



The Mouse Tower

Folk-Lore And Legends: German

German

Intermediate
4 min read

To the traveller who has traversed the delightful environs of the Rhine, from the city of Mentz as far as Coblenz, or from the clear waves of this old Germanic stream gazed upon the grand creations of Nature, all upon so magnificent a scale, the appearance of the old decayed tower which forms the subject of the ensuing tradition forms no uninteresting object. It rises before him as he mounts the Rhine from the little island below Bingen, toward the left shore. He listens to the old shipmaster as he relates with earnest tone the wonderful story of the tower, and, shuddering at the description of the frightful punishment of priestly pride and cruelty, exclaims in strong emotion—

“The Lord be with us!”

For, as the saying runs, it was about the year of Our Lord 968, when Hatto II., Duke of the Ostro-franks, surnamed Bonosus, Abbot of Fulda, a man of singular skill and great spiritual endowments, was elected Archbishop of Mentz. He was also a harsh man, and being extremely avaricious, heaped [Pg 63] up treasure which he guarded with the utmost care.

It so happened, under his spiritual sway, that a cruel famine began to prevail in the city of Mentz and its adjacent parts, insomuch that in a short time numbers of the poorer people fell victims to utter want. Crowds of wretches were to be seen assembled before the Archbishop's palace in the act of beseeching with cries and prayers for some mitigation of their heavy lot.

But their harsh lord refused to afford relief out of his own substance, reproaching them at the same time as the authors of their own calamity by their indolence and want of economy. But the poor souls were mad for food, and in frightful and threatening accents cried out—

“Bread, bread!”

Fearing the result, Bishop Hatto ordered a vast number of hungry souls to range themselves in order in one of his empty barns under the pretence of supplying them with provisions. Then, having closed the doors, he commanded his minions to fire the place, in which all fell victims to the flames. When he heard the death shouts and shrieks of the unhappy poor, turning towards the menial parasites who abetted his crime he said—

“Hark you! how the mice squeak!”

But Heaven that witnessed the deed did not permit its vengeance to sleep. A strange and unheard of death was preparing to loose its terrors upon the sacrilegious prelate. For behold, there arose out of the yet warm ashes of the dead an innumerable throng of mice which were seen to approach the Bishop, and to follow him whithersoever he went. At length he flew into one of his steepest and highest towers, but the mice climbed over the walls. He closed every door and window, yet after him they came, piercing their way through the smallest nooks and crannies of the building. They poured in upon him, and covered him from head to foot, in numberless heaps. They bit, they scratched, they tortured his flesh, till they nearly devoured him. So great was the throng that the more his domestics sought to beat them off, the more keen and savagely, with increased numbers, did they return to the charge. Even where his name was found placed upon the walls and tapestries they gnawed it in their rage away.

In this frightful predicament the Bishop, finding that he could obtain no help on land, bethought of taking himself to the water. A tower was hastily erected upon the Rhine. He took ship and shut himself up there. Enclosed within double walls, and surrounded by water, he flattered himself that the rushing stream would effectually check the rage of his enemies. Here too, however, the vengeance of offended Heaven gave them entrance. Myriads of mice took to the stream, and swam and swam, and though myriads of them were swept

away, an innumerable throng still reached the spot. Again they climbed and clattered up the walls. The Bishop heard their approach. It was his last retreat. They rushed in upon him with more irresistible fury than before, and, amidst stifled cries of protracted suffering, Bishop Hatto at length rendered up his cruel and avaricious soul.

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