

The Shepherd of the Giant Mountains

Friedrich de la Motte Fouqué



Idle Tidal Idyll

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A New Edition by Idle Tidal Idyll

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Chapter I

MANY hundred years ago, one evening just at sunset, there was seen a strange disturbance amongst the peasants who dwelt in a valley formed by the huge mountains which separate Silesia from Bohemia. It was the hour when all things seemed to call to rest; but the shepherds were hurrying to and fro with frightened, anxious looks; and at length, as a noise of mighty wings was heard above them, they took refuge in the bushes and brakes, whispering to each other, "It is the dreadful griffin!"¹ One only among the shepherds, a youth slender and tall, of a blooming countenance, sat apart, seemingly untroubled, on the top of a grassy hillock, which still looked bright in the parting rays of the sun; he played upon a pipe, and sang occasionally a few verses very sweetly.

The old neatherd, Hans, was vexed at seeing the youth so calm, and called to him, "Ah! Gottschalk, how can any one sing so joyously, just like the senseless larks, when we are in such great trouble?"

Gottschalk only smiled and nodded to him, and went on with his snatches of song.

The old man shook his head, and climbed up the hillock to the youth. "It is true," he said, "the danger is now over-for to-day, at least; the evil bird has flown to her nest, where she is probably rearing many young ones, who will one day complete our destruction." And then the old shepherd told a sad tale of the prey that the monster had already carried off.

"I know that well," said Gottschalk; "the creature has already snatched away six of my beautiful sheep."

"And yet," said Hans, "you can sit and play away as if it were no affair of yours or mine! Tell me only what will be the end of this griffin."

"I know not, dear old Hans, I know not; only let me play."

¹ A griffin is an imaginary monster, much larger than an eagle, and much more powerful and cruel. In many old legends they are mentioned as carrying off not only animals, but even men and women. These stories are probably exaggerated accounts of what some eagle or vulture really did; for these birds are strong enough to carry off children in their talons.

“Nay; but rather hear what will happen; I can tell you all about it,” continued Hans. “The griffin will first eat up all our herds-sheep and cows, calves and lambs-and then she will come to us. She now often looks down upon us very greedily.”

“Ah! you thin old Hans,” said Gottschalk, laughing; “she will never eat you!”

“You may joke,” answered the old man; “but who knows? when she is hungry she can eat any one. But there is no help for it, so we must wait in patience.”

“If only,” said Gottschalk, “she would alight long enough for us to fight with her; but she darts down on her prey, and darts up again with it. What can be done?”

“So I say,” replied Hans; “and that is why I am so troubled.”

“And that is why I sing and play,” said Gottschalk. “Your lamentations do no good, dear Hans. Listen; I have thought of such a beautiful song:

‘O fir-tree, O fir-tree,
A noble tree art thou!
For green as in the summer
Is the winter of thy bough.’”

“Why, that is an old song!” said Hans.

“Listen still,” answered the youth; “I have added something new. Now the fir-tree is to answer:

‘O shepherd youth, O shepherd youth!
And so I needs must be;
For a glory bright and a lovely light
Hath shone on the old fir-tree.’
‘O fir-tree, O fir-tree!
Pray tell me of that light;
For deep within my bosom’s core

With me too all is bright.
As full of hope as birds in May,
Is my heart in its joyous mood;
Then tell me wherefore thou art green,
Thou monarch of the wood.'
'O shepherd youth, O shepherd youth!
There passed a lady fair;
As bright as morning's amber clouds
The tresses of her hair.'"

"That must mean the duke's daughter, who lately rode through our woods," said Hans.
"She looked to me very bright and beautiful. Go on; for I like your song." And Gottschalk continued,

" 'As slender she as a tall fir-tree,
As fresh as the grass in May;
Fair as a water-lily,
And young as opening day.
That lady was a maiden fair,
Of high and noble blood;
Around her gather'd dames and knights,
All in a joyous mood.
And I am bright with hopeful green,
And glistening o'er with dew,
Because she will come here again
When the violets bloom anew.'
'O fir-tree, O fir-tree!
We both are very bold;
The same sweet hope keeps thee and me

From ever growing old.
The same bright form hath shed on each
Her golden summer sheen;
And that is why both thou and I
Are ever fresh and green.”

“Well, and what answers the fir?” asked old Hans.

“My song is ended,” said Gottschalk.

“So much the better for thee,” said the old man; “for no doubt the fir would have answered, I cannot put it into verse, but the meaning would be, ‘Shepherd, you are mad; you speak of hope and the duke’s daughter in one breath. If she came here again, your few remaining wits would leave you. Ah, Gottschalk, you make me laugh, poor boy!’ The tree would say this.”

“Well, if it pleases the tree to laugh at me, I give it leave; Gottschalk is well satisfied. Good night, old Hans.” And the youth sprung homewards joyfully. The old man shook his head as he looked after him.

Chapter II

A HERALD rode through the woods, making a proclamation to the sound of a trumpet. Gottschalk, who saw him from afar, flew down, jumping from rock to rock, to the valley, and greeted the stranger courteously. The herald checked his gaily adorned white horse, and thanked the youth, whose looks pleased him. Then said Gottschalk, "Sir herald, may I know what good tidings you bring us?"

The herald smiled and answered, "I bring a message to all the knights of these high mountains which may give deliverance and safety, by God's help, to the inhabitants of the valleys."

"May I not know it?" asked Gottschalk.

"Assuredly; I am to proclaim it to all the world." And again to the sound of the trumpet the herald gave out the following words: "Greeting to all Christian people of this land from our lord duke! As it is well known that a monstrous griffin plunders the flocks, terrifies the shepherds, and is like to bring destruction on the whole country, our gracious lord promises to reward the man who slays the monster with the hand of his only daughter, the fairest lady Adeltrude. Up, up, you valiant men, and to the fight!" And again the blast of the trumpet sounded, and the herald was about to ride on. But Gottschalk, with kindling eyes, stepped before him, and said: "Do you think your message concerns but the knights of the mountains? It goes much further; it concerns all Christian men in this land."

"You say rightly, young shepherd," answered the herald; "but only a knight would adventure so bold a deed. Go back to thy flocks, guard them well from the griffin."

He went on; and Gottschalk returned in deep thought, not heeding his sheep; so that he could hardly have been taken for the same youth who lately sang so joyously through the woods. And yet a gleam of the joy and glory of victory shone at times in his eyes.

“Where is Gottschalk? He must play to us while we dance, he must dance with us.” So said the youths and maidens; but in vain. The young shepherd was wandering afar off in the late evening twilight, and climbing the steepest heights of the mountains, where the foot of man had never yet been. Before him the griffin swept on with heavy wing, slowly, as if weighed down by the prey she carried. She did not notice the youth, whose light tread was hardly to be heard; he suppressed even the sound of his breathing, while he followed intently with his eyes the dreadful bird. She now stoops her flight; she must have reached her nest on the loftiest summit of the mountain. Gottschalk looks from his hiding-place, and can see into the nest. The hideous brood of the griffin eagerly and fiercely contend for the food it has brought them; the bones of the animals crack and snap as the birds snatch at their prey, twisting and bending their long necks as they devour it; and the blood both of the victims and of the griffins flows together out of the nest, as with loud, horrible cries the monstrous brood fight and tear each other with their sharp, strong beaks. Gottschalk was almost bewildered by the noise, and well nigh fell through dizziness. But he held fast, till, having seen enough, he carefully descended, and returned for a time to his peaceful home.

The next day, Gottschalk, his shepherd's staff pointed with iron on his shoulder, set forth at noon on his lonely way, knowing that the monster was seeking prey in distant meadows. He knew his path again by the stones and branches he had dropped the day before as he went along. The mountains looked more and more wild, the passes grew more and more narrow, till even the slender youth could hardly pass through them. The streams murmured mournfully, and the fir-trees groaned as before a coming storm; all nature seemed to say, “Return, return, poor shepherd-boy, or all is over with thee! Thou wilt perish on the bleak mountains, and not even find a grave.” Gottschalk's heart had almost failed him, but he still drew forth cheerful sounds from his pipe, and sang this song at intervals:

“When other shepherds sleep
In the quiet noontide shade,
Gottschalk leaves his sheep,
And seeks a distant glade.
‘Whither away, rash youth?
Slumberers, ye may not know;
My distant haunts, in sooth,
Are much too high for you.’”

And the notes of his pipe fell softly, softly, as if breathing forth a sweet secret. A light seemed to spring up in his heart, and he darted on. But may he trust to this light? He stopped, and knelt down reverently, as if at the altar of his village-church, and poured forth this prayer: “O Lord God, Who knowest that I go forth at my prince’s command to destroy the wicked brood, and to deliver my countrymen from danger; if it be a sin that I cherish yet another and glorious hope, root it out of my heart, or deny me the sweet prize, and give it to a better Christian; but yet grant me now victory, in Thy strength, for the good of my country; or, if this may not be, grant me a joyful death.”

He seemed to hear within the words, “Go on, good servant.” And as he arose, a purer light shone about him, bringing a brighter, holier hope; and while he climbed the mountain, he dared yet to think on that sweet prize which might be his.

At length he reached the spot whence he could see into the nest of the hateful monster; and as he listened to the angry sounds of the young griffins, and saw their fiery eyes and their sharp beaks, he thought to himself that old Hans was right, and that in time they would devour even men. He determined to make an end of them at once; he was glad they were so hideous and so fierce, for it made the task of destroying them less painful. He lit some twigs at the end of a long

pole, and then held them under the nest; the wood and straw quickly caught fire, and crackled and blazed; even the lofty tree on which the nest was built, and which had so often streamed with blood, now felt the power of the flames, and kindled, till the whole became a huge funeral pile, from the midst of which were heard the cries of the griffin's brood. The parent-bird was far off, waging bloody war on distant flocks; but she heard their cries, and swiftly flapping her huge wings, she soon flew back, and cast a frightful shadow over the mountain. Gottschalk commended his soul to God, and thought that he had done with life. But the griffin first alighted on her nest, and beat the flames with her wings, striving to put them out, till Gottschalk wondered at the monster's love for her young, which made her forget her own pain and danger. But the young ones were all dead, and the fire so scorched the wings of the griffin herself, that she fell from the tree on the grass below. Now had the youth need of his strong shepherd's staff, great need; for the griffin, mad with rage and pain, was preparing for the fiercest combat, and she would have seized and torn him to pieces, but that he cried to God for help, and a beloved image seemed to stand near him and give him courage. He struck the enemy blow after blow ; one stroke entered its eye, and it half rose, as if preparing to soar up; but Gottschalk seized the moment, and plunged the steel point of his weapon deep into the monster's heart. It bellowed with the noise of a thousand oxen, it tottered, once more tried to move its powerless wings, and then fell, the terror of the land lay stiff in death. Gottschalk leant breathless upon his staff, and looked around on the valleys beneath, which lay now in the cool quiet of evening. A light breeze arose, as if to thank him, playing with the clustering curls of his hair, and refreshing him after the heat of the combat.

Chapter III

THE next day the young shepherd stood in the courtyard of the duke's palace, and by him the dead monster, which he had dragged there with great labour. Gottschalk looked down, colouring and ashamed, while the lords and knights gathered round him. He dared not now think on the lovely prize, he felt himself so poor and unworthy of her. The duke stood in deep thought, now looking at the youth, now at the griffin, and then again into his own heart. He made a sign, and a page flew back to the palace to call the fair lady Adeltrude. Then one of the nobles drew near, and whispered in the duke's ear, "Are you in earnest? Will you indeed give that delicate lady to a peasant boy?"

"He has slain the griffin - the prize is his."

"Yes, had he been a knight."

"I excepted no Christian man."

"What will men say?"

"God has spoken."

"Noble prince, you know that I myself - I hoped that -"

"Wherefore, then, did not you yourself slay the griffin?"

The Lady Adeltrude came forth timid and blushing from her bower; all were silent, and turned away their eyes. The noble heart of the duke was sad; but he thought on his plighted word, and looked around with a steady glance. The maiden advanced, her hands folded on her bosom; she looked up to heaven, and then with her wonted meekness and humbleness she took the hand of the youthful Gottschalk, and bending down before her father, she said, "The land is free and happy through this brave arm. Noble prince, bless the shepherd's bride!"

By earliest dawn of the next morning Gottschalk returned to his flocks. Was he, then, no longer the son-in-law of a prince? Had the duke retracted his word? Or had Adeltrude in caprice

withdrawn her consent? Not so: no change or cloud came over their steadfast mind. But the duke had said to the shepherd, “My Gottschalk, as thou lackest land and castle befitting the estate of my child, go forth to-morrow when the sun first lights up the crests of the mountains, take thy victorious staff, and for the last time lead out thy flocks far into the valleys; all the land that thou canst pass over before the sun goes down is thine and thy bride’s.”

How eagerly did Gottschalk drive forth his flock to gain what was to be Adeltrude’s! How joyfully the lambs skipped before him! He lightened the way by the cheerful sounds of his pipe, and amongst other songs he sang this joyous lay:

“Who wins to-day
Serfs and domain,
That his fair bride
He may maintain?
Ah! ‘tis the shepherd!
Look on him, sun!
Look on him, brook!
All ye loved forests,
Hearken and look!
Who ever heard
Of silly sheep gaining
Castles and lands
For beauty’s maintaining?
Hark to the sheep-bell!
See the lambs skipping
Over the brook!
Sun, spring, and forests,
Hearken and look!”

And when the dewy shades of evening fell, Gottschalk, with song and melody, had compassed a wide space of rich land, such as has since been called a county. As he drove his flock to the palace of the duke, the prince looked down smiling from his high chamber on his strange son-in-law, and thought, "It was ordained by God; it must be well."

Far otherwise thought the Knight Boleslaus - he who had whispered in the ear of the duke; he stood at the castle-gate as the shepherd entered, and laughed scornfully: "Well done, little Gottschalk! Gottschalk, thy sheep run well! and they have brought thee to high honour, Gottschalk!"

The youth looked at him with his clear bright eyes, and said, "To-day, proud lord, I shall answer you nothing; but the time for my answer may come." And he entered the castle singing.

Torches shone bright through the painted glass of the chapel-windows, the priest in his white vestments stood at the altar awaiting the betrothed, trumpets sounded loudly, and the procession was about to move, when the shepherd knelt before the duke, and spoke these words: "My noble prince, you have granted me, by your favour, enough of lands to keep my bride as beseems so tender a flower. But yet lack I the ways and words of courtesy, the knightly skill in arms, and, alas! many other noble gifts which might make me worthy to possess her. Let me, then, leave my pearl in your fatherly keeping till I become a knight, worthy in the opinion of all to guard my treasure; as pure, bright gold encircles and keeps from injury a precious jewel."

The duke gave a gracious consent, and led the youth to an old knight of high lineage and renown, who should be his master-in-arms. He joyfully accepted his valiant pupil; and as they went together out of the castle the Lady Adeltrude gave her lily hand to the youth to kiss.

Chapter IV

MORE than twelve months had passed before tidings came of the young shepherd. He and his master lived as in exile in a distant fortress, and in the wild forests which surrounded it. At length, one day a knight in bright armour, on a snow-white steed, rode into the courtyard of the duke's palace. None knew that it was the shepherd Gottschalk, none would believe it possible, as with noble grace and princely mien, like one accustomed from his cradle to the company of highborn knights and ladies, he looked up and saluted the Lady Adeltrude, who stood in her balcony. He bent low his plumed head before his lovely bride; she smiled on him blushing; a far brighter, happier smile than that with which she greeted the shepherd Gottschalk when she first saw him standing by the dead griffin. The duke could hardly believe the joyful sight; but Gottschalk's knightly master-in-arms advanced, and proudly bore witness that this was his pupil, whom, three days before, he had made knight after a severe probation. Then he asked for Gottschalk the combat, in open lists, with the knight Boleslaus, who had mocked him when he brought his flock into the courtyard of the castle. The duke granted the request; soon Sir Boleslaus appeared in full armour, and the lists were prepared before the castle. A tear swam in the soft blue eyes of Adeltrude.

The knights rushed against each other to the joyful sound of the trumpet; their spears were shattered into a thousand splinters; but they kept firm in their saddles, and drew their shining swords to begin a closer combat. Boleslaus struck fiercely and violently; Gottschalk avoided his blows by dexterous and quick movements; and, as if in sport, only lightly touched his adversary. He knew his superior power, and delayed his victory only to shew his skill to his fair bride. She saw this joyfully, and felt all fear vanish from her heart as she looked at her father and smiled; while he glanced proudly round on the group of knights and nobles, as if he would have said, "See what a bridegroom Heaven has granted to my child!" At length Boleslaus lost his balance as he dealt a powerful blow, and Gottschalk, with quick dexterity, threw him from his horse. The youth then sprang lightly off his own, seized the sword of Boleslaus, and threw it out of the lists; then he raised him gently, and said, "Noble knight, the shame you put upon me is now wiped off; I pray you to

take this sword from me, as a token of my good-will.” He put the beautiful weapon, with its golden hilt and ornaments of precious stones, into the hand of his astonished enemy, who only bent his head in silence; but soon, calling up nobler feelings, he lifted his vizor, and shewing his face glowing with honourable shame, he acknowledged his injustice aloud, and pressed his generous victor in his arms. The duke, from the balcony, called to Gottschalk, “Come up hither; worthy art thou to be a prince’s son!”

The knight knelt before the duke, who raised him with fatherly affection, and said, while the Lady Adeltrude fastened around Gottschalk the richly embroidered scarf of her colours, which he was henceforth to wear as her knight and defender, “My dear son, I would I had somewhat to give thee as a token of my fatherly love and favour; but I gave thee all when I gave thee my sweet child. Yet if any hidden wish lies deep in thy heart, speak it now; it shall be granted if it is in my power.”

The young knight thus answered, “My lord and father, as I but now rode through the valley on my way hither, I met an old neatherd whom I well knew in my former low estate. I had given him my flock to keep for my sake; so I called out to him joyously, ‘Well, good old Hans, how is it with thee?’ He answered as he would in old times, ‘Well, dear Gottschalk; and the sheep are all well likewise.’ This fell on my ears as a solemn warning, and I resolved in my mind to turn today what had been reproached me as my shame, to my honour. I therefore pray you, noble prince, to let me and my heirs bear always the lowly name of Shepherd. That man of God, king David, in his most glorious condition, never forgot that he had tended sheep; how much less should I, the poor knight Gottschalk! And the pure noble spirit of my bride, I know, will rejoice in such humility. Is it not so, Adeltrude?” She bent forward, in love and joy, to give him her first kiss; and the duke, gladly consenting, said, “You have done well, my son. By God’s blessing you have established your house strong and firm for many hundred years.”

