

Part one

A long time ago, on a mountain in the Odenwald - that forested part of southern Germany where the Main river meets the Rhine - Baron Von Landshort's castle stood. These days nearly nothing is left of it, but in those days it looked down on the country around it - like its owner.

The baron was a proud man from the Katzenellenbogen family. His father, a great army man, had left him the castle, and the baron took care of it as well as he could.

Other old German families had sold their uncomfortable castles in the hills and built more comfortable houses in the valleys. But the baron stayed and continued with the old family ways. This meant he often argued with his neighbours, because his ancestors had once disagreed with theirs.

The baron had only one child, a beautiful daughter. Two unmarried aunts cared for her when she was a child, and taught her all the important things a young lady should know.

By the time she was eighteen, she could read without trouble. She could also write her name without forgetting a single letter - and big enough for her aunts to read without their glasses. She could dance, play the guitar, and sing several beautiful love songs from memory, too.

Her aunts, who had lived for love when they were young, always kept a careful eye on her, and made sure she never got into trouble. She never left the castle alone, and had to listen to endless talks about the importance of politeness.

'You must always obey your father,' one aunt told her.

'Never get close to men, and never believe a word they say,' said the other.

Her aunts felt sure that, although other young women might make mistakes in matters of love, this would never happen to the baron's daughter.

'Without her father's approval, she won't look twice at the best-looking young man in the world, even if he's dying at her feet,' they thought.

Plenty of other people lived in the baron's castle with him. He had many poorer relatives who often visited him for big family parties paid for by the baron.

They always told him after a few drinks, 'There's nothing more enjoyable than our visits to your home.'

The baron was a small man with a big heart. He loved telling stories about the brave old Katzenellenbogen fighters who stared down proudly from their pictures on the castle walls. His special favorites were ghost stories. Each story he told was always listened to happily by his poor relatives, even if it was the hundredth time they'd heard it.

This was the baron's life. He was like a king in his castle, and believed himself to be the cleverest man in the world.

On the day when my story begins, the baron had planned a big party in the castle to celebrate the arrival of his daughter's future bridegroom.

The baron and a very grand old man from one of the finest families in Bavaria had decided to join their fortunes together by marrying their children to each other. Letters of great politeness were sent and replied to. Although they hadn't even seen each other, the young pair were engaged to be married, and the date for the wedding was decided.

Young Count von Altenburg had left the army in order to come and fetch his bride from the baron's castle. Earlier he'd sent a letter from the nearest city, which the baron had read with interest:

Friday, Wurtzburg

Sir, I have some business to finish here in Wurtzburg which has made me later than I planned, but I'll arrive soon.

Von Altenburg

Now everyone in the castle was making things ready for the young man's arrival. The future bride was wearing her finest clothes. Her two aunts had argued all morning about every single thing she should wear, so she'd left them arguing and had chosen her clothes herself. Luckily she had good taste. She looked as lovely as any young bridegroom could wish for, and her excitement meant that her pink face and shining eyes made her look even more beautiful than usual.

Her sighs and the dreamy look in her eyes all told of the gentle hopes and fears that fought together in her little heart. And now her aunts were at her side, telling her what to do and what to say to her lover when he arrived. Unmarried aunts are always good at that kind of thing!

The baron was running worriedly here and there, telling his servants to take care with this or that. He had nothing special to do, but was a naturally active man who hated sitting still when all around him were in a hurry.

The castle kitchen was full of food, and a small cow was cooking on the fire, together with the fattest birds from the nearby forest. The most excellent drinks the baron had to offer were all ready for the young count to taste.

But the young bridegroom was late. After some hours, the sun began to disappear behind the mountain tops. The baron climbed to the highest room in the castle and looked out of the window, hoping to see the count and his servants coming along the mountain road.

Once he thought he could see them, but it was only some men on horses who went past his castle. In the end, it became too dark for the baron to see the road clearly.

While all this was happening, in a different part of the Odenwald forest, two young men were riding along. One was Count Von Altenburg, who was going unhurriedly to meet his future bride. The other was a good army friend of his - Herman von Starkenfaust - whom he'd met by chance in Wurtzburg.

Starkenfaust was one of the strongest, bravest men in Germany. He was returning from the army to his father's castle. This was close to Baron Landshort's home, although their two families never spoke because their ancestors had argued long ago.

The two young men were travelling the same way, so they agreed to ride onwards together.

The count told his servants, 'You can follow and catch up with me later.'

Then he rode off with his friend through the forest. On the way they first talked happily about their memories of army life. Then the count became a little boring when he started speaking about his future bride.

'Everyone says she's so beautiful, and I'm really looking forward to married life,' he said.

In those days German forests were as full of robbers as German castles were full of ghosts. So it's not surprising that, when they reached the loneliest part of the Odenwald, they were attacked by a group of thieves. Both fought bravely, but soon they were losing the battle.

Just then, the count's servants arrived and ran to help them. The criminals ran away. But before leaving, one of them pushed his knife deep into the count's side, leaving him badly hurt on the forest floor.

Slowly and carefully his servants carried him back to the city of Wurtzburg. There they took him to a man of the church who was also famous for his doctorly skill, but it was too late for half of the man's skills to be of any use. No medicines could save the young count now. He was dying.

His last words were to the friend who stood at his bedside.

'Go at once to the castle of Landshort and explain why I couldn't come to meet my bride.'

He wasn't perhaps the most loving of lovers, but he was a serious young man, and asked Starkenfaust to give the sad news as nicely as possible.

'If you don't, I won't rest in my grave,' he said.

'I'll do what you ask,' Starkenfaust promised, giving the dying man his hand.

The count took it and held it for a while, but soon he became feverish, and began talking crazily.

'I mustn't break my promise. I must ride to Landshort myself to meet my bride.'

He died while he was trying to get out of bed, run out of the door and jump onto his horse.

Starkenfaust cried a little over his friend's early death. Then he began to think of the difficult job he'd agreed to do.

'How can I visit the castle of my father's enemy unasked, bringing depressing news that will destroy his hopes and happiness?' he said to himself.

On the other hand, he was very interested in meeting this young Katzenellenbogen woman whom people said was so beautiful, and who was kept locked away from the world in her father's castle. He loved beautiful women, and he enjoyed adventures.

Before leaving Wurtzburg, he arranged for the count's funeral to take place in the cathedral, where several of Von Altenburg's relatives were buried. The rest he left to the young man's servants.

Part two

Now let's return to the Katzenellenbogen family, who were waiting for their guest - and for their dinner. Night came, and still the count hadn't arrived. Their dinner couldn't wait. The meats were nearly burnt, the cook was half worried to death, and everyone in the castle had hungry faces, like soldiers who hadn't eaten for months.

In the end, the baron gave orders for the meal to begin immediately. Everyone was just sitting down at the table, when suddenly they heard the sound of a horn at the castle gate. A stranger was outside, asking to enter. Quickly the baron went to welcome his future son-in-law.

The gate opened, and the stranger, horn in hand, waited outside. He was a tall, fine-looking young man on a black horse. His face was pale, but he had shining mysterious eyes and a look of proud sadness about him.

The baron was surprised to see he'd come alone, without any servants. At first he felt annoyed.

'Doesn't that young man realize this is an important visit, and an important family he's marrying into?'

But then he calmed down, saying to himself, 'His youthful excitement has made him hurry here before his servants.'

'I'm sorry,' began the stranger, getting down from his horse, 'to arrive like this at this hour-'

The baron stopped him from saying more by welcoming him warmly and politely. He was proud of his own skill at speaking. Once or twice the stranger tried to stop the river of fine words, but he couldn't. In the end he just looked down at the ground and let it all wash over him.

By the time the baron had finished, they were deep inside the castle. Once more the stranger tried to speak, but this time he was stopped by the arrival of the women of the family, bringing his nervous young bride to meet him. He stared at her for a moment like a man in a dream. His eyes shone lovingly as he took in her beautiful face and figure.

One of the unmarried aunts whispered something in the young woman's ear. She tried to speak, lifting her bright blue eyes from the ground to look at her bridegroom nervously, but the words died on her soft lips.

Then she looked back at the floor, although there was now the ghost of a smile on her pretty face, showing she liked what she'd seen. Indeed it was impossible for a young girl of eighteen, who often dreamt of love, not to be pleased by this good-looking young man.

Because their guest had arrived so late, the baron said, 'Let's leave all talk of the wedding until tomorrow.'

He at once invited the young man to join them at the long table in the great hall where dinner waited for them.

From the walls the pictures of the baron's hard-faced ancestors looked down on them as they ate. Next to them there were old battle flags with lots of holes in them, several badly beaten bits of armor, and the heads of a number of wild animals from the nearby forest that different Katzenellenbogens had hunted, caught, and killed over the centuries.

The young man didn't take much notice of the other dinner guests, and touched little of the fine meal. He seemed too busy with his bride to think of things like that.

He spoke softly to her in words that those sitting next to them found hard to catch. But a woman can always hear the soft, sweet voice of her lover. His seriousness and gentleness seemed to touch the young lady deeply, and she listened closely to all he said, sometimes smiling and sometimes serious.

From time to time she said something back to him. And when he wasn't looking at her, she watched him out of the corner of her eye and sighed happily.

The two unmarried aunts, who both knew the mysteries of the heart well, told their neighbours at the table, 'We're sure the two of them fell in love the moment they met.'

The dinner went on happily. The baron's poorer relatives ate hungrily, in the way that people with little money do after they've spent days walking in the mountains.

The baron told his best stories with great success. When it was a mystery story, his listeners were suitably surprised, and when it was amusing, they laughed in all the right places.

Other, cleverer relatives told even funnier stories, or whispered things in the ladies' ears that made it hard for them not to laugh. One very happy, round-faced man sang some not very polite songs that made the unmarried aunts' faces turn red.

But instead of enjoying the fun of the party, the bridegroom looked a little out of place. His face became more miserable as the evening went on, and - strangely - the baron's funny stories made him look even sadder.

Sometimes he seemed to forget all around him. At other times he looked round the hall with restless eyes that spoke of an uneasy heart.

His conversations with his bride became more serious and mysterious. Her pretty face became clouded with worry, and she began to shake nervously at his words.

The people sitting near them noticed. They couldn't understand why the bridegroom looked so miserable, but his coldness darkened the warm happiness of all around him.

People began whispering to each other and shaking their heads. Songs and laughs died on people's lips, and there were uncomfortable silences in conversations.

Then people began telling stories about ghosts and other wild figures of the night. Each story was more frightening than the one before it. In the end, the baron made several ladies scream at the now very famous story of the 'goblin horseman'. He told of how the strange mannish thing on a black horse came quietly one dark midnight and took the beautiful Leonora, the only child of her mother and father, from her room, and how she was never seen again alive after that night.

The bridegroom listened to this story with interest. Just before the baron finished, the young man began to stand up. He grew taller and taller until - to the baron at his side - he seemed like a great mountain of a man standing over him. Immediately the story was finished, the young man sighed deeply and said goodbye to everyone. They were all surprised, and no one was more surprised than the baron himself.

'Are you planning to leave at midnight? But everything's ready for you to stay with us tonight! Please go to your room now if you'd like to lie down.'

The stranger shook his head sadly saying, 'I must lie in a different place tonight.'

There was something about this answer, and the way it was said, that made the baron's heart stop for a second. But he pulled himself together and again warmly invited the young man to stay.

The stranger shook his head silently. Waving goodbye to everyone, he walked slowly from the hall. The unmarried aunts sat as still as stones, and the bride began to cry.

The baron followed the stranger outside to where his black horse was waiting. As they stood at the castle entrance, the stranger turned and spoke to the baron in a deep, loud voice which the high roof above them made deeper and louder.

'Now we're alone I'll tell you why I must go. I have business that cannot wait which calls me away.'

'Can't you send someone in your place?'

'No. I must go myself. I have to be in Wurtzburg Cathedral-'

'Yes, but not now. Tomorrow you'll take your bride and marry her there.'

'No!' replied the stranger, ten times more seriously than before. 'I'm not going to marry. Death is waiting. I'm a dead man. I was killed by robbers. My body lies in Wurtzburg. At midnight they'll bury me. My grave is waiting. I mustn't be late!'

With that, he jumped on his horse, rode across the wooden bridge that took him to the road, and soon disappeared into the dark, windy night.

The baron returned worriedly to the great hall and told everyone there what had happened. Two ladies fainted, and others felt sick at the idea that they'd eaten dinner at the same table as a ghost.

Some said, 'Perhaps he's the Wild Hunter.'

He's a famous ghostly figure in many old German stories: a tall, strong, larger-than-life fighter, riding a black horse through the air at midnight. He often calls loudly to the group of noisy big black dogs around him. Their eyes always shine with red fire when they smell the warm meat of lonely travellers still out on the road after dark. The Wild Hunter hunts the living, and a crazy crowd of thin grey figures always dances after him. These are the ghosts of the newly dead - headless, armless, or legless - who moan and bleed helplessly as they're pulled by the Hunter and his dogs through the endless night sky.

Others disagreed with that idea. 'Perhaps he came out of the dark rocky heart of a mountain, or from deep under the ground below an old tree in the forest,' they said.

Anyone who didn't really believe the bridegroom was a terrible ghost or goblin of some kind had to change their ideas the following day. Next morning a letter arrived at the castle explaining about the young count's murder, and his funeral in Wurtzburg Cathedral.

Part three

The news of the count's death at the hands of robbers shocked everyone in the castle. The baron locked himself away in his room. His guests, who'd come to celebrate with him, couldn't think of leaving him now in his time of trouble. They walked around the castle or met in the hall in groups, talking and shaking their heads. And they ate and drank more than ever, to try and make themselves feel more cheerful.

But for the bride things were even worse. Just think of losing the man of your dreams before you've even taken him in your arms - and what a man he had been!

'The ghost of him was so polite and so fine-looking,' she said to herself. 'And I'm sure when he was alive, he was even politer and finer than that!'

She filled the castle with her moans and sighs. On the second night after she'd met - and lost - the love of her life, she went to her room. One of her aunts - the fatter one - went with her. She didn't want the girl to sleep alone. This aunt, who was one of the best tellers of ghost stories in Germany, was telling one of her longest stories when she fell asleep in the middle of it.

The room looked out on a garden.

Lying in bed, the young woman watched the moon shining on the leaves of the tree that stood outside her window.

As she listened, the bell of the castle clock sounded twelve times. It was midnight!

Suddenly she heard soft guitar music coming from the garden. She left her bed and went to the window. A tall figure stood below, among the shadows of the trees. It looked up at her and just then, the silvery light of the moon shone down on it. She recognized the face. It was her ghostly bridegroom!

Suddenly she heard a loud scream in her ear, and her aunt - who'd woken up and followed her niece to the window - fell into her arms. When she looked down at the garden again, the ghost had disappeared.

It was now the aunt that needed the most looking after. She was really terrified. The young woman, on the other hand, felt that there was something even in the ghost of her lover that touched her heart. He seemed to her so manly. And - although the shadow of a man is not really enough to please a girl who's sick with love - a manly ghost is better than no man at all.

The aunt said, 'I'm never want to sleep in this room again.'

The niece answered, 'And I'll never sleep in any other room in the castle except this one.'

So the niece decided to sleep in the room alone.

'Promise me faithfully you won't tell anyone about the ghost,' she asked her aunt.

'I promise,' the aunt replied.

The niece didn't want to lose the only happiness she had in the world. She didn't want to leave the room near that garden which her lover's ghost haunted at night.

I'm not sure if the aunt kept her promise or not. She loved telling stories, and it's fun to be the first person who learns about a piece of news and can then inform others. People say she kept her promise for over six days, but she didn't have to keep things secret for longer than that.

While she was sitting at the breakfast table on the seventh day, a servant came in, saying, 'Nobody can find the young lady. Her room's empty, she hasn't slept in her bed, and her window's open. She's gone!'

Everyone at the breakfast table was shocked at the news. Even the poorer relatives stopped eating for a moment. Then the fat aunt - who could say nothing when she first heard the news - suddenly began telling the story of what she'd seen in the garden, adding, 'The goblin's taken her!'

Two of the servants added, 'It's true! We heard a horse hurrying down the mountain road at about midnight. It was surely the ghostly bridegroom on his black horse, taking his bride away to the grave!'

All strongly believed what they said was true because awful things like this often happen in Germany, as you'll see if you read all the reports about them.

What a terrible thing to happen to the baron! Both as a father and as part of the great Katzenellenbogen family it was unspeakably awful.

'Has a ghost taken my only daughter to the grave, or am I going to have a wild hunter as a son-in-law, or maybe half-goblin grandchildren?'

As usual he began running around worriedly and everyone in the castle became nervous.

He gave orders to his men, 'Take your horses and ride through the Odenwald forest at once. Look for my daughter on every hill, in every valley, and along every road.'

The baron himself had just pulled on his boots and was ready to get on his horse's back when he saw something that made him stop.

A young lady was riding towards the castle on a white horse, and a young man on a black horse was riding beside her.

She rode up to the gate and jumped down from the horse. At once she fell at the baron's feet and put her arms round his legs. It was his lost daughter, and her friend was - the ghostly bridegroom!

The baron was very surprised. He looked first at his daughter and then at the ghost and almost couldn't believe his eyes.

The ghost seemed in much better health since his visit to the land of the dead. His clothes were rich and fine, and he looked strong and manly in them. He was no longer white-faced and miserable. His face was pink and full of life, and happiness shone from his large brown eyes.

The mystery was at an end. The young man (as I'm sure you've guessed already) introduced himself to the baron as Herman von Starckenfaust.

He explained about his adventure with the young count, and told of how he'd hurried to the castle to bring the sad news, but that the baron had stopped him speaking again and again.

'When I saw the bride, she won my heart,' he went on, 'So I decided to stay for a while as the count in order to spend a few hours at her side. I was thinking about how I could say goodbye and go when suddenly your story about the goblin, Baron, gave me the idea for the strange way in which I left. Because you and my father are enemies, I knew later visits of mine wouldn't meet with your approval,' he added. 'So I came back in secret, haunting the garden below your daughter's window. There I met her, talked to her, won her heart, and carried her off with me to church where we've just celebrated our wedding.'

Normally the baron was a hard man. He liked his daughter to obey him, and his ancestors' enemies were his enemies, too. But he also loved his daughter, and he'd believed he would never see her again. Now he was happy to see her alive. And, although her husband was the son of his enemy, at least he wasn't a goblin!

'Young man,' he began, 'I have to say there's something not quite honest and true about the way you told me you were dead.'

But one of his friends, who was an old army man, said, 'Everything's fair in the name of love.'

Another old soldier added, 'Von Starkenfaust has recently been in the army, and what he's done needs to be seen in a different light because of that.'

So everything ended happily. The baron told his daughter and son-in-law there and then, 'I'm ready to forget what's happened and to welcome you both into my home with open arms.'

Everyone in the castle began celebrating again. The poor relatives made the young man's ears burn red with all the nice things they said to him:

'You're so brave.'

'You're so kind.'

And so rich!'

The aunts, it was true, were a little shocked at the way their niece had forgotten so quickly everything that they'd tried to teach her.

'It was a serious mistake not to have metal bars put across her window,' said the thinner of the two, and her sister agreed.

The fatter aunt was very annoyed.

'I can't tell my wonderful story of the ghost in the garden any more,' she thought. 'Because the only ghost I've ever seen wasn't real after all.'

But the niece seemed very happy indeed to find out that her ghostly bridegroom was in fact a living husband in the end.

- THE END -