

A FOREST BETROTHAL

By Erckmann-Chatrian

One day in the month of June, 1845, Master Zacharias' fishing-basket was so full of salmon-trout, about three o'clock in the afternoon, that the good man was loath to take any more; for, as Pathfinder says: "We must leave some for to-morrow!" After having washed his in a stream and carefully covered them with field-sorrel and rowell, to keep them fresh; after having wound up his line and bathed his hands and face; a sense of drowsiness tempted him to take a nap in the heather. The heat was so excessive that he preferred to wait until the shadows lengthened before reclimbing the steep ascent of Bigelberg.

Breaking his crust of bread and wetting his lips with a draught of Rikevir, he climbed down fifteen or twenty steps from the path and stretched himself on the moss-covered ground, under the shade of the pine-trees; his eyelids heavy with sleep.

A thousand animate creatures had lived their long life of an hour, when the judge was wakened by the whistle of a bird, which sounded strange to him. He sat up to look around, and judge his surprise; the so-called bird was a young girl of seventeen or eighteen years of age; fresh, with rosy cheeks and vermilion lips, brown hair, which hung in two long tresses behind her. A short poppy-colored skirt, with a tightly-laced bodice, completed her costume. She was a young peasant, who was rapidly descending the sandy path down the side of Bigelberg, a basket poised on her head, and her arms a little sunburned, but plump, were gracefully resting on her hips.

"Oh, what a charming bird; but she whistles well and her pretty chin, round like a peach, is sweet to look upon."

Mr. Zacharias was all emotion--a rush of hot blood, which made his heart beat, as it did at twenty, coursed through his veins. Blushing, he arose to his feet.

"Good-day, my pretty one!" he said.

The young girl stopped short--opened her big eyes and recognized him (for who did not know the dear old Judge Zacharias in that part of the country?).

"Ah!" she said, with a bright smile, "it is Mr. Zacharias Seiler!"

The old man approached her--he tried to speak--but all he could do was to stammer a few unintelligible words, just like a very young man--his embarrassment was so great that he completely disconcerted the young girl. At last he managed to say:

"Where are you going through the forest at this hour, my dear child?"

She stretched out her hand and showed him, way at the end of the valley, a forester's house.

"I am returning to my father's house, the Corporal Yeri Foerster. You know him, without doubt, Monsieur le Juge."

"What, are you our brave Yeri's daughter? Ah, do I know him? A very worthy man. Then you are little Charlotte of whom he has often spoken to me when he came with his official reports?"

"Yes, Monsieur; I have just come from the town and am returning home."

"That is a very pretty bunch of Alpine berries you have," exclaimed the old man.

She detached the bouquet from her belt and tendered it to him.

"If it would please you, Monsieur Seiler."

Zacharias was touched.

"Yes, indeed," he said, "I will accept it, and I will accompany you home. I am anxious to see this brave Foerster again. He must be getting old by now."

"He is about your age, Monsieur le Juge," said Charlotte innocently, "between fifty-five and sixty years of age."

This simple speech recalled the good man to his senses, and as he walked beside her he became pensive.

What was he thinking of? Nobody could tell; but how many times, how many times has it happened that a brave and worthy man, thinking that he had fulfilled all his duties, finds that he has neglected the greatest, the most sacred, the most beautiful of all--that of love. And what it costs him to think of it when it is too late.

Soon Mr. Zacharias and Charlotte came to the turn of the valley where the path spanned a little pond by means of a rustic bridge, and led straight to the corporal's house. They could now see Yeri Foerster, his large felt hat decorated with a twig of heather, his calm eyes, his brown cheeks and grayish hair, seated on the stone bench near his doorway; two beautiful hunting dogs, with reddish-brown coats, lay at his feet, and the high vine arbor behind him rose to the peak of the gable roof.

The shadows on Romelstein were lengthening and the setting sun spread its purple fringe behind the high fir-trees on Alpnach.

The old corporal, whose eyes were as piercing as an eagle's, recognized Monsieur Zacharias and his daughter from afar. He came toward them, lifting his felt hat respectfully.

"Welcome, Monsieur le Juge," he said in the frank and cordial voice of a mountaineer; "what happy circumstance has procured me the honor of a visit?"

"Master Yeri," replied the good man, "I am belated in your mountains. Have you a vacant corner at your table and a bed at the disposition of a friend?"

"Ah!" cried the corporal, "if there were but one bed in the house, should it not be at the service of the best, the most honored of our ex-magistrates of Stantz? Monsieur Seiler, what an honor you confer on Yeri Foerster's humble home."

"Christine, Christine! Monsieur le Juge Zacharias Seiler wishes to sleep under our roof to-night."

Then a little old woman, her face wrinkled like a vine leaf, but still fresh and laughing, her head crowned by a cap with wide black ribbons, appeared on the threshold and disappeared again, murmuring:

"What? Is it possible? Monsieur le Juge!"

"My good people," said Mr. Zacharias, "truly you do me too much honor--I hope--"

"Monsieur le Juge, if you forget the favors you have done to others, they remember them."

Charlotte placed her basket on the table, feeling very proud at having been the means of bringing so distinguished a visitor to the house. She took out the sugar, the coffee and all the little odds and ends of

household provisions which she had purchased in the town. And Zacharias, gazing at her pretty profile, felt himself agitated once more, his poor old heart beat more quickly in his bosom and seemed to say to him: "This is love, Zacharias! This is love! This is love!"

To tell you the truth, my dear friends, Mr. Seiler spent the evening with the Head Forester, Yeri Foerster, perfectly oblivious to the fact of Therese's uneasiness, to his promise to return before seven o'clock, to all his old habits of order and submission.

Picture to yourself the large room, the time-browned rafters of the ceiling, the windows opened on the silent valley, the round table in the middle of the room, covered with a white cloth, with red stripes running through it; the light from the lamp, bringing out more clearly the grave faces of Zacharias and Yeri, the rosy, laughing features of Charlotte, and Dame Christine's little cap, with long fluttering streamers. Picture to yourself the soup-tureen, with gayly-flowered bowl, from which arose an appetising odor, the dish of trout garnished with parsley, the plates filled with fruits and little meal cakes as yellow as gold; then worthy Father Zacharias, handing first one and then the other of the plates of fruit and cakes to Charlotte, who lowered her eyes, frightened at the old man's compliments and tender speeches.

Yeri was quite puffed up at his praise, but Dame Christine said: "Ah, Monsieur le Juge! You are too good. You do not know how much trouble this little girl gives us, or how headstrong she is when she wants anything. You will spoil her with so many compliments."

To which speech Mr. Zacharias made reply:

"Dame Christine, you possess a treasure! Mademoiselle Charlotte merits all the good I have said of her."

Then Master Yeri, raising his glass, cried out: "Let us drink to the health of our good and venerated Judge Zacharias Seiler!"

The toast was drunk with a will.

Just then the clock, in its hoarse voice, struck the hour of eleven. Out of doors there was the great silence of the forest, the grasshopper's last cry, the vague murmur of the river. As the hour sounded, they rose, preparatory to retiring. How fresh and agile he felt! With what ardor, had he dared, would he not have pressed a kiss upon Charlotte's little hand! Oh, but he must not think of that now! Later on, perhaps!

"Come, Master Yeri," he said, "it is bedtime. Good-night, and many thanks for your hospitality."

"At what hour do you wish to rise, Monsieur?" asked Christine.

"Oh!" he replied gazing at Charlotte, "I am an early bird. I do not feel my age, though perhaps you might not think so. I rise at five o'clock."

"Like me, Monsieur Seiler," cried the Head Forester. I rise before daybreak; but I must confess it is tiresome all the same--we are no longer young. Ha! Ha!"

"Bah! I have never had anything ail me, Master Forester; I have never been more vigorous or more nimble."

And suiting his actions to his words, he ran briskly up the steep steps of the staircase. Really Mr. Zacharias was no more than twenty; but his twenty years lasted about twenty minutes, and once nestled in the large canopied bed, with the covers drawn up to his chin and his handkerchief tied around his head, in lieu of a nightcap, he said to himself:

"Sleep Zacharias! Sleep! You have great need of rest; you are very tired."

And the good man slept until nine o'clock. The forester returning from his rounds, uneasy at his non-appearance, went up to his room and wished him good morning. Then seeing the sun high in the heavens, hearing the birds warbling in the foliage, the Judge, ashamed of his boastfulness of the previous night, arose, alleging as an excuse for his prolonged slumbers, the fatigue of fishing and the length of the supper of the evening before.

"Ah, Monsieur Seiler," said the forester, "it is perfectly natural; I would love dearly myself to sleep in the mornings, but I must always be on the go. What I want is a son-in-law, a strong youth to replace me; I would voluntarily give him my gun and my hunting pouch."

Zacharias could not restrain a feeling of great uneasiness at these words. Being dressed, he descended in silence. Christine was waiting with his breakfast; Charlotte had gone to the hay field.

The breakfast was short, and Mr. Seiler having thanked these good people for their hospitality, turned his face toward Stantz; he became pensive, as he thought of the worry to which Mademoiselle Therèse had been subjected; yet he was not able to tear his hopes from his heart, nor the thousand charming illusions, which came to him like a latecomer in a nest of warblers.

By Autumn he had fallen so into the habit of going to the forester's house that he was oftener there than at his own; and the Head Forester, not knowing to what love of fishing to attribute these visits, often found himself embarrassed at being obliged to refuse the multiplicity of presents which the worthy ex-magistrate (he himself being very much at home) begged of him to accept in compensation for his daily hospitality.

Besides, Mr. Seiler wished to share all his occupations, following him in his rounds in the Grindewald and Entilbach.

Yeri Foerster often shook his head, saying: "I never knew a more honest or better judge than Mr. Zacharias Seiler. When I used to bring my reports to him, formerly, he always praised me, and it is to him that I owe my raise to the rank of Head Forester. But," he added to his wife, "I am afraid the poor man is a little out of his head. Did he not help Charlotte in the hay field, to the infinite enjoyment of the peasants? Truly, Christine, it is not right; but then I dare not say so to him, he is so much above us. Now he wants me to accept a pension--and such a pension--one hundred florins a month. And that silk dress he gave Charlotte on her birthday. Do young girls wear silk dresses in our valley? Is a silk dress the thing for a forester's daughter?"

"Leave him alone," said the wife. "He is contented with a little milk and meal. He likes to be with us; it is a change from his lonesome city life, with no one to talk to but his old governess; whilst here the little one looks after him. He likes to talk to her. Who knows but he may end by adopting her and leave her something in his will?"

The Head Forester, not knowing what to say, shrugged his shoulders; his good judgment told him there was some mystery, but he never dreamed of suspecting the good man's whole folly.

One fine morning a wagon slowly wended its way down the sides of Bigelberg loaded with three casks of old Rikevir wine. Of all the presents that could be given to him this was the most acceptable, for Yeri Foerster loved, above everything else, a good glass of wine.

"That warms one up," he would say, laughing. And when he had tasted this wine he could not help saying:

"Mr. Zacharias is really the best man in the world. Has he not filled my cellar for me? Charlotte, go and gather the prettiest flowers in the

garden; cut all the roses and the jasmine, make them into a bouquet, and when he comes you will present them to him yourself. Charlotte! Charlotte! Hurry up, here he comes with his long pole."

At this moment the old man appeared descending the hillside in the shade of the pines with a brisk step.

As far off as Yeri could make himself heard, he called out, his glass in his hand:

"Here is to the best man I know! Here is to our benefactor."

And Zacharias smiled. Dame Christine had already commenced preparations for dinner; a rabbit was turning at the spit and the savory odor of the soup whetted Mr. Seiler's appetite.

The old Judge's eyes brightened when he saw Charlotte in her short poppy-colored skirt, her arms bare to the elbow, running here and there in the garden paths gathering the flowers, and when he saw her approaching him with her huge bouquet, which she humbly presented to him with downcast eyes.

"Monsieur le Juge, will you deign to accept this bouquet from your little friend Charlotte?"

A sudden blush overspread his venerable cheeks, and as she stooped to kiss his hand, he said:

"No, no, my dear child; accept rather from your old friend, your best friend, a more tender embrace."

He kissed both her burning cheeks. The Head Forester laughing heartily, cried out:

"Monsieur Seiler, come and sit down under the acacia tree and drink some of your own wine. Ah, my wife is right when she calls you our benefactor."

Mr. Zacharias seated himself at the little round table, placing his pole behind him; Charlotte sat facing him, Yeri Foerster was on his right; then dinner was served and Mr. Seiler started to speak of his plans for the future.

He was wealthy and had inherited a fine fortune from his parents. He wished to buy some few hundred acres of forest land in the valley, and build in the midst a forester's lodge. "We would always be together," he said turning to Yeri Foerster, "sometimes you at my house, sometimes I at yours."

Christine gave her advice, and they chatted, planning now one thing, then another. Charlotte seemed perfectly contented, and Zacharias imagined that these simple people understood him.

Thus the time passed, and when night had fallen and they had had a surfeit of Rikevir, of rabbit and of Dame Christine's "koechten" sprinkled with cinnamon. Mr. Seiler, happy and contented, full of joyous hope, ascended to his room, putting off until to-morrow his declaration, not doubting for a moment but that it would be accepted.

About this time of the year the mountaineers from Harberg, Kusnacht and the surrounding hamlets descend from their mountains about one o'clock in the morning and commence to mow the high grass in the valleys. One can hear their monotonous songs in the middle of the night keeping time to the circular movement of the scythes, the jingle of the cattle bells, and the young men's and girls' voices laughing afar in the silence of the night. It is a strange harmony, especially when the night is clear and there is a bright moon, and the heavy dew falling makes a pitter-patter on the leaves of the great forest trees.

Mr. Zacharias heard nothing of all this, for he was sleeping soundly; but the noise of a handful of peas being thrown against the window waked him suddenly. He listened and heard outside at the bottom of the wall, a "scit! scit!" so softly whispered that you might almost think it the cry of some bird. Nevertheless, the good man's heart fluttered.

"What is that?" he cried.

After a few seconds' silence a soft voice replied:

"Charlotte, Charlotte--it is I!"

Zacharias trembled; and as he listened with ears on the alert for each sound, the foliage on the trellis struck against the window and a figure climbed up quietly--oh so quietly--then stopped and stared into the room.

The old man being indignant at this, rose and opened the window, upon which the stranger climbed through noiselessly.

"Do not be frightened, Charlotte," he said, "I have come to tell you some good news. My father will be here tomorrow."

He received no response, for the reason that Zacharias was trying to light the lamp.

"Where are you, Charlotte?"

"Here I am," cried the old man turning with a livid face and gazing fiercely at his rival.

The young man who stood before him was tall and slender, with large, frank, black eyes, brown cheeks, rosy lips, just covered with a little moustache, and a large brown, felt hat, tilted a little to one side.

The apparition of Zacharias stunned him to immovability. But as the Judge was about to cry out, he exclaimed:

"In the name of Heaven, do not call. I am no robber--I love Charlotte!"

"And--she--she?" stammered Zacharias.

"She loves me also! Oh, you need have no fear if you are one of her relations. We were betrothed at the Kusnacht feast. The fiancés of the Grindewald and the Entilbach have the right to visit in the night. It is a custom of Unterwald. All the Swiss know that."

"Yeri Foerster--Yeri, Charlotte's father, never told me."

"No, he does not know of our betrothal yet," said the other, in a lower tone of voice; "when I asked his permission last year he told me to wait--that his daughter was too young yet--we were betrothed secretly. Only as I had not the Forester's consent, I did not come in the night-time. This is the first time. I saw Charlotte in the town; but the time seemed so long to us both that I ended by confessing all to my father, and he has promised to see Yeri tomorrow. Ah, Monsieur, I knew it would give such pleasure to Charlotte that I could not help coming to announce my good news."

The poor old man fell back in his chair and covered his face with his hands. Oh, how he suffered! What bitter thoughts passed through his brain; what a sad awakening after so many sweet and joyous dreams.

And the young mountaineer was not a whit more comfortable, as he stood leaning against a corner of the wall, his arms crossed over his breast, and the following thoughts running through his head:

"If old Foerster, who does not know of our betrothal, finds me here, he will kill me without listening to one word of explanation. That is certain."

And he gazed anxiously at the door, his ear on the alert for the least sound.

A few moments afterward, Zacharias lifting his head, as though awakening from a dream, asked him:

"What is your name?"

"Karl Imnant, Monsieur."

"What is your business?"

"My father hopes to obtain the position of a forester in the Grindewald for me."

There was a long silence and Zacharias looked at the young man with an envious eye.

"And she loves you?" he asked in a broken voice.

"Oh, yes, Monsieur; we love each other devotedly."

And Zacharias, letting his eyes fall on his thin legs and his hands wrinkled and veined, murmured:

"Yes, she ought to love him; he is young and handsome."

And his head fell on his breast again. All at once he arose, trembling in every limb, and opened the window.

"Young man, you have done very wrong; you will never know how much wrong you have really done. You must obtain Mr. Foerster's consent--but go--go--you will hear from me soon."

The young mountaineer did not wait for a second invitation; with one bound he jumped to the path below and disappeared behind the grand old trees.

"Poor, poor Zacharias," the old Judge murmured, "all your illusions are fled."

At seven o'clock, having regained his usual calmness of demeanor, he descended to the room below, where Charlotte, Dame Christine and Yeri were already waiting breakfast for him. The old man, turning his eyes from the young girl, advanced to the Head Forester, saying:

"My friend, I have a favor to ask of you. You know the son of the forester of the Grinderwald, do you not?"

"Karl Imnant, why yes, sir!"

"He is a worthy young man, and well behaved, I believe."

"I think so, Monsieur."

"Is he capable of succeeding his father?"

"Yes, he is twenty-one years old; he knows all about tree-clipping, which is the most necessary thing of all--he knows how to read and how to write; but that is not all; he must have influence."

"Well, Master Yeri, I still have some influence in the Department of Forests and Rivers. This day fortnight, or three weeks at the latest, Karl Imnant shall be Assistant Forester of the Grinderwald, and I ask the hand of your daughter Charlotte for this brave young man."

At this request, Charlotte, who had blushed and trembled with fear, uttered a cry and fell back into her mother's arms.

Her father looking at her severely, said: "What is the matter, Charlotte? Do you refuse?"

"Oh, no, no, father--no!"

"That is as it should be! As for myself, I should never have refused any request of Mr. Zacharias Seiler's! Come here and embrace your benefactor."

Charlotte ran toward him and the old man pressed her to his heart, gazing long and earnestly at her, with eyes filled with tears. Then pleading business he started home, with only a crust of bread in his basket for breakfast.

Fifteen days afterward, Karl Innant received the appointment of forester, taking his father's place. Eight days later, he and Charlotte were married.

The guests drank the rich Rikevir wine, so highly esteemed by Yeri Foerster, and which seemed to him to have arrived so opportunely for the feast.

Mr. Zacharias Seiler was not present that day at the wedding, being ill at home. Since then he rarely goes fishing--and then, always to the Brünnen--toward the lake--on the other side of the mountain.