**The Halberdier of the Little Rheinschloss**

O. Henry

I go sometimes into the *Bierhalle* and restaurant called Old Munich. Not long ago it was a resort of interesting Bohemians, but now only artists and musicians and literary folk frequent it. But the Pilsner is yet good, and I take some diversion from the conversation of Waiter No. 18.

For many years the customers of Old Munich have accepted the place as a faithful copy from the ancient German town. The big hall with its smoky rafters, rows of imported steins, portrait of Goethe, and verses painted on the walls—translated into German from the original of the Cincinnati poets—seems atmospherically correct when viewed through the bottom of a glass.

But not long ago the proprietors added the room above, called it the Little Rheinschloss, and built in a stairway. Up there was an imitation stone parapet, ivy-covered, and the walls were painted to represent depth and distance, with the Rhine winding at the base of the vineyarded slopes, and the castle of Ehrenbreitstein looming directly opposite the entrance. Of course there were tables and chairs; and you could have beer and food brought you, as you naturally would on the top of a castle on the Rhine.

I went into Old Munich one afternoon when there were few customers, and sat at my usual table near the stairway. I was shocked and almost displeased to perceive that the glass cigar-case by the orchestra stand had been smashed to smithereens. I did not like things to happen in Old Munich. Nothing had ever happened there before.

Waiter No. 18 came and breathed on my neck. I was his by right of discovery. Eighteen’s brain was built like a corral. It was full of ideas which, when he opened the gate, came huddling out like a flock of sheep that might get together afterward or might not. I did not shine as a shepherd. As a type Eighteen fitted nowhere. I did not find out if he had a nationality, family, creed, grievance, hobby, soul, preference, home, or vote. He only came always to my table and, as long as his leisure would permit, let words flutter from him like swallows leaving a barn at daylight.

“How did the cigar-case come to be broken, Eighteen?” I asked, with a certain feeling of personal grievance.

“I can tell you about that, sir,” said he, resting his foot on the chair next to mine. “Did you ever have anybody hand you a double handful of good luck while both your hands was full of bad luck, and stop to notice how your fingers behaved?”

“No riddles, Eighteen,” said I. “Leave out palmistry and manicuring.”

“You remember,” said Eighteen, “the guy in the hammered brass Prince Albert and the oroide gold pants and the amalgamated copper hat, that carried the combination meat-axe, ice-pick, and liberty-pole, and used to stand on the first landing as you go up to the Little Rindslosh.”

“Why, yes,” said I. “The halberdier. I never noticed him particularly. I remember he thought he was only a suit of armour. He had a perfect poise.”

“He had more than that,” said Eighteen. “He was me friend. He was an advertisement. The boss hired him to stand on the stairs for a kind of scenery to show there was something doing in the has-been line upstairs. What did you call him—a what kind of a beer?”

“A halberdier,” said I. “That was an ancient man-at-arms of many hundred years ago.”

“Some mistake,” said Eighteen. “This one wasn’t that old. He wasn’t over twenty-three or four.

“It was the boss’s idea, rigging a man up in an ante-bellum suit of tinware and standing him on the landing of the slosh. He bought the goods at a Fourth Avenue antique store, and hung a sign-out: ‘Able-bodied hal-halberdier wanted. Costume furnished.’”

“The same morning a young man with wrecked good clothes and a hungry look comes in, bringing the sign with him. I was filling the mustard-pots at my station.

“‘I’m it,’ says he, ‘whatever it is. But I never halberdiered in a restaurant. Put me on. Is it a masquerade?’

“‘I hear talk in the kitchen of a fishball,’ says I.

“‘Bully for you, Eighteen,’ says he. ‘You and I’ll get on. Show me the boss’s desk.’”

“Well, the boss tries the Harveyized pajamas on him, and they fitted him like the scales on a baked redsnapper, and he gets the job. You’ve seen what it is—he stood straight up in the corner of the first landing with his halberd to his shoulder, looking right ahead and guarding the Portugals of the castle. The boss is nutty about having the true Old-World flavour to his joint. ‘Halberdiers goes with Rindsloshes,’ says he, ‘just as rats goes with rathskellers and white cotton stockings with Tyrolean villages.’ The boss is a kind of a antiologist, and is all posted up on data and such information.

“From 8 p.m. to two in the morning was the halberdier’s hours. He got two meals with us help and a dollar a night. I eat with him at the table. He liked me. He never told his name. He was travelling impromptu, like kings, I guess. The first time at supper I says to him: ‘Have some more of the spuds, Mr. Frelinghuysen.’ ‘Oh, don’t be so formal and offish, Eighteen,’ says he. ‘Call me Hal—that’s short for halberdier.’ ‘Oh, don’t think I wanted to pry for names,’ says I. ‘I know all about the dizzy fall from wealth and greatness. We’ve got a count washing dishes in the kitchen; and the third bartender used to be a Pullman conductor. And they *work*, Sir Percival,’ says I, sarcastic.

“‘Eighteen,’ says he, ‘as a friendly devil in a cabbage-scented hell, would you mind cutting up this piece of steak for me? I don’t say that it’s got more muscle than I have, but—’ And then he shows me the insides of his hands. They was blistered and cut and corned and swelled up till they looked like a couple of flank steaks criss-crossed with a knife—the kind the butchers hide and take home, knowing what is the best.

“‘Shoveling coal,’ says he, ‘and piling bricks and loading drays. But they gave out, and I had to resign. I was born for a halberdier, and I’ve been educated for twenty-four years to fill the position. Now, quit knocking my profession, and pass along a lot more of that ham. I’m holding the closing exercises,’ says he, ‘of a forty-eight-hour fast.’”

“The second night he was on the job he walks down from his corner to the cigar-case and calls for cigarettes. The customers at the tables all snicker out loud to show their acquaintance with history. The boss is on.

“‘An’—let’s see—oh, yes—’An anachronism,’ says the boss. ‘Cigarettes was not made at the time when halberdiers was invented.’”

“‘The ones you sell was,’ says Sir Percival. ‘Caporal wins from chronology by the length of a cork tip.’ So he gets ’em and lights one, and puts the box in his brass helmet, and goes back to patrolling the Rindslosh.

“He made a big hit, ’specially with the ladies. Some of ’em would poke him with their fingers to see if he was real or only a kind of a stuffed figure like they burn in elegy. And when he’d move they’d squeak, and make eyes at him as they went up to the slosh. He looked fine in his halberdashery. He slept at $2 a week in a hall-room on Third Avenue. He invited me up there one night. He had a little book on the washstand that he read instead of shopping in the saloons after hours. ‘I’m on to that,’ says I, ‘from reading about it in novels. All the heroes on the bum carry the little book. It’s either Tantalus or Liver or Horace, and its printed in Latin, and you’re a college man. And I wouldn’t be surprised,’ says I, ‘if you wasn’t educated, too.’ But it was only the batting averages of the League for the last ten years.

“One night, about half past eleven, there comes in a party of these high-rollers that are always hunting up new places to eat in and poke fun at. There was a swell girl in a 40 H.-P. auto tan coat and veil, and a fat old man with white side-whiskers, and a young chap that couldn’t keep his feet off the tail of the girl’s coat, and an oldish lady that looked upon life as immoral and unnecessary. ‘How perfectly delightful,’ they says, ‘to sup in a slosh.’ Up the stairs they go; and in half a minute back down comes the girl, her skirts swishing like the waves on the beach. She stops on the landing and looks our halberdier in the eye.

“‘You!’ she says, with a smile that reminded me of lemon sherbet. I was waiting up-stairs in the slosh, then, and I was right down here by the door, putting some vinegar and cayenne into an empty bottle of tabasco, and I heard all they said.

“‘It,’ says Sir Percival, without moving. ‘I’m only local colour. Are my hauberk, helmet, and halberd on straight?’

“‘Is there an explanation to this?’ says she. ‘Is it a practical joke such as men play in those Griddle-cake and Lamb Clubs? I’m afraid I don’t see the point. I heard, vaguely, that you were away. For three months I—we have not seen you or heard from you.’”

“‘I’m halberdiering for my living,’ says the stature. ‘I’m working,’ says he. ‘I don’t suppose you know what work means.’”

“‘Have you—have you lost your money?’ she asks.

“Sir Percival studies a minute.

“‘I am poorer,’ says he, ‘than the poorest sandwich man on the streets—if I don’t earn my living.’”

“‘You call this work?’ says she. ‘I thought a man worked with his hands or his head instead of becoming a mountebank.’”

“‘The calling of a halberdier,’ says he, ‘is an ancient and honourable one. Sometimes,’ says he, ‘the man-at-arms at the door has saved the castle while the plumed knights were cake-walking in the banquet-halls above.’”

“‘I see you’re not ashamed,’ says she, ‘of your peculiar tastes. I wonder, though, that the manhood I used to think I saw in you didn’t prompt you to draw water or hew wood instead of publicly flaunting your ignominy in this disgraceful masquerade.’”

“Sir Percival kind of rattles his armour and says: ‘Helen, will you suspend sentence in this matter for just a little while? You don’t understand,’ says he. ‘I’ve got to hold this job down a little longer.’”

“‘You like being a harlequin—or halberdier, as you call it?’ says she.

“‘I wouldn’t get thrown out of the job just now,’ says he, with a grin, ‘to be appointed Minister to the Court of St. James’s.’”

“And then the 40-H.P. girl’s eyes sparkled as hard as diamonds.

“‘Very well,’ says she. ‘You shall have full run of your serving-man’s tastes this night.’ And she swims over to the boss’s desk and gives him a smile that knocks the specks off his nose.

“‘I think your Rindslosh,’ says she, ‘is as beautiful as a dream. It is a little slice of the Old World set down in New York. We shall have a nice supper up there; but if you will grant us one favour the illusion will be perfect—give us your halberdier to wait on our table.’”

“That hits the boss’s antiology hobby just right. ‘Sure,’ says he, ’dot vill be fine. Und der orchestra shall blay “Die Wacht am Rhein” all der time.’ And he goes over and tells the halberdier to go upstairs and hustle the grub at the swells’ table.

“‘I’m on the job,’ says Sir Percival, taking off his helmet and hanging it on his halberd and leaning ’em in the corner. The girl goes up and takes her seat and I see her jaw squared tight under her smile. ‘We’re going to be waited on by a real halberdier,’ says she, ‘one who is proud of his profession. Isn’t it sweet?’

“‘Ripping,’ says the swell young man. ‘Much prefer a waiter,’ says the fat old gent. ‘I hope he doesn’t come from a cheap museum,’ says the old lady; ‘he might have microbes in his costume.’”

“Before he goes to the table, Sir Percival takes me by the arm. ‘Eighteen,’ he says, ‘I’ve got to pull off this job without a blunder. You coach me straight or I’ll take that halberd and make hash out of you.’ And then he goes up to the table with his coat of mail on and a napkin over his arm and waits for the order.

“‘Why, it’s Deering!’ says the young swell. ‘Hello, old man. What the—’

“‘Beg pardon, sir,’ interrupts the halberdier, ‘I’m waiting on the table.’”

“The old man looks at him grim, like a Boston bull. ‘So, Deering,’ he says, ‘you’re at work yet.’”

“‘Yes, sir,’ says Sir Percival, quiet and gentlemanly as I could have been myself, ‘for almost three months, now.’ ‘You haven’t been discharged during the time?’ asks the old man. ‘Not once, sir,’ says he, ‘though I’ve had to change my work several times.’”

“‘Waiter,’ orders the girl, short and sharp, ‘another napkin.’ He brings her one, respectful.

“I never saw more devil, if I may say it, stirred up in a lady. There was two bright red spots on her cheeks, and her eyes looked exactly like a wildcat’s I’d seen in the zoo. Her foot kept slapping the floor all the time.

“‘Waiter,’ she orders, ‘bring me filtered water without ice. Bring me a footstool. Take away this empty salt-cellar.’ She kept him on the jump. She was sure giving the halberdier his.

“There wasn’t but a few customers up in the slosh at that time, so I hung out near the door so I could help Sir Percival serve.

“He got along fine with the olives and celery and the bluepoints. They was easy. And then the consommé came up the dumb-waiter all in one big silver tureen. Instead of serving it from the side-table he picks it up between his hands and starts to the dining-table with it. When nearly there he drops the tureen smash on the floor, and the soup soaks all the lower part of that girl’s swell silk dress.

“‘Stupid—incompetent,’ says she, giving him a look. ‘Standing in a corner with a halberd seems to be your mission in life.’”

“‘Pardon me, lady,’ says he. ‘It was just a little bit hotter than blazes. I couldn’t help it.’”

“The old man pulls out a memorandum book and hunts in it. ‘The 25th of April, Deering,’ says he. ‘I know it,’ says Sir Percival. ‘And ten minutes to twelve o’clock,’ says the old man. ‘By Jupiter! you haven’t won yet.’ And he pounds the table with his fist and yells to me: ‘Waiter, call the manager at once—tell him to hurry here as fast as he can.’ I go after the boss, and old Brockmann hikes up to the slosh on the jump.

“‘I want this man discharged at once,’ roars the old guy. ‘Look what he’s done. Ruined my daughter’s dress. It cost at least $600. Discharge this awkward lout at once or I’ll sue you for the price of it.’”

“’dis is bad pizness,’ says the boss. ‘Six hundred dollars is much. I reckon I vill haf to—’

“‘Wait a minute, Herr Brockmann,’ says Sir Percival, easy and smiling. But he was worked up under his tin suitings; I could see that. And then he made the finest, neatest little speech I ever listened to. I can’t give you the words, of course. He give the millionaires a lovely roast in a sarcastic way, describing their automobiles and opera-boxes and diamonds; and then he got around to the working-classes and the kind of grub they eat and the long hours they work—and all that sort of stuff—bunkum, of course. ‘The restless rich,’ says he, ‘never content with their luxuries, always prowling among the haunts of the poor and humble, amusing themselves with the imperfections and misfortunes of their fellow men and women. And even here, Herr Brockmann,’ he says, ‘in this beautiful Rindslosh, a grand and enlightening reproduction of Old World history and architecture, they come to disturb its symmetry and picturesqueness by demanding in their arrogance that the halberdier of the castle wait upon their table! I have faithfuly and conscientiously,’ says he, ‘performed my duties as a halberdier. I know nothing of a waiter’s duties. It was the insolent whim of these transient, pampered aristocrats that I should be detailed to serve them food. Must I be blamed—must I be deprived of the means of a livelihood,’ he goes on, ‘on account of an accident that was the result of their own presumption and haughtiness? But what hurts me more than all,’ says Sir Percival, ‘is the desecration that has been done to this splendid Rindslosh—the confiscation of its halberdier to serve menially at the banquet board.’”

“Even I could see that this stuff was piffle; but it caught the boss.

“‘Mein Gott,’ says he, ‘you vas right. Ein halberdier have not got der right to dish up soup. Him I vill not discharge. Have anoder waiter if you like, und let mein halberdier go back und stand mit his halberd. But, gentlemen,’ he says, pointing to the old man, ‘you go ahead and sue mit der dress. Sue me for $600 or $6,000. I stand der suit.’ And the boss puffs off down-stairs. Old Brockmann was an all-right Dutchman.

“Just then the clock strikes twelve, and the old guy laughs loud. ‘You win, Deering,’ says he. ‘And let me explain to all,’ he goes on. ‘Some time ago Mr. Deering asked me for something that I did not want to give him.’ (I looks at the girl, and she turns as red as a pickled beet.) ‘I told him,’ says the old guy, ‘if he would earn his own living for three months without being discharged for incompetence, I would give him what he wanted. It seems that the time was up at twelve o’clock to-night. I came near fetching you, though, Deering, on that soup question,’ says the old boy, standing up and grabbing Sir Percival’s hand.

“The halberdier lets out a yell and jumps three feet high.

“‘Look out for those hands,’ says he, and he holds ’em up. You never saw such hands except on a labourer in a limestone quarry.

“‘Heavens, boy!’ says old side-whiskers, ‘what have you been doing to ’em?’

“‘Oh,’ says Sir Percival, ‘little chores like hauling coal and excavating rock till they went back on me. And when I couldn’t hold a pick or a whip I took up halberdiering to give ’em a rest. Tureens full of hot soup don’t seem to be a particularly soothing treatment.’”

“I would have bet on that girl. That high-tempered kind always go as far the other way, according to my experience. She whizzes round the table like a cyclone and catches both his hands in hers. ‘Poor hands—dear hands,’ she sings out, and sheds tears on ’em and holds ’em close to her bosom. Well, sir, with all that Rindslosh scenery it was just like a play. And the halberdier sits down at the table at the girl’s side, and I served the rest of the supper. And that was about all, except that when they left he shed his hardware store and went with ’em.”

I dislike to be side-tracked from an original proposition.

“But you haven’t told me, Eighteen,” said I, “how the cigar-case came to be broken.”

“Oh, that was last night,” said Eighteen. “Sir Percival and the girl drove up in a cream-coloured motor-car, and had dinner in the Rindslosh. ‘The same table, Billy,’ I heard her say as they went up. I waited on ’em. We’ve got a new halberdier now, a bow-legged guy with a face like a sheep. As they came down-stairs Sir Percival passes him a ten-case note. The new halberdier drops his halberd, and it falls on the cigar-case. That’s how that happened.”