

Peter Klaus the Goatherd

At the peaceful village of Sittendorf dwelled Peter Klaus, the goatherd. He daily tended his flocks to pasture in the Kyffhaeusen mountains, and never failed, as evening approached, to muster them in a little meadow, surrounded by a stone wall, preparatory to driving them home; for some time, however, he had observed, that one of the finest of his herd regularly disappeared soon after coming to this nook, and did not join her companions till late.

One night, watching her attentively, he remarked that she slipped through a hole or opening in the wall, on which he cautiously crept after the animal, and found she was in a cave, busily engaged in gleaning the grains of corn that fell down singly from the roof. Peter did not look long before the shower of corn that now saluted him made him shake his ears, and inflamed his curiosity the more to discover the cause of so singular an occurrence in that out-of-the-way place. However, at last he heard the neigh and stamping of horses, apparently proceed from above; and it was doubtless from their mangers that the oats had fallen.

While standing, still wrapped in amazement at the singularity of the adventure, Peter's surprise was not diminished on observing a boy, who, without saying a word, silently beckoned him to follow. Peter mechanically obeyed the gestures of the lad, and ascended some steps, which led over a walled court into a hollow place, completely surrounded on all sides by lofty rocks, and crowned by the rich foliage of shrubs, through which an imperfect twilight displayed a smooth, well-trimmed lawn, that formed the ground he stood upon.

Here were twelve knights, who, without so much as uttering a syllable, were very gravely playing at nine-pins; and as silently was Peter inducted into the office of assistant, namely, in setting up these nine-pins. Peter's courage was none of the strongest during all this time, and his knees smote each other most devoutly as he commenced his duties; while he occasionally ventured to steal a glance at the venerable knights, whose long beards and antique slashed doublets filled him with profound awe.

His fears, however, began to be on the wane, as he became more accustomed to his new employment. Indeed, he went so far as to gaze on one of the noble knights straight in the face--nay, even at last ventured to sip out of a bowl of wine that stood near him, which diffused a most delicious odor around. He found this sip so invigorating, that he soon took a somewhat longer pull; and in a short time Peter had quite forgotten that such things as Sittendorf, Wife, or Goats had ever existed; and on finding himself the least weary, he had only to apply to the never-failing goblet. At last he fell fast asleep.

On waking, Peter found he was in the same little enclosure where he was wont to count his flocks. He shook himself well, and rubbed his eyes; but neither dog nor goats were to be seen; and he was astonished in no slight degree to observe that he was nearly surrounded with high grass, and trees, and shrubs, which he never before remarked, growing about that spot. Lost in perplexity, he followed his way to all the different haunts he had frequented with his herds, but no traces of them were to be discovered; at last he hastily bent his steps to Sittendorf, which lay beneath.

The persons whom he met on his way to the village were all strangers to him; they were differently dressed, and did not precisely speak the language of his acquaintance; and on inquiring after his goats, all stared and touched their chins. At last he mechanically did the same, but what was his surprise when he found his beard lengthened at least a foot; on which he began to conclude that he and those around him were all under the influence of magic or enchantment. Yet the mountain he had descended was certainly the Kyffhaeusen--the cottages, too, with their gardens and enclosures, were all quite familiar to him--and he heard some boys reply to the passing questions of a traveller, that it was Sittendorf.

His doubt and perplexity now increased every moment, and he quickened his steps towards his own dwelling; he hardly knew it, it was so much decayed; and before the door lay a strange goatherd's boy, with a dog apparently at the last extreme of age, that snarled when he spoke to him. He entered the house through an opening, which had formerly been closed by a door. All was waste and void within; he staggered out as if he had lost his senses, calling on his wife and children by their names; but no one heard--none answered.

Before long, a crowd of women and children had collected around the strange old man, with the long hoary beard, and all inquired what it was he was seeking after. This was almost too much; to be thus questioned before his own door was more than strange, and he felt ashamed to ask after his wife and children, or even of himself; but to get rid of his questioners he mentioned the first name that occurred to him, "Kurt Steffen?" The people looked around in silence, till at length an old woman said, "He has been in the churchyard these twelve years past, and you'll not go thither to-day."-- "Velten Meier?"--"Heaven rest his soul!" replied an ancient dame, leaning on a crutch. "Heaven rest his soul! He has lain in the house he will never leave these fifteen years!"

The goatherd shuddered to recognize in the last speaker his next neighbor, who seemed all at once to have grown old; but he had lost all desire to inquire further. Suddenly a smart young woman pressed through the surrounding gapers, with an infant in her arms, and leading a girl about fourteen years old--all three the exact image of his wife. With greater surprise than ever he inquired her name. "Maria!"--"And your father's name?"--"Peter Klaus! Heaven rest his soul! It is now

twenty years since his goats returned without him, and we sought for him in vain day and night in the Kyffhaeusen mountains--I was then hardly seven years old.”

Our goatherd could no longer contain himself. “I am Peter Klaus!” he roared, “I am Peter Klaus, and no one else!” and he caught the child from his daughter's arms. Every one, for an instant, stood as if petrified, till at length one voice, and another, and then another, exclaimed, “Yes, this is, indeed, Peter Klaus! Welcome, neighbor! Welcome, after twenty years!”