
I

In the village of Sittendorf in Germany there dwelt, a long time ago, a poor but worthy man whose name was Peter Klaus. All the people for miles around knew Peter. He was not fond of hard work. He could not have been persuaded for all the money in the world to spend his days in a shop tinkering at a trade. He liked to be out of doors. He liked to wander at his ease in the fields and the woods, enjoying the sunlight and the flowers and the songs of the birds.

Since he could not be induced to follow any occupation in the village, his neighbors sometimes hired him to take care of their goats. Every morning he drove a great flock of Billies and Nannies out upon the slopes of the Kyffhäuser Mountain; and while they browsed upon the grass, he wandered around in the groves and glens or went to sleep on the sunny slope of some great rock. In the evening he got the goats together and drove them slowly back to the village. This was just the kind of life that he liked, and he wished no grander title than that of "Peter Klaus the goatherd."

One morning, soon after reaching the pasture, Peter missed the prettiest Nanny goat in the flock. He hunted for her among the rocks and in the thickets of underbrush; he called her; he climbed to the top of the hill whence he could see all over the country for miles around. But no stray goat could he find.

When evening came and it was time to go home, he was in great despair. Should he go home and say that he had lost one of his flock? Such a thing had never happened before. But what was his surprise upon rounding up the flock, to see the lost Nanny in its midst!

The same thing happened for several days. Every morning Nanny would disappear and nothing could be seen of her until late in the evening, when she would suddenly join her fellows and run, frisking and playing, back to the village.

Peter was much puzzled, for, do what he could he was unable to find out what the frolicking creature did with herself during the day. At length he made up his mind not to take his eyes off her during the whole day. He watched her closely and saw that, when the flock passed the corner of an old broken-down wall at the foot of a hill, she quietly dropped behind and was out of sight in a moment.

Peter examined the wall. He had seen it many a time before. People said that it was part of the ruins of an old castle. As he looked closely he saw that, just behind a hawthorn bush, there was a hole large enough for a goat, or even a man on all-fours, to pass through. This, then, was the place where Nanny disappeared so

strangely; indeed, she had worn quite a path beneath the hawthorn, and the only wonder was that her master had not discovered it before.

The next day Peter watched her as before, and when she ran slyly through the wall he followed her. After creeping on his hands and knees for some distance he found himself in a long and lofty cavern. The sunlight streamed through some crevices in the rocks and made the place look quite light and cheerful. At the farther end he saw Nanny busily picking up some oats that were scattered on the floor. How did the oats come there? The plump grains were constantly trickling down from above, and the goat had nothing to do but stand and eat.

Peter could not understand it. But as he came nearer he heard the stamping of heavy feet overhead and the whinnying of horses.

“Oh, somebody has a stable up there,” he said to himself; “but how can that be? I have been all over these hills, and have never seen even the sign of a house.”

As he was looking about him, a door in the side of the cavern suddenly opened and a queer little fellow with a big head and saucer eyes came in.

“Good morning to you, sir,” said Peter, thinking it was the stable man. “I beg you will pardon me for coming in without any invitation. Is there anything I can do to serve you?”

The little man made no answer, but looked at Peter funnily with those great eyes, and beckoned him to follow.

Peter was too good-natured to refuse, and besides this he was curious to learn all about the strange place. So he followed his queer guide through the door and up a long flight of stairs until he again felt the warm sun on his cheeks and saw the green; grass beneath his feet.

He saw that he was now in a square courtyard surrounded by stone walls and shaded by tall trees. His guide led him through another broad cavern and then out upon a green lawn that was fenced in on every side by tall cliffs and rocky heights. Near one end of the lawn were twelve old-fashioned knights playing at ninepins. The knights were dressed in a very queer way. They wore long hose and silver-buckled shoes. Their snow-white hair and beards reached almost to their knees.

They scarcely noticed Peter, so busy were they at their game, and not one of them spoke a word. The guide motioned to Peter to pick up the nine-pins and return the bowls to the bowlers. Peter was so badly frightened by the strangeness of everything that he dared not disobey. Trembling in every limb, he hastened to serve the knights as he was bidden.

He noticed as the bowls were rolled over the lawn that they made a noise like thunder rumbling among the hills, and this frightened him still more. By and by, however, he began to gain courage. As the players were never in a hurry, he learned to humor himself and to do his work as slowly as he pleased. Looking around him, he saw a pitcher of wine and twelve golden goblets on a table at the end of the lawn. He did not stop to think that the goblets were for the knights and that there was none for him; he was very thirsty, and he drank right out of the pitcher.

The wine made him very brave. He felt that he would rather pick up ninepins than mind his neighbors' goats; and every time one of the bowls rolled toward the table he would run and take another sip from the pitcher. At last, however, his head began to feel heavy; and while he was in the act of picking up the ninepins, he fell gently over upon the grass and went to sleep.

II

When Peter Klaus awoke he found himself lying on the grass where he had been in the habit of feeding his goats. He sat up and looked around. There were the same rocks upon which he had sat a hundred times; there were the same hills among which he had so often wandered; and there was the same noisy brook along which he had walked a thousand times with so much delight. But the trees and shrubs seemed strange to him—they were much larger than when he had seen them before, and there were many new ones that he did not remember.

He looked for his goats, but they were nowhere in sight. He called, but not one of them came to him. He started out to seek them, but was surprised to see that all the well-known paths among the hills were overgrown with tall grass. He rubbed his eyes to make sure that he was awake. "Strange! strange!" he muttered. "I will go back to the village and see if the beasts are there."

His legs were so stiff that walking was a hard task. He stumbled along slowly, wondering why the rheumatism should trouble him so much. After a while he came to a spot from which he could see the village spread out before him at the bottom of the valley. It was the same pretty village of Sittendorf; he could not see that it had changed. He hurried along to the main road, hoping to find his flock there. But not a goat could he see.

Before reaching the village he met a number of people; but they were all strangers to him, and they looked at him so queerly that he did not dare to ask any questions. In the village the women and children stood in their doorways and stared at him as he passed. All were strangers to him. He noticed that some of them stroked their chins and laughed; and without thinking much about it, he put his hand to his own chin. What was his surprise to find that he had a beard more than a foot long!

“Ah, me!” thought he. “Am I mad, and has all the world gone mad too? Where am I?”

But he knew that the village was Sittendorf—for there were the church and the long street which he knew so well, and towering above them was the great Kyffhäuser Mountain looking just as it did when he was a child.

He went on until he came to his own house. It was greatly altered. The roof was beginning to fall in; the door was off its hinges; the rooms were empty and bare. He called his wife and children by their names; but no one answered him. A strange dog came round the corner and snarled at him. A strange man in the next dooryard looked over the fence and told him to go away.

Soon a crowd of idlers and women and children gathered around him. They were laughing at his long beard and his tattered clothes. A woman who seemed more thoughtful than the rest asked him what he wanted.

“I don’t know what I want,” he answered. “I came here to find my goats and I find everything and everybody lost. Does anybody know—”

He was about to inquire for his wife and children; but he thought how odd that would seem, and stopped short. He was silent for a moment; then he looked around at the circle of strange faces and asked, “Where is Kurt Steffen, the blacksmith?”

The crowd stared at him, but no one spoke. Then an old woman who had hobbled across the street to look at him answered, “Kurt Steffen! Why, Kurt Steffen went to the wars years and years ago. Nobody has heard from him since.”

Poor Peter Klaus looked around him, more dazed than ever. His lips quivered pitifully as he asked, “Then where is Valentine Meyer, the shoemaker?”

“Ah, me!” answered another old woman. “Valentine has been lying for nearly twenty years in a house that he will never leave.”

Peter thought that he had seen both of the old women before—but as he remembered them they were young and handsome and of about his own age. He was about to ask another question when he saw a sprightly young mother, who looked very much like his wife, coming down the street. She was leading a little girl about four years of age, and on her arm was a year-old baby. He staggered and rubbed his eyes, and leaned against the wall for support.

“Does anybody know Peter Klaus, the goat-herd?” he stammered.

“Peter Klaus!” cried the young mother. “Why, that was my father’s name. It is now twenty years since he was lost. His flock came home without him one

evening, and all the village searched night and day among the hills and on the mountain, but could not find him. I was then only four years old.”

“And are you little Maria?” asked Peter, trembling harder than ever.

“My name is Maria,” was the answer, “but I am no longer little Maria.”

“And I am your father!” cried Peter. “I am Peter Klaus who was lost. Don’t any of you know Peter Klaus?”

All who heard him were filled with astonishment; and Maria, with her two children, rushed into his arms crying, “Welcome, father! Welcome home again! I felt sure it was you as soon as I saw you.”

And soon all the old people in the village came to greet him. “Peter Klaus? Yes, yes, it seems only yesterday that you drove our goats to the pasture. How time does fly! Welcome, old neighbor! Welcome home after being away twenty years.”

Such is the old, old story of Peter Klaus. Hundreds of years ago the people of Germany talked about it and laughed over it. It is perhaps even older than the second part of the legend of Frederick Barbarossa, which, as you will remember, has some resemblance to it and also relates to a mysterious cavern in the Kyffhäuser Mountain.