz district, from which he declaimed against the wickedness of the inhabitants, their communication with fiends, witches, and fairies, and particularly with the woodland goblin of the Hartz. The doctrines of Luther had already begun to spread among the peasantry, for the incident is placed under the reign of Charles V, and they laughed to scorn the zeal with which the venerable man insisted upon his topic. At length, as his vehemence increased with opposition, so their opposition rose in proportion to his vehemence. The inhabitants did not like to hear an accustomed demon, who had inhabited the Brockenberg for so many ages, summarily confounded with Baalpeor, Ashtaroath, and Beelzebub himself, and condemned without reprieve to the bottomless Tophet. The apprehensions that the spirit might avenge himself on them for listening to such an illiberal sentence, added to the national interest in his behalf. A travelling friar, they said, that is here today and away tomorrow, may say what he pleases, but it is we the ancient and constant inhabitants of the country, that are left at the mercy of the insulted demon, and must, of course, pay for all. Under the irritation occasioned by these reflections the peasants from injurious language betook themselves to stones, and having pebbled the priest most handsomely, they drove him out of the parish to preach against demons elsewhere.

Three young men, who had been present and assisting in the attack upon the priest, carried on the laborious and mean occupation of preparing charcoal for the smelting furnaces. On their return to their hut, their conversation naturally turned upon the demon of the Hartz and the doctrine of the capuchin. Maximilian and George Waldeck, the two elder brothers, although they allowed the language of the capuchin to have been indiscreet and worthy of censure, as presuming to determine upon the precise character and abode of the spirit, yet contended it was dangerous, in the highest degree, to accept his gifts, or hold any communication with him. He was powerful they allowed, but wayward and capricious, and those who had intercourse with him seldom came, to a good end. Did he not give the brave knight, Echert of Rabenwald, that famous black steed, by means of which he vanquished all the champions at the great tournament at Bremen? and did not the same steed afterwards precipitate itself with its rider into an abyss so deep and fearful, that neither horse nor man was ever seen more? Had he not given to Dame Gertrude Trodden a curious spell for

making butter come? and was she not burnt for a witch by the grand criminal judge of the Electorate, because she availed herself of his gift? But these, and many other instances which they quoted, of mischance and ill-luck ultimately attending upon the apparent benefits conferred by the Hartz spirit, failed to make any impression on Martin Waldeck, the youngest of the brothers.

Martin was youthful, rash, and impetuous; excelling in all the exercises which distinguish a mountaineer, and brave and undaunted from the familiar intercourse with the dangers that attend them. He laughed at the timidity of his brothers. „Tell me not of such folly,“ he said; „the demon is a good demon—he lives among us as if he were a peasant like ourselves—haunts the lonely crags or recesses of the mountains like a huntsman or goatherd—and he who loves the Hartz-forest and its wild scenes cannot be indifferent to the fate of the hardy children of the soil. But if the demon were as malicious as you make him, how should he derive power over mortals who barely avail themselves of his gifts, without binding themselves to submit to his pleasure? When you carry your charcoal to the furnace, is not the money as good that is paid you by blaspheming Blaize, the old reprobate overseer, as if you got it from the pastor himself? It is not the goblin’s gifts which can endanger you then, but it is the use you shall make of them that you must account for. And were the demon to appear at this moment, and indicate to me a gold or silver mine, I would begin to dig away before his back were turned, and I would consider myself as under protection of a much Greater than he, while I made a good use of the wealth he pointed out to me.“

To this the elder brother replied, that wealth ill won was seldom well spent, while Martin presumptuously declared, that the possession of all the Hartz would not make the slightest alteration on his habits, morals, or character.

His brother entreated Martin to talk less wildly upon this subject, and with some difficulty contrived to withdraw his attention, by calling it to the consideration of an approaching boar chase. This talk brought them to their hut, a wretched wigwam, situated upon one side of a wild, narrow, and romantic dell in the recesses of the Brockenberg. They released their sister from attending upon the operation of charring the wood, which requires constant attention, and divided among themselves the duty of watching it by night, according to their custom, one always waking while his brothers slept.

Max Waldeck, the eldest, watched during the two first hours of night, and was considerably alarmed, by observing upon the opposite bank of the glen, or valley a huge fire surrounded by some figures that appeared to wheel around it with antic gestures. Max at first bethought him of calling up his brothers; but recollecting the daring character of the youngest, and finding it impossible to wake the elder without also disturbing him—conceiving also what he saw to be an illusion of the demon, sent perhaps in consequence of the venturous expressions used by Martin on the preceding evening, he thought it best to betake himself to the safe-guard of such prayers as he could murmur over, and to watch in great terror and annoyance this strange and alarming apparition. After blazing for some time, the fire faded gradually away into darkness, and the rest of Max’s watch was only disturbed by the remembrance of its terrors.

George now occupied the place of Max, who had retired to rest. The phenomenon of a huge blazing fire, upon the opposite bank of the glen, again presented itself to the eye of the watchman. It was surrounded as before by figures, which, distinguished by their opaque forms, being between the

spectator and the red glaring light, moved and fluctuated around it as if engaged in some mystical ceremonies. George, though equally cautious, was of a bolder character than his elder brother. He resolved to examine more nearly the object of his wonder; and accordingly, after crossing the rivulet which divided the glen, he climbed up the opposite bank, and approached within an arrow's flight from the fire, which blazed apparently with the same fury as when he first witnessed it.

The appearance of the assistants who surrounded it, resembled those phantoms which are seen in a troubled dream, and at once confirmed the idea he had entertained from the first, that they did not belong to the human world. Amongst the strange unearthly forms, George Waldeck distinguished that of a giant overgrown with hair, holding an uprooted fir in his hand, with which, from time to time, he seemed to stir the blazing fire and having no other clothing than a wreath of oak leaves round his forehead and loins. George's heart sunk within him at recognizing the well-known apparition of the Hartz demon, as he had often been described to him by the ancient shepherds and huntsmen who had seen his form traversing the mountains. He turned, and was about to fly; but, upon second thoughts, blaming his own cowardice, he recited mentally the verse of the Psalmist, „All good angels praise the Lord!“ which is in that country supposed powerful as an exorcism and turned himself once more towards the place where he had seen the fire. But it was no longer visible.

The pale moon alone enlightened the side of the valley, and when George, with trembling steps, a moist brow, and hair bristling upright under his collier's cap, came to the spot where the fire had been so lately visible, marked as it was by a scathed oak tree, there appeared not on the heath the slightest vestiges of what he had seen. The moss and wild flowers were unscorched, and the branches of the oak tree, which had so lately appeared enveloped in wreaths of flame and smoke, were moist with the dews of midnight.

George returned to his hut with trembling steps, and, arguing like his elder brother, resolved to say nothing of what he had seen, lest he should awake in Martin that daring curiosity which he almost deemed to be allied with impiety.

It was now Martin's turn to watch. The household cock had given his first summons, and the night was well nigh spent. On examining the state of the furnace in which the wood was deposited in order to its being coked, or charred, he was surprised to find that the fire had not been sufficiently maintained; for in his excursion and its consequences, George had forgot the principal object of his watch. Martin's first thought was to call up the slumberers, but observing that both his brothers slept unwontedly deep and heavily, he respected their repose, and set himself to supply their furnace with fuel, without requiring their aid. What he heaped upon it was apparently damp and unfit for the purpose, for the fire seemed rather to decay than revive. Martin next went to collect some boughs from a stack which had been carefully cut and dried for this purpose; but, when he returned, he found the fire totally extinguished. This was a serious evil, which threatened them with loss of their trade for more than one day. The vexed and mortified watchman set about to strike a light in order to rekindle the fire, but the tinder was moist, and his labour proved in this respect also ineffectual. He was now about to call up his brothers, for the circumstance seemed to be pressing, when flashes of light glimmered not only through the window, but through every crevice of the rudely

built hut, and summoned him to behold the same apparition which had before alarmed the successive watches of his brethren. His first idea was, that the Muhllerhaussers, their rivals in trade, and with whom they had had many quarrels, might have encroached upon their bounds for the purpose of pirating their wood, and he resolved to awake his brothers, and be revenged on them for their audacity. But a short reflection and observation on the gestures and manner of those who seemed „to work in the fire“, induced him to dismiss this belief, and although rather sceptical in these matters, to conclude that what he saw was a supernatural phenomenon. „But be they men or fiends,“ said the undaunted forester, „that busy themselves with such fantastical rites and gestures, I will go and demand a light to rekindle our furnace.“ He relinquished, at the same time, the idea of waking his brethren. There was a belief that such adventures as he was about to undertake were accessible only to one person at a time; he feared also that his brothers in their scrupulous timidity, might interfere to prevent the investigation he had resolved to commence; and therefore, snatching his boar-spear from the wall, the undaunted Martin Waldeck set forth on the adventure alone.

With the same success as his brother George, but with courage far superior, Martin crossed the brook, ascended the hill, and approached so near the ghostly assembly that he could recognize, in the presiding figure, the attributes of the Hartz demon. A cold shuddering assailed him for the first time in his life, but the recollection that he had at a distance dared and even courted the intercourse which was now about to take place, confirmed his staggering courage, and pride supplying what he wanted in resolution, he advanced with tolerable firmness towards the fire; the figures which surrounded it appeared more phantastical, and supernatural, the nearer he approached to the assembly. He was received with a loud shout of discord and unnatural laughter, which, to his stunned ears, seemed more alarming than a combination of the most dismal and melancholy sounds which could be imagined.—„Who art thou?“ said the giant compressing his savage and exaggerated features into a sort of forced gravity, while they were occasionally agitated by the convulsion of the laughter which he seemed to suppress.

„Martin Waldeck, the forester,“ answered the hardy youth;—„And who are you?“

„The king of the wastes and of the mine,“ answered the spectre;—„And why hast thou dared to encroach on my mysteries?“

„I came in search of light to rekindle my fire,“ answered Martin hardily, and then resolutely asked in his turn, „What mysteries are these that you celebrate here?“

„We celebrate,“ answered the demoniac being, „the wedding of Hermes with the Black Dragon.—But take thy fire that thou camest to seek, and begone—No mortal may long look upon us and live.“

The peasant stuck his spear point into a large piece of blazing wood, which he heaved with some difficulty, and then turned round to regain his hut, the shouts of laughter being renewed behind him with treble violence, and ringing far down the narrow valley. When Martin returned to the hut, his first care, however much astonished with what he had seen, was to dispose the kindled coal among the fuel so as might best light the fire of his furnace, but after many efforts, and all exertions of bellows and fire prong, the coal he had brought from the demon's fire became totally extinct, without kindling any of the others. He

turned about and observed the fire still blazing on the hill, although those who had been busied around it had disappeared. As he conceived the spectre had been jesting with him, he gave way to the natural hardihood of his temper, and determining to see the adventure to the end, resumed the road to the fire, from which, unopposed by the demon, he brought off in the same manner a blazing piece of charcoal but still without being able to succeed in lighting his fire. Impunity having increased his rashness, he resolved upon a third experiment, and was as successful as before in reaching the fire; but, when he had again appropriated a piece of burning coal, and had turned to depart, he heard the harsh and supernatural voice which had before accosted him, pronounce these words; „Dare not to return hither a fourth time!“

The attempt to rekindle the fire with this last coal having proved as ineffectual as on the former occasions, Martin relinquished the hopeless attempt, and flung himself on his bed of leaves, resolving to delay till the next morning the communication of his supernatural adventure to his brothers. He was awakened from a heavy sleep into which he had sunk, from fatigue of body and agitation of mind, by loud exclamations of joy and surprise. His brothers, astonished at finding the fire extinguished when they awoke, had proceeded to arrange the fuel in order to renew it, when they found in the ashes three huge metallic masses, which their skill, (for most of the peasants in the Hartz are practised mineralogists,) immediately ascertained to be pure gold.

It was some damp upon their joyful congratulations when they learned from Martin the mode in which he had obtained this treasure, to which their own experience of the nocturnal vision induced them to give full credit. But they were unable to resist the temptation of sharing their brother's wealth. Taking now upon him as head of the house, Martin Waldeck bought lands and forests, built a castle, obtained a patent of nobility, and greatly to the scorn of the ancient nobility of the neighbourhood, was invested with all the privileges of a man of family. His courage in public war, as well as in private feuds, together with the number of retainers whom he kept in pay, sustained him for some time against the odium which was excited by his sudden elevation, and the arrogance of his pretensions. Now it was seen in the instance of Martin Waldeck, as it has been in that of many others, how little mortals can foresee the effect of sudden prosperity on their own disposition. The evil dispositions in his nature, which poverty had checked and repressed, ripened and bore their unhallowed fruit under the influence of temptation and the means of indulgence. As Deep calls unto Deep, one bad passion awakened another:—the fiend of avarice invoked that of pride, and pride was to be supported by cruelty and oppression. Waldeck's character, always bold and daring, but rendered more harsh and assuming by prosperity, soon made him odious, not to nobles only, but likewise to the lower ranks, who saw, with double dislike, the oppressive rights of the feudal nobility of the empire so remorselessly exercised by one who had risen from the very dregs of the people. His adventure, although carefully concealed, began likewise to be whispered, and the clergy already stigmatized as a wizard and accomplice of fiends, the wretch, who, having acquired so huge a treasure in so strange a manner had not sought to sanctify it by dedicating a considerable portion to the use of the church. Surrounded by enemies, public and private, tormented by a thousand feuds, and threatened by the church with excommunication, Martin Waldeck, or, as we must now call him the Baron Von Waldeck, often regretted bitterly the

labours and sports of unenvied poverty. But his courage failed him not under all these difficulties and seemed rather to augment in proportion to the danger which darkened around him, until an accident precipitated his fall.

A proclamation by the reigning Duke of Brunswick had invited to a solemn tournament all German nobles of free and honourable descent, and Martin Waldeck, splendidly armed, accompanied by his two brothers, and a gallantly equipped retinue, had the arrogance to appear among the chivalry of the province and demand permission to enter the lists. This was considered as filling up the measure of his presumption. A thousand voices exclaimed, „we will have no cinder—sifter mingle in our games of chivalry.“ Irritated to frenzy, Martin drew his sword, and hewed down the herald who, in compliance with the general outcry, opposed his entrance into the list. A hundred swords were unsheathed to avenge what was, in those days, regarded as a crime only inferior to sacrilege, or regicide. Waldeck, after defending himself with the fury of a lion, was seized, tried on the spot by the judges of the lists, and condemned, as the appropriate punishment for breaking the peace of his sovereign and violating the sacred person of a herald-at-arms, to have his right hand struck from his body, to be ignominiously deprived of the honour of nobility, of which he was unworthy, and be expelled from the city. When he had been stripped of his arms, and sustained the mutilation imposed by this severe sentence, the unhappy victim of ambition was abandoned to the rabble, who followed him with threats and outcries, levelled alternately against the necromancer and oppressor, which at length ended in violence. His brothers, (for his retinue had fled and dispersed) at length succeeded in rescuing him from the hands of the populace, when, satiated with cruelty, they had left him half dead through loss of blood, through the outrages he had sustained. They were not permitted, such was the ingenious cruelty of their enemies, to make use of any other means of removing him, excepting such a collier's cart as they had themselves formerly used, in which they deposited their brother on a truss of straw, scarcely expecting to reach any place of shelter ere death should release him from his misery.

When the Waldecks, journeying in this miserable manner, had approached the verge of their native country, in a hollow way, between two mountains, they perceived a figure advancing towards them, which at first sight seemed to be an aged man. But as he approached, his limbs and stature increased, the cloak fell from his shoulders, his pilgrim's staff was changed into an uprooted pine tree, and the gigantic figure of the Hartz demon passed before them in his terrors. When he came opposite to the cart which contained the miserable Waldeck, his huge features dilated into a grin of unutterable contempt and malignity, as he asked the sufferer, „How like you the fire MY coals have kindled!“ The power of motion, which terror suspended in his two brothers, seemed to be restored to Martin by the energy of his courage. He raised himself on the cart, bent his brows, and, clenching his fist, shook it at the spectre with a ghastly look of hate and defiance. The goblin vanished with his usual tremendous and explosive laugh and left Waldeck exhausted with the effort of expiring nature.

The terrified brethren turned their vehicle towards the towers of a convent which arose in a wood of pine trees beside the road. They were charitably received by a bare-footed and long-bearded capuchin, and Martin survived only to complete the first confession he had made since the day of his sudden prosperity, and to receive absolution from the very priest, whom, precisely that

day three years, he had assisted to pelt out of the hamlet of Morgenbrodt. The three years of precarious prosperity were supposed to have a mysterious correspondence with the number of his visits to the spectral fire upon the hill.

The body of Martin Waldeck was interred in the convent where he expired, in which his brothers, having assumed the habit of the order, lived and died in the performance of acts of charity and devotion. His lands, to which no one asserted any claim, lay waste until they were reassumed by the emperor as a lapsed fief, and the ruins of the castle, which Waldeck had called by his own name, are still shunned by the miner and forester as haunted by evil spirits. Thus were the evils attendant upon wealth, hastily attained and ill-employed, exemplified in the fortunes of Martin Waldeck.

