



The Sturgeon

Folk-Lore And Legends: German

German

Intermediate
9 min read

The Convent of Schwartz-Rheindorf was founded in the year of our Lord 1152 by the Bishop of Cologne, Arnold Graf von Wied, for the reception of noble ladies alone, and was placed by him under the strict rule of St. Benedict. The prelate, who died in the year 1159, lies buried beneath the high altar of the church.

Among the many other rights and privileges conferred on the convent by the Bishop was the right of fishing in the river, within certain limits above and below the convent's territorial boundaries. This was a most valuable right for a long period.

The certainty of a profitable fishing was always heralded by the appearance of two immense sturgeon. They came at the commencement of each year, harbingers of good luck, and they were ever succeeded by shoals of river fish, in such numbers as to be absolutely inexhaustible until the expiration of the season. Of these sturgeon the one, a huge male, always allowed himself to be taken by the fishermen, but the female was never captured. It was understood [Pg 177] by those who knew all about these matters that on her freedom depended the fisher's success. This good fortune lasted for centuries.

It was, however, remarked that as the discipline of the convent became more and more relaxed, and grace grew to be less and less among its inmates, the fishing became more and more unprofitable. The sturgeon, it is true, still made their appearance, but they were spent and thin, and altogether unlike those which had been

wont of yore to visit the fishing-ground of the sisterhood. The abbess and the nuns, however, either could not or they would not perceive the cause of the falling off in the take, or the change in the appearance of the sturgeon, but the common people who dwelt in the vicinity of the convent, and especially those poor persons to whom the river had been heretofore a source of support, were neither slow in seeing the cause nor in publishing the consequences to the world. Thus stood matters: dissoluteness of life on the one hand, distress on the other; profligacy and poverty, extravagance and starvation, linked inseparably together.

It was midwinter. On the bank of the river stood the purveyor of the convent, accompanied by the lady abbess herself and a great number of the nuns. They waited to watch the first haul made by the fishermen on the New Year's morning, according to the custom which had prevailed in the convent for centuries. It was not usual for the river to be open at that time, but this year there was not a piece of ice on its surface. The fishermen put out in their boats, and cast their nets into the current; then, making the circuit of the spot, they returned to the bank and commenced to haul them in. Little difficulty was at first experienced by them in this operation. For several years preceding the supply of fish had scarcely sufficed to defray the expense of catching. It would seem, however, as if fortune were inclined to smile on the sisterhood once more. The nets had not been more than half drawn in when the fishermen began to perceive that they contained something heavier than usual. The lady abbess and the nuns were made acquainted with the circumstance, and they watched, in eager expectancy, the landing of the fish. The nets were at length with much trouble hauled on shore.

"Hilloa!" said the principal fisherman, an aged man, to the purveyor of the convent, "hast thou ever seen such monsters before? My soul! but this will glad the hearts of the whole convent, and make many poor folk happy, an it be but the harbinger of a return to the old times."

While he spoke two immense sturgeon were landed. The abbess and her train approached the landing-place, and admired the strength and superior size of the fish.

"It would be but folly to set one of them free," she partially soliloquised and partially spoke to the purveyor. "The convent has not had such a treat for years past, and we absolutely require some change. I'll warrant me they will eat delightfully."

The purveyor, a wily Jewish-looking fellow, who passed for an Italian, at once assented to the observations of his mistress, and added a few remarks of his own in support of them. Not so, however, the old fisherman, who

overheard the conversation, having approached the abbess with the purveyor to learn her will and pleasure as to the disposal of the fish.

“Nay, nay, master,” he interposed, in his rough way, “not so fast, not so fast. My father fished on this river for full fifty years, and my father’s father did the same; and fifty years have I drawn net here too, all in the service of the noble ladies of Schwartz-Rheindorf. Never, in that time, knew I other than this done with these fish—the one to be let free, the other to be given away among the poor. I’ll do nought else with them.”

The abbess and the purveyor were but ill-pleased to hear what the old man said.

“You must do as I bid you, Herman,” said the former.

“You must obey my lady, your mistress,” echoed the latter. “She is too good and gracious to ye.”

“Not I,” said the old man bluntly,—“not I. For all the broad lands on the Rhine I would not have hand, act, nor part in such a matter. Do as ye list, but I’ll be none your servant in the matter.”

The old man walked away as he said these words, and neither the entreaties of the abbess, the threats of the purveyor, nor the interposition of some of the nuns present could bring him back.

Others, however, were soon found among his companions who were less scrupulous; and the two fish were accordingly removed to the convent, and consigned to the care of the cook, to be served up for dinner that day.

The dinner-hour arrived—the sisterhood were all seated at table—the servitors, marshalled by the supple purveyor, made their appearance, bearing the expected banquet in large covered dishes. A hasty grace was muttered, and then every eye was turned to the covers. The abbess had ordered the sturgeon to be served up first.

“And now, sisters,” she said, with a complacent look of benignant condescension, “I hope soon to know how you approve of our dinner. It is my constant study to make you happy, and my efforts are unceasing to afford you every gratification in my power. Let us begin.”

The covers were removed in a twinkling by the servitors, the carvers clattered their knives and forks impatiently; but what was the surprise of all, when every dish as it was uncovered was found to be empty. The

wrath of the abbess rose at the sight, and the zeal of the nuns knew no bounds in seconding her indignation. The cook was hurriedly [Pg 181] sent for. He stood before the excited sisterhood an abject, trembling wretch, far more like one who expected to be made a victim of himself, than one who would voluntarily make victims of others.

“How is this, villain?” exclaimed the abbess, her face reddening with rage.

“How’s this, villain?” echoed threescore female voices, some of them not musical.

“Ay, how is this, hound?” growled the purveyor.

“Do you mock us?” continued the abbess, as the cook stood trembling and silent.

“Do you mock us?” echoed the purveyor, with as much dignity as he could impart into his thin, meagre figure.

“Speak!” said the abbess in a loud voice, while the cook cast his eyes around as if seeking aid against the excited throng the room contained,—“speak!”

Thus urged, the cook proceeded to explain—as far, at least, as he was able. He declared that he had cut up and cooked the sturgeon, according to the directions he had received from the purveyor, and that, when dinner was served up, he had sent them up dressed in the manner that official had directed.

The abbess and her nuns were much puzzled how to explain this extraordinary occurrence, and each busied herself in conjectures which, as usual in such cases, never approached the fact. At this juncture the aged fisherman entered the room.

“My lady,” he said to the abbess, when he learnt what had occurred, “it is the judgment of Heaven. Even now I saw the fish in the river. I knew them well, and I’ll swear to them if necessary. They floated away, swimming down the stream, and I am a much mistaken man if ever ye see them any more.”

The pleasurable anticipations of the day that the sisters had entertained were completely annihilated; but it would have been well for them if the consequences of their avarice and gluttony had ended with that hour. Never more did the sturgeon make their appearance, and the part of the stream which pertained to the convent thenceforth ceased to produce fish of any kind whatsoever.

People say that the Reformation had the effect of wooing the finny tribe back to their old haunts. At all events, whatever may have been the cause, it is the fact that there is not at present a less plentiful supply in this spot than there is in any other part of that rich river.

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