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LUDWIG TIECK

Blond Eckbert

In a region of the Harz Mountains there once lived a knight who was generally known simply as 'Blond Eckbert'. He was around forty years of age, barely of middle height, and his short light-blond hair hung thick and unadorned about his pale, haggard face. He lived a very quiet and withdrawn existence, was never involved in his neighbours' feuds, and was only seldom to be seen outside the curtain wall of his small castle. His wife was just as fond of this solitary life as he, and they seemed to love each other dearly; but they frequently lamented that heaven did not bless their union with children.

Only rarely did Eckbert receive guests and, when he did so, hardly anything in the normal course of life was changed for their sakes; moderation reigned in the castle and thrift itself appeared to rule over everything. On such occasions Eckbert was good-humoured and merry; when he was alone, however, a sort of reticence, a quiet reserved melancholy, could be seen in him.

No one came to the castle as often as Philipp Walther, a man with whom Eckbert had formed a friendship because he was more or less of the same way of thinking as Eckbert. Walther's home was in Franconia, but he often stayed for more than half a year in the vicinity of Eckbert's castle; here he would gather herbs and stones and spend his time in sorting them; he was not dependent upon anyone but lived on his modest fortune. Eckbert often accompanied him on his lonely walks and the friendship between the two deepened with every year.

Sometimes a man is anxious when he must keep a secret from his friend, a secret which, until then, he has most carefully concealed; then his soul feels an irresistible urge to reveal itself completely, to open its innermost depths to his friend in order to secure his friendship even more. In moments such as this, the two gentle souls reveal themselves to each other and it sometimes happens, too, that one shies away from the other's acquaintance.

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Walther

It was already autumn when, one misty evening, Eckbert was sitting with his friend and his wife Bertha before the hearth. The flames were casting a bright light throughout the room and playing upon the ceiling; the blackness of the night peered through the windows and the trees outside trembled in the wet cold. Walther was grumbling about the long way home which faced him. Eckbert suggested that he should stay to spend half the night in pleasant chat and then sleep in one of the rooms in the castle until morning. Walther agreed; now supper and wine were brought, more logs were piled upon the fire, and the conversation became merrier and more intimate.

After supper had been cleared away and the servants had gone, Eckbert took Walther by the hand and said: 'My friend, you must hear from my wife the story of her youth—a strange enough tale it is.'—'With pleasure,' replied Walther, and they took their places before the hearth once more.

The clock had just struck midnight and the moon was shining intermittently through the clouds scudding past. 'You must not think me intrusive,' Bertha began, 'but my husband says you are such a noble-minded man that it would be unjust to conceal anything from you. But please do not consider my story a mere fairy-tale, however strange it may sound.'

I was born in a small village; my father was a poor herdsman. My parents had such difficulties managing their household that they often did not know where the next crust of bread was to come from. But what saddened me far more was that my father and mother often quarrelled because of their poverty, and that one would reproach the other bitterly for it. What was more, I was always having to hear that I was a stupid, silly creature not capable of doing even the simplest task, and I was indeed very clumsy and awkward; I used to drop everything, I could not learn either sewing or spinning, I was of no help in the fields—but I understood my parents' plight only too well. I would often sit in the corner and dream of how I would help them if I were suddenly to become rich, how I would shower them with gold and silver and rejoice at their amazement; I imagined spirits appearing who showed me buried treasures or gave me little pebbles which turned into jewels—in a word, I busied myself with the

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strangest fantasies, and then, whenever I had to stand up to help with something or carry something, I was even more clumsy, because my head was spinning from all those odd imaginings.

My father was always very angry with me because, he said, I was such a useless burden on the family; he often treated me quite cruelly and it was seldom that I heard a friendly word from him. I was now about eight years old, so that they began to make serious efforts to have me work or learn something useful. My father believed it was only stubbornness or laziness on my part, making me wish to spend my days in idleness; and he was unbelievably hard on me and used to threaten me; but as this was all to no avail, he punished me in the cruellest possible manner, saying that this punishment would be repeated every day, because I was such a good-for-nothing creature.

I wept bitterly the whole night through; I felt so dreadfully forsaken and so sorry for myself that I wished I was dead. I feared the coming of the dawn; I did not know what to do; I wished for every possible talent and could not understand why I should be more stupid than the other children I knew. I was on the brink of despair.

As dawn approached I rose and, hardly knowing what I was doing, opened the door of our little hut. Soon I was in the open fields and, a short time later, I found myself in a forest where the light of day was hardly to be seen. On and on I ran without looking back; I did not feel tired at all, always imagining that my father would overtake me and, angry at me for running away, treat me even more cruelly.

The sun was already quite high in the sky when I came out of the forest; now I could see something dark ahead of me covered in a thick mist. Sometimes I had to climb hills, sometimes I had to walk a winding path through cliffs; now I guessed that I must be in the neighbouring mountains and I began to be afraid in the midst of the solitude; I had never seen mountains on the plain where we lived, and the very word 'mountains' was a dreadful sound to my ears whenever I heard it mentioned. I had not the courage to go back and my fear drove me on; often I looked around in terror whenever the wind rushed through the trees above me or the sound of a distant axe echoed far through the still morning air. When at last I encountered some miners and

As evening approached, the surrounding district seemed somewhat more friendly; my thoughts and wishes revived and the desire to live awoke in all my veins. Now I thought I could hear the clatter of a mill in the distance, I doubled my pace—and oh! how happy, how relieved I felt when at last I came to the end of those barren cliffs; I saw woods and meadows with smiling, far-off hills ahead of me once more. It was as if I had walked out of Hell into Paradise, and my loneliness and helplessness no longer seemed so frightening.

Instead of the mill I had hoped for, I came upon a waterfall, which naturally lessened my joy a great deal; I was just scooping a handful of water from the brook when I thought I heard a gentle sound of coughing some distance away. Never have I been so pleasantly surprised as at that moment; I went closer, and there at the edge of the wood I glimpsed an old woman who seemed to be resting. She was dressed almost entirely in black, a black hood covered her head and a large part of her face, and she was holding a crutch in her hand.

I went up to her and begged her to help me; she bade me sit down beside her and gave me bread and some wine. Whilst I was eating, she sang a hymn in a grating voice, then, when she had finished singing, she bade me follow her.

I was very pleased at this request, even though the old woman's voice and manner seemed so strange to me. With the help of her crutch she walked quite nimbly, though pulling a face at every step, so that I could not help laughing at first. The wild crags lay farther and farther behind us; we went across a pleasant meadow and then through a fairly wide forest. The sun was just setting as we came out of the forest, and I shall never forget the sight and my feelings on that evening. Everything was melting in the softest shade of red and gold, the trees were standing with their tops against the setting sun; the fields were bathed in its beautiful light, the woods and the leaves of the trees were still, the clear sky seemed like an open paradise; the whispering of the streams and, from time to time, the rustling of the trees resounded through the pleasant stillness as if in melancholy joy. For the first time, my soul began to gain an inkling of the world and what went on in it. I completely forgot myself and my guide, and my eyes and mind were lost in wonder amid the golden clouds.

charcoal burners and heard their outlandish accents, I almost fainted with fright.

Then I came through a number of villages where I had to beg, for now I was hungry and thirsty; I was able to get along fairly well with my replies whenever people questioned me. I had been wandering for about four days when I came to a narrow, steep path which led me farther and farther from the highway. The crags around me now took on another, far uncannier aspect: cliffs, piled one upon another in such a way that it seemed the first puff of wind would topple them. I did not know whether I should go on. Until now, I had always slept in the forest at night—for it was just then the loveliest time of year—or in shepherd's huts off the beaten track; but here I could see no human dwelling, nor could I expect to find one in this wilderness; the cliffs became more and more frightening; often I had to walk past dizzying chasms and at last even the path came to an end beneath my feet. I was in despair, I wept and shrieked and my voice echoed dreadfully in the rocky valleys. Now night was falling and I looked for a mossy spot where I might rest. But I could not sleep; during the night I heard the most eerie sounds; sometimes I took them for wild animals, sometimes for the wind moaning through the cliffs, and sometimes for strange birds. I said my prayers and did not fall asleep until it was almost morning.

I awoke with daylight shining in my face. A steep cliff rose in front of me, and I climbed up in the hope of discovering a way out of the wilderness, and perhaps of seeing houses and people. When I reached the top, however, everything, as far as my eye could see, was just like the scene around me; everywhere was veiled in a misty haze; the day was grey and gloomy, nowhere could I spy a tree, a meadow, or even a bush, save for some single shrubs which had sprouted, lonely and dreary, out of narrow cracks in the cliffs. I cannot describe how I yearned to see just one human being, even if it should be someone I would fear. At the same time I was tormented by a ravaging hunger. I sat down and made up my mind to die. But after a while the desire to live gained the upper hand, and I dragged myself to my feet and walked on, weeping and sighing broken sighs the whole day; at last I scarcely knew who I was, so tired and exhausted was I; I hardly wished to live, yet I was afraid to die.

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Now we went up a hill on which birch trees were growing; from the top you could look down into a green valley filled with birches and in the midst of the trees was a small hut. We heard the sound of excited barking, and soon a lively little dog appeared, leaping up at the old woman and wagging his tail; then he came to me, looked at me from all sides, and went back to the old woman again, jumping happily about her.

As we walked down the hill I heard a wonderful sound of singing, like that of a bird, which seemed to come from the hut. The song went like this:

The woods lonely
A joy to me
Each day will be
In eternity.
What joy to me
The woods lonely.

These few words were constantly repeated; I would say it sounded almost as if a horn and a shawm were playing together far, far away.

In a fit of extreme curiosity I walked into the hut without waiting for a word from the old woman. It was already twilight; everything in the hut was neat and tidy, there were some cups standing on a cupboard and some curious vessels upon a table; there was a bird in a gleaming cage near the window, and it was indeed the bird that was singing those words. The old woman began coughing and wheezing, and I thought she would never recover; sometimes she would stroke the little dog, sometimes she would speak to the bird, which only answered with its usual song; all in all she behaved as if I were simply not there. I could not help shuddering whenever I looked at her, for her face kept twitching, and she kept nodding her head as well, as if from old age, so that I could not see at all what she really looked like.

After she had recovered she lighted a lamp and laid a tiny little table, on which she placed our supper. Then she looked around for me and bade me bring up one of the basket chairs; now I sat facing her with the lamp between us. Folding her bony hands together she began to pray aloud, her face twitching all

the while, so that again I almost laughed; but I took care not to do so, not wishing to make her angry.

After supper was over she prayed again; then she showed me to a bed in a low, narrow room; she herself slept in the outer room. I did not remain awake for long, I was half dazed with weariness, but I awoke several times in the night to hear the old woman talking to the dog and, now and then, to the bird, which seemed to be dreaming and only sang a few words of its song. All this, together with the birch trees rustling in front of the window and the song of a distant nightingale, made such a strange medley that I had a feeling of not being awake, but only of falling into another, even stranger dream.

Next morning the old woman woke me and, shortly after, showed me the work I was to do. I had to spin for her, and this I learned quickly; I also had to look after the dog and the bird. I was soon able to cope with the household, and I became familiar with all the things around me; I now felt that everything had to be just as it was; nor did it occur to me any more that there was something strange about the old woman, that her house was bizarre and far away from other human dwellings, and that there was something extraordinary about the bird. Naturally I was always aware of its beauty; its feathers gleamed in every possible colour, the loveliest pale blue and the most fiery red alternated on its throat and body, and when it sang it swelled its breast proudly, so that its feathers seemed more splendid than ever.

The old woman often went away and did not return until evening; then I would go with the dog to meet her and she would call me her child and daughter. At last I became fond of her with all my heart, just as we grow accustomed to everything, especially in our childhood. In the evenings she would teach me to read; I learned to do so easily and later it became a source of endless pleasure to me in my loneliness, for she had some old, handwritten books with wonderful stories.

The memory of how I lived in those days seems strange to me even now; never visited by any human creature, living in such a narrow family circle—for the dog and the bird were like old friends to me. I have never been able to recall the dog's strange name since, in spite of all the times I called him.

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I had been living with the old woman for four years in this way, and I must have been about twelve when she at last began to trust me more and revealed a secret to me: every day the bird used to lay an egg with a pearl or a jewel inside it. Already I had often noticed her furtively busying herself with the cage, although I had never taken any particular notice. Now she gave me the task of taking out the eggs when she was away and keeping them safe in those curious vessels. She used to leave me my food and remain away for longer periods—for weeks, for months; my spinning-wheel would hum, the dog would bark, the wondrous bird would sing, and yet everything around was so quiet that, all the time I was there, I cannot recall ever hearing a gale or a thunderstorm. No human soul ever strayed to our house, no wild animal ever approached our door; I was contented and worked from one day to the next.—People might perhaps be very happy if they could live like that, undisturbed until the end of their days.

From the little that I read, I formed strange fantasies about the world and its people; all these I deduced from myself and the beings around me: whenever merry people were mentioned, I could only imagine them to be like the little dog; splendid ladies always looked like the bird, and all old women looked like that strange old one of mine. I had also read something about love, and enacted wondrous tales in my own imagination. I thought up the most handsome knight in the world, I endowed him with every possible virtue, without really knowing what he looked like after all my efforts; but I was also able to feel genuine pity for myself when he did not return my love; then I would deliver long, moving speeches to myself, at times aloud, only to win his love.—I see you smiling! Well, of course, we are all of us past that time of our youth.

By now I preferred to be alone, for then I was the mistress of the house. The dog was very fond of me and did everything I wished; the bird replied to all my questions with its only song, and my spinning-wheel turned merrily so that, truly, I never wished for things to be different. Whenever the old woman returned from her long travels she would praise me for my work; she said that her house was kept much more orderly since I lived there. She was pleased to see how I was growing and how healthy I looked; in a word, she treated me just like a daughter.

'You're a good girl, child,' she once said to me in her grating voice; 'if you continue this way, life will always be kind to you; but no one who strays from the path of righteousness will ever prosper, and punishment will follow, no matter how late'.—I did not pay much heed as she said this, for I was always a very lively child in all my deeds and all my being; during the night, however, her words came back to me, yet I did not understand what she had meant. I thought them all over very carefully, for I had indeed read about riches, and at last it occurred to me that her pearls and jewels might well be something valuable. Soon this thought became clearer and clearer to me. But whatever could she mean by the 'path of righteousness'? I still did not fully understand the meaning of her words.

I was now fourteen years of age, and it is always man's misfortune that he only gains his wits in order to lose the innocence of his soul. For I fully realized that I alone could decide whether I should take the bird and the jewels while the old woman was away and go out into the world which I had read about. At the same time, I thought, perhaps I might be able to meet that very handsome knight who still lived in my memory.

This thought was at first no more vivid than any other but, whenever I sat at my spinning-wheel, it would always come back to me against my will and I would immerse myself so deeply in it that I could imagine myself splendidly adorned with jewels and surrounded by knights and princes. And whenever I had forgotten myself in this way, I would feel very gloomy when I looked up once more and found myself in the little dwelling. While I was at my work, by the way, the old woman did not trouble herself about me.

One day my hostess again set out, saying that this time she would remain away longer than usual, that I should take good care of everything, and not waste my time. It was not without a certain anxiety that I said farewell to her, for I had a feeling that I would not see her again. I stood watching her for a long time as she went off, though I did not know myself why I was so afraid; it was almost as if my plan lay directly before me without my really knowing it.

Never did I make such efforts to care for the dog and the bird; they meant more to me then than ever before. The old woman

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had already been gone for several days when I rose one morning with the firm intention of taking the bird with me and going off to seek the world, as it is called. My thoughts oppressed me and weighed heavily upon me. I wanted to remain there and yet the idea was repulsive to me; a strange struggle raged in my soul, like a quarrel between two conflicting spirits within me. One moment the calm solitude seemed so pleasant, the next, I was captivated by the thought of a new world with all its wonderful variety.

I did not know what to make of myself; the dog kept jumping up at me, the sunshine spread joyfully across the meadows, and the green birch-trees glistened; I felt as if I had something very urgent to do; I seized the little dog, tied him up in the room, and took the cage, with the bird in it, under my arm. The dog twisted and turned, whining at such unaccustomed treatment; he looked at me with pleading eyes but I was afraid to take him with me. Then I picked up one of the vessels filled with jewels and put it in my pocket, leaving the others where they were.

The bird turned its head in a curious manner as I walked out of the door carrying it, and the dog did everything he could to follow me, but he had to remain behind.

Avoiding the path which led to the menacing cliffs, I went in the opposite direction. The dog was barking and whining, which deeply affected me; the bird made as if to sing several times but, since I was carrying it, did not much care to do so.

The farther I went, the weaker became the sound of the dog's barking, until at last it died away completely. I wept and almost went back again, but the urge to see something new drove me on.

I had already crossed the mountains and passed through several forests when evening approached and I had to spend the night in a village inn. I was very shy as I walked in; I was given a room and a bed where I slept quite peacefully, except that I dreamed of the old woman threatening me.

It was a rather tiresome journey, yet the farther I went, the more frightened I was by my thoughts of the old woman and the little dog; I thought that he was bound to starve without me to care for him, and often, when I was in the forest, I imagined the

old woman would suddenly appear before me. And so I went on my way, sighing and weeping, and whenever I halted and set down the cage, the bird would sing its wondrous song and I would vividly recall my happy sojourn, now left behind me. So forgetful is human nature: I now believed that my first journey during my childhood had not been as sorrowful as the present one and I wished myself back in my childhood again.

I had sold some of the jewels, and now, after wandering about for many days, I came to a village. Even as I entered it I had an odd feeling; I was afraid, though I did not know why, but soon I realized where I was: it was the very same village where I had been born. How astonished I was! A thousand strange memories flooded over me, and tears of joy ran down my cheeks. Many things had changed; new houses had been built, whilst others, which had only just been built when I lived there, had now fallen down; I could also see where houses had burned down; everything was far smaller, far more cramped than I had expected. I looked forward with boundless joy to seeing my parents again after so many years; I found the little house again, the familiar threshold and the door-handle were exactly as before, it seemed as if I had pulled the door to only yesterday; I quickly opened it, my heart pounding furiously—but the faces in the room were completely strange to me and stared at me in surprise. I asked them about Martin the shepherd and they told me that he and his wife had been dead for three years.—I left the house hastily and went away from the village, weeping loudly.

I had imagined how wonderful it would be to surprise them with my riches; by the strangest chance, the things that I had dreamed of as a child had now come true—and now everything was in vain; they could not share my happiness, and what I had always hoped for most in life was now lost to me forever.

In a pleasant town I rented a little house with a garden and engaged a servant girl. I did not find the world so wonderful as I had supposed but, little by little, I forgot the old woman and my former home and lived, on the whole, quite contentedly.

The bird had not sung for a long time, and so I was more than a little frightened when, one night, it suddenly began to sing again, though it was now a different song:

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The woods lonely
 How far from me!
 Regrets there'll be
 In time, you'll see.
 Alas, the only joy for me,
 The woods lonely.

I could not sleep the whole night through; it all came back to me once again and I felt more than once that I had done wrong. When I awoke, the sight of the bird was perfectly hateful to me; it looked at me all the time and its very presence made me anxious. Now it did not cease its song at all, but sang louder and more strongly than it had used to sing before. The more I watched it, the more frightened I became; at last I opened the cage, put in my hand, and seized it by the throat; then I closed my fingers firmly; the bird looked at me with pleading eyes, and I released my grip, but it was already dead.—I buried it in the garden.

Now I was often afraid of my maidservant, I thought back to my own days as a servant and believed that she, too, might rob me some day or even murder me.—For a long time I had known a young knight whom I liked very much; I gave him my hand in marriage—and that, Herr Waltherr, is the end of my tale.

'You should have seen her in those days,' broke in Eckbert hurriedly; 'her youth, her beauty—what a strange charm her lonely upbringing had given her. To me she seemed a miracle and I loved her more than words can tell. I had no fortune of my own, but came into this wealth through her love for me; we came here and, until this day, we have not regretted our marriage for a single instant.'

'But with all our chatting,' went on Bertha once more, 'it is now the middle of the night—we should go to bed.'

She rose to her feet and made to go to her chamber. Waltherr kissed her hand, wishing her good night, and said: 'Thank you, noble lady; I can well imagine you with that wondrous bird and giving little *Strohmanian* his food.'

Waltherr, too, then went to bed, only Eckbert remained walking back and forth in the hall.—'Is not man a foolish creature?'

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he said at last to himself; 'I of all people was the cause of my wife telling Waltherr her story, and now I regret the trust I placed in him.—Will he not abuse my trust? Will he not tell it to others? Will he not perhaps—for that is man's nature—feel a base desire to possess our jewels and secretly make plans to steal them?'

It occurred to Eckbert that Waltherr had not taken leave of him with such heartfelt fondness as would have been natural after such a display of trust. Once suspicion is aroused within a man's soul it finds confirmation of this suspicion in every little detail. Then Eckbert reproached himself for his ignoble mistrust of his good friend, yet he could not banish it from his mind. He busied himself with these fantasies all night and slept very little indeed.

Bertha was ill and unable to appear at breakfast; Waltherr did not seem to be greatly concerned about this and took leave of Eckbert in a rather indifferent manner. Eckbert could not understand his friend's behaviour; he went to see his lady, in bed with a high fever; she said that the tale she had told that night must have excited her.

Since that evening, Waltherr very seldom visited his friend's castle; and when he did so, he would leave again after a few trivial words. This behaviour troubled Eckbert very deeply; he did not betray his feelings either to Bertha or to Waltherr, yet no one could have failed to notice his inner restlessness.

Bertha's illness became more and more disturbing; the physician grew anxious, the rosy colour had vanished from her cheeks and her eyes were more and more feverish.—One morning she summoned her husband to her bedside and the maids were ordered to leave.

'Dearest husband,' she said, 'I must confess something which, small and insignificant though it may be, has almost driven me out of my mind and is destroying my health.—You know that, whenever I came to speak of my childhood, I could never recall the name of the little dog that I took care of for so long, no matter how much I tried; when Waltherr was taking leave of me that evening, he suddenly said to me: "I can well imagine you giving little *Strohmanian* his food." Was that mere chance? Did he guess the name? Does he know the name and did he pronounce

it intentionally? And how is this man bound up with my fate? At times I struggle with myself, as if I were only imagining this curious incident—but it is true, only too true. I was struck by an awful terror when this unknown person helped my memory in this way. What do *you* think, Eckbert?

Eckbert, deeply moved, looked at his suffering wife; he said nothing, but pondered for a while, then, with a few words of consolation, he left her. In a remote room of the castle he walked back and forth in a conflict of unspeakable anxiety. For many years Walther had been his only friend, but was now the only person in the world whose existence oppressed and tormented him. Eckbert felt he would be happy and free of care if only this one person could be got out of his way. In search of some distraction he took his crossbow and went off to hunt.

It was a rough, stormy winter's day; the hills lay covered in deep snow which bent the branches of the trees. He wandered about aimlessly, his brow beaded with sweat; he did not find any game, which only served to increase his ill humour. Suddenly he saw something moving in the distance; it was Walther, gathering moss from the trees. Without knowing what he was doing, Eckbert raised his crossbow. Walther turned round and made a silent, threatening gesture, but then the bolt flew on its way and Walther fell to the ground.

Eckbert felt relieved and free of care, yet a cold fear drove him back to his castle; he had a long way to go, for he had strayed deep into the woods.—When he reached the castle Bertha was already dead; before she died she had spoken a great deal about Walther and the old woman.

Eckbert now lived a long while in deepest solitude. He had always been of a melancholy turn, for his wife's uncanny tale disturbed him, and he was afraid that something dreadful might happen—now, however, he was entirely at odds with himself. In his mind's eye, he kept seeing the murder of his friend, and could not stop reproaching himself for what he had done.

In order to take his mind off these matters he sometimes went off to the nearest large town to attend banquets and take part in festivities. He was moved by a wish to fill the emptiness in his soul with the help of some friend or other, yet whenever he thought of Walther he would shudder at the idea of finding a

new friend, for he was convinced that friendship with anyone at all would only bring him unhappiness. He had lived so long in peace and harmony with Bertha, and his friendship with Walther had brought him happiness for many a year, and now both had been torn away from him so suddenly that, at certain moments, his life seemed to him more like a strange fairy-tale than real life.

A young knight, Hugo, sought the acquaintance of the quiet, melancholy Eckbert and seemed to have a genuine liking for him. Eckbert was surprised in a strange way; the unexpectedness of the young knight's friendship led him to respond all the more quickly. Soon the two men were often in each other's company; the stranger showed Eckbert every possible form of kindness, and one would scarcely ever ride out without the other; they would meet at every festivity; in short, they seemed inseparable.

Yet all the time Eckbert was happy only for a few brief moments, for he clearly felt that Hugo was fond of him only because he was mistaken in him; Hugo did not know him and was not familiar with his story, so that Eckbert once more felt the same compulsion to confess everything to him in order to be certain that Hugo really was his friend. But again he was restrained by his doubts and his fear that Hugo would feel revulsion for him. Many a time he was so convinced of his own unworthiness that he believed no one to whom he was not a complete stranger could possibly have respect for him. Yet he could not resist the urge; while they were out on a lonely ride together he revealed the whole story to his friend, and then asked him whether he could feel affection for a murderer. Hugo, deeply moved, tried to console him; Eckbert, now relieved, went with Hugo into the town.

But it seemed to be his fate always to harbour suspicion in the very moment of taking someone into his confidence; hardly had they entered the banquet hall when he felt displeased by his friend's expression, seen in the light of the many lamps. He thought he could detect a mocking smile on Hugo's features; he noticed that Hugo spoke very little to him, that he spoke a great deal to the other guests whilst seeming to pay no attention to Eckbert at all. There was an old knight present at the feast who

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had always shown himself to be Eckbert's enemy and had often displayed an odd interest in Eckbert's wealth and in Bertha. Hugo took his place beside the knight and the two conversed secretly for a while together, pointing to Eckbert as they did so. Eckbert saw his suspicions confirmed; thinking himself betrayed, he fell into a dreadful rage. As he continued to stare at the two men, he suddenly saw Walther's face with all its features, Walther's entire form that was so familiar to him; he went on staring, convinced that none other than *Walther* was speaking to the old knight.

The terror which he felt was indescribable; storming wildly out of the hall, he left the town that very night and returned to his castle by many devious paths.

There he ran like a restless spirit from one chamber to the next, unable to think clearly, and his mind raced from one dreadful fantasy to another, yet more dreadful; he could not close his eyes in sleep even for a moment. Often he believed himself to be mad, and that everything was a product of his own imagination; then he would recall Walther's features once again and everything would become more and more a mystery. He decided to go on a journey in order to collect his thoughts; his hopes of finding friendship, his desire for company, he had now given up for ever.

He set off without determining which way to take; he scarcely noticed the scenery which lay in front of him. After having pressed on for several days as fast as his horse could go, he suddenly realized that he was lost in a labyrinth of rocks, from which no way out was to be seen. At last he met a peasant who showed him a path which led past a waterfall; he tried to give him a few coins by way of thanks, but the man refused.—'What am I thinking of?' said Eckbert to himself; 'I could easily believe it was none other than Walther!' He looked back once more and indeed it was none other than Walther.—Eckbert spurred his horse on through forest and meadow as fast as it could gallop until at last, worn out, it collapsed beneath him.—Unconcerned, he now continued his way on foot.

In a dream, he climbed a hill; he thought he heard the sound of lively barking nearby, mingled with the rustling of birch-trees, and a strange song came to his ears:

The woods lonely
Once more a joy to me.
No pain there'll be,
Here's no envy
But joy once more for me,
The woods lonely.

Now his consciousness and senses failed him completely; he could find no answer to the mystery, whether he was now dreaming or whether he had once dreamed of a woman named Bertha; the most fantastic things were mingled with the most commonplace; the world around him seemed enchanted, and he himself incapable of any thought, of any memory.

A bent-backed old woman leaning on a crutch crept up the hill, coughing. 'Have you brought me my bird? my pearls? my dog?' she screeched at him. 'There, you see—evil punishes itself—I and no other was: your friend Walther, your friend Hugo.'

'Almighty God!' murmured Eckbert to himself—'in what awful loneliness have I spent my life!'

'And Bertha was your sister.'

Eckbert fell to the ground.

'Why did she leave me so treacherously? All would have been well and ended well—her trial years were over. She was the daughter of a knight who had her brought up by a herdsman; she was your father's daughter.'

'Why have I always had these dreadful forebodings?' cried Eckbert.

'Because when you were very young, you once heard your father tell the story; because of his wife, he could not bring up his daughter in his home, for she was the child of another woman.'

Eckbert lay crazed and dying upon the ground; in dim confusion he heard the old woman speaking, the dog barking, and the bird repeating its song.

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