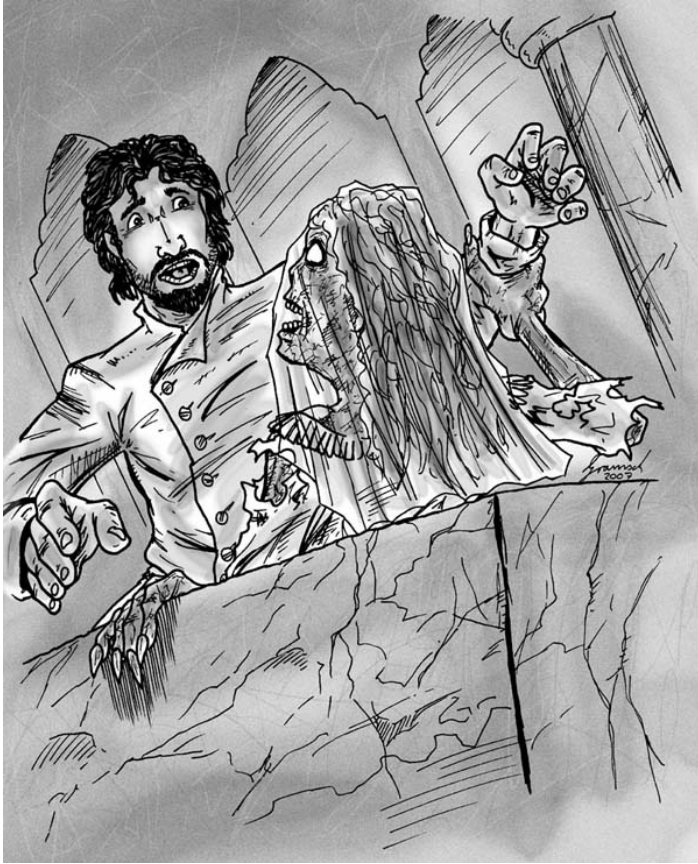


The Treasure of the Bärenburg



Countless centuries ago, in a valley near Oppenau, there stood a castle, the remains of which have long since vanished. It was called the Bärenburg, the Bear Castle.

Soon after the castle's destruction by a rival knight, a rumour began to spread, and people whispered of an enormous treasure hidden underneath the fallen stronghold in a deep, deep vault. These tales caught the ear of a daring young page, who served the lord of nearby Castle Rosenstein. The page desired to make the treasure his own, and he begged an old wizard to tell him the charm which would cause the mouldering old vault to open for him. He paid for the spell with a silver coin, and once night had fallen, the youth set off on his clandestine undertaking.

He reached the Bärenburg, took the long and winding staircase down into the earth, and spoke the magic words. The doors opened for him, and he stepped into the castle's sepulchre. Hastily the greedy page lifted the lids off the coffins, expecting to find precious jewels. But to his great disappointment, only rotten skeletons greeted his eye; death was everywhere around him, but not a trace of golden treasure.

Nevertheless, the page continued his eager search and opened coffin after coffin until at last he came to the final tomb. It contained the body of a maiden not yet fully decomposed, the last flower of a long ancestral race plucked by the grim reaper. Her white hand was adorned with a diamond, and a heavy golden chain was twined about her neck.

The audacious youth snatched the jewels from the dead maiden and fled in haste from the gruesome sight. His success, however, spurred him on, and the next night, he returned to the vault, searching again with renewed eagerness. He seized the maiden's hand hoping to find more precious things in her coffin — when all of a sudden her slender white fingers grasped his rough hand, and the pale maiden slowly raised herself. Looking at him with ghastly pale eyes, she spoke in a hollow voice:

*“Why didst thou take my jewels,
My ring and chain with thee?
Now thou art mine for ever,
Lie down and rest by me.”*

Did this really happen? Or was it just a mad delusion of this violator of the dead? No one will ever know.

But with a wild cry the thief released the maiden's ice-cold hand and fled back to Rosenstein. A few days later a violent fever seized him and ended his wicked life.