

THE SILVER DIAL.

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"AS MANY LINES CLOSE IN THE DIAL'S CENTRE;
SO MANY A THOUSAND ACTIONS, ONCE AFOOT,
END IN ONE PURPOSE."—*Henry V.*

VOL I.

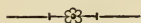


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CHAPTER I.

A YOUNG MATHEMATICIAN.

LONG ago, there lived in the city of Strassburg a worthy burgher named Christian Dasipodius. Very highly esteemed was this man by his fellow-citizens, and there were few among them who had not an approving word for him. This was a little remarkable, inasmuch as Christian was by no means a rich man. It is true that he had a goodly house of his own, and wore his fur-bordered gown of stout murrey-cloth with the best of them, and held his head high among the wealthiest of his merchant brethren, looking every inch the honest trader in skins and furs that he was. Still, comparatively, Christian Dasipodius was poor; he had

not contrived, after the wont of so many of his fraternity, to lay up much goods for many years. In earlier life he had met with one or two heavy pecuniary losses ; and afterwards, when Fortune did smile on him, and everybody said that now Christian really bade fair to be a rich man, there began to develop in him some rather rare characteristics. He found it, for example, so utterly impossible to pass unheeding by a distressed fellow-creature, or to withhold any help it was in his power to afford strugglers up the hill of life. If some poor but honest young apprentice, whose years of servitude had just expired, chanced to cross his path, and Christian saw him painfully toiling to amass the little capital necessary for setting himself up in his craft, he immediately began to think of his own once meagre purse, and how to him, in early days, a friend in need would have been a friend indeed ; and then he would come forward with a word of encouragement on his lips, and nice little gold pieces in his hand, which the recipient was to repay only at some date quite convenient to himself.

Now and then it happened this convenient date was so long a coming, that Christian knew

he would have to bid farewell for ever and a day to his gold pieces ; but then he always consoled himself with the reflection that if his generosity had been misplaced, or went otherwise unrequited, it was far oftener his privilege to see those to whom he had afforded such timely aid pushing on with a lighter heart and better courage. It is, perhaps, needless to reiterate that Christian's generosity had not made him a richer man by so much dross sterling ; but it did make the pure metal of his nature shine out through his eyes, and in his kindly smile ; and perhaps there was not to be found in all Strassburg a happier, more thoroughly contented-minded man than Christian ; but this was before his great sorrow fell upon him, a sorrow in whose presence all his pecuniary trials and losses faded to nothingness,—the death of his wife. Christian, who was a handsome fellow, and might have chosen pretty nearly where he would from among the maidens of his native city, had with that perversity innate in the masculine mind, chosen to fall in love with a beautiful Lorraine woman, whom he married. One son was born to them. This boy while inheriting his father's tall, well-knit figure

and manly features, was endowed also with much of his mother's soft, intelligent beauty ; and as the boy, whom they christened Conrad, grew up, it was small wonder that the parents were very proud of their only child.

At an unusually early age, Conrad evinced a talent for figures and geometry, and an affection for Euclid which mightily astonished his school-mates. His mother, marking the bent of the boy's mind, bade her husband mark it too ; and Christian, with something of a sigh—for he would so infinitely have preferred to discover in him a talent for skin-dressing, said : “ Good—let it be so, then ; and I will spare nothing that Conrad may learn all he seems to have such a fancy for. Mathematics is a grand science, and has made men famous and honourable—only he must work.” And Conrad did work ; and his mother watched him with a proud, thrilling heart, longing earnestly for that day when her son should take his place among the great and learned of their city. But years—many years ere that day could come, the mother's heart had ceased to throb, and her marvellously beautiful eyes were closed in death. A sharp, brief illness carried her away from Christian and

her child, and the two were left alone to fight their life's battle together.

Christian's grief at his wife's loss was great indeed ; he thought when for the last time his lips touched that face so fair even in death, that he could never again be the man he had been ; and he was right—the smiles rarely brightened his honest face now ; and somehow, when they did come, they only made it look the sadder. Nevertheless, for the sake of the boy, through whose eyes the soul of her he so dearly loved seemed still to commune with his, Christian did strive hard to recall a little of his old cheeriness. Grief is more transitory in youthful natures, and dearly as Conrad had loved his mother, time blunted his sharper sorrow for her loss ; but he was always wont to say, that when he tried to think what his guardian angel was like, it was a bright, beautiful form, like his dead mother, which his mind's eye saw ; and though there came a time when he loved as he never believed he could have loved, and the girl who won his heart was pure and good as one fancies the angels are, still not even she supplanted the guardian angel of his boyhood ; for dead or

living, a good mother is always a good mother to the end of one's life.

When still quite a boy, Conrad had been placed in the school or studio of Chretei Herlin, a monk of the Benedictine Monastery of Saint Thomas, who, in the seclusion of the cloister, had made himself one of the greatest mathematicians and mechanists of his age. Possibly if Herlin and his cotemporaries could rise from their graves now, and see the wonders of our day—our printing-presses, our looms, our Reuters, our locomotives, our sewing machines, and all those countless other contrivances for making steel and wire do duty for human sinew and bone, they would, in their humility, tell themselves that they could have no place now among men. And yet, who but men like Chretei Herlin and Conrad Dasipodius, with their thoughtful brains, their plodding industry, and poor clumsy apparatus, could have smoothed the way for our Brunels, our Jacquards, our Stephensons, and all the rest of that noble company which has applied its knowledge to the uses of every-day life, and given us comforts and conveniences of which those Middle Ages might not even dream ?

At all events, Conrad Dasipodius did not disgrace his century; and Chretei Herlin was vastly proud of this aptest among his pupils, and loved him with that glorious kindred-spirit love which sometimes does exist between master and pupil, when jealousy does not step in to dull its brightness. Sometimes Herlin would smile, and say to the elder Dasipodius: "The world will forget all about Chretei Herlin, Master Christian; and that is only as it should be; for what am I but a poor unworthy monk? Still, methinks that now and again, I shall hear the good Strassburgers say as they pass my grave, 'Oh, yes, the old monk Chretei! he lies there. Once he was something of a teacher to the great Conrad Dasipodius'; and then I shall smile proudly enough in my coffin, I can tell you, and sing my *Gaudeamus*."

"He is a good lad, Father Chretei," Christian would answer with glistening eyes; and then, with a faint sigh, he generally used to add: "But you will bid him come home more betimes of a day? I see so little of him now, and I would fain have him more with me. He is a good son, and does not neglect his old father; but still his heart is all in his work; the boy toils too closely."

And truly Dasipodius did toil from morning till night, and from night till near morning again ; he was for ever at his problems and his experiments, never daunted by obstacle or defeat—for ever toiling, persevering on towards what he had undertaken, and happier and more content over his work than my Lord of Hapsburg himself. The necessity for eating and sleeping troubled him somewhat ; but he satisfied these demands of Dame Nature in a manner as niggardly as she would possibly countenance, and a crust of black bread, and a draught of thin red wine, were as good as a feast to him. As for sleeping, it was difficult to say when the young mathematician ever did rest his busy brain, for the lamp seemed always to be gleaming up long after midnight in that little turret chamber at the angle of the furrier's house—which, in compliment to his son's mathematical and horological talent, Christian had long ago named the "*Silver Dial*," for every house in Strassburg was then distinguished by its sign.

There was no doubt Conrad was burning the candle of his youth at both ends. It fretted the elder Dasipodius to see this. "It is my own fault," he would say ; "I urged on this

willing horse of mine too hard at first, and now he has taken the bit between his teeth, and nothing will stop him. Thou'rt killing thyself, Conrad." Then Conrad would smile, and a very winning smile it was. "Why now, Väterchen, what would you have? You who have worked so hard all your own life too!"

"Nay, but not at night; your health will suffer, and you will blind yourself poring over these crabbed figures, and then all these coils and springs, no thicker than threads. Why, see now, this wheel is hardly big enough for a flea to take hold of!"

"Oh, that wheel, for example. Yes, it is not altogether a bad piece of workmanship. It is cleanly turned out, but the cogs must be filed down a little more—just a little"; and so, talking to his wheel, Conrad would find his way, without looking, up the turret staircase, all impervious to parental expostulation.

It was about this time that the civilised world was making great advances in the science of mechanics; and perhaps since Sol, the primæval time-marker, had first begun to rise and set, never before had such an impetus been given to improvements in horology. The town of

Nuremberg had claimed for itself the invention of the coiled watch-spring, and carried on a large trade in the manufacture of its celebrated "Nuremberg eggs," as watches came almost universally to be called. Strassburg was also very foremost in efforts for the advancement of the sciences; and especially she had been the nursing mother of several learned geometricians and mathematicians, among these being Chretei Herlin. Some who understood such matters predicted, as we have seen had Herlin himself, that the young Dasipodius would rival him; but as yet Conrad was a comparatively unknown toiler, silently working his way among a dozen or so of other students in Herlin's shady old monastery studio, and when night came on, and his comrades took holiday, he would go home to the Dial, and mounting the turret staircase, would work on at the labour he delighted in, until worn out at last, he would snatch a few hours for rest.