

THE UNEXPECTED GUEST

Written in 1856

By Christoph von Schmid

Chapter 1

In a certain wild hill and wood district of Bohemia, by the side of a small, still, and deep lake, there stood not long ago a fisherman's hut. Poor and humble as this dwelling would certainly have appeared to everyone, it was the happy home of little Hans and his worthy father, the fisherman Friedrich, or as he was more generally called, Fritz Hoffmann.

Little Hans' mother had died the very night that he was born, and since she was carried out in her coffin to the village burying-ground, no woman had ever lived in the lonely lakeside cottage. Hans was taken care of by a kind widow woman, a cousin of his father's, till he was able to talk and walk. Then his father, who felt sad all alone in his hut, took the little fellow home and was never after lonely.

For the little three-year old mannikin toddled all about after his father, who lifted him with his baskets and oars in and out of the boat when he went to fish, and kept him in the sunshine on the pebbly beach in the summer mornings, and on the floor in the pleasant glow of the hearth in the winter evenings, close by his side, while he prepared the tackle or mended the nets.

So the lad grew up. He became strong and active, and was a docile and affectionate companion to his father, who was never heard to speak a hard or angry word to him. They feared God, and lived quietly and happily together.

Some people in the village said Fritz belonged to the sect of the Moravian brothers, and thought that he took too much upon himself in keeping his boy so far aloof from all the sports and games of the neighboring children and giving him his schooling at home. But the gossip of his neighbors seemed to trouble the fisherman wonderfully little, and if Hans had few games, he had fewer quarrels with the village children.

And as for learning, he could, at ten years old, read a chapter, without much spelling, out of the great old Bible in which his father read to him morning and evening. And though he knew no more of penmanship than the outward appearance of pen and ink, he never made any mistakes in the value of the fish his father bade him carry down on Friday into the village, or in the change he was to bring home from the shop where the twine was sold, of which they made their nets.

A few goats, which all knew and followed him whenever he let them out of their high enclosure at the back of the cottage, were his chief companions and playmates. And his only industry on earth (for the assistance he gave his father in fishing was on the water and employed the principal part of his time) was the cultivation of a small vegetable garden. Here he was lucky enough to have a bed of most particularly large and well-flavored white strawberries, of which he was sometimes able to carry a good quantity, in a pretty basket made by himself, of tall, shining, green rushes, up to the castle, and generally received a small silver piece for them from the wife of the steward. This money he carried very joyfully home and gave his father with great pride, because he had earned it entirely himself.

Chapter 2

Now, about this castle I must say a word. It stood upon a high hill beyond the village and above the lake. It was a large, lordly house, built all of stone, with a great courtyard before it and high iron gates, on the top of which were cut in stone the arms of the noble Count, to whom it and all the country far and wide for many miles round belonged. The number of windows in the front of the house was something quite wonderful. And when the western sun shone upon them, indeed beautiful.

But they were never opened. Great shutters, barred inside, preserved an impenetrable darkness within the walls, and except from the lower corner of one wing, or pavilion, as it was called, where Madame Hensel, the steward's wife, lighted her own morning fire or evening lamp, no light was seen to shine from within any of those many tall glittering ranges of window panes.

The grass grew in the courtyard, the iron gates were rusty on their hinges, a slender fringe of foxglove and wallflower, and delicate silver grasses, had sown itself along the high garden wall—together, the great house was as lonely a place as you shall wish to see on a summer's day or a moonlight night.

Twice only, in the recollection of the oldest residents of the village, had the family of the owners visited this mansion, and then, indeed, for a short time, there had been a perfect hubbub of noise, and riot, and confusion up at the house, and down at the village, and all over the neighborhood. Lords and ladies, and serving-men and waiting-women, grooms and runners, and horsemen and footmen, had swept down upon the quiet little place like a storm.

And then for a few weeks there was riding over the hills and hunting in the forests, and hawking in the meadows and sailing on the lake. And music, and dancing, and drinking, and dicing up at the castle, and wild doings in the servants' hall, and brawls and drunken frolics at the village inn. And all the good sober people of the village were very glad when the rout departed all as suddenly as it came, and the castle shutters were shut again, and the red sun set, and white full moon shone again on the silent ranges of the tall glittering window panes.

Chapter 3

Now it was ten years, I suppose, since the Count had paid his last visit to this hunting-house. And just at the time of the Christmas feast, lo and behold, couriers came riding through the village and then wagons, laden with furniture and provisions, creaked and stumbled over the ruts of the back road to the castle. And then long strings of horses and packs of hounds went by, and then a close coach full of waiting maids.

At last, on a sunny, sparkling, frosty winter's morning, gay barouches with outriders and postilions, with jingling of bells and clacking of whips, and hurraing and shouting, and running and staring, drove at a gallop through the village street, and the tall iron gates were swung open, and fire light, and chandeliers, and chamber candles, flamed and shone and flitted half the night through from every one of the long range of tall windows.

The holy Christmas Eve came on. Deep snow had fallen all over the hills, and except a little path to the village church door, which the lads had risen up early to clear away for the feet of the weaker worshippers, women, and children, and old and sick, who all thronged that door that holy day. The roads all round were covered with the soft white furry mantle of old Father Winter, and all was as still and as bright as if the world had been made that morning of double refined confectioner's sugar.

So thought little Hans, when he looked abroad at the sparkling white sheet that came down to the very brink of the steel-colored waters of the lake. But he had not much time for

observation, for his father called him and bade him make haste up to the castle with some fish that he had been out all night to catch, for orders had come for fish at any cost of trouble or money, as there was to be a grand Christmas feast at the castle.

“Will the Count and the great lords and ladies come down to the village for God’s service today, father?” quote the little man, as he buttoned his fur coat close up to the chin.

“No, Hans, the great folk from the castle never go down to the village to say their prayers.”

“I suppose they have the pastor up there and say their own prayers in the chapel I have heard you tell of?” continued the boy.

“Little enough of that, either, I believe,” said his father, “the key of the chapel was lost, they say, by the old Count, many a long year ago, and I don’t think any of his family have ever tried if any other would open the door. But come, lad, get thee up yonder and remember what I have bid you ever since the great folk have been at the castle—do not go within side of the servants’ gate or set thy feet over the threshold. Stand at the kitchen backdoor and someone will sooner or later see you, and take the fish from you. I know of no good you will get nearer the hall than the furthest postern.”

And so admonished, the lad set forth. Now what Fritz Hoffmann said was quite true, that the chapel gate at the castle had never been opened since the death of the old Count, who, it was said, making but little use of it, had lost the key. The gay folks who were now up at the castle amusing themselves every hour of the day, and as it seemed of the night too, had certainly not found it. The old hunting-house had been explored from cellar to garret by laughing parties of young ladies and gentlemen, and a ballroom, a concert room, and even a fine little theater had been opened to the daylight, and resounded with the tripping of light feet, the music of young voices, and many a ringing peal of surprise and merriment, but the chapel remained dark and silent—the key was lost.

Meantime, little Hans, kicking the snow like white dust before him, ran, slipped, slid, and climbed up to the great house, and remained as his father bade him, silently leaning against the postern-gate that led into one of the back courts. Much ado had he to keep his place, for the whistling, whooping, laughing, singing throng of hurrying domestics that passed to and fro. The place seemed like a very pleasant sort of Bedlam, and the lad had twice been called by one of the under cook-boys to come in with his fish, before he could get his wits enough together to mind what was said to him.

And now, not his old friend Madame Hensel, the steward’s wife, took the basket from his hand, but a tall wonderful looking gentleman with a white apron before him and a white cap on his head, no less a person, indeed, than his excellency the Count’s head cook. Just as little Hans was receiving from this great personage, with much awe, the money for his fish, a young lady, the very smartest he ever beheld, came up, and smiling good humoredly, tapped him on the shoulder and said, “Here, my little man, I know you are going down into the village, and you look like a sharp lad. Call in at the grocer’s for me and bid him send up in all haste twelve pounds of the finest wax candles—my lady can burn none others, and the stupid fellow who ordered the provisions from town has forgotten to send half enough. Will you do this errand for me?”

“Ay, Madam,” stammered Hans, devouring with all his eyes the flowers and pink ribbons, and lace cap and general elegance of this lovely lady’s maid. As he turned from the door, he heard a shrill, yet sweet voice cry, “Margaret, Margaret, why do you keep the boy standing there?”

“My Lady,” returned the young woman, “I am sending down a message to the village by him about the wax candles.” Hans looked up, but was so dazzled, that he never was able

rightly to explain to his father what he saw, but he said he thought it was the glorious sun himself dressed in a blue silk gown. He remained with his eyes and mouth wide open, gazing up at the balcony where this splendid vision appeared, until the lady, laughing a clear ringing laugh, threw him down a small silver piece, and bade him buy himself a Christmas cake therewith.

Whereupon Hans became purple in the face with delight, and bowing to the very ground, backed out of the castle court and half way down the hill, still bowing at every third step. And then, recovering himself from all these wonderful emotions, faced about, and shouted at the top of his voice and ran at the top of his speed, till he reached the grocer's shop in the village. Where as soon as he could draw his breath, he delivered the message about the best wax candles for the Lady Countess, and then remained with his eyes and mouth as round as crown-pieces, looking first at his silver coin and then at everything in the shop which could or could not come within the compass of his newly acquired wealth.

A triple candle for Christmas was his first purchase, and a moderate sized cake exhausted his funds. The good-natured grocer added a small pot of Christmas mead to be drunk with the cake, and Hans trotted homewards towards the cottage by the lake, as the winter evening fell, a very happy boy.

Night had come down upon the hills, the leafless forests, and the lake. The full moon silvered over the snowy covering of the earth, the Christmas candles glimmered from the little scattered houses of the village, and the great house on the hill shone from roof to basement with a glorious illumination.

Chapter 4

And now, my dear readers, I must acquaint you with the arrival in that same quiet village of a very strange and unexpected visitor—in fact, no less a person than the devil himself. I dare say you were not at all prepared in the middle of this very peaceful story for the appearance of such a personage. But indeed, that is extremely apt to be the case with him, inasmuch as he suddenly makes his appearance felt among people and in places the least prepared for it, and to all outward signs, the least likely to attract or harbor such a guest.

From whence he came, I really cannot tell, but probably from some considerable distance, as he travels rapidly, and makes little ado of being in several places almost, so to speak, at once. From the snowy hollows of the last mountain range beyond the lake, he suddenly emerged upon the little plain, and sailing into the village in the shape of a great white owl, began taking a survey through the windows of the good country folk and their Christmas Eve occupations. These did not, upon the whole, appear to give him much satisfaction, or to allay in any great degree the irritation and restlessness which it is more than probable he experienced at the return of the sacred season itself.

The village drinking-house was almost empty, the village church was almost full. The devil bethought himself of a lame old maid, who lived at the furthest end of the village street from the church, and who, partly on account of her physical infirmity and partly on account of a more grievous infirmity in her temper, which was apt to induce her to allow as little pleasure to others as she was able to enjoy herself, he thought might be keeping the holy festival more agreeably to him than her neighbors.

But on flattening his hooked nose against her windowpane, and seeing her surrounded by several of the poorest little orphans in the village, to whom she was giving good lumps of gingerbread, while the pleasant warmth of her fire-light made her thin, yellow face look quite rosy and pleasant, he whisked away in such disgust up the village-street, that the

good folks in their houses said, "Bless me! what a sudden gust of wintry wind!" and the snow was shaken up all over the hilltops like a white coverlid.

Now the devil had not gone far along the lonely lake road, when he came upon our fisherman's little hut. And what do you think, my children? Over against that very humble dwelling, with white wings outspread in the broad moonlight, there sat a lovely and glorious angel of the Lord.

"Hallo!" exclaimed the devil, "what can there be so mighty precious to watch over here?"

The beautiful angel replied, sweetly, "I do not know," for even to Satan, a good angel always gives a gentle answer, and in truth, the shining guardian knew no more than that he had been bidden that night to shelter with his wings the poor fisherman's lonely dwelling and had obeyed. For, my dear friends, those gracious children always do the will of their Heavenly Father without questioning it.

"Ha!" said the devil, then peeping in at the little window, "Very pretty, indeed! Three Christmas candles! A very fine illumination, truly! Look yonder," said he, pointing to the hunting-house, which blazed like a beacon on the hill. "That I call something like an illumination! Those candles are all mine. We will see whose lights burn longest." So saying, he spread his wings and flew swiftly up to the portal of the merry mansion, leaving the bright angel at his post.

Little dreamed old Fritz the fisherman or our good little Hans who sat without their cottage door, as by the light of the three tapers, they rejoicingly and thankfully ate their cake and drank their Christmas mead. And then the father, having taken down the Bible from the chimney-shelf, read, in a low and subdued tone, that passage of the Holy Book which suited best with the season. And as the words, "Glory to God in the highest—peace on earth—good-will to men!" died away on his lips, they knelt and uttered heartfelt thanksgivings.

And then, having carefully covered over the embers of the fire with ashes, father and son crept softly to bed and soon were sleeping the blessed sleep of faith and innocence, while the tapers burned low down and cast a feeble glimmer through the cottage, and the glorious angel, with his countenance radiant with heavenly love and adoration, sat watching over them in the still moonlight without.

Chapter 5

And now let us follow the last guest who had entered the open portals of the great hunting-house on the hill. Truly, if glare and noise, and music and dancing, and gambling and drinking, and loud laughing and light talking, make mirth, then was the Christmas feast at the castle a feast indeed.

From room to room flew the sound of revelry. Round and round whirled the never-ending circles of waltzers, and on each side of the doorways, on marble tables propped by gilt dragons, stood huge china bowls of punch, whose fragrant steam rose incessantly into the air, intoxicating still more by its perfumes those who had already partaken of the liquid itself.

Now the old steward of the castle, none other, I grieve to say, than the husband of Hans' old patroness, Madame Hensel, acted also as butler on this occasion, and with the cellar keys in his pocket, and no small portion of the cellar contents in his brain, went from

room to room replenishing these same punch bowls. Dipping into each, by way of ascertaining by his own taste that that of the guests was likely to be satisfied with their contents.

Suddenly—how came it—was it the last glass he swallowed of the reeking spirituous poison?—was it, that now standing behind the very door, close to which was set the bowl from which he drank, stood the *last unexpected guest* who entered the castle?—who can tell? A sudden thought flashed into his mind—he *would* see what was kept in the little lower cellar of the castle! The keys were in his pocket and at last he *would* see what that mysterious vault contained!

Now, my dear young friends, in order to explain to you this very sudden fancy of Herr Hensel, I must inform you that at the further end of the great cellar or vault, which stretched under the old hunting-house and to which Herr Hensel had access whenever any of the family visited the place in order to draw thence the wine necessary for their use, there was a small strong door. This opened into some inner vault or cellar, which had for years past excited the intensest curiosity in the mind of the old steward!

What precious wine was hoarded in that inner cellar, the key of which was never entrusted to him? He used to weary Madame Hensel by day and wake her by night with conjectures as to the contents of that inner cellar. Now it so happened that the Count, in giving the old steward the cellar key for the necessary supplies for this grand Christmas festivity, did not appear to be aware that he had given him *two*, instead of the one he usually delivered to him.

Old Hensel instantly perceived the circumstance and the thought of the inner cellar door rushed into his mind like lightning. The many various things he had had to superintend and see to, had, however, left him no time during the whole day for his visit of discovery. He had been deterred, too, by the fear of detection by some of the numerous idle servants and hangers-on with which the castle was swarming.

Evening came, and in the midst of all the fatigue and labors of that busy day, the inner cellar had gone out of his mind. When suddenly—as I told you, just as that last ominous unexpected guest placed himself behind the ballroom door, close to which stood the punch bowl from which Herr Hensel drank—the recollection of the inner cellar door, and that the key of it was in his pocket, flashed across his mind, followed by the resolution that now he *would* see what its contents were. The Count was at the card table, the Countess spinning round the ballroom. The steward seized up a light, and with hasty steps, and a frame trembling with the joint excitement of curiosity, fear, and intoxication, went stumbling in his hurry along the lower passages.

Chapter 6

Down the stone staircases he went, till the light and noise of the upper chambers died away, and he reached the door of the great cellar, where stood in casks and hogsheads, and bottles innumerable—the choice produce of the finest vintages of Europe. Through them he passed straight on to the little low-arched iron-banded door, to which, descending by two or three stone steps, he, with a shaking hand, inserted the key in the lock, pushed with all his might against the door, which, long unopened, only yielded by degrees to his efforts, and finally stood within the mysterious precincts of the lower vault.

And there, piled from floor to ceiling, one upon another, as closely and compactly as they could stand, were rows of small stout casks, whose sides, covered with the dust and cobwebs of years, bore witness to the length of time which had elapsed since they had been visited.

“Ah, ha!” exclaimed old Hensel, “imperial sweet white wine! Here is the liquid treasure which his excellency my master has thought too precious or too exquisite for any guests who have visited the castle in my time! Now, then, to see if indeed it deserves to be hoarded with such care and bestowed with such excessive stinginess!”

In his hasty progress from the upper regions, our friend had not neglected to provide himself with a drill and the means of opening the casks, which he supposed the mysterious receptacle to contain. Setting down his candle on the floor, without heeding that he had left the door open, he knelt down and began boring one of the lower casks in such a manner as to be able to apply his mouth to the opening and imbibe the contents as they flowed forth.

What was his surprise and dismay, however, at seeing, when he withdrew the drill, a stream of black, dry, granulated dust pour itself from the opening and form a rapidly increasing heap upon the floor—it was gunpowder, stored away since the Thirty Years’ War in this lowest vault of the castle, which the Count never allowed anyone to visit, for fear of the tremendous consequences of any careless proximity of light to its most dangerous contents.

The steward gazed in drunken impotent terror at what he had done—suddenly, a blast of wind swept through the door, the light glared, and fell upon the still outpouring black destruction. And now burst forth upon the night an explosion terrible as the trumpet of doom. A thick black cloud rushed up into the sky, and when it slowly rolled away and settled down, the winter moon was shining through the shattered windows and roof, and upon the begrimed and blackened walls of the lordly hunting-house on the hill, and just then, the last of the tiny consecrated tapers flickered in the socket, went out, and left the fisherman’s hut in peaceful darkness.

Chapter 7

Well was it that the angel of the Lord that night sat over against the humble walls and spread his wide white wings over the lonely roof. For the ruins of the castle fell far and wide into the lake, and the little hut at the foot of the hill had surely been overwhelmed with the falling masses, but for the heavenly guardian who now saw and knew the all-wise and merciful purpose for which he had been sent to earth.

Years passed away and the blowing-up of the castle had become an old fireside evening story. When one summer’s day, a traveling carriage drove to the door of the village pastor and a young gentleman and lady alighting from it, desired to speak with him. Soon after they were seen ascending, under his guidance, the hill to the ruined castle, where, after examining all that remained of the once lordly house, they came down to the cottage of our friend Fritz Hoffman.

And going in, sat down and began talking with him of that fearful night’s explosion, and the miraculous preservation of his house and life. While his father discoursed with the gentlefolks, who it seemed were then the owners of the ruined castle and its domain, Hans spread the table tidily and quietly, and fetching some fresh trout that had not long left their native lake, cooked them quickly and well, and setting them with brown bread and a dish of his famous white strawberries before their guests, invited them with respectful courtesy to refresh themselves.

The young lady thanked him with a sweet smile, that sent a strange thrill through him, for it reminded him of the beautiful vision he had seen on the balcony of the castle, the very morning of the fatal day on which it was destroyed. And she and her husband

accepted with great good will the simple hospitality thus offered, discoursing meanwhile with their hosts still about the sad and awful ruin of their fine hunting-seat.

“Have you never,” said the gentleman, “thought of dragging the lake? For, though it seems singularly enough that nothing whatever has ever been found in all the neighborhood of the valuable property which I should have thought would have been scattered all over the district, I think that things of considerable price must have been thrown into the lake by the force of the shock.”

Hans opened his eyes and mouth wide, as in his very earlier days of astonishment, at this suggestion. His father replied—

“Yes, my Lord Count. I have thought that by using the drag-nets it might not be impossible that some articles of value might be recovered from the lake, but I am a poor man, my Lord, and the exercise of my labor in fishing just supports me and my boy. I am very sorry that I could not afford the leisure to try and recover your Excellency’s property. But if you will please to allow me what the pastor here shall mention as a small compensation for my time, that the lad may not go without his bit and his sup in the meanwhile, I will cheerfully give up the fishing and drag the lake as long as your Lordship may desire that I should do so.”

The gentleman and lady looked at each other and smiled. After a little more chat, they rose to depart. And as they turned from the door, with many thanks for their entertainment, the young Count said, “Fritz, I cannot offer to pay you for the kind hospitality I have received from you, and you shall not drag the lake for me, but I entitle you, and the pastor witnesses what I say, to any and everything that you may ever find, if you think proper to do so, on your own account.”

Fritz bowed low, almost until they were out of sight, and then turning to Hans, who was rushing at once for the boat and drag-nets, he laid his hand on his arm, “No, my son,” said he, “our young Lord is noble and generous, and has meant to bestow a favor upon us and to do us a good, but you and I, Hans, have lived too long by industry to begin making a fortune by chance. The fish of the lake are our lawful prey, and neither I nor you will exchange a small and certain profit, laborious though it be, for uncertain gains, however great, with all their evils and anxieties. Never think of the drag-nets, lad, but go get the hooks and lines in order, the evening will be a beautiful one for the trout to rise.”

Hans, a little disappointed, obeyed his father, nevertheless, and the lake remained undragged. But it was a very remarkable circumstance, that whenever the nets were wearing out and a new set were sorely wanted, some silver spoon, or gilt goblet, or bit of broken jewelry, would come up with one of the lines, and with that twine was bought, with which, in the winter evenings, Fritz, whose eyes were growing weak, would make fresh nets, while Hans, who had become something more of a scholar, read to his father from the big old Bible off the chimney shelf.

THE END

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