

THE HERMIT OF THE CAVERN



"The noise of approaching footsteps caused Brown to rise hurriedly he gazed attentively in the direction of the entrance of his cave. When he recognized Weiser, he went to him quickly."

THE HERMIT OF THE CAVERN

A novel of the early sixties abounding in dramatic situations – the struggle of those early German settlers in Southwest Texas to maintain their neutrality in a nation torn asunder by internal strife.

TRANSLATED AND ADAPTED

BY

MAY E. FRANCIS

FROM

EIN VERSTEHLTES LEBEN

A PRIZE NOVEL

BY

A. SIEMERING

1876

ILLUSTRATIONS

BY

RALPH J. PEREIDA

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INTRODUCTION

OFTEN times we encounter truths, which, if presented as fiction, would be far too absurd for our human minds to accept, let alone digest. Such is true of the amazing coincidences which have woven themselves around this narrative and the cave which plays so prominent a part therein.

As stated in the foreword, this novel was transcribed from facts during the year of 1876. For perhaps fifty years the book was out of print. During that half-century the cave was likewise hidden from public scrutiny-lying apart from the world, in the remote corner of a cow pasture. During the intervening years Nature constructed a screen of giant oaks, scrubby undergrowth and trailing vines which hid the arched entrance. Meteoric waters brought in debris which almost filled the first room, somewhat blocking admission-and beyond this obstruction the waters collected in a subterranean lake, as if to further thwart curious individuals who might be disposed to trespass the Old Hermit's sanctuary.

Then, early in 1932, a frayed copy of the story fell from obscurity into the hands of the translator. At precisely the same time this speleologist chanced to wander upon the cave. Crawling through the partially blocked entrance room, and swimming the lake, he found before him the underground palace which the Old Hermit had chosen as his home.

Totally unaware, at the time of the romance that stalked the cloister passage-way, but anxious to throw the underground beauties open to the world, he set about developing the cavern.

During the same weeks, the translator, miles away, having read her frayed copy of the book, realized it to be so striking a human tale as to deserve a rebirth.

Eventually, their paths met. Notes were compared, and the connection between the narrative and the cavern were definitely established.

We find the story concerns life in a German settlement northwest of San Antonio - which would be Boerne. The descriptions which are given by the original author of the book - his picture of the entrance to the cave, the cliff, the trees, gnarled

roots and vegetation, matches even the present panorama one sees there.

In the story the Old Hermit tells of the Indian tribe, the Lipons, which dwelt at the entrance; he tells of their flint arrowheads and their stone hatchets. While excavating debris from the floor of the first room, this writer watched workmen unearth arrowheads and stone hatchet blades – which have been preserved at the cave.

It is also stated that the Old Hermit was the possessor of several guns and revolvers, and that he was buried, with his possessions, in this cavern he chose to call his home. Our most eerie find was when digging some four and a half feet into the floor of the first chamber we unearthed a quantity of human bones and the metal frame of a revolver of ancient vintage.

Since reading the narrative, this writer seldom strolls through the vaulted passageways of the cave without now and again the strange feeling that the spirit of the Old Hermit is hovering about – wandering unseen through the dim recesses. And with the prevalence of this feeling comes the prophecy that if, indeed, one can look back through the curtain of death, what then is the mental reaction of the Old Hermit as the public passes through his sanctuary, and as the public reads again the records of his Wasted Life.

FRANK ERNEST NICHOLSON

THANKS ARE DUE TO
MR. E. W. WINKLER, LIBRARIAN OF THE UNIVERSITY OF
TEXAS, FOR HIS KINDNESS IN PLACING THE ONLY KNOWN
COPY OF THE ORIGINAL STORY AT THE DISPOSAL OF THE
WRITER.

FOREWORD

THIS novelette is an adaptation of a story entitled *Ein Verstehtes Leben* written by A. Siemering and published in 1876 as the prize winner in a contest conducted by the *Cincinnati Volks-Blattes*. According to the author's Foreword, the foundation of the story is laid in actual occurrences in the German settlements in Southwest Texas during the Civil War. He therefore considers it a regional novel.

It is clearly the picturesque "Hill Country" of Southwest Texas that is described so vividly by this early German writer; and the pictures that abound in his story, lending it a peculiar charm, strongly suggest the rugged and beautiful environs of the old German settlements at Fredericksburg, Blanco, Boerne, Comfort, Kerrville, New Braunfels, San Marcos, and other towns in the proximity of San Antonio.

Of the caverns of this region suitable for human habitation, none is more notable than the one formed by the subterranean passage of the Cibolo in the vicinity of Boerne. This cave has for generations been passable for several hundred feet through a gradually descending series of chambers, one opening into another as the underground stream receded, and ending at the rock-like wall which marked the water's edge. Now that this barrier has been broken and the water drained away, an inner passage has been revealed, extending, so far as explored, a full mile from the entrance. Beholding all the wonders which sweeping water and erosion have wrought, the geologist's eye reconstructs the former terraces, now fallen into ruins, yet leaving ample traces of their previous forms. It requires no strain of the imagination to connect this Cavern with the hermit's cave of the old settler's story; and an added interest is gained from the discovery, in the exploration of the cavern, of a human skeleton.

That the differences in sectional feeling between the North and the South should play a part in the story may to some readers seem unfortunate. But some light is thrown upon the motives which actuated the colonists in their adherence to the Union; and in adapting the narrative to the present generation of readers, the

translator has taken pains to avoid giving a partial coloring to the controversial issues of the time.

MAY E. FRANCIS

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THE HERMIT OF THE CAVERN

CHAPTER I

A STRANGER ARRIVES IN A NEW COUNTRY

"AND now you have the story of the German pioneer in Texas. Every colonist in the state can tell you more or less the same thing. Always the same old song which remains forever new. One cannot endure it in the Old Country any longer, one must absolutely go out into the world and try his fortune. One goes, and rams his head against a stone wall, and is finally glad to find a clod of dirt which he can call his own!

"And yet I should not like to exchange my present life for all the treasures of Europe,—that is to say, for such treasures as one in my position in life might expect. You see, it is an independent life which we live from day to day, to make ourselves useful here, to idle away time there, to-day bury our noses in books and newspapers, to-morrow lie upon the hills or the prairies and try desperately to imitate the life of an Indian.

I tell you, it has a peculiar charm, and I am sure I could not endure the urge and drive of the large cities of Germany for eight days without becoming homesick for the old hills, like the best Swiss boy."

It was a tall man, past the bloom of youth, who was speaking in this manner to his companion. He had a thin face, tanned by the sun, from which a pair of friendly eyes gleamed good-naturedly; his hair was closely cut, and because of this, his mustache stood out in greater prominence. He spoke rapidly, in a cultured voice, and gesticulated with much frequency.

His companion could not be older than twenty-five years, and one could see by his face that the southern sun had not yet exerted its force upon him.

The men were on horseback and were riding over a low mountain ridge in West Texas. An extensive view unfolded, revealing a wooded valley upon whose dark green a white speck shimmered.

"Those are the farms of our countrymen," explained the older of the two riders, who up to this time had been spokesman, –"and away back there in the direction of the mountain peak, lies the destination of our journey to-day. To-morrow I shall introduce you to my bachelor house-keeping, and the day after to-morrow you are to see the piece of land upon which you are to try your luck."

"And who is the man to whose home you are taking me to-day?" asked the companion.

"An American, one of the better class. You must never lose sight of the fact that we live in a border state. A few miles farther on, history stops and the Indians begin: and among the Americans who settle in this region are some who represent dregs of new-world society, –fellows who have known every sharp trick in other states, who are in constant warfare with the law, and who have long since forgotten the difference between mine and thine. They settle themselves comfortably on the first good piece of land, build a miserable hut, and begin to steal cattle. Should the rightful owner of the cattle object, they grab their guns, and usually do not stop with empty threats. When they have stolen enough they become respectable, cast an eye over the daughters of the land, marry, and perhaps even pay for the land which they unlawfully preempted. These have even been called the pioneers of civilization. In fact, they do open the way for better people."

"But," said the younger man again, "you started once to tell me some interesting facts about our future host."

"Oh, yes!" replied the other. "That is what happens when one's tongue runs away with one's thoughts. As I said, he belongs to the better class of Americans. After you know what the worse class is you will be able to appreciate the better class. I do not know whether Mr. Jackson, like so many of the old border settlers, started his fortune with 'strayed' cattle; but that he has passed the probation period, and deserves all honor, I do know, and when you learn to know him, you will think as I do, namely, that he is an

honorable and an estimable man. Besides he has two daughters,—a couple of girls who, I tell you "

He smiled in a friendly fashion, and touched his horse lightly with his riding whip. This the fiery animal took as an admonition to increase its speed, and forthwith broke into a lively gallop.

The younger man laughed. "So that explains your prepossession in favor of a man whose past is questionable."

"What do you expect?" replied the other, "The man with whom we stayed yesterday is, as everyone knows, a two-fold murderer. They could prove nothing on him. The jurors winked at the evidence. Because he calls himself Colonel, he is not without influence. Yesterday you shook that man's hand with all cordiality; and I'll wager you could not detect from meeting him, that he has two human lives upon his conscience. But in this locality who would make anything over such a trifle? Why, there was a time when we shrugged our shoulders at a man who could not boast of having taken somebody's life! We have emerged from the standards of Indian life, and it is a mark of progress that 'killing', as it is called, is considered wrong. Wait ten years more and killing will be punishable as a crime!"

"Then we have to go through the whole history of civilization with each new frontier? "

"Why, to be sure, every state in the Union has experienced that. But since we have railroads, steamships, and telegraph, civilization goes faster. Such a process is sometimes completed in twenty years. If the period of wildness lasts too long, a few regulars appear on the scene and clean things up. Then the place is fit for better people, and by degrees, the highest culture comes in with lithesome song. Just think,—we already have two pianos in our settlement. I have one, and my friend Jackson has the other. His daughters play divinely. Well, you will see for yourself! There lies the farm,—now let's proceed so that we may reach the gateway before the sun sets."