

GOETHE THE FORGER OF HIS DESTINY.

BY THE EDITOR.

GOETHE'S was indeed a happy lot. Not that his life was free from troubles and anxieties, but he was a man so normal, so characteristically human that he could not help being typical, a rarely exquisite specimen of humanity. During the writer's last trip through Europe he discovered some pictures previously unknown to him, and he wishes to reproduce them in *The Open Court*. One of them appears as frontispiece to the current number and shows Goethe in his advanced age writing his famous poem at the hunter's hut on the Gickelhahn:

“Over all the mountains
Lies peace.
Hushed are the treetops;
Breezes cease
Slumber caressed.
Asleep are the birds on the bough,—
Wait then, and thou
Soon too wilt rest.”

As an instance of the happy disposition of Goethe we will here recapitulate an anecdote of his younger years as told by Johann Daniel Falk.¹ It dates from June, 1777, when he had just settled in Weimar.

The narrative rests on the authority of Johann Ludwig Gleim, one of the most popular poets of Germany before Goethe. Gleim was born April 2, 1719 and died at Halberstadt, February 18, 1803. He is best known for his “Prussian War Songs of a Grenadier,” and his are the thrilling dithyrambs in honor of Prussia's great king, beginning “Fredericus Rex, unser König und Herr,” which have been set so grandly to music. He was a patron of the whole

¹ *Goethe aus näherem persönlichem Umgang dargestellt.* Leipsic, 1832, p. 139.

generation of younger poets; he cheered them up and encouraged them even with pecuniary assistance when required, and often he helped those who were unworthy of his generosity. But this was Gleim's nature, and so he deserved the title "Father Gleim" which literary Germany accorded him. Naturally he was anxious to meet the young Goethe, the new star that had so suddenly risen on the horizon of German literature and was strong enough not to stand in need of Father Gleim's patronage. Falk tells the story thus:

"Shortly after Goethe had written his 'Werther'—the venerable old Gleim once related to me [Falk]—I came to Weimar and desired to make his acquaintance. One evening I was invited with some others to the Duchess Amalia's where it was said that Goethe too would come later in the evening. By way of a literary novelty I had brought with me the latest *Göttinger Musenalmanach* from which I read aloud one thing and another to the company. While I was reading, a young man, whom I hardly noticed, with boots and spurs and a short green hunting coat, had mingled with the other auditors. He sat opposite me and listened very attentively. With the exception of a pair of wonderfully sparkling black Italian eyes there was nothing else about him which particularly attracted my attention. Nevertheless I was destined to know him much more intimately. During a brief pause in which some gentlemen and ladies were giving their judgment about this or that piece, praising one and criticizing another, our elegant hunter—for such I had taken him to be at the start—rose from his chair, joined in the conversation and, bowing to me courteously, offered to take turns with me in reading aloud from time to time, if I would be pleased to do so, that I might not tire myself too greatly. I could not avoid accepting this polite proposal and at once handed him the book. But by Apollo and the Nine Muses, not to forget the Three Graces, to what was I at last compelled to listen! In the beginning to be sure it went quite passably:

"Zephyrs listened
Brooks murmured and glistened,
The sun
Spread light for sheer fun, etc.'

"Even the somewhat heavier fare of Voss, Leopold Stolberg and Bürger was delivered so well that no one could find fault. But all at once it was as if the devil of impertinence had seized the reader, and I thought that I beheld the wild huntsman incarnate before me. He read poems which were never in the *Almanach*, and

he took turns with every conceivable key and style—hexameter, iambic, and doggerel just as it happened, everything mixed up and thrown together as if he just poured it out that way.

“What did he not improvise in his gay mood that evening! Sometimes there were such splendid thoughts—even though as carelessly thrown off as roughly sketched—that the authors to whom he ascribed them might well thank God upon their knees if such thoughts had occurred to them at their desks. As soon as every one shared the joke general merriment spread through the room. The mysterious reader worked in something about all who were present. Even the patronage which I had always considered my duty towards young scholars, poets and artists, although he praised it on the one hand, yet he did not forget on the other hand to give me a little stab for making mistakes sometimes in the individuals to whom I accorded my support. Therefore in a little fable composed *ex tempore* in doggerel verses he compared me, wittily enough, with a pious, and at the same time exceedingly long-suffering; turkey cock who sat very patiently upon large numbers of eggs of his own and other kinds, but to whom it once happened (and he did not take it ill) that a chalk egg was put under him in place of a real one.

“‘That is either Goethe or the devil!’ I exclaimed to Wieland who sat across the table from me. ‘Both,’ Wieland replied, ‘he is possessed by the devil again to-day. Then he is like a spirited bronco that strikes out in all directions so that one would do well not to come too near him.’”

Goethe’s was a happy lot indeed, and yet on one of the most essential ordinances of destiny he missed the mark most glaringly, and as he deserved the happiness he gained through his happy temperament in being truly human, so he missed his mark in his marriage relation through his natural disposition to shrink back from a bond that, being indissoluble, seemed to him a fetter.

Goethe’s view on marriage is thus outlined in one of his poems:

He:

“So well thou pleasest me, my dear,
That as we are together here
I’d never like to part;
’Twould suit us both, sweet heart.”

She:

“As I please you, so you please me,
Our love is mutual you see.
Let’s marry, and change rings,
Nor worry about other things.”

He:

"Marry? The word makes me feel blue,
I feel at once like leaving you."

She:

"Why hesitate? For then of course
If it won't work, we'll try divorce."

Goethe met many gifted and beautiful women who would have been worthy of him, and we will mention here only one who



CORONA SCHRÖTER.

By Georg Melchior Kraus.

would have made an unusually noble and helpful consort of the great poet. We mean Corona Schroeter. She had met Goethe as

a student in Leipsic and had at that time been greatly impressed by the charm of his personality. In 1776 she was engaged as a concert singer in court circles at Weimar, and to her were assigned the heroine parts of romantic love dramas. The most critical minds were agreed in regarding her as one of the greatest stars in her specialty, and she was also a great favorite with Goethe who

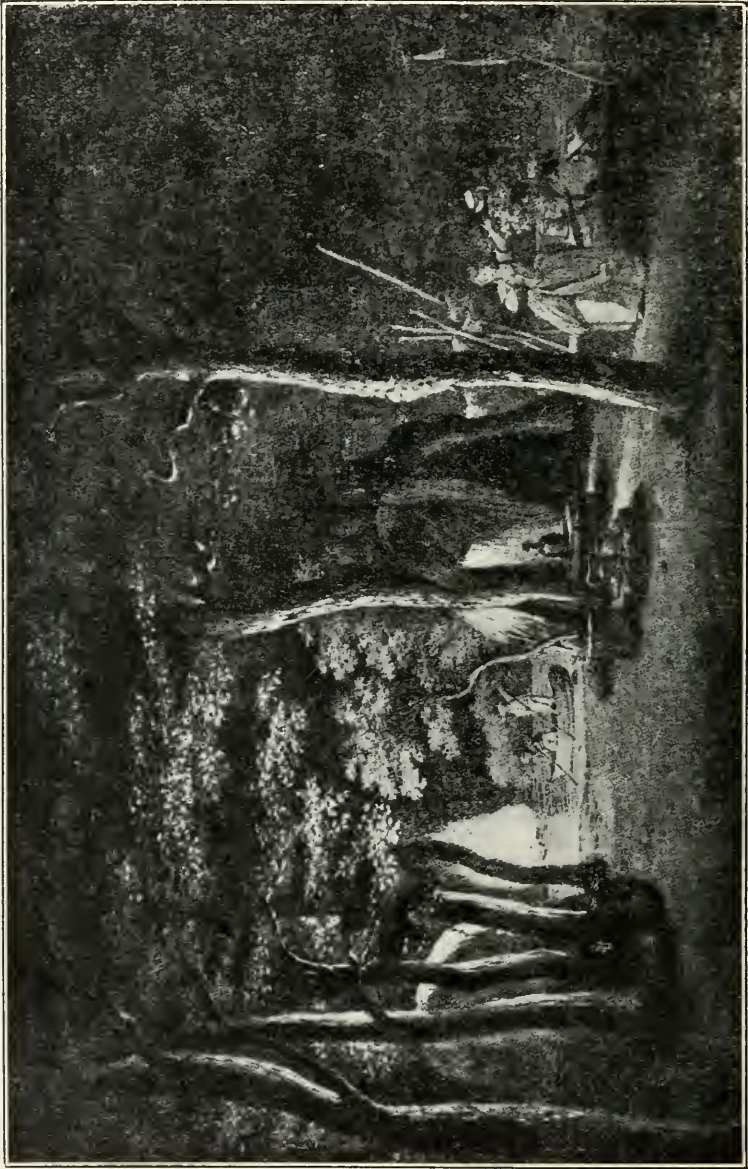


IPHIGENIA AND ORESTES.

By Georg Melchior Kraus.

sometimes appeared with her on the stage. She was the first Iphigenia and acted the rôle with Goethe as Orestes. A good drawing of one of these scenes was made by Georg Melchior Kraus. Corona's whole appearance was such as worthily to represent the Greek heroine. The audience was confined to the ducal court of

Weimar, and no other public was admitted. In Kraus's picture the scenery is in so far misleading as it suggests that the play was



“THE FISHERMAIDEN” PLAYED IN TIEFURT PARK.
By Georg Melchior Kraus.

performed in the open air at Ettersburg, but we know definitely that “Iphigenia” was first performed indoors.

Later on Corona Schröter became a successful teacher of reci-

tation and singing, and many of the most distinguished Weimar ladies were her pupils. She was also an exquisite and gifted painter and composer. She set to music Goethe's "Fisher Maiden" of which the Erl King is a part, and her composition of this poem appears like a rough draft of Schubert's more elaborate, more powerful and more artistic composition.

This little drama, Goethe's "Fisher Maiden," in which Corona Schroeter took the part of Dortchen, was performed on the banks of the Ilm at Tiefurt, the summer residence of the Duchess Anna Amalia, and has been portrayed in a wash drawing by Georg Melchior Kraus. The adjoined picture represents the first scene. Dortchen is enraged because she contends that women are not appreciated. She contrives a plot in which she makes it appear that there has been an accident. She hides one pail, places another on a plank near the water, and throws her hat among the bushes so that her father and lover will think she is drowned. After these preparations, she disappears in the woods just as the men return in their boat. They take alarm as she desired, but after a while their fears are dissolved when she returns and sets their minds at rest.

The field of Corona Schroeter's activity was not limited to the stage, for she was endowed with almost every other talent. Moreover her charming personality was like an incarnation of the heroines she represented. When Wieland first met her in the park together with her great poet friend he described her appearance in these strong terms:

"There we found Goethe in company with the beautiful Corona Schroeter who in the infinitely noble Attic elegance of her whole figure and in her quite simple yet infinitely *recherché* and insidious costume looked like the nymph of the charming grotto."

Goethe called her *Krone*, the German equivalent of Corona meaning "crown," and in his poem "On Mieding's Death" refers to her suggestive name in one of his verses saying,

"And e'en the name Corona graces thee."

In the same passage he dwells on her advantage in being endowed with beauty, a queenly figure, and all the arts, saying:

"Unto the world she like a flower appears,
Is beauty's model in its finished state.
She, perfect, doth perfection personate.
The Muses did to her each grace impart
And nature in her soul created art."

Tr. by Bowring.

In Weimar she was a favorite with almost every one and was especially admired by Friedrich von Einsiedel. Goethe dedicated to her the following lines inscribed beneath the statue of a Cupid feeding a nightingale, which adorned the Chateau Tiefurt:

“Certainly Cupid has raised thee,
O singer; himself he has fed thee,
And on his arrow the god
Childlike presented thy food.
Thus, Philomele, thy throat,
Which is steeped in the sweetest of poisons,
Chanting thy strains without guile
Fills with love’s power our hearts.”



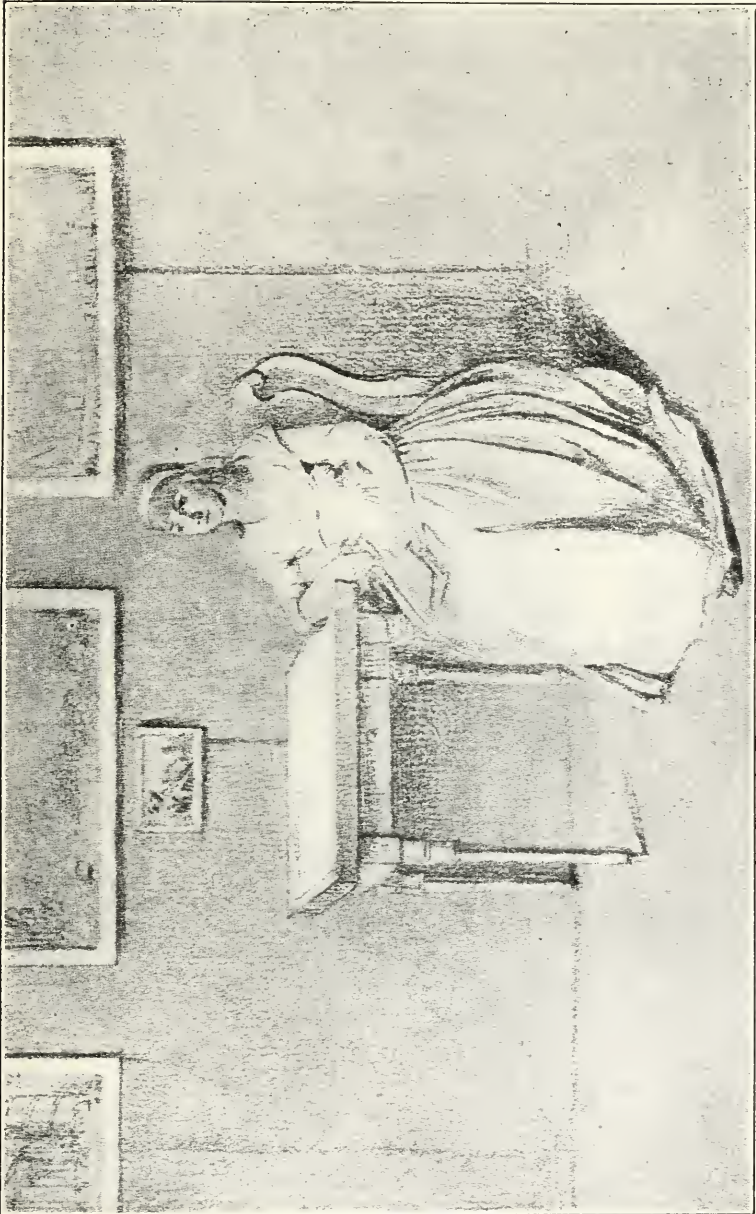
CUPID IN THE TIEFURT GARDEN.

After Corona Schroeter retired from the stage she made her home in Ilmenau and died there August 23, 1802.

Having missed the best chances in his life to select a distinguished woman of superior beauty and talents as his helpmate and wife to become the mother of a superior race of children, Goethe did the next best thing; he married, although not until after many years of hesitation, Christiana Vulpius, the mother of his son. She was the daughter of a talented man, who, however, had lost his situation through love of liquor.

Christiana's position in life was a humble one. She worked in the flower factory of Mr. Bertuch, a business man who had done much to develop Weimar. The girl was a buxom country lass with

rosy cheeks and a simple-hearted disposition. Goethe took a fancy to her and used to meet her in his garden house. We have a



CHRISTIANA WAITING.
Drawn by Goethe from life.

picture of her, drawn by Goethe himself, which shows her as a demure maiden sitting quietly at a simple table. On the wall hang

pictures of Rome. The small picture is Tischbein's sketch of his well-known painting of Goethe on the ruins of the Campagna.

Once it happened that Goethe kept Christiana waiting so long that she grew first impatient, then sleepy, and when he arrived he could not find her. Searching around he finally discovered her curled up in the corner of a sofa fast asleep:

"In the hall I did not find the maiden,
Found the maiden not within the parlor.
And at last on opening the chamber
I discovered her asleep in graceful posture;
Fully dressed she lay upon the sofa."



CHRISTIANA ASLEEP.

Drawn by Goethe in illustration of his poem.

Goethe brought her into his home where she took charge of the household. A charming little poem is dedicated to her which describes their meeting in a figurative way.

In the translation of William Gibson it reads as follows:

"I walked in the woodland,
And nothing sought;
Simply to saunter—
That was my thought.

"I saw in shadow
A floweret rise,
Like stars it glittered,
Like lovely eyes.

"I would have plucked it,
When low it spake:
'My bloom to wither,
Ah! wherefore break?'

"I dug, and bore it,
Its roots and all,
To garden-shades of
My pretty hall.

“And planted now in
A sheltered place,
There grows it ever
And blooms apace.”

Goethe married Christiana October 19, 1806.

The incidents here mentioned are straws in the wind which characterize Goethe, and we can see that the results of his life were in agreement with his disposition. His life was an exemplification of the old Roman proverb,

“Faber est suae quisque fortunae,”

which means, “Every one is the forger of his own destiny.” We close with a verse of Goethe’s own which might well have served as a controlling maxim of his life:

*Liegt dir Gestern klar und offen,
Wirst du Heute kräftig frei;
Kannst auch auf ein Morgen hoffen
Das nicht minder glücklich sey.*

Weimar d. 15 Jun.

Goethe.

1816.

“If yestreen’s account be clear,
Art thou brave to-day and free,
Meet thy morrow with good cheer:
Surely t’will auspicious be.”