

THE SEVERED HAND

By Wilhelm Hauff

[This story is related by a Greek merchant, in the collection called "Die Karavane."]

I was born at Constantinople, where my father was a dragoman to the Sublime Porte, and carried on besides, a tolerably lucrative trade in perfumes and silks. He gave me a good education, partly instructing me himself, and partly engaging a priest of our religion for that purpose. He originally intended me for his own business, but as I displayed greater talents than he expected, he determined, by the advice of his friends, to make me a physician, being of opinion that a physician, if he has learned more than the common charlatans, could make his fortune in Constantinople. Our house was frequented by many Franks, one of whom urged my father to let me go to the city of Paris, in his native country, where people might study such things gratis and in the best manner, saying, he would take me with him for nothing when he returned thither.

My father, who in his youth had also travelled, agreed, and the Frank told me to be ready in three months. I was delighted beyond measure at the prospect of seeing foreign lands, and could scarcely await the time when we should embark. Having at length concluded all his business, the Frank prepared for his voyage, and on the evening previous to our departure my father took me to his lodgings. Here I saw beautiful dresses and arms lying on the table; but what most attracted my eyes was a large heap of gold, as I had never before seen so much together. My father embraced me, saying, "Behold, my son, I have provided these clothes for your voyage; those arms are yours, and they are the same your grandfather gave me when I went forth to foreign countries. I know you can wield them, but never use them excepting in self-defence, and then fight bravely. My fortune is not large; but see, I have divided it into three parts, of which one is yours,

one shall be for my support and wants, but the third shall be sacred property, and devoted to the purpose of saving you in the hour of need." Thus spoke my aged father, and tears trembled in his eyes, perhaps from a certain presentiment, for I never saw him again.

Our voyage was prosperous; we soon reached the land of the Franks, and in six days' journey, after landing, we came to the great city of Paris. Here my Frankish friend hired a room and advised me to use proper discretion in laying out my money, which in all was two thousand thalers. I lived for three years in this city, and learned what every skilful physician ought to know; but I should not speak the truth were I to say that I liked the place, for the manners and customs of this people did not suit me. Moreover, I had but few friends, though these were indeed noble young men.

The desire of seeing my native country, at length, became strong; and having all this time heard nothing of my father, I seized a favourable opportunity to return home.

This opportunity was afforded me by an embassy from the land of the Franks to the Sublime Porte. I engaged myself as surgeon in the suite of the ambassador, and was fortunate enough to return to Constantinople. There I found my father's house closed, and the neighbours were astonished when they saw me, and told me that my father had died two months since. The priest who had instructed me in my youth brought me the keys of the now desolate house, which I entered alone and forsaken. I found every thing as my father had left it, only the money he had promised to bequeath me was not there. I inquired of the priest about it, who, with a bow, told me that my father had died as a holy man, since he had bequeathed all his money to the church.

The latter circumstance has ever since been inexplicable to me. Yet what could I do? I had no witnesses against the priest, and could not but consider myself fortunate that he had not also claimed as a legacy

the house and goods of my father. This was the first calamity that befel me, but from that time misfortunes succeeded each other. My reputation as a physician spread but slowly, because I was ashamed to play the quack, and I wanted everywhere the recommendation of my father, who would have introduced me to the wealthiest and noblest persons, who now no longer thought of poor Zaleukos. Neither could I find customers for my father's goods, for all had gone elsewhere after his death, and new ones come but slowly. Once sadly reflecting on my situation it occurred to me that I had often seen in France men of my native land, who travelled through the country, exposing their goods in the market-places of the towns; I remembered that they easily found customers because they came from a foreign country, and that by such traffic one might profit a hundred-fold. My resolution was soon taken. I sold my father's house, gave part of the money I received for it to a tried friend to keep for me, and with the rest I purchased such things as are seldom seen in the west--viz: shawls, silks, ointments, and perfumes. Having engaged a berth in a ship, I thus set out on my second voyage to France. As soon as I had turned my back on the castles of the Dardanelles it seemed as if fortune would again smile on me. Our passage was short and prosperous.

I travelled through large and small towns, and found everywhere ready purchasers of my goods. My friend in Constantinople supplied me constantly with fresh goods, and I daily became more wealthy.

When at length I thought I had saved enough to risk a greater enterprise, I went to Italy. But I must here mention that I derived no small additional profit from the healing art. Whenever I entered a town, I announced, by bills, that a Greek physician had arrived, who had already cured many; and truly my balsams and medicines brought me in many a zechino. I now reached the city of Florence, in Italy, where I purposed remaining for some time, as I liked it much, and wished to recover from the fatigues of my travels. I hired a shop in the quarter called Santa Croce, and in an inn not far from thence two beautiful rooms which led to a balcony. Having made these

arrangements, I had my bills placarded about, announcing myself as a physician and merchant. I had no sooner opened my shop than I had crowds of customers, and though my prices were rather high, I sold more than others, because I was civil and obliging to my customers. When I had thus pleasantly spent four days in Florence, I was one evening about closing my shop, and only had to examine my stock of boxes of ointments, as was my custom, when I found in a small jar a piece of paper which I did not recollect to have put there. On opening it I discovered that it was an invitation for me to appear that night at twelve o'clock precisely on the bridge called Ponte Vecchio. I conjectured a long time who it could possibly be that invited me thither, but, not knowing a soul in Florence, I thought some one wished, perhaps, to take me secretly to some sick person, which was not uncommon, and I therefore determined to go. However, I took the precaution to buckle on the sword my father had given me.

When it was near midnight I set out on my way, and soon arrived at the Ponte Vecchio. I found the bridge forsaken and lonely, and determined to await the person who had appointed to meet me.

It was a cold night, the moon shone brightly, and I looked down on the waves of the Arno, glistening in the moonlight. The church clocks now struck the midnight hour, I looked up and saw before me a tall man, enveloped in a red cloak, a corner of which he had drawn over his face.

At first, I was rather terrified, at his suddenly appearing behind me, but soon recovered myself, and said, "If you have summoned me hither, say what is your command." The Red Cloak turned round, and slowly said, "Follow me." I felt somewhat uneasy at the thought of following the stranger alone; so I stood still, saying, "Nay, sir, please first to tell me whither. Moreover, you might let me have a peep at your face, that I may see whether you intend any good with me." But the Red Cloak did not seem to mind my words, "If you will not follow, Zaleukos, stop where you are," he said, and then went on.

Now my anger was roused, and I cried, "Think you a man like me, will submit to be tantalized by any fool, and to wait for nothing in a cold night like this?" In three leaps I overtook him, seized him by the cloak, and cried still louder, while grasping my sword with the other hand. But the cloak alone remained in my hand, and the stranger vanished round the next corner. My rage gradually subsided, but still I held the cloak, and this I expected would give me a clue to this singular adventure. I wrapped it round me, and walked home. When I was about a hundred paces from my house, some one passed close by me, and whispered to me in French, "Be on your guard, Count, there is nothing to be done to night." But before I could look round, this somebody had passed, and I only saw his shadow glide along the houses. That those words were addressed to the owner of the cloak and not to me was pretty evident, but this threw no light on the affair. The following morning, I considered what I should do. At first I intended to have the cloak cried, as if I had found it: on reflection, however, I thought the owner might send another person for it, and that I might still have no clue to the discovery. While thus considering, I looked at the cloak more narrowly; It was of heavy Genoese reddish purple velvet, edged with Astracan fur, and richly embroidered with gold. The sight of this splendid cloak suggested an idea to me, which I resolved to execute. I carried it to my shop, and exposed it for sale, but set upon it so high a price, that I felt sure I should not find a purchaser. My object in this was to look closely at every person who might ask the price; for I thought I could discover, among a thousand, the figure of the stranger, which after the loss of the cloak had shown itself to me distinctly, though but for a moment. Many came desirous of buying the cloak, the extraordinary beauty of which attracted every eye, but no one had the remotest resemblance to the stranger, and none would pay for it the high price of two-hundred zechinos. What struck me most was, that all whom I asked whether they had ever seen such a cloak in Florence before, replied in the negative, assuring me they had never seen such costly and tasteful work.

As evening approached, a young man came who had often been in my shop, and had also during the day made a handsome offer for it. He threw a purse of zechinos on the table, saying, "By Heavens, Zuleukos I must have your cloak, though it will beggar me!" At these words he counted down the gold. I was greatly embarrassed, having only exposed the cloak for sale in hopes of attracting the looks of its owner, and now comes a young madcap to pay the exorbitant price. But what could I do? I yielded; for the idea was pleasing of being so handsomely recompensed for my nocturnal adventure. The young man put on the cloak and went away; but returned at the door, as he took off a paper which was fastened to it, threw it to me, and said, "Here, Zaleukos is something which I think does not belong to the cloak." I took the paper carelessly, when behold! it contained these words:

"Bring the cloak to night at the usual hour to the Ponte Vecchio, and four hundred zechinos shall be yours." I was thunderstruck. Thus then I had trifled with my good luck, and utterly missed my aim; but I soon recovered, took the two-hundred zechinos, followed him, and said, "Take back your money, my friend, and leave me the cloak, I cannot possibly part with it." He thought at first I was joking, but when he perceived I was in earnest, he flew into a rage at my demand, called me a fool, and we at length came to blows. In the scuffle, I was fortunate enough to secure the cloak, and was about to run off with it, when the young man called the police to his assistance, and brought me before the magistrate. The latter was much surprised at the accusation, and awarded the cloak to my opponent. I now offered the young man twenty, fifty, eighty, nay, a hundred zechinos, if he would let me have it. My gold effected what my entreaties could not. He took my money, I went off triumphant with the cloak, and was obliged to submit to be called mad by all Florence. But I cared little for the opinion of the people, since I knew more than they, viz: that I still gained by my bargain.

I awaited the night with impatience. About the same time as before I went to the Ponte Vecchio, with the cloak under my arm. The figure approached me with the last stroke of the clock, and I could not be mistaken as to its identity. "Have you the cloak?" was the question. "I have, sir," I answered, "but it cost me a hundred zechinos." "I know it," he replied; "here are four hundred for it." With these words he stepped to the broad balustrade and counted down the gold, four hundred pieces, which sparkled beautifully in the moonlight; their glitter delighted my heart, which, alas! little imagined that this was its last joy. I put the money in my pocket, and was going to take a close survey of the kind unknown, but he had on a mask, through which his dark eyes flashed at me frightfully. "I thank you, sir, for your kindness," said I. "What else do you desire of me? for I must tell you beforehand that it must be nothing underhanded." "Unnecessary fear," he replied, as he wrapped the cloak round him. "I want your assistance as a physician, not, however, for one living, but for one who is dead."

"How can that be?" I exclaimed, astonished. He beckoned me to follow him, and related as follows: "I came here from foreign lands with my sister, and have lived with her at the house of a friend, where she died suddenly yesterday. Her relatives wish her to be buried tomorrow; and by an ancient custom in our family every member is to be buried in the vault of our ancestors, where many who died in foreign countries now repose embalmed. I wish to leave her body to our relations here, but must take to my father her head, at least, that he may see his daughter's face once more."

This custom of cutting off the head of beloved relatives seemed to me somewhat repulsive, but I did not venture to raise any objections, fearing to give offence to the stranger. I therefore told him that I well understood embalming the dead and begged him to take me to the deceased. At the same time I could not refrain from asking him why all this must be done so mysteriously, and in the night. To this he answered, that his relations, considering his intention as somewhat cruel, would prevent him if he attempted it during the daytime; but

that if the head was once severed they would say little about it; that he, indeed, would have brought me the head himself had not a natural feeling deterred him from performing the operation.

In the meanwhile we arrived at a large, splendid mansion, which my companion pointed out as the end of our nocturnal walk. Passing the principal gate we entered the house by a small door, which he carefully fastened after him, and ascended, in the dark, a narrow winding staircase. This led to a faintly lighted corridor through which we came to an apartment, which was lighted by a lamp suspended from the ceiling.

In this apartment was a bed in which the corpse lay. The stranger averted his face and seemed anxious to hide his tears. Pointing to the bed, he ordered me to do my business well and expeditiously, and left the apartment.

I took my knives out of the case, which, as a doctor, I always carried, and approached the bed. Only the head of the corpse was visible; it was so beautiful that, involuntarily, I felt compassion in my inmost heart; the dark hair hung in long tresses over the pale face, and the eyes were closed. I commenced, according to the custom of surgeons when they amputate a limb, by making an incision in the skin. Then taking my sharpest knife I cut the throat with one stroke. Oh! horror! the dead opened her eyes, but closed them again immediately, and with one deep sigh now breathed forth her life. At the same time a stream of hot blood gushed over me from the wound. I was convinced that I only had killed the poor lady. That she was dead now I could no longer doubt, since such a wound was sure to be fatal. I stood for some minutes in fearful anxiety as to what I had done. Had the Red Cloak imposed on me, or had his sister only been apparently dead? The latter seemed to me the more probable, but I dare not tell the brother of the dead that a less speedy cut would perhaps have aroused her without killing her. I was going, therefore, to sever the head entirely, when the dying lady once more groaned, stretched herself in

painful convulsions, and then expired. Overcome by terror, I rushed shuddering from the apartment. It was dark in the corridor without, the lamp was extinguished, no trace of my companion was to be discovered, and I was obliged to grope my way along the wall at hazard in order to reach the winding staircase. I found it at length, and hurried down precipitately. There was no one visible below, the door was ajar, and when I reached the street I breathed more freely, having felt oppressed with horror in the house. Spurred on by terror, I hastened towards my lodging and buried myself in the pillows of my couch, to forget the atrocious deed I had perpetrated. But sleep fled from me, and the morning first summoned me to composure. It seemed to me probable that the man who had seduced me to the fearful act, as it now appeared to me, would not inform against me. I determined to go into my shop to business and assume, if possible, a cheerful air. But alas! a new circumstance which I observed only now, increased my anxiety; I missed my cap and belt, as well as the knives, and was uncertain whether I had left them in the apartment of the murdered lady, or had lost them in my flight. The former, unfortunately, seemed more probable, and the knives would therefore betray me as the murderer.

I opened my shop at the usual time, and my neighbour came in, as he usually did in the morning, being fond of a chat. "Well, neighbour," said he, "what do you think of this horrible occurrence which took place last night?" I pretended not to know any thing about it. "What! do you pretend not to know what is known all over the town? Not to know that the fairest flower in Florence, Bianca, the daughter of the governor, was murdered last night?" Ah me! I saw her even yesterday go in her carriage with her bridegroom, for it was only yesterday she was married. Every word spoken by my neighbour was a dagger in my heart. How often were these my tortures renewed, for each of my customers repeated the story, one painting it more frightfully than the other, though none could speak all the horrors I had myself witnessed. About noon an officer from the magistrate entered my shop, and requesting me to dismiss the customers, and, producing the things I

missed, he said, "Senore Zaleukos, do you own these things?" I hesitated a moment whether I had not better disown them altogether, but seeing through the half-open door my landlord and several acquaintances, who might perhaps witness against me, I determined not to aggravate the affair by telling a falsehood, and so owned the things produced. The officer desired me to follow him, and led me to a large building, which I soon recognised as a prison. He showed me into an apartment to await further orders.

My situation was terrible as I reflected on it in my solitude; the thought of having committed murder, though unintentionally, constantly returned. Neither could I deny to myself that the glitter of gold had captivated my senses, or I could not so easily have been caught in the snare. Two hours after my arrest, I was led from my room up several staircases into a large hall. Twelve persons, mostly old men, were sitting at a round table, covered with black cloth. Along the walls stood benches occupied by the nobility of Florence. In the galleries above stood the spectators, densely crowded together. When I stepped to the table, a man, with a gloomy and melancholy expression of countenance, rose: it was the president of the tribunal. Addressing the assembly, he said, that as the father of the murdered, he could not pass judgment in this matter, and therefore, ceded his place to the senior of the senators. The latter was an aged man of at least ninety years. He was bent with age, and his temples were scantily covered with a few white hairs, but his eyes still burned with lustre, and his voice was strong and firm. He began by asking me whether I confessed the murder? I demanded to be heard, and fearlessly, and in a very audible voice, related what I had done, and what I knew. I observed that the president, during my statement, was alternately flushed and pale, and that when I concluded, he started up furiously, crying to me, "What, wretch! Do you wish to charge the crime you committed from avarice upon another?" The senator called him to order for his interruption, as he had voluntarily resigned his right of judgment, remarking, moreover, that it was by no means proved that I committed the crime from avarice, as, by his own

deposition, nothing had been stolen from the murdered. Indeed, he went still further, declaring that the president must give an account of the life of his daughter, for that only could enable them to determine whether I had spoken the truth or not. He now dismissed the court for that day to consult, as he said, the papers of the deceased, which the president would deliver to him.

I was again led back to my prison where I spent a sorrowful day, still ardently hoping that some connexion between the dead lady and the Red Cloak might be discovered. Full of this hope I entered the judgment hall the following day. Several letters lay on the table, and the aged senator asked me whether they were written by me. I looked at them, and found they must be by the same hand as the two slips of paper I had received. This I stated to the senate, but they did not seem to regard it, and answered that I could, and must, have written both, the initial on both letters being evidently a Z, the initial letter of my name. The letters contained menaces to the deceased, and warnings against the marriage which she was about to contract.

The president appeared to have given singular information respecting my person, for they treated me on this day more suspiciously and severely. In justification of myself I appealed to my papers which must be found in my lodgings, but they told me that they had searched and found nothing. Thus, at the closing of the court, all my hopes vanished, and when, on the third day, I was again led into the hall, the sentence was read to me that I was convicted of premeditated murder and was to die. To this condition had I come! Forsaken by all that was dear on earth, far distant from my native country, I was, though innocent, to die by the axe in the flower of youth. As I was sitting in my lonely dungeon on the evening of this terrible day that had decided my fate, all my hopes having fled, and all my thoughts being seriously fixed on death, the door opened and a man entered, who looked silently at me for a long time.

"Do I thus find you again, Zaleukos?" said he.

The faint glimmer of my lamp prevented me from recognising him, but the sound of his voice awakened in me recollections of former days. It was Valetti, one of the few friends I had known in Paris while there pursuing my studies. He told me that he happened to come to Florence where his father lived much respected, that he had heard my history, and had come to see me once more, and to learn from me how I could have committed such a heavy crime. I told him the whole story. He seemed much astonished, and conjured me to tell him, my only friend, every thing, that I might not depart this life with a lie on my conscience. I swore to him with a most solemn oath that I had spoken the truth, and that no other guilt oppressed me, but that, being dazzled by the gold, I had not at once recognised the improbability of the stranger's story.

"You did not then know Bianca?" he asked.

I assured him I had never seen her. Valetti now related to me that a deep secret was connected with the deed, that the president had very much hastened my sentence, and that a report was circulated that I had long known Bianca, and now had murdered her out of revenge for her marrying another. I observed to him, that all this applied well to the Red Cloak, but that I could not prove his participation in the deed. Valetti embraced me, weeping, and promised to do all in his power to save my life at least. I had little hope, though I knew him to be a wise man and well conversant in the law, and that he would not fail to do his utmost to save me. For two long days I remained in suspense; at length he came and exclaimed, "I bring a consolation though a sad one. You will live to be free, but must lose one hand." Deeply affected, I thanked my friend for having saved my life. He told me the president had been inexorable as to granting a new investigation into the affair, but, that he might not appear unjust, he at length agreed that if they could find a similar case in the annals of Florence, my punishment should be according to that awarded in such a case. He, therefore, with his father had now read day and night in the archives,

and had, at length, found a case similar to mine, the punishment for which was that the perpetrator should have his left hand cut off, his property confiscated, and that he himself should be banished for life. This was now my sentence, and I was to prepare for the painful moment which awaited me. I will spare you this terrible moment: in the open market-place I placed my hand on the block, and my own blood gushed over me.

When all was over, Valetti took me to his house until my recovery was completed, and then nobly provided me with money for my journey, for all I had earned with so much labour had been taken from me. From Florence I went to Sicily, and thence by the first ship to Constantinople. Here I hoped to find the sum of money I had left with my friend, and begged him to receive me into his house, but what was my astonishment when he inquired why I did not take possession of my own? He informed me that a stranger had purchased a house in my name in the quarter of the Greeks, and had told the neighbours that I was soon coming. I immediately repaired thither with my friend, and was joyfully welcomed by all my old acquaintance. An aged merchant gave me a letter that had been left by the purchaser of the house for me. Its contents were as follows:

"Zaleukos! Two hands shall be constantly ready to work for you that you may not feel the loss of the one. The house you now own with all in it is yours, and you will receive every year sufficient to make you rank among the wealthy of your countrymen. May you forgive him who is more wretched than yourself!"

I could guess who was the writer of these lines, and the merchant told me, on inquiry, that he took the stranger, who wore a red cloak, for a Frank. I now knew sufficient to convince me that the stranger was not devoid of generous feelings. I found all in my new house arranged admirably, and also a shop with goods more beautiful than I ever possessed. Ten years have now elapsed, and I have continued my commercial travels more from former habit than necessity, yet I have

never again seen the country where I met such a misfortune. Ever since I have annually received a thousand gold pieces, but though I rejoice to know that that unfortunate man is generous, he cannot with his money relieve my soul from its grief, for the awful picture of the murdered Bianca will for ever be present with me.