Uncle Christian's Inheritance

Erckmann−Chatrian

Table of Contents

Uncle Christian's Inheritance.....**1**
Erckmann−Chatrian.....2

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When my excellent uncle Christian Hâas, burgomaster of Lauterbach, died, I had a good situation as maître de chapelle, or precentor, under the Grand Duke Yen Peter, with a salary of fifteen hundred florins, notwithstanding which I was a poor man still.

Uncle Christian knew exactly how I was situated, and yet had never sent me a kreutzer. So when I learned that he had left me owner of two hundred acres of rich land in orchards and vineyards, a good bit of woodland, and his large house at Lauterbach, I could not help shedding tears of gratitude.

"My dear uncle," I cried, "now I can appreciate the depth of your wisdom, and I thank you most sincerely for your judicious illiberality. Where would now the money be, supposing you had sent me anything? In the hands of the Philistines, no doubt; whereas by your prudent delays you have saved the country, like another Fabius Cunctator—

'Qui cunctando restituit rem—'

I honour your memory, Uncle Christian! I do indeed!"

Having delivered myself of these deep feelings, and many more which I cannot enter into now, I got on horseback and rode off to Lauterbach.

Strange, is it not, how the Spirit of Avarice, hitherto quite a stranger to me, came to make my acquaintance?

"Caspar!" he whispered, "now you are a rich man! Hitherto vain shadows have filled your mind. A man must be a fool to follow glory. There is nothing solid but acres, and buildings, and crown−pieces, put out in safe mortgages. Fling aside all your vain delusions! Enlarge your boundaries, round off your estate, heap up money, and then you will be honoured and respected!

You will be a burgomaster as your uncle was before you, and the country folks, when they see you coming a mile off, will pull off their hats, and say—'Here is Monsieur Caspar Hâas, the richest man and the biggest herr in the country.' "

These notions kept passing and repassing in my mind like the figures in a magic−lantern, with grave and measured step. The whole thing seemed to me perfectly reasonable.

It was the middle of July. The lark was warbling in the sky. The crops were waving in the plain, the gentle breezes carried on them the soft cry of the quail and the partridge amongst the standing wheat; the foliage was glancing in the sunshine, and the Lauter ran its course beneath the willows; but what was all that to me, the great burgomaster? I puffed up my cheeks and rounded off my figure in anticipation of the portly appearance I was to present, and repeated to myself those delightful observations—

"This is Monsieur Caspar Hâas; he is a very rich man! he is the first herr in the country! Get on, Blitz!"

And the nag trotted forward.

I was anxious to try on my uncle's three−cornered hat and scarlet waistcoat. "If they fit me," I said, "what is the use of buying?"

About four in the afternoon the village of Lauterbach appeared at the end of the valley, and very proud I felt as I surveyed the tall and handsome house of the late Christian Hâas, my future abode, the centre of my property, real and speculative. I admired its situation by the long dusty road, its vast roof of grey shingle, the sheds and barns covering with their broad expanse the waggons, the carts, and the crops; behind, the poultry−yard, then the little garden, the orchard, the vineyards up the hill, the green meadows farther off.

I chuckled with delight over all these comforts and luxuries.

As I went down the principal street the old women with nose and chin nearly meeting at the extremity, the bare−pated children with ragged hair, the men in their otter−skin caps, and silver−chained pipes in their mouths,

all gaze upon me, and respectfully salute me—

"Good day, Monsieur Caspar! How do you do, Monsieur Hâas?"

And all the small windows were filled with wondering faces. I am at home now; I seem as if I had always been a great landowner at Lauterbach, and a notable. My kapellmeister's life seems a dream, a thing of the past, my enthusiastic fondness for music a youthful folly! How money does modify men's views of things!

And now I draw bridle before the house of the village notary, Monsieur Becker. He has my title−deeds under his care, and is to hand them over to me. I fasten my horse to the ring at the door. I run up the steps, and the ancient scribe, with his bald head very respectfully uncovered, and his long spare figure clad in a green dressing−gown with full skirts, advances alone to receive me.

"Monsieur Caspar Hâas, I have the honour to salute you."

"Your servant, Monsieur Becker."

"Pray walk in, Monsieur Hâas."

"After you, sir, after you."

We cross the vestibule, and I find at the end of a small, neat, and well−aired room a table nicely and comfortably laid, and sitting by it a young maiden rosy and fresh−coloured, the very picture of modesty and propriety.

The venerable notary announced me— "Monsieur Caspar Hâas!"

I bowed.

"My daughter Lothe!" added the good man.

And whilst I felt in myself a reviving taste for the beautiful, and was admiring Mademoiselle Lothe's pretty little chubby nose, the rosy lips, and the large blue eyes, her dainty little figure, and her dimpled hands, Maître Becker invited me to sit down at the table, informing me that he had been expecting me, and that before entering on matters of business it would be well to take a little refreshment, a glass of Bordeaux, an invitation of which I fully recognised the propriety, and which I accepted very willingly.

And so we sit down. We talk first of the beautiful country. And I form opinions about the old gentleman, and wonder what a notary is likely to make at Lauterbach!

"Mademoiselle, will you take a wing?"

"Monsieur, you are very kind; thank you, I will."

Lothe looks down bashfully. I fill her glass, in which she dips her rosy lips. Papa is in good spirits; he tells me about hunting and fishing.

"Of course Monsieur Hâas will live as we do in the country. We have excellent rabbit−warrens.

The rivers abound in trout. The shooting in the forests is let out. People mostly spend their evenings at the inn. Monsieur the inspector of woods and forests is a delightful young man. The juge−de−paix is a capital whist−player," and so on, and so on.

I listen, and think all this quiet life must be delightful. Mademoiselle Lothe pleases me a good deal. She does not talk much, but she smiles and looks so agreeable! How loving and amiable she must be!

At last the coffee came, then the kirschwasser. Mademoiselle Lothe retires, and the old lawyer gradually passes to business. He explains to me the nature of my uncle's property, and I listen attentively. There was no part of the will in dispute; there were no legacies, no mortgages.

Everything is clear and straightforward. Happy Caspar! Happy man!

Then we went into the office to look over the deeds. The close air of this place of dry, hard business, those long rows of boxes, the files of bills—all these together put weak notions of love out of my head. I sat down in an armchair while Monsieur Becker, collecting his thoughts, puts his horn spectacles in their place upon his long, sharp nose.

"These deeds relate to your meadow−land at Eichmatt. There, Monsieur Hâas, you have a hundred acres of excellent land, the finest and best−watered in the commune; two and even three crops a year are got off that land. It brings in four thousand francs a year. Here are the deeds belonging to your vine−growing land at Sonnenthâl, thirty−five acres in all. One year with another you may get from this two hundred hectolitres (4,400 gals.) of light wine, sold on the ground at twelve or fifteen francs the hectolitre. Good years make up for the bad. This, Monsieur Hâas, is your title to the forest of Romelstein, containing fifty or sixty hectares (a hectare is 2 ½ acres) of excellent timber. This is your property at Hacmatt; this your pasture−land at Tiefenthal. This is your farm at

Grüneswald, and here is the deed belonging to your house at Lauterbach; it is the largest house in the place, and was built in the sixteenth century."

"Indeed, Monsieur Becker! but is that saying much in its favour?"

"Certainly, certainly. It was built by Jean Burckhardt, Count of Barth, for a hunting−box. Many generations have lived in it since then, but it has never been neglected, and it is now in excellent repair."

I thanked Monsieur Becker for the information he had given me, and having secured all my title−deeds in a large portfolio which he was good enough to lend me, I took my leave, more full than ever of my vast importance!

Arriving before my house, I enjoyed introducing the key into the lock of the door, and bringing down my foot firmly and proudly on the first step.

"This is all mine!" I cried enthusiastically.

I enter the hall—"Mine!" I open the wardrobes—"Mine!" Mine—all that linen piled up to the top! I pace majestically up the broad staircase, repeating like a fool, "This is mine, and that is mine! Here I am, owner of all this! No more uneasiness about the future! Not an anxious thought for the morrow! Now I am going to make a figure in the world!—not on the weak ground of merit—not for anything that fashion can alter. I am a great man because I hold really and effectually that which the world covets.

"Ye poets and artists! what are you in comparison with the rich proprietor who has everything he wants, and who feeds your inspiration with the crumbs that fall from his table? What are you but ornamental portions of his feasts and banquets, just to fill up a weary interval? You are no more than the sparrow that warbles in his hedges, or the statue that figures in his garden−walk. It is by him and for him that you exist. What need has he to envy you the incense of pride and vanity—he who possesses the only solid good this world has to offer?"

At that moment of inflated conceit if the poor Kapellmeister Hâas had appeared before me I might very likely have turned and looked at him over my shoulder and asked, "What fool is that? What business has he with me?".I threw a window open; evening was closing in. The setting sun gilded my orchards and my vines as far as I could see. On the declivity of the hill a few white patches indicated the cemetery.

I turned round. A great Gothic hall, with rich mouldings decorating the ceiling, pleased my taste exceedingly. This was the Seigneur Burckhardt's hunting−saloon.

An old spinet stood between two windows; I ran my fingers absently over the keys, and the loose strings jingled with the disagreeable squeaking of a toothless old woman trying to sing like a young damsel.

At the end of this long apartment was an arched alcove closed in by deep red curtains, and containing a lofty four−post bedstead with a kind of grand baldacchino covering it in. The sight of this reminded me that I had been six hours on horseback, and undressing with a self−satisfied smirk on my face all the time—

"It is the first time," I said, "that I shall sleep in a bed of my own."

And laying myself comfortably down, with my eyes dreamily wandering over the distant plains on which the shadows of evening were settling down, I felt my eyelids gently yielding to the sweet influence of sleep. Not a leaf was stirring; the village noises ceased one by one, the last golden rays of the sun had disappeared, and I dropped into the unconsciousness of welcome sleep.

Dark night fell on the face of the earth, and then the moon was rising in all her splendour, when I awoke, I cannot tell why. The wandering scents of summer air reached me through the open window, fragrant with the sweet perfume of the new−mown hay. I gazed with surprise, then I made an effort to rise and open the window, but some obstacle prevented me. To my astonishment, though my head was perfectly free to move in any direction, my body was buried in a deep sleep like a lump of lead. Not a single muscle obeyed my repeated efforts to raise my body; I was conscious of my arms lying extended near me, and my legs being stretched out straight and immovable; but my head was swaying helplessly to and fro. My breathing, deep and regular—the breathing of my body went on all the same, and frightened me dreadfully. My head, exhausted with its vain efforts to obtain obedience from the limbs, fell back in despair, and I said, "What! is it paralysis?"

My eyes closed. I was reflecting with a feeling of horror upon this strange phenomenon, and my ears were listening intently to the agitated beating of my heart, over whose hurried flow of blood the mind had no power.

"What, what is this?" I thought presently. "Do my own body and limbs refuse to obey my will? Cannot Caspar Hâas, the undisputed lord of so many rich vineyards and fat pastures, move this wretched clod of earth which most certainly belongs to him? Oh, what does it all mean?"

As I was thus wondering and meditating I heard a slight noise. The door of my alcove opened, and a man

clothed in some stiff material resembling felt, such as is worn by the monks in the chapel of St. Werburgh at Mayence, with a broad−brimmed hat and feather pushed off from the left ear, his hands buried up to the elbows in gauntlets of strong untanned leather, entered the room. This gentleman's huge jack−boots came over the knees, and were folded down again. A heavy chain of gold, with decorations suspended to it, hung from his shoulders. His tanned and angular countenance, his sallow complexion, his hollow eyes, bore an expression of bitterness and melancholy.

This dismal personage traversed the hall with a hard and sounding step as measured as the ticking of a clock, and placing his skinny hand upon the hilt of an immense long rapier, and stamping with his heel on the floor, he uttered in a horribly disagreeable creaking voice resembling the grating of an engine these words, which dropped in a dry mechanical fashion from his ashy lips:—

"This is mine—mine—Hans Burckhardt, Count of Barth!"

I felt a creeping sensation coming all over me.

At the same instant the door opposite flew open wide, and the Count of Barth disappeared in the next apartment; and I could hear his hard, dry automatic tread upon the stairs descending the steps, one by one, for a long time; there seemed no end to it, until at last the awful sounds died in the remote distance as if they had descended into the bowels of the earth.

But as I was still listening, and hearing nothing further, all in a moment the vast hall filled as if by magic with a numerous company; the spinet began to jingle; there was music and singing of love, and pleasure, and wine.

I gazed and saw by the bluish−grey moonlight ladies in the bloom of youth negligently floating over the floor, and chiefly about the old spinet; elegant cavaliers attired, as in the olden time, in innumerable dangling ribbons, and the very perfection of lace collars and ruffles, seated cross−legged upon gold−fringed stools, affectedly inclining sidelong, shaking their perfumed locks, making little bows, studying all kinds of graceful attitudes, and paying their court to the ladies, all so elegantly, and with such an air of gallantry, that it reminded me of the old mezzotint engravings of the graceful school of Lorraine in the sixteenth century.

And the stiff little fingers of an ancient dowager, with a parrot bill, were rattling the keys of the old spinet; bursts of thin laughter set discordant echoes flying, and ended in little squeaks with such a sharp discordant rattle of constrained laughter as made my hair stand on end.

All this silly little world—all this quintessence of fashion and elegance, long out of date, all exhaled the acrid odour of rose−water and essence of mignonette turned into vinegar.

I made new and superhuman exertions to get rid of this disagreeable nightmare, but it was all in vain. But at that instant a lady of the highest fashion cried aloud—

"Lords, you are at home here in all this domain—"

But she was cut short in her compliments; a silence like death fell on the whole assembly. They faded away. I looked, and the whole picture had vanished from my sight.

Then the sound of a trumpet fell on my listening ears. Horses were pawing the ground outside, dogs were barking, while the moon, calm, clear, inviting to meditation, still poured her soft light into my alcove.

The door opened as if by a blast of wind, and fifty huntsmen, followed by a company of young ladies attired as they were two centuries ago, in long trains, defiled with majestic pace out of one chamber into the other. Four serving−men passed amongst them, bearing on their brawny shoulders on a stout litter of oak boughs the bloody carcass of a monstrous wild boar, with dim and faded eye, and with the foam yet lying white on his formidable tusks and grisly jaws.

Then I heard the flourishes of the brazen trumpets redoubled in loudness and energy; but silence fell, and the pomp and dignity passed away with a sigh like the last moans of a storm in the woods; then—nothing at all—nothing to hear—nothing to see!

As I lay dreaming over this strange vision, and my eyes wandering vaguely over the empty space in the silent darkness, I observed with astonishment the blank space becoming silently occupied by one of the old Protestant families of former days, calm, solemn, and dignified in their bearing and conversation.

There sat the white−haired patriarch with the big Bible upon his knees; the aged mother, tall and pale, spinning the flax grown by themselves, sitting as straight and immovable as her own distaff, her ruff up to her ears, her long waist compressed in a stiff black bodice; then there sat the fat and rosy children, with serious countenances and thoughtful blue eyes, leaning in silence with their elbows on the table; the dog lay stretched by

the great hearth apparently listening to the reading; the old clock stood in the corner ticking seconds; farther on in the shadow were girls' faces and young men, talking seriously to them about Jacob and Rachel by way of love−making.

And this good family seemed penetrated with the truth of the sacred story; the old man in broken accents was reading aloud the edifying history of the settlement of the children of Israel in the Land of Canaan—
"This is the Land of Promise—the land promised to Abraham and Isaac and Jacob your fathers—that you may be multiplied in it as the stars of heaven for multitude, and as the sand which is upon the seashore. And none shall disturb you, for ye are the chosen people."

The moon, which had veiled her light for a few minutes, reappeared, and hearing no more sounds of voices, I looked round, and her clear cold rays fell in the great empty hall. Not a figure, not a shade, was left. The moonlight poured its silver flood upon the floor, and in the distance the forms of a few trees stood out against the dark purple sky.

But now suddenly the high walls appeared lined with books, the old spinet gave way to the secrétaire of some man of learning, whose full−bottomed wig was peering above the back of a red−leather arm−chair. I could hear the quill coursing over the paper. The learned man, buried in thought, never moved; the silence was oppressive.

But fancy my astonishment when, slowly turning, the great scholar faced me, and I recognised the portrait of the famous lawyer Gregorius, marked No. 253 in the portrait−gallery at Darmstadt.

How on earth had this personage walked out of his grave? I was asking myself this question when, in a hollow sepulchral voice, he pronounced these words:—
"Dominorum, ex jurè Quintio, est jus utendi et abutendi quatenus naturalis ratio patitur."

As this sapient precept dropped oracularly from his lips, a word at a time, his figure faded and turned pale. With the last word he had passed out of existence.

What more shall I tell you, my dear friends? For hours, twenty generations came defiling past me in Hans Burckhardt's ancient mansion—Christians and Jews, nobles and commoners, fools and wise men of high art, and men of mere prose. Every one proclaimed his indefeasible right to the property; every one firmly believed himself sole lord and master of all he surveyed. Alas!

Death breathed upon one after another, and they were all carried out, each as his turn came!

I was beginning to be familiar with this strange phantasmagoria. Each time that any of these honest folks turned round and declared to me, "This is mine!" I laughed and said, "Wait a bit, my fine fellow!—you will melt away just like the rest!"

At last I began to feel tired of it, when far away—very far—the cock crowed, announcing the dawn of day. His piercing call began to rouse the sleeper. The leaves rustled with the morning air; a slight shiver shook my frame; I felt my limbs gradually regaining their freedom, and, resting upon my elbow, I gazed with rapture upon the silent wide−spread land. But what I saw presently did not tend to exalt my spirits.

Along the little winding path to the cemetery were moving, in solemn procession, all the ghosts that had visited me in the night. Step by step they approached the decaying moss−grown door of the sacred inclosure; that silent, mournful march of spectres under the dim grey light of early morning was a gaunt and fearful sight.

And as I lay, more dead than alive, with gaping mouth and my face wet with cold perspiration, the head of the dismal line melted and disappeared among the weeping willows.

There were not many spectres left, and I was beginning to feel a little more composed, when the very last, my uncle Christian himself, turned round to me under the mossy gate and beckoned me to follow! A distant faint ironical voice said—
"Caspar! Caspar! come! Six feet of this ground belong to you!"

Then he too disappeared.

A streak of crimson and purple stretched across the eastern sky announced the coming day.

I need not tell you that I did not accept my uncle Christian's invitation, though I am quite aware that a similar call will one day arrive from One who must be obeyed. The remembrance of my brief abode at Burckhardt's fort has wonderfully brought down the great opinion I had once formed of my own importance, for the vision of that night taught me that though orchards and meadows may not pass away their owners do, and this fact compels to serious reflection upon the nature of our duties and responsibilities.

I therefore wisely resolved not to risk the loss of manly energy and of the best prizes of life by tarrying at that

Capua, but to betake myself, without further loss of time, to the pursuit of music as a science, and I hope to produce next year, at the Royal Theatre of Berlin, an opera which, I hope, will disarm all criticism at once.

I have come to the final conclusion that glory and renown, which speculative people speak of as if they were mere smoke, is, after all, the most enduring good. Life and a noble reputation do not depart together; on the contrary, death confirms well−deserved glory and adds to it a brighter lustre.

Suppose, for instance, that Homer returned to life, no one would dispute with him his claim to be the author of the Iliad, and each would vie with the rest to do honour to the father of epic poetry. But if peradventure some rich landowner of that day came back to assert a claim to the fields, the woods, the pastures of which he used to be so proud, ten to one he would be received like a thief and perhaps die a miserable death.