

## The Guest of the Dead

### Legend

The emperor Frederick Barbarossa, duly reprimanded by the Grand Council of Venice, came after many refusals to render homage to the sanctity of Pope Alexander III,<sup>1</sup> who, as penance for his rebellion and a host of other detestable sins, sent him to the Holy Land to fight the infidels.

When he had decided to depart, Frederick sent throughout his empire a large number of heralds-at-arms to summon, first all of his high barons and liege-men, and then all the good burgers of his good cities, and finally all his loyal and faithful subjects: nobles and commoners, burgers and villeins.

Many came at the first call and took the cross with great heart in order to follow their emperor to Palestine; but many required the summons to be repeated, because they liked sowing their fields and cleaving to their hearth better than riding over mountains and valleys in unknown lands, and preferred to earn indulgences by saying *Ave Marias* under the porches of their churches rather than pursuing the Saracens toward Damascus and Saint-Jean-d'Acre.

Gradually, however, whether they liked it or not, all good Germans in a condition to bear arms were brought under the orange and black banner of Barbarossa and took the road to Asia, to go and be decimated by famine, plague and Greek fire. And in the meantime, during the long years in which Germany waited for her children and her emperor, who was never to return, everything went from bad to worse in the empire.

To begin with, strong arms were lacking in the fields to labor the earth, and the crops cultivated by the old men and the children did not grow well; in the towns and in the fortresses the lords, always at war with one another, destroyed edifices and ruined commerce; on the Rhine, communications were cut everywhere and navigation was interrupted. To complete the misfortune, it seemed that all the maleficent spirits that haunted the Germanic lands in those days, without any regard for the pious devotion of the crusaders, had redoubled their rage and skill in order to torment the infirm old men and the poor widows.

Never, perhaps, had the gnomes and sprites of the forests of the Hartz and the Niederwald showed themselves so restless and played such malevolent tricks on the housewives who had sole care of their cottages or on travelers delayed on the roads; never had the fays and the loreleys been crueller and more deceptive to fishermen and boatmen; never finally, had the phantoms, stryges and vampires of the banks of the Danube slept less tranquilly in their tombs. In sum, there was a veritable desolation.

Fortunate still were those housewives neglected by their spouses who saw growing beside them some handsome lad, already strong, and soon capable of being the head of the family! Those gathered their courage, in the hope that better managed affairs and a more firmly conducted plow would soon bring back ease to their house. But what dolor, also, was there if those sons, the last hopes of an entire family, showed bad sentiments or gave themselves to vice and idleness, for want of a powerful hand to support or chastise them.

And that is why two poor women of the village of Arnsberg, situated in the confines of the Black Forest, were weeping and lamenting.

“Ah, Barbel my friend,” said one of them, wiping her eyes, “What have I done to Heaven to have a killecroff<sup>2</sup> in my family; for, God forgive me,” she added, making the sign of the cross, is it not evident

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<sup>1</sup> The Holy Roman Emperor Frederick I, nicknamed Barbarossa, acknowledged Alexander III as the true pope—having previously supported the antipope Victor IV—in 1177

<sup>2</sup> As the text explains, a *killecroff* is a kind of changeling; the term had apparently been introduced to French Romanticism by Gustave Brunet in his 1844 translation of Martin Luther's table talk; it was subsequently recycled in X. B. Saintine's oft-reprinted collection of *La Mythologie du Rhin* (1862; tr. as *Myths of the Rhine*) but was still esoteric when *Minuit!!* was published.

that Fritz is a killecroff, on seeing the manner in which he eats, drinks and beats his brothers, and all the children of the village?"

"Margareth, my good Margareth," replied the other, sobbing, "Don't blaspheme God and don't curse your son. Alas, if Fritz were a killecroff, my son Hermann would also be one, for throughout the country he alone is capable of matching Fritz in the matter of brutality and gluttony; but everyone knows that killecroffs, or changelings, are the spawn of the devil born of possessed girls and introduced into families by henchmen in place of veritable children. Now tell me, what have you and I, poor widows whose husbands are in the Holy Land fighting the infidels, done to see our sons exchanged by the devil for his own?"

Margareth sighed. "Oh, my dear Barbel, perhaps never have so many killecroffs been seen in Germany as at present! Do you remember the one in D\*\*\* who ate as much as two workers, cried and beat the neighbors all day long, and was only able to laugh when misfortune struck the house?"

"And the one in K\*\*\* near Halberstadt, Margareth, who, from birth didn't leave a drop of milk in his mother's teat for his twin, and dried up another five nurses! But, thank God, we were soon rid of that one, for his father took the good advice of his friends and relatives, and took him to Halberstadt to devote him to the blessed Virgin Mary. And as he passed over a bridge devils started to dance on the water and to call 'Killecroff! Killecroff!' The child, who was in a basket and had not moved or proffered a word until then, being scarcely six months old, started to agitate and to cry 'Oh! Oh! Oh!'

"Killecroff, Killecroff where are you going?" shouted the devils.

"I'm going to Halberstadt to have myself cradled," replied the infernal nursling—on seeing which, his father, who was a good Christian, recognized the genealogy of the brat, signed himself devotedly and threw the basket into the water, infant and all. Then he returned to do penance."

The two devotees signed themselves in their turn and raised their eyes to the heavens.

"Ah, Lord God," murmured Margareth, picking up her spindle, which she had dropped, "no, my dear Barbel, it's necessary to hope that our children aren't killecroffs...!"

To be sure, if some sage rector had initially found the judgment of the two prudish women regarding their children severe, he would have ended up thinking like them merely by seeing the surly and grim faces of the two boys, occupied at that moment in administering forceful slaps and punches.

They really were the two most frightful fellows that one could see and the two most diabolical scoundrels in the entire country. They were fighting then over the cadaver of a vulture, which each of them claimed to have killed, and blows fell as thickly as hailstones, accompanied by insults and blasphemies.

The elder was sixteen years old and the younger fifteen; but they were singularly strong for their age—which did not make them any better, said the two poor mothers, for they only employed their strength and skill in wringing the necks of their neighbors' chickens to make a meal, in stealing pitchers of beer and playing nasty tricks.

Fritz was a big, strongly-built and bony fellow with a flat head and twisted, almost limping, legs. Thick red hair fell over his forehead and mingled with his bushy eyebrows, which only allowed a glimpse of the wild pupils of two wandering eyes of different colors. Beneath those eyes a nose like the beak of a bird of prey surmounted a twisted mouth with overlapping teeth, which completed giving poor Margareth's son a horrible physiognomy.

Hermann, the young of the two scapegraces, was a stout boy, square from top to bottom, whose face was more bestial than grim. His heavy head, supported by a thick neck, was illuminated by two faience-blue eyes shaded by a magnificently tangled shock of coarse hair. He had bulging highly-colored cheeks, pale blond eyebrows and lashes, and thick lips. Gluttony and drunkenness were his principal vices, and for a pot of beer and a slice of bacon he sold himself body and soul to Fritz the bandit.

On an empty stomach, when he saw his mother weeping and his little neighbor Ketha, Fritz's sister and his own promise, he swore to mend his ways, but that repentance did not last long, for that miscreant Fritz, who had never been able to touch holy water without swearing, taught him to profit from that moment of confidence to steal coins and victuals and drown the repentance in some frank mouthful.

When the two mothers, having run out of sermons and weary of tears, had recognized their total impotence to put their sons on the right path, and when Ketha had begged her mother to send her as a novice to the convent rather than give her in marriage to Hermann, the parish priests of the neighborhood got involved, and with a great reinforcement of holy water adjured the devil to abandon the killecroffs. But Satan held tight to his property, for neither prayers nor exorcisms changed the miscreants. Every year they seemed to become more prolific drunkards, more prolific thieves and more malevolent.

Often, strange noises had been heard in the hovel where they made their lair, ill-sounding for a Christian son of a good mother; so everyone in the village desired ardently to be rid of the killecroffs..

They poached, pillaged and started fires. They pursued young women, threw excrement into the holy water and profaned cemeteries. But seigneurial justice was finally stirred by so many crimes. Fritz was seized by the Baron of Halberstadt's men-at-arms after killing a gamekeeper, and shortly afterwards his body, hung high and short, was swinging on the gibbet, to serve as an example to his companion.