



# *The Nixy Lake*

Margaret Arndt

German

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*Intermediate*

*26 min read*

In one of the wildest and most romantic parts of Germany, there is a high mountain which is as renowned for the strange stories that are told about it, as for its many natural peculiarities. It is flat on the top, falling off precipitously on every side. In recent times a high tower has been built on the very edge of the rock. Curious to say, the ground on the summit of this mountain is a bog or morass; flat slabs of stone have been placed on it to enable bold tourists to reach the tower without sinking in unawares. There is a bronze ring on a balcony surrounding the tower, with darts pointing in different directions, showing where London, Paris, and St Petersburg, for instance, are situated. I need hardly say that these towns are not visible, but that if a straight line could be drawn from this spot, it would reach them.

Not far below the summit there is a mysterious-looking lake, which it is strange indeed to find at so high a level. A huge cliff formed of boulders of rock rises on the one side of the lake; it falls like a great wall straight into the water; only daring little ferns and plants have a foothold on it; the lake is inaccessible from this direction. A narrow pathway winding in and out edged with water-reeds leads by it on the other side. This lake is said to be so deep that it is unfathomable; it is dark brown in colour, bitter and brackish to the taste. No fish can live in it. Learned men, called geologists, who study the crust of the earth, have decided that this region is not volcanic in origin as it would appear at first sight, but that the lake is fed by water from the morass.

This mountain is constantly visited by sudden violent atmospheric disturbances, great winds and heavy thunderstorms, that spring up at a moment's notice, striking terror into the hearts of any travellers who may be caught in them.

Now several centuries ago, before the time of railways and steamboats, a mighty king of the water-sprites lived in this lake with his three beautiful daughters, the famed nixies of the lake.

The King was a majestic old man with long white beard and hair; his eyes were black and sinister, and when he drew his eyebrows together in a straight line over his eyes, his frown was terrible to behold. The thunderstorms which devastated the country round, were attributed to him. In his fits of rage, the village folk declared, he would hurl stones and thunderbolts down from the mountain, heedless of what or whom he might destroy.

The day would be fine, the sky blue, and in a moment a storm wind would arise, clouds would cover the heavens, and lightning shoot forth; how could this be accounted for by natural agency?

The nixies were much to be pitied, if the truth were known, for their father was a stern old tyrant, and interfered constantly with their harmless amusements, also prohibiting their leaving the lake to frolic at midnight with the wood-spirits, whom he considered as beneath them in rank.

On a warm day in the lovely month of June (which is the favourite month of all the year for the water-nixies, for then the white and yellow water lilies are in flower, and the yellow irises shine among the water-reeds) the three sisters were swimming lazily to and fro, plunging under the water like seals, to reappear like seals on the look-out for something to happen. But nothing ever did happen but one of their father's tempers, and of these they were tired enough as you may imagine. They had not fishes' tails like their cousins the mermaids, but slender limbs of dazzling whiteness. Their hair resembled beautiful seaweed as they dived under the water, or when it spread out like a fan on the surface.

The eldest, Clothilde, was dark; she was beautiful, but haughty, and looked as if she had inherited her father's temper.

The youngest was very fair; she had the golden hair of a fairy, her eyes were blue, but meaningless; there was little sense in their depths. Her name was Elfrida.

The second sister, Lenore, was of a different type, and might have been mistaken for a mortal maiden. Her hair was neither dark nor fair, neither red nor brown, it was of a pale hazel colour and fell in straight masses nearly to her feet. Her eyes were of a deep grey fringed with dark lashes; they had a mysterious and pathetic look—a look caused by longing after something indefinite and yet desired, or by a prescience perhaps of coming disaster.

Lenore rose to the surface of the water. “Sisters,” she called, “sisters, listen to me,” and she swam towards the shade of the rock, and seated herself on a stony seat, half in half out of the water. “I can bear the monotony of our existence no longer. I tire of this life of ceaseless dancing, swimming, drifting. I want to visit the homes of men who live in the village that lies below us at the foot of the mountain, to hear stories of the world from which we are shut out, to share as far as it is possible for us in the simple and homely amusements of mortals.”

“I am willing to go with you,” said Clothilde, frowning discontentedly. “I am tired too of this melancholy lake; the eternal nothingness of our life oppresses me too.” She tore a water-lily to pieces as she spoke.

“O do not do that!” said Lenore, almost as if in pain, “the flowers can feel too!”

“What if they can!” said Clothilde scornfully; for the cruelty of the nixies coursed through her veins.

“And you Elfrida,” said Lenore, turning to her fairer sister, “will you come with us?”

“Ah!” said Elfrida, “I prefer to stay here among the water-lilies. I have no aspirations, I could live here for ever sleeping through the winter months, dreaming through the summer ones, yet if you go, I will go too; for we three have never been separated, and I should be afraid if I were left alone with my father.” As she spoke she placed a water-lily in her golden hair; the sunbeams struck through the fir-trees by the lake and fell on her, till she looked like some wonderful fairy princess, too exquisite to be real.

A young man happened to be passing the lake just at this moment; he caught the entrancing picture as if it were a vision from Heaven; his brain reeled, his breath failed him, he would have fallen in a swoon; but then he met Lenore’s eyes, grave, calm, and searching. A wild longing and deep melancholy seized on him. He rushed

towards the lake, and clutched hold of the branches of a young willow, only just in time to prevent himself from falling into those treacherous depths.

With a weird cry and their white arms raised over their heads, the nixies disappeared in the lake. The young man gazed as one bewitched; crossed himself in fear; and gazed again. All was silent: no living creature stirred; only the sunbeams fell athwart the lake, and little cascades of water fell over the surface of the rock.

“I have seen the nixies of the pool,” thought the young man, who was the son of a rich peasant farmer in the village. “Surely that means that I shall die ere long. I should not fear death,” he continued, “if I were to die in battle in honourable and open conflict; but to die young, stricken by some awful and unaccountable fate, that would be terrible.”

As he turned homewards, a wind arose that nearly hurled him into the lake; so violent was the gust, and a storm burst forth, the like of which he had never experienced before. Branches were torn from the trees, and hurled in his path; the lightning was continuous and nearly blinded him. Glancing fearfully back at the lake, the waters seemed to have arisen in great waves, and he thought he saw the nixy King himself raging and roaring like a wild creature, casting the storm winds forth from their fortresses in the rocks, holding the lightning like fireworks in his long fingers, and hurling it across the land. Terrified, half-stunned by the thunder, and stupefied by the hail and rain, he at last reached home, where his mother awaited him in great anxiety. However he soon had off his wet, torn clothes, and casting himself on his bed fell into a profound slumber. He slept for nearly a night and a day, and when he awoke his adventures seemed to him a wild dream, and like a dream were half-forgotten although they exerted a subtle influence on his waking thoughts that he was unaware of.

Meanwhile the nixies, and especially Lenore, had been anxious as to his fate. Not until she had sent their dwarf messenger into the village to make inquiries as to his welfare, could she be at rest. Her wish to visit the homes of men became a passion, a burning desire that could not be quenched. She called on her dread father; three times she cried out to him, and her sisters echoed the call. Then he arose from the depths, majestic and so terrible to behold that Lenore almost lost the courage to address him. But he listened to her request in silence, brooding, while great ravens whirled and swooped in the sky above their heads. Then he spoke:

“It is decreed that no one can alter the path of fate, or avoid the doom that is written in the stars. The hour has

come: I have foreseen this day; go, my daughters, go. But remember there is one condition which you must strictly obey. One night in the week you may be absent from the lake; but as the hour strikes twelve, you must be back again in these waters. I shall send a messenger to fetch you, the dwarf Hunold, beware lest you keep him waiting! If you disobey, destruction will overtake you, and your home will know you no more." He sank gloomily into the lake; the day was oppressive; no rain fell and the evening brought no relief. Strange and uneasy were the dreams of many that night in the little village.

Some young people returning late from a social gathering, reported that they had seen a bright, uncanny light in the sky, like a fire, or some said like a golden hand, at midnight over the ill-omened mountain.

In those days when it was so difficult to travel from place to place, the villagers were obliged to depend on themselves for amusement and entertainment. In the villages round about the mountain it was the custom for the young people to meet together at each other's houses on Saturday evenings. Those who had rooms large enough, took it in turns to invite all the rest; the girls brought their spinning-wheels, and the room where they met was called the spinning-room. The girls were busy and merry at the same time. Stories were told, and songs were sung, the young men smoked and drank wine, and not infrequently the spinning-wheels were cleared away and there was dancing. Strangers were welcome; for the peasants were renowned for their hospitality; but seldom did it happen that travellers passed that way; some young fellow perhaps might drop in who was wandering about for a year or so before settling down to the work of his life as the German custom is; but tourists were few when roads were bad and money scarce.

One lovely summer's evening at the end of June the full moon was shining in the sky, the latticed windows of the peasant's house where the young folk were assembled, were wide open; the air was laden with the scent of the white lilies and roses that grew in the garden at the back of the cottage. There was no light as yet but that of the moon in the parlour; the spinning-wheels too were silent; for stories were being told; one more marvellous than the other, of ghosts and goblins, of dwarfs and mountain-spirits, and naturally enough awful tales of the neighbouring nixy King, and of his three daughters who lived in the enchanted lake.

Hermann, the young man who had been overtaken by the thunderstorm, was present this evening; he was silent and glum, though the most charming village maidens chaffed him and tried to captivate him, and the peasant girls in this part of Germany are renowned for their beauty and their grace. The melancholy which was

not so much part of his natural disposition as due to the adventures of that evening, fell on him again like a dark cloud oppressing his brain. The girls who had been listening to the stories, were by this time worked up to a state of feeling which can only be described by the words creepy, or eerie. Most of them experienced that unaccountable sensation which Germans call Gänsehaut (goose-flesh). So that a sudden knock at the door caused them to cry out in fear and clutch hold of their sweethearts. The knock was repeated three times before anyone summoned up courage to open the door. Then the assembled company fell back in astonishment as three beautiful young girls entered the room, each holding a spinning-wheel under her arm. They walked erect like princesses, everyone was sure they must be of high rank. They wore dresses of some shimmering material such as the village folk had never seen before, and necklaces of pearls, silken hose and silver shoes.

Hermann's heart beat to bursting as he beheld them: where had he seen them before? Surely they were the nixies of the magic pool, and his doom had fallen upon him. Never, never, had he been able to forget Lenore's eyes. Their mournful beauty haunted his dreams. He met them now, as his breath came and went in great gasps; and there was a flash of recognition between them. "What heavenly beauty, what a noble air she has," he thought, hardly regarding her sisters who were strictly speaking far more beautiful.

The three nixies, for of course it was they, put forth all their fascinating arts to ingratiate themselves with the young people assembled there.

"You are pleased to see us, are you not?" they said. "We have heard of the fame of your spinning-evenings, and have come from a far country to take part in them. You shall see how we can spin."

"Very gratifying for us, I am sure," murmured the officiating president of the club.

"Now do not let us disturb you, you were telling stories I believe as we entered," said Lenore, who, being the most human, took the lead in the conversation.

But no one dared to open his mouth, even those who had been the most eager to narrate wild tales before, seemed stricken with dumbness now.

“You could tell us a story, I believe,” she said, turning to Hermann, who could only shake his head. “Then I must tell one myself,” she said with a little sigh. She poured forth an extraordinary story to which the peasants listened open-mouthed, the tale of a terrible doom that overtook a faithless lover.

“A mortal man,” she said, “had made love to a beautiful nixy, and won her affection in return. But because she was not human, he did not think of marrying her, but became engaged to a village maiden who was good and sweet, if not so beautiful as the nixy. But the nixy had her revenge. She swam under the bridge where the little river ran through the fields, and one day as the two were walking in the dewy meadows, she caused the waters to rise suddenly in a great flood, and tore her lover away from his human bride down with her in the stream, choking him under the water till he was dead. Then she sat with his head on her lap, and stroked his beautiful dark curls, and wept until she dissolved in tears, and became part of the water, which has been slightly salt from that day. The village maiden was married to a rich old peasant not long afterwards; so much for human fidelity,” said Lenore, fixing her sad eyes on Hermann.

“He well-deserved his fate,” said Hermann, “who chose the lesser when he might have had the greater love.”

“I think the nixy was a mean, wicked thing,” said a young girl, almost a child, called Brigitte, with soft, dark eyes, and a sweet expression on her face. “She could not really have cared for her lover, or she would have wanted him to be happy with the village girl, as she knew she could not marry him herself.”

“Never,” said Hermann, excitedly, whose blood was coursing like fire in his veins, “better death in the arms of the beloved, than a contented life with lower aims!”

The men laughed.

“Now who would have thought that Hermann was so romantic!” they said. “And he has the fattest pigs and the biggest casks of wine in the village!”

Songs were proposed; everyone joined in; the voices of the nixies were heard above all, clear and beautiful as a bell. They began with one of the best-known songs in the German language which is always sung on especially jovial occasions, it begins:

“I cannot tell why or wherefore

A legend of olden times

Deep in my heart is singing,

In mournful rhythmic rhymes.”

After several songs had been sung in unison, Hermann begged the young man who was the host that evening to ask the beautiful strangers to sing a song alone and of their own choosing, he longed to hear their voices, unspoilt by those of others.

The nixy maidens readily complied: was not singing their most natural mode of expressing themselves? They sang these verses to a weird, haunting melody:

“The wild-fowl are calling: come back to the lake!

O nixies come back, or your proud hearts must break;

The moonbeams are glancing, the fairies are dancing,

Come back.

The grey mists are rising! Beware, O beware!

For though you are slender and though you are fair,

Your treacherous waters, O nixy king’s daughters,

Can slay.

Beware the king’s anger—O tempt not your fate,

The white water-lilies your coming still wait;

Wide open each flower until the twelfth hour—

Beware!”

The old pendulum clock on the wall struck eleven. How fast the time had flown! The three beautiful maidens rose up hastily and departed, wishing a courteous “good night” and “good luck to you” to the company.

As Hermann opened the door for them, he saw a little dwarf with a lighted lantern waiting for them outside the door, and much as he wished to accompany them home, he did not dare to do so.

When they had left the room, a storm of conjecture burst forth; at last everyone agreed that they must be the nixies of the lake.

“We did not like the look of their eyes; they were so cold and treacherous,” said some of the girls who were jealous of a beauty that they felt they could never attain to.

“You are ill-natured things, not fit to sweep the floor for such exquisite creatures,” said Hermann angrily; and the whole company began to jeer and to laugh at him, saying:

“Hermann has fallen in love with the nixies. Many a wet kiss will he have from them—ha—ha!—but cold water will be his bridal bed, and death the groomsman—ha, ha!”

“Do not be so cruel,” said kind little Brigitte, who had blamed the nixy in the story. “See how pale Hermann looks, he will faint in another minute; he has never been strong since he was out in that awful storm.”

Hermann could bear the conversation no longer; hastily saying good night he went home with wild thoughts in his head, and, alas! wild, ungovernable love in his heart.

For the next few weeks on Saturday evenings the same thing happened. There was the usual social gathering, no one was absent; the little room could hardly hold the thronging guests. Then there was the eagerly looked for knock at the door, and the three lovely maidens entered and shared so naturally in what was going on that the young people gradually lost somewhat of their awe of them. Who could spin so fast and so finely as the three strangers; who could sing such entrancing songs; who could tell more wonderful stories!

Hermann generally managed to sit by Lenore, and to hold her hand, and he knew his love was returned.

Naturally the exquisite Elfrida, and the stately Clothilde had their admirers as well.

“Soon they will have taken all our sweethearts away from us, the nasty creatures,” whispered some of the village girls under their breath, “and they cannot marry all the lads in the country round. The men are bewitched, that is certain—no good can come of it. Most of the men realise it, however, and will come back to us in time; all except Hermann. He is so far gone that it is quite hopeless to try and influence him.”

“I am sorry for Lenore,” said little Brigitte, “I would do anything I could to help her; she looks so very unhappy!”

On the night of the 9th of September the spinning evening was to be at Hermann’s house, which was a splendid building in its way, like a great wooden castle. He was feverish with excitement. He bought and gathered all the flowers he could get together, and decked the house as for a wedding-feast. His mother could not bake cakes that were fine enough to suit his taste; the furniture seemed to him clumsy and old-fashioned. He would gladly have strewn rose-leaves, instead of rushes, on the floor for his lady-love to tread on. All the time a voice was telling him to desist: that such love could never be hallowed; that his bride was but a myth, a dream that would vanish away. His mother was terribly troubled about him, and feared that the boy had lost his wits in the thunderstorm.

“You shall see my bride to-night, mother,” he said. “Ah, there is no one like her!”

But the old woman trembled and shook and crossed herself, she knew not why. She felt a presentiment of coming evil.

“She shall not escape from me so soon to-night,” thought Hermann to himself. “I know what I will do: I shall put the clock an hour back, so that when it is really twelve o’clock, they will think it is only eleven. One hour, one blessed hour more in her company, snatched in defiance of fate!”

Never had Hermann been more charming as a host than he was to-night. He bade his guests heartily welcome and shook them warmly by the hand. True, he was somewhat distracted and gave strange answers to questions that were put to him. His eyes were constantly on the door. It opened at last, and the three entered; they looked lovelier than ever; they had on golden shoes and wore golden girdles. Their dresses were white edged with pale green like water-lilies with a green calyx. There was to be no spinning to-night. Hermann had provided for music and dancing; he became giddy and his senses failed him almost at the thought of dancing with the lovely Lenore.

Ah what light little feet! They hardly seemed to touch the ground as they flew round; but the time too sped by with great rushing wings, though Hermann had striven to check its headlong course. They paid no heed to the dwarf and his constant warning taps on the door; the three sisters were too engrossed in the delights of the dance. But suddenly Lenore glanced at the clock; it pointed to eleven.

“A few moments more, my beloved,” she said, “and then we must part. But why are you so pale?” she asked of Hermann, whose heart was beating fast enough to suffocate him; for he was afraid now of the consequences of his deed.

“Lenore,” he said chokingly, “it is midnight; I hope I have not done wrong. I put back the clock. I wanted to keep you all longer at my house.”

Lenore turned deadly pale, then she told her sisters of the fatal trick that Hermann had played on them, and they too turned white as the chalk on the walls; well they knew their father and what his revenge might be!

Murmuring a sad farewell Lenore gazed for the last time in Hermann’s eyes, and then the dark night swallowed her up for ever.

The dwarf’s lantern could be seen from time to time among the forest trees like a will-o’-the-wisp; then that too vanished.

The dancing and feasting went on for some time; but Hermann’s heart was sick within him; he had no spirit left for the revelry. An indescribable feeling of terror and anxiety possessed him. The clock struck twelve; the guests dispersed. They had hardly left the house when a terrific storm broke forth, appalling in its awful violence; the house shook, trees were uprooted, lightning blazed continually. The tempest was nothing, however, compared to that in Hermann’s breast; he could not rest or sleep; fearful visions assailed him: he seemed to hear his beloved Lenore calling him, or begging for mercy from her cruel father.

Towards morning the storm had somewhat abated though it was by no means over. Hermann rushed out of the house, taking a wild pleasure in battling with the fierce elements. Up and up with a certain step he went towards that lake where all his anguish had begun, and yet where all his hopes and desires were centred. As he approached the lake through the fir-wood, the sky over the great cliff was rosy in the early dawn, the birds

were singing, the harebells raised their dew-drenched heads and looked at him. No motion—no sound—the lake was cruel it seemed to him in its indifference to his grief. “Lenore,” he cried, “Lenore!”

Then the waters of the lake stirred and three waves arose, each one greater than the last, and in the third was the nixy king with a cruel expression on his face.

“Ah, call for Lenore,” he said mockingly, “but you will never see her again!—Behold, the doom of the disobedient daughters is fulfilled.” As he spoke the lake stirred again, the waters whirled round, three exquisite rose-leaves rose from the depths of the lake and floated on the surface of the water. “Never again will you or any mortal man behold the nixies of the pool; they are changed into rose-leaves; this was their punishment,” he said, “a poetical punishment—ha, ha!” and he vanished with a tremendous clap of thunder.

More than half-mad Hermann stumbled home; for weeks he lingered between life and death.

The kind little Brigitte would have liked to have taken care of him, and would have made him a good wife; but because of his consuming love for Lenore, he slowly pined away, until one day he was found lying dead beside the fatal lake.

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