

The Owl's Ear

Erckmann-Chatrain

Oh no! My word processor mixed up pages 2 to 21 of this book. Can you put them in the right order and figure out what Martin Luther King Jr. did to the page numbers?

<https://donkirkby.github.io/book-blender>

The Owl's Ear

"Just as the telescope brought the discovery of myriads of worlds performing their harmonious revolutions in infinite space--so also will my *micracoustic* ear trumpet extend the sense of the unhearable beyond all possible bounds. Thus, sir, the circulation of the blood and the fluids of the body will not give me pause; you shall hear them flow with the impetuosity of cataracts; you shall perceive them so distinctly as to startle you; the slightest irregularity of the pulse, the least obstacle, is striking, and produces the same effect as a rock against which the waves of a torrent are dashing!

"It is doubtless an immense conquest in the development of our knowledge of physiology and pathology, but this is not the point on which I would emphasize. Upon applying your ear to the ground, sir, you may hear the mineral waters springing up at immeasurable depths; you may judge of their volume, their currents, and the obstacles which they meet!

"Do you wish to go further? Enter a subterranean vault which is so constructed as to gather a quantity of loud sounds; then at night when the world sleeps, when nothing will be confused with the interior noises of our globe--listen!

The Owl's Ear

"This discovery, from the point of view of sentiment, which makes us live in the universal life, surpasses in its importance all that I could say on the matter.

"After so much suffering, privations, and weariness, how happy it makes one to reap the rewards of all his labors! How the soul soars toward the divine Author of all these microscopic worlds, the magnificence of which is revealed to us! Where now are the long hours of anguish, hunger, contempt, which overwhelmed us before? Gone, sir, gone! Tears of gratitude moisten our eyes. One is proud to have achieved, through suffering, new joys for humanity and to have contributed to its mental development. But howsoever vast, howsoever admirable may be the first fruits of my *micracoustic* ear trumpet, these do not delimit its advantages. There are more positive ones, more material, and ones which may be expressed in figures.

The Owl's Ear

"By what right do you come to disturb my studies, wretched creatures?"

This grandiose apostrophe was scarcely in accord with his costume and physiognomy. Accordingly the burgomaster indignantly replied:

"Try to show that you're honest, you knave, or I'll begin by administering a correction."

"A correction!" said the little man, leaping with anger, and drawing himself up under the nose of the burgomaster.

"Yes," replied the other, who, nevertheless, did not fail to admire the pygmy's courage; "if you do not answer the questions satisfactorily I am going to put to you. I am the burgomaster of Hirschwiller; here are the rural guard, the shepherd and his dog. We are stronger than you--be wise and tell me peaceably who you are, what you are doing here, and why you do not dare to appear in broad daylight. Then we shall see what's to be done with you."

"All that's none of your business," replied the little man in his cracked voice. "I shall not answer."

"Tis strange, cousin," said I, "truly strange. And you have no other information concerning the unknown?"

"None."

"And you have found nothing which could give you a clue as to his purpose?"

"Absolutely nothing, Christian."

"But, as a matter of fact, what could he have been doing in the cistern? On what did he live?"

The burgomaster shrugged his shoulders, refilled our glasses, and replied with:

"To your health, cousin."

"To yours."

We remained silent a few minutes. It was impossible for me to accept the abrupt conclusion of the adventure, and, in spite of myself, I mused with some melancholy on the sad fate of certain men who appear and disappear in this world like the grass of the field, without leaving the least memory or the least regret.

"Cousin," I resumed, "how far may it be from here to the ruins of Geierstein?"

"Twenty minutes' walk at the most. Why?"

"Because I should like to see them."

I

The cistern staircase struck me as being exceedingly curious, with its elegant spiral. The bushes bristling in the fissures at every step, the deserted aspect of its surroundings, all harmonized with my sadness. We descended, and soon the luminous point of the opening, which seemed to contract more and more, and to take the shape of a star with curved rays, alone sent us its pale light. When we attained the very bottom of the cistern, we found a superb sight was to be had of all those steps, lighted from above and cutting off their shadows with marvelous precision. I then heard the hum of which I have already spoken: the immense granite conch had as many echoes as stones!

"Has nobody been down here since the little man?" I asked the rural guardsman.

"No, sir. The peasants are afraid. They imagine that the hanged man will return."

"And you?"

"I--oh, I'm not curious."

"But the justice of the peace? His duty was to--"

"Ha! What could he have come to the *Owl's Ear* for?"

"They call this the *Owl's Ear*?"

A

"I am going out for a walk--on the hillside--sit up for me until ten o'clock. Here's the key."

"Yes, sir."

Then the old soldier took down his gun from the hook over the door, examined the priming, and slung it over his shoulder; then he addressed Kasper Boeck:

"Go and tell the rural guard to meet me in the holly path, and tell him behind the mill. Your *spirit* must be some marauder. But if it's a fox, I'll make a fine hood of it, with long earlaps."

Master Petrus Mauerer and humble Kasper then went out. The weather was superb, the stars innumerable. While the shepherd went to knock at the rural guard's door, the burgomaster plunged among the elder bushes, in a little lane that wound around behind the old church.

Two minutes later Kasper and Hans Goerner, whinger at his side, by running overtook Master Petrus in the holly path.

All three made their way together toward the ruins of Geierstein.

N

On the 29th of July, 1835, Kasper Boeck, a shepherd of the little village of Hirschwiller, with his large felt hat tipped back, his wallet of stringy sackcloth hanging at his hip, and his great tawny dog at his heels, presented himself at about nine o'clock in the evening at the house of the burgomaster, Petrus Mauerer, who had just finished supper and was taking a little glass of kirchwasser to facilitate digestion.

This burgomaster was a tall, thin man, and wore a bushy gray mustache. He had seen service in the armies of the Archduke Charles. He had a jovial disposition, and ruled the village, it is said, with his finger and with the rod.

"Mr. Burgomaster," cried the shepherd in evident excitement.

But Petrus Mauerer, without awaiting the end of his speech, frowned and said:

"Kasper Boeck, begin by taking off your hat, put your dog out of the room, and then speak distinctly, intelligibly, without stammering, so that I may understand you."

F

"Mr. Christian," said he, "see--it's getting late--the burgomaster must have come back from the council."

"Ha! That's a fact," cried I, crumpling up the paper, "come on."

We descended the hill.

My worthy cousin met me, with a smiling face, at the threshold of his house.

"Well! well! Christian, so you've found no trace of the imbecile who hanged himself?"

"No."

"I thought as much. He was some lunatic who escaped from Stefansfeld or somewhere--Faith, he did well to hang himself. When one is good for nothing, that's the simplest way for it."

The following day I left Hirschwiller. I shall never return.

R

"You know that we have a meeting of the municipal council, and that I can't accompany you."

"Oh! I can find them by myself."

"No, the rural guard will show you the way; he has nothing better to do."

And my worthy cousin, having rapped on his glass, called his servant:

"Katel, go and find Hans Goerner--let him hurry, and get here by two o'clock. I must be going."

The servant went out and the rural guard was not tardy in coming.

He was directed to take me to the ruins.

While the burgomaster proceeded gravely toward the hall of the municipal council, we were already climbing the hill. Hans Goerner, with a wave of the hand, indicated the remains of the aqueduct. At the same moment the rocky ribs of the plateau, the blue distances of Hundsrück, the sad crumbling walls covered with somber ivy, the tolling of the Hirschwiller bell summoning the notables to the council, the rural guardsman panting and catching at the brambles--assumed in my eyes a sad and severe tinge, for which I could not account: it was the story of the hanged man which took the color out of the prospect.

N

I sat down on a large stone, while the rural guard cast his falcon eyes over the village to see if there chanced to be any trespassers in the gardens. I carefully examined the glazed vase, of which nothing but splinters remained. These fragments presented the appearance of a funnel, lined with wool. It was impossible for me to perceive its purpose. I then read the piece of a letter, written in an easy running and firm hand. I transcribe it here below, word for word. It seems to follow the other half of the sheet, for which I looked vainly all about the ruins:

"My *micracoustic* ear trumpet thus has the double advantage of infinitely multiplying the intensity of sounds, and of introducing them into the ear without causing the observer the least discomfort. You would never have imagined, dear master, the charm which one feels in perceiving these thousands of imperceptible sounds which are confounded, on a fine summer day, in an immense murmuring. The bumble-bee has his song as well as the nightingale, the honey-bee is the warbler of the mosses, the cricket is the lark of the tall grass, the maggot is the wren--it has only a sigh, but the sigh is melodious!

H

"Yes."

"That's pretty near it," said I, raising my eyes. "This reversed vault forms the *pavilion* well enough; the under side of the steps makes the covering of the *tympanum*, and the winding of the staircase the *cochlea*, the *labyrinth*, and *vestibule* of the ear. That is the cause of the murmur which we hear: we are at the back of a colossal ear."

"It's very likely," said Hans Goerner, who did not seem to have understood my observations.

We started up again, and I had ascended the first steps when I felt something crush under my foot; I stopped to see what it could be, and at that moment perceived a white object before me. It was a torn sheet of paper. As for the hard object, which I had felt grinding up, I recognized it as a sort of glazed earthenware jug.

"Aha!" I said to myself; "this may clear up the burgomaster's story."

I rejoined Hans Goerner, who was now waiting for me at the edge of the pit.

"Now, sir," cried he, "where would you like to go?"

"First, let's sit down for a while. We shall see presently."

W

Here the letter stopped.

I let my hands fall in stupefaction. Had I read the conceptions of an idiot--or the inspirations of a genius which had been realized? What am I to say? to think? So this man, this miserable creature, living at the bottom of a burrow like a fox, dying of hunger, had had perhaps one of those inspirations which the Supreme Being sends on earth to enlighten future generations!

And this man had hanged himself in disgust, despair! No one had answered his prayer, though he asked only for a crust of bread in exchange for his discovery. It was horrible. Long, long I sat there dreaming, thanking Heaven for having limited my intelligence to the needs of ordinary life--for not having desired to make me a superior man in the community of martyrs. At length the rural guardsman, seeing me with fixed gaze and mouth agape, made so bold as to touch me on the shoulder.

E

Hereupon the burgomaster, standing near the table, tranquilly emptied his little glass and wiped his great gray mustachios indifferently.

Kasper put his dog out, and came back with his hat off.

"Well!" said Petrus, seeing that he was silent, "what has happened?"

"It happens that the *spirit* has appeared again in the ruins of Geierstein!"

"Ha! I doubt it. You've seen it yourself?"

"Very clearly, Mr. Burgomaster."

"Without closing your eyes?"

"Yes, Mr. Burgomaster--my eyes were wide open. There was plenty of moonlight."

"What form did it have?"

"The form of a small man."

"Good!"

And turning toward a glass door at the left:

"Katel!" cried the burgomaster.

An old serving woman opened the door.

"Sir?"

I

"In that case, forward, march," ordered the burgomaster, who grasped him firmly by the nape of the neck; "you are going to sleep in prison."

The little man writhed like a weasel; he even tried to bite, and the dog was sniffing at the calves of his legs, when, quite exhausted, he said, not without a certain dignity:

"Let go, sir, I surrender to superior force--I'm yours!"

The burgomaster, who was not entirely lacking in good breeding, became calmer.

"Do you promise?" said he.

"I promise!"

"Very well--walk in front."

And that is how, on the night of the 29th of July, 1835, the burgomaster took captive a little red-haired man, issuing from the cavern of Geierstein.

Upon arriving at Hirschwiller the rural guard ran to find the key of the prison and the vagabond was locked in and double-locked, not to forget the outside bolt and padlock.

Everyone then could repose after his fatigues, and Petrus Mauerer went to bed and dreamed till midnight of this singular adventure.

C

These ruins, which are twenty minutes' walk from the village, seem to be insignificant enough; they consist of the ridges of a few decrepit walls, from four to six feet high, which extend among the brier bushes. Archaeologists call them the aqueducts of Seranus, the Roman camp of Holderlock, or vestiges of Theodoric, according to their fantasy. The only thing about these ruins which could be considered remarkable is a stairway to a cistern cut in the rock. Inside of this spiral staircase, instead of concentric circles which twist around with each complete turn, the involutions become wider as they proceed, in such a way that the bottom of the pit is three times as large as the opening. Is it an architectural freak, or did some reasonable cause determine such an odd construction? It matters little to us. The result was to cause in the cistern that vague reverberation which anyone may hear upon placing a shell at his ear, and to make you aware of steps on the gravel path, murmurs of the air, rustling of the leaves, and even distant words spoken by people passing the foot of the hill.

Our three personages then followed the pathway between the vineyards and gardens of Hirschwiller.

"I see nothing," the burgomaster would say, turning up his nose derisively.

D

"Sir, all that it is possible for me to tell you at the present moment--for in the midst of my profound misery, of my privations, and often of my despair, I am left only a few lucid instants to pursue my geological observations--all that I can affirm is that the seething of glow worms, the explosions of boiling fluids, is something terrifying and sublime, which can only be compared to the impression of the astronomer whose glass fathoms depths of limitless extent.

"Nevertheless, I must avow that these impressions should be studied further and classified in a methodical manner, in order that definite conclusions may be derived therefrom. Likewise, as soon as you shall have deigned, dear and noble master, to transmit the little sum for use at Neustadt as I asked, to supply my first needs, we shall see our way to an understanding in regard to the establishment of three great subterranean observatories, one in the valley of Catania, another in Iceland, then a third in Capac-Uren, Songay, or Cayembé-Uren, the deepest of the Cordilleras, and consequently--"

P

"Nor I either," the rural guard would repeat, imitating the other's tone.

"It's down in the hole," muttered the shepherd.

"We shall see, we shall see," returned the burgomaster.

It was in this fashion, after a quarter of an hour, that they came upon the opening of the cistern. As I have said, the night was clear, limpid, and perfectly still.

The moon portrayed, as far as the eye could reach, one of those nocturnal landscapes in bluish lines, studded with slim trees, the shadows of which seemed to have been drawn with a black crayon. The blooming brier and broom perfumed the air with a rather sharp odor, and the frogs of a neighboring swamp sang their oily anthem, interspersed with silences. But all these details escaped the notice of our good rustics; they thought of nothing but laying hands on the *spirit*.

When they had reached the stairway, all three stopped and listened, then gazed into the dark shadows. Nothing appeared--nothing stirred.

"The devil!" said the burgomaster, "we forgot to bring a bit of candle. Descend, Kasper, you know the way better than I--I'll follow you."

A

But, by the acoustic effect which I have already pointed out, the *spirit*, the marauder, the individual who chanced to be actually in the cistern, had heard everything. The idea of stopping a gunshot did not strike him as amusing, for in a shrill, piercing voice he cried:

"Stop! Don't fire--I'm coming."

Then the three functionaries looked at each other and laughed softly, and the burgomaster, leaning over the opening again, cried rudely:

"Be quick about it, you varlet, or I'll shoot! Be quick about it!"

He cocked his gun, and the click seemed to hasten the ascent of the mysterious person; they heard him rolling down some stones. Nevertheless it still took him another minute before he appeared, the cistern being at a depth of sixty feet.

What was this man doing in such deep darkness? He must be some great criminal! So at least thought Petrus Mauerer and his acolytes.

At last a vague form could be discerned in the dark, then slowly, by degrees, a little man, four and a half feet high at the most, frail, ragged, his face withered and yellow, his eye gleaming like a magpie's, and his hair tangled, came out shouting:

O

On the morrow, toward nine o'clock, Hans Goerner, the rural guard, having been ordered to bring the prisoner to the town house for another examination, repaired to the cooler with four husky daredevils. They opened the door, all of them curious to look upon the Will-o'-the-wisp. But imagine their astonishment upon seeing him hanging from the bars of the window by his necktie! Some said that he was still writhing; others that he was already stiff. However that may be, they ran to Petrus Mauerer's house to inform him of the fact, and what is certain is that upon the latter's arrival the little man had breathed his last.

The justice of the peace and the doctor of Hirschwiller drew up a formal statement of the catastrophe; then they buried the unknown in a field of meadow grass and it was all over!

Now about three weeks after these occurrences, I went to see my cousin, Petrus Mauerer, whose nearest relative I was, and consequently his heir. This circumstance sustained an intimate acquaintance between us. We were at dinner, talking on indifferent matters, when the burgomaster recounted the foregoing little story, as I have just reported it.

E

At this proposition the shepherd recoiled promptly. If he had consulted his inclinations the poor man would have taken to flight; his pitiful expression made the burgomaster burst out laughing.

"Well, Hans, since he doesn't want to go down, show me the way," he said to the game warden.

"But, Mr. Burgomaster," said the latter, "you know very well that steps are missing; we should risk breaking our necks."

"Then what's to be done?"

"Yes, what's to be done?"

"Send your dog," replied Petrus.

The shepherd whistled to his dog, showed him the stairway, urged him--but he did not wish to take the chances any more than the others.

At this moment, a bright idea struck the rural guardsman.

"Ha! Mr. Burgomaster," said he, "if you should fire your gun inside."

"Faith," cried the other, "you're right, we shall catch a glimpse at least."

And without hesitating the worthy man approached the stairway and leveled his gun.