

RUDOLPH.

By MARY W. SHELLEY.

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We are taught, I believe, by the best critical authority that the essence of tragedy lies in the conflict of will and fate, or rather in the victory of fate over the more or less consciously struggling individual, and that the catastrophe, to be truly Greek, must in some way result from deeds morally significant. But is there not an appalling tragic element in the action of fate, when, as we so often know it, the catastrophe has no relation to responsibilities anywhere; when it is but a blind bolt, falling blindly, stopping, crushing, annihilating, without more moral significance than is in the rain which falls alike on the just and on the unjust? Is it not because this is too appalling, because it frightens us as children are frightened in the dark, that we cling so closely to those instances of human history in which deed and doom are bound together by brief and simple sequences?

It is a very unimposing little figure that is most deeply associated in my mind with that other and more mysterious tragedy in which the fine and sane and true are overpowered by that blank, meaningless and terrible power we call chance.

One spring day, years ago, it happened that for a few hours I, myself only a schoolgirl, was given charge of an unfamiliar village school. It was in a mongrel southern mountain town, where some coal mines were lamely contributing to the foundations of that new south which as yet the old south scarcely grudgingly admitted as a possibility. The school was made up of such a variety of elements as probably could not have been matched at that time in any schoolroom south of the Ohio river. There were Yankee children from the east and the west, mountain born and southern born children (the mountaineer is southern only in a shallow geographical sense), even children with a brogue and a touch of broad Lancashire dialect, but in this crowd, so heterogeneous for the south, so homogeneous compared to the mixtures the north is forced to venture upon, there was but one child who spoke the English language with a foreign accent.

To me, as I struggled with the opening class, they all seemed conspicuously united by a common dullness. This class was of the older scholars, and they were studying "Peter Parley's Universal History," that absurd yet admirable little book superseded generations ago everywhere but in forgotten and benighted southern nooks by works paralyzingly full and distressingly accurate. The lesson was about Prussia. That torpor which nature enables all but the liveliest children to take on as a protection against the horrors of the schoolroom pervaded the class. The big girls and boys sat about in attitudes of heavy woodenness, answering questions, when they could answer them at all, as if badly constructed, insufficient machinery were for the moment put in motion. I was casting about in my mind as to what would bring them to life, when, as I quoted something from the lesson about the king of Prussia (the book dated much farther back than the seventies), I heard the shiest, softest, eagerest young voice say, as if the barriers of repression had perforce given way, "He's emperor now."

I turned to see to whom all these lesson words meant facts, thoughts, something else than gibberish, with a sense of unreasonably grateful refreshment. There he was, a broad shouldered, dark eyed little boy, about 13 years old, who was seated, when school opened, half way back in the long, grimy room, but who was now wriggling with vitality, suppressed interest and an overpowered but abiding sense of misconduct on a seat just behind the recitation benches, drawn there evidently by a force similar in its imperiousness to gravitation itself.

"He's Dutch," remarked a boy in the class in a tone explanatory, but not lowered.

"What's your name?" I asked.

"Rudolph, ma'am." It seemed that for purposes of convenience the regular teacher had found Rudolph name enough and had pointedly refused to struggle with further Teutonic syllables.

"Well, Rudolph, come out here and tell these big boys and girls about how the king came to be made emperor. Come, sit there."

But Rudolph had found an opportunity for something more dear than humiliating others. His bright, dark eyes were fastened upon me as he slipped from the one seat into the other, saying: "The war it was that made so, was not? The emperor is bigger than the king. They want the German—the German one to be big, my father say. Who—how it come done—what Herr Bismarck do?"

The child sat on the edge of the bench, bending toward me as he poured forth his questions, as if the major part of his young life had hitherto been spent in a fruitless search for the facts of the German consolidation. I listened, divided betwixt admiration and terror. Needless to say I did not find time to satisfy all his exhaustive questionings, but I told him to come and see me after school, and we would see what we could do. Before the class was dismissed I found that there was nothing very special in Rudolph's interest in the emperor and Bismarck; that he brought this same insatiably curiosity, this same large, intelligent comprehension of the existence of uncomprehended causes, to other subjects.

Before noon I was enjoying quite a delightful small excitement about the child. What so thrilling as discovery, and what discovery so thrilling as to find a mind? Rudolph came into two more classes, one in spelling, where he was recklessly and speedily rational and consistent, and one struggling with

the tedium of long division, where he was slow, patient and sorely afflicted. At noon my little brief authority ended. I left Rudolph plunging about the playground in a game of base, rather clumsy, something of a butt in the sport, and perfectly hearty and good natured.

Before he came to me in the afternoon I had learned something about him. He was known among the men of our household, I found, through his habit of "hanging around" where any talk about the mines was going on, and, oddly enough, because of his notably courteous ways at the postoffice and the store, places where the miners were given to tacitly asserting their superiority to all other classes. His father and mother were Germans, I was first told, but Jim, a small cousin, said the father was "half Eytalian," and further informed me that Rudolph was "no good"—that he couldn't catch a ball.

"But he's very nice and good natured, isn't he?" I inquired, weakly longing to hear only praises of my discovery.

My young man stared. "Yaw," he drawled in uncomprehending derision and disappeared around the corner of the porch on his hands.

I was sitting on the porch when Rudolph came, a little awkward, but withal much more pleased than shy, stopping to wipe his bare feet on the grass, and before he was fairly under the roof taking off his shapeless rag of a hat, with a bright smile of greeting. I had gathered together some old illustrated papers of the time of the Franco-Prussian war. He fell upon them.

"I before one did see, a long time. It had a picture of another emperor, Max—Maximilian? He that was killed, is it not so? How—how could that come when he was emperor? Was he not the biggest?"

Rudolph soon recognized the necessity of limiting his field of research and began to put me through a most exhaustive examination on Franco-German politics. He did not find me altogether satisfactory. My knowledge was too superficial and too qualified. He caught continually at main lines of causation, which could be followed only by going far afield.

"Why wished the French emperor to fight?" he finally asked, with a touch of sternness, when I had tried to describe the diplomatic pretenses by which the war was precipitated.

"People thought that he was afraid the French nation were getting tired of



He sat with his little forefinger on a portrait of Napoleon.

him, that they might begin to ask again why he should be emperor, and so he wanted to give them something else to think about and to please them by making them victorious."

Rudolph pondered. "You know not surely?"

"No, of course he would not say things like that, nor would the men who worked for him even if they believed they knew his thoughts."

"It must be something that way, is it not? You think it would be better he not try and be smart so?" He sat with his grimy little forefinger on a portrait of Napoleon III and looked at me eagerly, as if it were the end of a fairy tale he was awaiting.

"Hello, Dutchy!" called Jim from the doorway.

"Hello!" answered Rudolph pleasantly, but with the same air of deeply unconscious patronage with which one would pat a dog while thinking of something else.

"Miss Mollycoddle, Miss Mollycoddle!" shouted the other as he tore away and over the fence.

"He goes fish with some time," said Rudolph, as if in explanation and apology for the familiar rudeness of this address.

"He should not speak to you so," I said.

Rudolph grinned. The remarks of young animals like that did not seem to him in any way related to emotional experience.

After he had exhausted both me and himself in historical research I began asking him about his home, and he brightened again and told me that he had a little sister, who was "sehon"—"You know sehon, that is better than English word"—and that she was fair, with hair and eyes like a Christmas doll, and that she loved to ride upon his back. Three years old she was.

"I must go," he suddenly broke out, starting up. "She will want to go ride to our spring. I forget," and he smiled confidentially at me, and then stood twisting his hat, with a sense of needless ceremonial of which he was ignorant. "I much thank you. Oh, yes, I come again. I like it much. Guten Abend." And he ducked his black head to me, and then to my mother, whom he saw standing, shining with benevolence, in an inner doorway; then he scurried down the long porch, and I heard Jim challenge him for a race.

"Jim will beat him," said my mother indignantly from the window to which she had hurried.

The radiant faced little lad had won our hearts.

I was afraid of growing sentimental about him and tried to view him coldly, but in truth it was impossible not to feel enthusiasm for such an example of humanity. He revived one's belief in the possibility of the race. I feel now that I might give my tale a greater

resemblance by in some way belittling him, the expedient of inadequacy, but obligations stronger than artistic ones are upon me.

I soon made my way to the despoiled hillside—half poor village, half bare woods—where was Rudolph's home. It was a neat little cabin, and I was pleased to find the family all there—the little Teutonic blond sister, the work worn, dust colored, plain mother, and the big, dark father, with his touch of Latin vivacity appearing and disappearing beneath his gravity.

Rudolph gazed at me, pleased and proud and possessive—possessive of everybody—and silently brought the little passive sister to my elbow, that I might better note her charms.

I sent him off to fill my bottle with water from the sulphur spring, so that I could talk better about himself.

"I think Rudolph is a very remarkable boy," I began—"a very, very smart boy," I added in my effort to make myself comprehended.

"Yes," said the father briefly from the doorway where he stood, "he is great—great here, great here." He touched first his forehead, then his breast.

The mother, who could speak no English, showed by her softening countenance, as she looked at us and then after the boy, that she understood.

"I come to America for he. I know not that he get much good, but I try."

"He'll be great in himself anyhow."

"Yes, dat is so," spoken with tranquil solemnity. "Not many is born dat way as he, aber. I wish he get ed-u-cation." The word had been well learned.

"He not get much here?" turning a gaze of troubled inquiry upon me. He told me how he was afraid to go now to a place with better schools for fear he could not find work. He could do no skilled labor. He longed to get Rudolph a place in the machine shops, but the boy was not clever with his hands. Perhaps he could never rise much above his father unless he got "one ed-u-cation."

I said there was small fear; he'd find his way to a very practical education; he'd know many things before he was grown.

The man's face brightened, and he showed his white teeth as he nodded and said a few words to the mother, who nodded and smiled too.

"He ask, ask always," he said.

The small sister now started down the hill, making her legs fly until she met the returning brother and was lifted on his back, where, when he arrived, she hung, dumb, solemn and round eyed as before.

I arranged that Rudolph should come and see me often, and laboriously suppressed my tendency to make vague promises and prophecies as to his future. Who knew what could or could not be counted upon in this disjointed world?

The captivating thing about Rudolph's mind was the curious absence of any touch of precocity. It was as normal as a blackbird's; all its peculiarity seemed to lie in its superior soundness, reasonableness and activity; things were real to him; phenomena needed to be accounted for. He was always trying to accomplish the explanation, striking for the roots of things. He had a sleepless desire to find out. His interest in history—it did not, by the way, reach the point of enabling him to derive pabulum from the usual historical classics—was as simple in its way as Jim's in the story of a possum hunt. The difference was that Rudolph had the qualities that enabled him to grasp the verity of the larger games, while poor Jim could only comprehend the existence of things akin to his experience.

I tried, of course, a hundred youthful experiments with this delightful mind and came to the conclusion that it was not an artist's organ; that it was meant for the conduct of large affairs at first hand, not for any plastic or poetic after interpretation of them. Not that he was without appreciation of such interpretations. On the contrary, he was appreciative of more things than any one I ever knew. He was alive to the interest of every form of mental activity presented to him. He was a choice champion for days in the woods and would lie silent for hours on the high brinks of those far, fair blue gulfs with which the valleys encompass the mountain.

But he was mastered by the thirst for large knowledge of human undertakings. He probably had more actual acquaintance with the mines than had my cousin, the president of the company, and though arithmetic was a painful thing to him he would enter into computations as to the operations and by sheer force of reasoning would push his calculations beyond the point of his schoolroom acquirements.

The chestnuts were brown in their caskets when one day, one memorable day, I went nutting with Rudolph and Jim. We had two or three hours of the simplest, purest delights, all turned into three harmless young animals, with but one idea in the world—chestnuts.

There is nothing like some such primitive pursuit to bring the heart close to nature, for getting past the rhapsodical and wordy state and becoming one with her. A hundred deep, starved, hereditary instincts are once more gratified. But nature is an appalling mother.

The place we chiefly haunted was a chestnut grove near the edge of the cliffs, and just here the formation was unusual. The mountain sloped rapidly down toward the valley for a little distance, instead of descending from its full height by the usual perpendicular cliff, but this steep slope broke off abruptly above a straight wall of granite, far below which again waved the delicate crests of the great trees. The turf and small woodland growths extended down the slope nearly to the brink, but before it was reached the scanty soil failed, and at last was the living rock of the mountain side, dark, unbroken by frost or time, now damp and smooth.

In that simplicity of absorption, the pleasure of which I have been ranting, I followed a rolling nut (such a big one!) down close to the danger line—too close. The slight hold of the mosses

and grasses on which I stood gave way, my hand uprooted the bush I held, my feet slipped from under me, and I lay face down on that smooth, sloping surface, without a thing within reach to support a child. I kept myself from slipping only by a certain strain of muscular pressure. Below was the gulf, whose far depths were filled with the beautiful, visible music of waving branches; above me the late yellow sunlight shone brilliantly between the dark trunks of other trees, and beneath them stood two white faced little boys. Rudolph was nearest me, half way down the slope. I saw a whole heartful of history take place within him as I gazed. The first stroke of terror was followed by a heavier, for between the two, in a long second's time, the child found out he loved me. He had never thought of loving me before; rather, as love goes not by thinking, he had been deflected by no pulsation of conscious love toward me. I was a pleasant factor in a diversified universe; I was not the father, nor the mother, nor the little sister. But suddenly, here and now, as I lay there beneath the fair sky, helpless and in mortal danger, Rudolph's heart went out to me. He loved me, and he loved me greatly, with a flashing, backward, heart bursting realization that I had been good to him. These are many words, but three changing expressions, melting swiftly into each other on the child's face, told it all.

Jim did the best he could. It was useless, but it was all his lights and his gifts were equal to. He could run, and he ran, far and fast, starting at once, with only a half choked word and a nod to Rudolph, and taking himself off in good shape, though he was so white.

Rudolph and I were alone, and already my power to cling to the rock was weakening.

I tried to wriggle myself upward. I slipped a very little farther down. Rudolph now nodded reassuringly at me, saying in a queer, low voice, "In one minute," as he ran a short distance to where a lot of poles lay cut for some purpose. He came back dragging one. The nearest point to me that offered firm anchorage was where, at one side and somewhat above me, stood a young hemlock in a cleft in the rock. Rudolph selected the spot in an instant, but the distance between me and it was greater than the length of the pole. He immediately stripped off his coarse cotton

shirt. Splitting one sleeve in two, he knotted the parts firmly around the tree. He tore a strip off the garment. He tied that, with a loop hanging, just above the butt end of the pole. By holding to the shirt bound to the tree he could extend his range perhaps a foot. The loop at the end of the pole gave him a few inches more. He clutched the shirt, and the other hand through the loop and twisted it about his wrist, slipped toward me as far as he could on his knees and pushed me the pole. Not a moment had been lost. I could reach it if I caught quick and firm before I had time to slip after relaxing my pressure on the rock. There was nothing else to do.

A minute later I sat at the foot of the hemlock, and death had once more fled into the far, dim haze of the unrealized future, but I was cold with the feel of his breath upon me. It seemed hours before two haggard faced men rode up on un saddled, foaming horses.

The next day came the end—the stupid, meaningless, miserable end. I cannot dwell upon it.

Rudolph was coming through one of the little peninsulas of woodland that here and there invaded the straggling village. He caught his foot in a vine, staggered against a tree, appeared to regain his foothold, and then sank down. Some boys at a distance saw this. But what was it to call for special attention? They went on.

It seems to have been more than half an hour later that a man coming along the path found the child dead. He lay under the soft, drifting, bright leaves in a pool of blood. He had cut his wrist with a big sharp knife, his pride, which he had upon in his hand when he stumbled. An artery was severed. He had bled to death.

By such fantastic fooling did chance take the life that the day before had been gallantly risked for mine, and so were stilled the heart and brain to whose power I owe all these happy years.

For a decade has passed since—alone in the sweet, checked autumn sunshine—the rarest child, the most hope stirring human being I ever knew, lay dying. Would that these pages might give some shadowy glimpse of that noble and splendid little figure and defy ever so faintly and ineffectually the hideous recklessness of the fate that thus quenched such a life!

He was buried in the small unkempt graveyard on the hill. I have not seen the spot since that winter. Perhaps half a dozen people in the world within a many years have remembered that he once lived. Beyond those his memory is faded from the earth as though he had never been.

THE END.

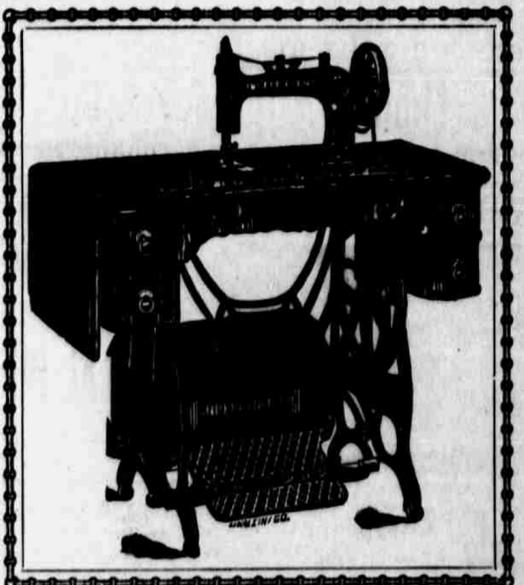
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