The Sword Maker eBook

The Sword Maker by Robert Barr (writer)

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BOOKRAGS

Contents

The Sword Maker eBook....1

Contents....2

Table of Contents....11

Page 1....12

Page 2....13

Page 3....14

Page 4....15

Page 5....16

Page 6....18

Page 7....20

Page 8....21

Page 9....22

Page 10....24

Page 11....26

Page 12....28

Page 13....30

Page 14....32

Page 15....34

Page 16....36

Page 17....37

Page 18....39

Page 19....41

Page 20....43

Page 21....45

Page 22....47

Page 23.....49
Page 24.....51
Page 25.....53
Page 26.....55
Page 27.....57
Page 28.....59
Page 29.....61
Page 30.....62
Page 31.....64
Page 32.....66
Page 33.....68
Page 34.....70
Page 35.....71
Page 36.....73
Page 37.....75
Page 38.....77
Page 39.....79
Page 40.....81
Page 41.....83
Page 42.....85
Page 43.....86
Page 44.....87
Page 45.....89
Page 46.....91
Page 47.....93
Page 48.....95

Page 49.....97
Page 50.....99
Page 51.....101
Page 52.....103
Page 53.....105
Page 54.....107
Page 55.....109
Page 56.....111
Page 57.....113
Page 58.....114
Page 59.....116
Page 60.....118
Page 61.....120
Page 62.....122
Page 63.....124
Page 64.....126
Page 65.....128
Page 66.....130
Page 67.....132
Page 68.....134
Page 69.....136
Page 70.....138
Page 71.....140
Page 72.....142
Page 73.....144
Page 74.....145

Page 75.....147
Page 76.....149
Page 77.....151
Page 78.....153
Page 79.....154
Page 80.....155
Page 81.....157
Page 82.....159
Page 83.....161
Page 84.....163
Page 85.....165
Page 86.....167
Page 87.....169
Page 88.....171
Page 89.....173
Page 90.....175
Page 91.....177
Page 92.....179
Page 93.....181
Page 94.....182
Page 95.....184
Page 96.....186
Page 97.....188
Page 98.....190
Page 99.....192
Page 100.....193

Page 101.....194
Page 102.....196
Page 103.....197
Page 104.....199
Page 105.....201
Page 106.....203
Page 107.....205
Page 108.....207
Page 109.....209
Page 110.....211
Page 111.....213
Page 112.....215
Page 113.....217
Page 114.....219
Page 115.....221
Page 116.....222
Page 117.....223
Page 118.....225
Page 119.....227
Page 120.....229
Page 121.....230
Page 122.....232
Page 123.....234
Page 124.....236
Page 125.....238
Page 126.....240

Page 127.....242
Page 128.....243
Page 129.....245
Page 130.....247
Page 131.....249
Page 132.....251
Page 133.....253
Page 134.....255
Page 135.....257
Page 136.....259
Page 137.....261
Page 138.....263
Page 139.....265
Page 140.....266
Page 141.....268
Page 142.....270
Page 143.....272
Page 144.....274
Page 145.....275
Page 146.....277
Page 147.....279
Page 148.....281
Page 149.....282
Page 150.....284
Page 151.....286
Page 152.....288

Page 153.....290
Page 154.....292
Page 155.....294
Page 156.....296
Page 157.....298
Page 158.....300
Page 159.....302
Page 160.....304
Page 161.....306
Page 162.....308
Page 163.....310
Page 164.....312
Page 165.....314
Page 166.....316
Page 167.....318
Page 168.....320
Page 169.....322
Page 170.....324
Page 171.....326
Page 172.....328
Page 173.....330
Page 174.....332
Page 175.....334
Page 176.....336
Page 177.....338
Page 178.....340

Page 179.....342
Page 180.....344
Page 181.....346
Page 182.....348
Page 183.....350
Page 184.....352
Page 185.....354
Page 186.....356
Page 187.....358
Page 188.....360
Page 189.....362
Page 190.....364
Page 191.....366
Page 192.....368
Page 193.....370
Page 194.....372
Page 195.....374
Page 196.....376
Page 197.....378
Page 198.....379
Page 199.....381
Page 200.....383
Page 201.....385
Page 202.....387
Page 203.....389
Page 204.....391

Page 205.....393
Page 206.....395
Page 207.....397
Page 208.....399
Page 209.....401
Page 210.....403
Page 211.....405
Page 212.....407
Page 213.....409
Page 214.....411
Page 215.....413
Page 216.....415

Table of Contents

Table of Contents

Section	Page
Start of eBook	1
AN OFFER TO OPEN THE RIVER	1
II	12
III	27
IV	41
V	54
VI	58
VII	65
VIII	77
IX	89
X	99
XI	114
XII	126
XIII	138
XIV	145
XV	157
XVI	161
XVII	174
XVIII	180
XIX	189
XX	195
XXI	201
XXII	208
THE END	216

Page 1

AN OFFER TO OPEN THE RIVER

Considering the state of the imperial city of Frankfort, one would not expect to find such a gathering as was assembled in the Kaiser cellar of the Rheingold drinking tavern. Outside in the streets all was turbulence and disorder; a frenzy on the part of the populace taxing to the utmost the efforts of the city authorities to keep it within bounds, and prevent the development of a riot that might result in the partial destruction at least of this once prosperous city. And indeed, the inhabitants of Frankfort could plead some excuse for their boisterousness. Temporarily, at any rate, all business was at a standstill. The skillful mechanics of the town had long been out of work, and now to the ranks of the unemployed were added, from time to time, clerks and such-like clerical people, expert accountants, persuasive salesmen, and small shopkeepers, for no one now possessed the money to buy more than the bare necessities of life. Yet the warehouses of Frankfort were full to overflowing, with every kind of store that might have supplied the needs of the people, and to the unlearned man it seemed unjust that he and his family should starve while granaries were packed with the agricultural produce of the South, and huge warehouses were glutted with enough cloth from Frankfort and the surrounding districts to clothe ten times the number of tatterdemalions who clamored through the streets.

The wrath of the people was concentrated against one man, and he the highest in the land; to blame, of course, in a secondary degree, but not the one primarily at fault for this deplorable state of things. The Emperor, always indolent from the time he came to the throne, had grown old and crabbed and fat, caring for nothing but his flagon of wine that stood continually at his elbow. Laxity of rule in the beginning allowed his nobles to get the upper hand, and now it would require a civil war to bring them into subjection again. They, sitting snug in their strongholds, with plenty of wine in their cellars and corn in their bins, cared nothing for the troubles of the city. Indeed, those who inhabited either bank of the Rhine, watching from their elevated castles the main avenue of traffic between Frankfort and Cologne, her chief market, had throughout that long reign severely taxed the merchants conveying goods downstream. During the last five years, their exactions became so piratical that finally they killed the goose that laid the golden eggs, so now the Rhine was without a boat, and Frankfort without a buyer.

Page 2

For too long Frankfort had looked to the Emperor, whose business it was to keep order in his domain, and when at last the merchants, combining to help themselves, made an effort towards freedom, it was too late. The result of their combination was a flotilla of nearly a hundred boats, which, gathering at Frankfort and Mayence, proceeded together down the river, convoyed by a fleet containing armed men, and thus they thought to win through to Cologne, and so dispose of their goods. But the robber Barons combined also, hung chains across the river at the Lorely rocks, its narrowest part, and realizing that this fleet could defeat any single one of them, they for once acted in concert, falling upon the boats when their running against the chains threw them into confusion.

The nobles and their brigands were seasoned fighters all, while the armed men secured by the merchants were mere hirelings, who fled in panic; and those not cut to pieces by their savage adversaries became themselves marauders on a small scale, scattered throughout the land, for there was little use of tramping back to the capital, where already a large portion of the population suffered the direst straits.

Not a single bale of goods reached Cologne, for the robbers divided everything amongst themselves, with some pretty quarrels, and then they sank the boats in the deepest part of the river as a warning, lest the merchants of Frankfort and Mayence should imagine the Rhine belonged to them. Meantime, all petitions to the Emperor being in vain, the merchants gave up the fight. They were a commercial, not a warlike people. They discharged their servants and underlings, and starvation slowly settled down upon the distressed city.

After the maritime disaster on the Rhine, some of the merchants made a futile attempt to amend matters, for which their leaders paid dearly. They appealed to the seven Electors, finding their petitions to the Emperor were in vain, asking these seven noblemen, including the three warlike Archbishops of Cologne, Treves, and Mayence, to depose the Emperor, which they had power to do, and elect his son in his stead. But they overlooked the fact that a majority of the Electors themselves, and probably the Archbishops also, benefited directly or indirectly by the piracies on the Rhine. The answer to this request was the prompt hanging of three leading merchants, the imprisonment of a score of others, and a warning to the rest that the shoemaker should stick to his last, leaving high politics to those born to rule. This misguided effort caused the three Archbishops to arrest Prince Roland, the Emperor’s only son, and incarcerate him in Ehrenfels, a strong castle on the Rhine belonging to the Archbishop of Mayence, who was thus made custodian of the young man, and responsible to his brother prelates of Cologne and Treves for the safe-keeping of the Prince. The Archbishops, as has been said, were too well satisfied with the weak administration then established at Frankfort to wish a change, so the lad was removed from the capital, that the citizens of Frankfort might be under no temptation to place him at their head, and endeavor to overturn the existing order of things.

Page 3

This being the state of affairs in Frankfort, with every one gloomy, and a majority starving, it was little wonder that the main cellar of the Rheingold tavern should be empty, although when times were good it was difficult to find a seat there after the sun went down. But in the smaller Kaiser cellar, along each side of the single long table, sat young men numbering a score, who ate black bread and drank Rhine wine, to the roaring of song and the telling of story. They formed a close coterie, admitting no stranger to their circle if one dissenting voice was raised against his acceptance, yet in spite of this exclusiveness there was not a drop of noble blood in the company. They belonged, however, to the aristocracy of craftsmen; metal-workers for the most part, ingenious artificers in iron, beaters of copper, fashioners of gold and silver. Glorious blacksmiths, they called themselves; but now, like every one else, with nothing to do. In spite of their city up-bringing all were stalwart, well-set-up young men; and, indeed, the swinging of hammers is good exercise for the muscles of the arm, and in those turbulent days a youth who could not take care of himself with his stick or his fists was like to fare ill if he ventured forth after nightfall.

This, indeed, had been the chief reason for the forming of their guild, and if one of their number was set upon, the secret call of the organization shouted aloud brought instant help were any of the members within hearing. Belonging neither to the military nor the aristocracy, they were not allowed to wear swords, and to obtain this privilege was one of the objects of their organization. Indeed, each member of the guild secretly possessed a weapon of the best, although he risked his neck if ever he carried it abroad with him. Among their number were three of the most expert sword makers in all Germany.

These three sword makers had been instrumental in introducing to their order the man who was now its leader. This youth came to one of them with ideas concerning the proper construction of a sword, and the balancing of it, so that it hung easily in the hand as though part of the fore-arm. Usually, the expert has small patience with the theories of an amateur; but this young fellow, whose ambition it was to invent a sword, possessed such intimate knowledge of the weapon as it was used, not only in Germany, but also in France and Italy, that the sword maker introduced him to fellow-craftsmen at other shops, and they taught him how to construct a sword. These instructors, learning that although, as Roland laughingly said, he was not allowed to wear a sword, he could wield it with a precision little short of marvelous, the guild gave permission for this stranger to be a guest at one of their weekly meetings at the Kaiser cellar, where he exhibited his wonderful skill.

Page 4

Not one of them, nor, indeed, all of them together, stood any chance when confronting him. They clamored to be taught, offering good money for the lessons, believing that if they acquired but a tithe of his excellence with the blade they might venture to wear it at night, and let their skill save them from capture. But the young fellow refused their money, and somewhat haughtily declined the role of fencing-master, whereupon they unanimously elected him a member of the coterie, waiving for this one occasion the rule which forbade the choice of any but a metal-worker. When the stranger accepted the election, he was informed that it was the duty of each member to come to the aid of his brethren when required, and they therefore requested him to teach them swordsmanship. Roland, laughing, seeing how he had been trapped, as it were, with his own consent, acceded to the universal wish, and before a year had passed his twenty comrades were probably the leading swordsmen in the city of Frankfort.

Shortly after the disaster to the merchants' fleet at the Lorely, Roland disappeared without a word of farewell to those who had come to think so much of him. He had been extremely reticent regarding his profession, if he had one, and no one knew where he lodged. It was feared that the authorities had arrested him with the sword in his possession, for he grew more reckless than any of the others in carrying the weapon. One night, however, he reappeared, and took his seat at the head of the table as if nothing had happened. Evidently he had traveled far and on foot, for his clothes were dusty and the worse for wear. He refused to give any account of himself, but admitted that he was hungry, thirsty, and in need of money.

His hunger and thirst were speedily satisfied, but the money scarcity was not so easily remedied. All the score were out of employment, with the exception of the three sword makers, whose trade the uncertainty of the times augmented rather than diminished. To cheer up Roland, who was a young fellow of unquenchable geniality, they elected him to the empty honor of being their leader, Kurzbold's term of office having ended.

The guild met every night now, instead of once a week, and it may be shrewdly suspected that the collation of black bread and sausage formed the sole meal of the day for many of them. Nevertheless, their hilarity was undiminished, and the rafters rang with song and laugh, and echoed also maledictions upon a supine Government, and on the rapacious Rhine lords. But the bestowal of even black bread and the least expensive of wine could not continue indefinitely. They owed a bill to the landlord upon which that worthy, patient as he had proved himself, always hoping for better times, wished for at least something on account. All his other customers had deserted him, and if they drank at all, chose some place where the wine was thin and cheap. The landlord held out bravely for three months after Roland was elected president, then, bemoaning his fate, informed the guild that he would be compelled to close the Rheingold tavern.

Page 5

“Give me a week!” cried Roland, rising in his place at the head of the table, “and I will make an effort to get enough gold to settle the bill at least, with perhaps something over for each of our pockets.”

This promise brought forth applause and a rattle of flagons on the table, so palpably empty that the ever-hopeful landlord proceeded forthwith to fill them.

“There is one proviso,” said Roland, as they drank his health in the wine his offer produced. “To get this money I must do something in return. I have a plan in mind which it would be premature to disclose. If it succeeds, none of us will ever need to bend back over a workman’s bench again, or hammer metal except for our own pleasure. But acting alone I am powerless, so I must receive your promise that you will stand by any pledge I make on your behalf, and follow me into whatever danger I choose to lead you.”

There was a great uproar at this, and a boisterous consent.

“This day week, then,” said Roland, as he strapped sword to side, threw cloak over shoulders, so that it completely concealed the forbidden weapon, waved a hand to his cheering comrades, and went out into the night.

Once ascended the cellar steps, the young man stood in the narrow street as though hesitating what to do. Faintly there came to him the sound of singing from the cellar he had quitted, and he smiled slightly as he listened to the rousing chorus he knew so well. From the direction of the Palace a more sinister echo floated on the night air; the unmistakable howl of anger, pain, and terror; the noise that a pursued and stricken mob makes when driven by soldiers. The populace had evidently been engaged in its futile and dangerous task of demonstrating, and proclaiming its hunger, and the authorities were scattering it; keeping it ever on the move.

It was still early; not yet ten o’clock, and a full moon shone over the city, unlighted otherwise. Drawing his cloak closer about him, Roland walked rapidly in an opposite direction to that from which the tumult of the rabble came, until he arrived at the wide Fahrgasse, a street running north and south, its southern end terminating at the old bridge. Along this thoroughfare lived the wealthiest merchants of Frankfort.

Roland turned, and proceeded slowly towards the river, critically examining the tall, picturesque buildings on either hand, cogitating the question which of them would best answer his purpose. They all seemed uninviting enough, for their windows were dark, most of them tightly shuttered; and, indeed, the thoroughfare looked like a street of the dead, the deserted appearance enhanced, rather than relieved, by the white moonlight lying on its cobble-stones.

Nearing the bridge, he discovered one stout door ajar, and behind it shone the yellow glow of a lamp. He paused, and examined critically the facade of the house, which, with its quiet, dignified architectural beauty, seemed the abode of wealth. Although the shutters were closed, his intent inspection showed him thin shafts of light from the chinks, and he surmised that an assemblage of some sort was in progress, probably a secret convention, the members of which entered unannounced, and left the door ajar ready for the next comer.

Page 6

For a moment he thought of venturing in, but remembering his mission required the convincing of one man rather than the persuasion of a group, he forbore, but noted in his mind the position and designation of the house, resolving to select this building as the theater of his first effort, and return to it next morning. It would serve his purpose as well as another.

Roland's attention was then suddenly directed to his own position, standing in the bright moonlight, for there swung round from the river road, into the Fahrgasse, a small and silent company, who marched as one man. The moon was shining almost directly up the street, but the houses to the west stood in its radiance, while those in the east were still in shadow. Roland pressed himself back against the darkened wall to his left, near the partially opened door; between it and the river. The silent procession advanced to the door ajar, and there paused, forming their ranks into two lines, thus making a passage for a tall, fine-looking, bearded man, who walked to the threshold, then turned and raised his bonnet in salute.

"My friends," he said, "this is kind of you, and although I have been silent, I ask you to believe that deeply I appreciate your welcome escort. And now, enter with me, and we will drink a stoup of wine together, to the somber toast, 'God save our stricken city!'"

"No, no, Herr Goebel. To-night is sacred. We have seen you safely to your waiting family, and at that reunion there should be no intruders. But to-morrow night, if you will have us, we will drink to the city, and to your own good health, Herr Goebel."

This sentiment was applauded by all, and the merchant, seeing that they would not accept his present invitation, bowed in acquiescence, and bade them good-by. When the door closed the delegation separated into units, and each went his own way. Roland, stepping out of the shadow, accosted the rearmost man.

"Pardon me, mein Herr," he said, "but may I ask what ceremony is this in which you have been taking part?"

The person accosted looked with some alarm at his questioner, but the moonlight revealed a face singularly gentle and winning; a face that in spite of its youth inspired instinctive confidence. The tone, too, was very persuasive, and seemed devoid even of the offense of curiosity.

"'Tis no ceremony," said the delegate, "but merely the return home of our friend, Herr Goebel."

"Has he, then, been on a journey?"

"Sir, you are very young, and probably unacquainted with Frankfort."

"I have lived here all my life," said Roland. "I am a native of Frankfort."

“In that case,” replied the other, “you show yourself amazingly ignorant of its concerns; otherwise you would know that Herr Goebel is one of the leading merchants of the city, a man honorable, enlightened, and energetic—an example to us all, and one esteemed alike by noble or peasant. We honor ourselves in honoring him.”

Page 7

“Herr Goebel should be proud of such commendation, mein Herr, coming I judge, from one to whom the words you use might also be applied.”

The merchant bowed gravely at this compliment, but made no remark upon it.

“Pardon my further curiosity,” continued the young man, “but from whence does Herr Goebel return?”

“He comes from prison,” said the other. “He made the mistake of thinking that our young Prince would prove a better ruler than his father, our Emperor, and but that the Archbishops feared a riot if they went to extremes, Herr Goebel ran great danger of losing his life rather than his liberty.”

“What you say, mein Herr, interests me very much, and I thank you for your courtesy. My excuse for questioning you is this. I am moved by a desire to enter the employ of such a man as Herr Goebel, and I purpose calling upon him to-morrow, if you think he would be good enough to receive me.”

“He will doubtless receive you,” replied the other, “but I am quite certain your mission will fail. At the present moment none of us are engaging clerks, however competent. Ignorant though you are of civic affairs, you must be aware that all business is at a standstill in Frankfort. Although Herr Goebel has said nothing about it, I learn from an unquestionable source that he himself is keeping from starvation all his former employees, so I am sure he would not take on, for a stranger, any further obligation.”

“Sir, I am well acquainted with the position of affairs, and it is to suggest a remedy that I desire speech with Herr Goebel. I do not possess the privilege of acquaintance with any merchant in this city, so one object of my accosting you was to learn, if possible, how I might secure some note of introduction to the merchant that would ensure his receiving me, and obtain for me a hearing when once I had been admitted to his house.”

If Roland expected the stranger to volunteer such a note, he quite underestimated the caution of a Frankfort merchant.

“As I said before, you will meet with no difficulty so far as entrance to the house is concerned. May I take it that you yourself understand the art of writing?”

“Oh yes,” replied Roland.

“Then indite your own letter of introduction. Say that you have evolved a plan for the redemption of Frankfort, and Herr Goebel will receive you without demur. He will listen patiently, and give a definite decision regarding the feasibility of your project. And now, good sir, my way lies to the left. I wish you success, and bid you good-night.”

Page 8

The stranger left Roland standing at the intersection of two streets, one of which led to the Saalhof. They had been approaching the Romerberg, or market-place, the center of Frankfort, when the merchant so suddenly ended the conversation and turned aside. Roland remembered that no Jew was allowed to set foot in the Romerberg, and now surmised the nationality of his late companion. The youth proceeded alone through the Romerberg, and down directly to the river, reaching the spot where the huge Saalhof faced its flood. Roland saw that triple guards surrounded the Emperor's Palace. The mob had been cleared away, but no one was allowed to linger in its precincts, and the youth was gruffly ordered to take himself elsewhere, which he promptly did, walking up the Saalgasse, and past the Cathedral, until he came once more into the Fahrgasse, down which he proceeded, pausing for another glance at Goebel's house, until he came to the bridge, where he stood with arms resting on the parapet, thoughtfully shaping in his mind what he would say to Herr Goebel in the morning.

Along the opposite side of the river lay a compact mass of barges; ugly, somber, black in the moonlight, silent witnesses to the ruin of Frankfort. The young man gazed at this melancholy accumulation of useless floating stock, and breathed the deeper when he reflected that whoever could set these boats in motion again would prove himself, temporarily at least, the savior of the city.

When the bells began to toll eleven, Roland roused himself, walked across the bridge to Sachsenhausen, and so to his squalid lodging, consoling himself with the remembrance that the great King Charlemagne had made this his own place of residence. Here, before retiring to bed, he wrote the letter which he was to send in next day to Herr Goebel, composing it with some care, so that it aroused curiosity without satisfying it.

It was half-past ten next morning when Roland presented himself at the door of the leading merchant in the Fahrgasse, and sent in to that worthy his judiciously worded epistle. He was kept waiting in the hall longer than he expected, but at last the venerable porter appeared, and said Herr Goebel would be pleased to receive him. He was conducted up the stair to the first floor, and into a front room which seemed to be partly library and partly business office. Here seated at a stout table, he recognized the grave burgher whose home-coming he had witnessed the night before.

The keen eyes of the merchant seemed to penetrate to his inmost thought, and it struck Roland that there came into them an expression of disappointment, for he probably did not expect so youthful a visitor.

"Will you be seated, mein Herr," said his host; and Roland, with an inclination of the head, accepted the invitation. "My time is very completely occupied to-day," continued the elder man, "for although there is little business afoot in Frankfort, my own affairs have been rather neglected of late, and I am endeavoring to overtake the arrears."

Page 9

“I know that,” said Roland. “I stood by your doorcheek last night when you returned home.”

“Did you so? May I ask why?”

“There was no particular reason. It happened that I walked down the Fahrgasse, endeavoring to make up my mind upon whom I should call to-day.”

“And why have I received the preference?”

“Perhaps, sir, it would be more accurate to say your house received the preference, if it is such. I was struck by its appearance of solidity and wealth, and, differing from all others in the door being ajar, I lingered before it last night with some inclination to enter. Then the procession which accompanied you came along. I heard your address to your friends, and wondered what the formality was about. After the door was closed I accosted one of those who escorted you, and learned your name, business, and reputation.”

“You must be a stranger in Frankfort when you needed to make such inquiry.”

“Those are almost the same words that my acquaintance of last night used, and he seemed astonished when I replied that I was born in Frankfort, and had lived here all my life.”

“Ah, I suppose no man is so well known as he thinks he is, but I venture to assert that you are not engaged in business here.”

“Sir, you are in the right. I fear I have hitherto led a somewhat useless existence.”

“On money earned by some one else, perhaps.”

“Again you hit the nail on the head, Herr Goebel. I lodge on the other side of the river, and coming to and fro each day, the sight of all those useless barges depresses me, and I have formulated a plan for putting them in motion again.”

“I fear, sir, that wiser heads than yours have been meditating upon that project without avail.”

“I should have been more gratified, Herr Goebel, if you had said ’older heads.’”

The suspicion of a smile hovered for a brief instant round the shrewd, firm lips of the merchant.

“Young sir, your gentle reproof is deserved. I know nothing of your wisdom, and so should have referred to the age, and not to the equipment of your head. It occurs to me, as I study you more closely, that I have met you before. Your face seems familiar.”

“’Tis but a chance resemblance, I suspect. Until very recently I have been absorbed in my studies, and rarely left my father’s house.”

“I am doubtless mistaken. But to return to our theme. As you are ignorant of my name and standing in this city, you are probably unaware of the efforts already made to remove the deadlock on the Rhine.”

“In that, Herr Goebel, you are at fault. I know an expedition of folly was promoted at enormous expense, and that the empty barges, numbering something like fivescore, now rest in the deepest part of the Rhine.”

“Why do you call it an expedition of folly?”

“Surely the result shows it to be such.”

Page 10

“A plan may meet with disaster, even where every precaution has been taken. We did the best we could, and if the men we had paid for the protection of the flotilla had not, with base cowardice, deserted their posts, these barges would have reached Cologne.”

“Never! The defenders you chose were riff-raff, picked up in the gutters of Frankfort, and you actually supposed such cattle, undisciplined and untrained, would stand up against the fearless fighters of the Barons, swashbucklers, hardened to the use of sword and pike. What else was to be expected? The goods were not theirs, but yours. They had received their pay, and so speedily took themselves out of danger.”

“You forget, sir, or you do not know, that several hundred of them were cut to pieces.”

“I know that, also, but the knowledge does not in the least nullify my contention. I am merely endeavoring to show you that the heads you spoke of a moment ago were only older, but not necessarily wiser than mine. It would be impossible for me to devise an expedition so preposterous.”

“What should we have done?”

“For one thing, you should have gone yourselves, and defended your own bales.”

The merchant showed visible signs of a slowly rising anger, and had the young man’s head contained the wisdom he appeared to claim for it, he would have known that his remarks were entirely lacking in tact, and that he was making no progress, but rather the reverse. “You speak like a heedless, untutored youth. How could we defend our bales, when no merchant is allowed to wear a sword?”

Roland rose and put his hands to the throat of his cloak.

“I am not allowed to wear a sword;” and saying this, he dramatically flung wide his cloak, displaying the prohibited weapon hanging from his belt. The merchant sat back in his chair, visibly impressed.

“You seem to repose great confidence in me,” he said. “What if I were to inform the authorities?”

The youth smiled.

“You forget, Herr Goebel, that I learned much about you from your friend last night. I feel quite safe in your house.”

He flung his cloak once more over the weapon, and sat down again.

“What is your occupation, sir?” asked the merchant.

“I am a teacher of swordsmanship. I practice the art of a fencing-master.”

“Your clients are aristocrats, then?”

“Not so. The class with which I am now engaged contains twenty skilled artisans of about my own age.”

“If they do not belong to the aristocracy, your instruction must be surreptitious, because it is against the law.”

“It is both surreptitious and against the law, but in spite of these disadvantages, my twenty pupils are the best swordsmen in Frankfort, and I would willingly pit them against any twenty nobles with whom I am acquainted.”

“So!” cried the merchant. “You are acquainted with twenty nobles, are you?”

Page 11

“Well, you see,” explained the young man, flushing slightly, “these metal-workers whom I drill, being out of employment, cannot afford to pay for their lessons, and naturally, as you indicated, a fencing-master must look to the nobles for his bread. I used the word acquaintance hastily. I am acquainted with the nobles in the same way that a clerk in the woolen trade might say he was acquainted with a score of merchants, to none of whom he had ever spoken.”

“I see. Am I to take it that your project for opening the Rhine depends for its success on those twenty metal-workers, who quite lawlessly know how to handle their swords?”

“Yes.”

“Tell me what your plan is.”

“I do not care to disclose my plan, even to you.”

“I thought you came here hoping I should further your project, and perhaps finance it. Am I wrong in such a surmise?”

“Sir, you are not. The very first proviso is that you pay to me across this table a thousand thalers in gold.”

The smile came again to the lips of the merchant.

“Anything else?” he asked.

“Yes. You will select one of your largest barges, and fill it with whatever class of goods you deal in.”

“Don’t you know what class of goods I deal in?”

“No! I do not.”

Goebel’s smile broadened. That a youth so ignorant of everything pertaining to the commerce of Frankfort, should come in thus boldly and demand a thousand thalers in gold from a man whose occupation he did not know, seemed to the merchant one of the greatest pieces of impudence he had encountered in his long experience of men.

“After all, my merchandise,” he said, “matters little one way or another when I am engaged with such a customer as you. What next?”

“You will next place a price upon the shipload; a price such as you would accept if the boat reached Cologne intact. I agree to pay you that money, together with the thousand thalers, when I return to Frankfort.”

“And when will that be, young sir?”

“You are better able to estimate the length of time than I. I do not know, for instance, how long it takes a barge to voyage from Frankfort to Cologne.”

“Given fair weather, which we may expect in July, and premising that there are no interruptions, let us say a week.”

“Would a man journeying on horseback from Cologne to Frankfort reach here sooner than the boat?”

“The barge having to make headway against a strong current, I should say the horseman would accomplish the trip in a third of the time.”

“Very well. To allow for all contingencies, I promise to pay the money one month from the day we leave the wharf at Frankfort.”

“That would be eminently satisfactory.”

“I forgot to mention that I expect you, knowing more about navigation than I, to supply a trustworthy captain and an efficient crew for the manning of the barge. I should like men who understand the currents of the river, and who, if questioned by the Barons, would not be likely to tell more than they were asked.”

Page 12

“I can easily provide such a set of sailors.”

“Very well, Herr Goebel. Those are my requirements. Will you agree to supply them?”

“With great pleasure, my young and enthusiastic friend, provided that you comply with one of the most common of our commercial rules.”

“And what is that, mein Herr?”

“Before you depart you will leave with me ample security that if I never see you again, the value of the goods, plus the thousand thalers, will be repaid to me when the month is past.”

“Ah,” said the young man, “you impose an impossible condition.”

“Give me a bond, then, signed by three responsible merchants.”

“Sir, as I am acquainted with no merchant in this city except yourself, how could I hope to obtain the signature of even one responsible man?”

“How, then, do you expect to obtain my consent to a project which I know cannot succeed, while I bear all the risk?”

“Pardon me, Herr Goebel. I and my comrades risk our lives. You risk merely your money and your goods.”

“You intend, then, to fight your way down the Rhine?”

“Surely. How else?”

“Supported by only twenty followers?”

“Yes.”

“And you hope to succeed where a thousand of our men failed?”

“Yes; they were hirelings, as I told you. With my twenty I could put them all to flight. Aside from this, I should like to point out to you that the merchants of Frankfort formed their combination at public meetings, called together by the burgomaster. There was no secrecy about their deliberations. Every robber Baron along the Rhine knew what you were going to attempt, and was prepared for your coming. I intend that your barge shall leave Frankfort at midnight. My company will proceed across country, and join her at some agreed spot, probably below Bingen.”

“I see. Well, my young friend, you have placed before me a very interesting proposal, but I am a business man, and not an adventurer. Unless you can furnish me with security, I decline to advance a single thaler, not to mention a thousand.”

The young man rose to his feet, and the merchant, with a sigh, seemed glad that the conference was ended.

“Herr Goebel, you deeply disappoint me.”

“I am sorry for that, and regret the forfeiting of your good opinion, but despite that disadvantage I must persist in my obstinacy.”

“I do not wonder that this fair city lies desolate if her prosperity depends upon her merchants, and if you are chief among them; yet I cannot forget that you risked life and liberty on my behalf, though now you will not venture a miserable thousand thalers on my word of honor.”

“On *your* behalf? What do you mean?”

“I mean, Herr Goebel, that I am Prince Roland, only son of the Emperor, and that you placed your neck in jeopardy to elevate me to the throne.”

II

Page 13

THE BARGAIN IS STRUCK

Every epoch seems to have possessed a two-word phrase that contained, as it were, the condensed wisdom of the age, and was universally believed by the people. For instance, the aphorism “Know thyself” rose to popularity when cultured minds turned towards science. In the period to which this recital belongs the adage “Blood tells” enjoyed universal acceptance. It was, in fact, that erroneous statement “The King can do no wrong” done up into tabloid form. From it, too, sprang that double-worded maxim of the days of chivalry, “*Noblesse oblige*.”

In our own time, the two-worded phrase is “Money talks,” and if diligent inquirers probe deeply into the matter, they will find that the aspirations of the people always correspond with reasonable accuracy to the meaning of the phrase then in use. Nothing could be more excellent, for instance, than the proverb “Money talks” as representing two commercial countries like America and England. In that short sentence is packed the essence of many other wise and drastic sayings, as, for instance, “The devil take the hindmost;” for, of course, if money talks, then the man without it must remain silent, and his place is at the tail of the procession, where the devil prowls about like a Cossack at the rear of Napoleon’s army.

Confronting each other in that ancient house on the Fahrgasse, we witness, then, the personification of the two phrases, ancient and modern: blood represented by the standing lad, and money by the seated merchant.

“I am Prince Roland, only son of the Emperor,” the young man had said, and he saw at once by the expression on the face of his host that, could he be convinced of the truth of the assertion, the thousand thalers that the Prince had demanded would be his on the instant.

For a full minute Roland thought he had succeeded, but as the surprise died out of the merchant’s countenance, there replaced it that mask of caution which had had so much to do with the building of his fortune. During their conference Herr Goebel cudgeled his brain, trying to remember where he had seen this young man before, but memory had roamed among clerks, salesmen, and industrious people of that sort where, somehow, this young fellow did not fit in. When Roland suddenly sprung on him the incredible statement that he was a member of the Imperial family, the merchant’s recollection then turned towards pageants he had seen, in one of which this young stranger might very well have borne a part. Blood was beginning to tell.

But now experience came to the merchant’s aid. Only in romances did princes of the blood royal wander about like troubadours. Even a member of the lesser nobility did not call unheralded at the house of a merchant. The aristocracy always wanted money, it is true, “but what they thought they might require, they went and took,” as witness the

piratical Barons of the Rhine, whose exactions brought misery on the great city of Frankfort.

Page 14

Then all at once came the clinching remembrance that when the Electors were appealed to on behalf of the young Prince, the three Archbishops had promptly seized his Royal Highness, and, in spite of the pleadings of the Empress (the Emperor was drunk and indifferent) placed him in the custody of the Archbishop nearest to Frankfort, the warrior prelate of Mayence, who imprisoned him in the strong fortress of Ehrenfels, from which, well guarded and isolated as it was upon a crag over-hanging the Rhine, no man could escape.

“Will you kindly be seated again, sir,” requested the merchant, and if he had spoken a short time before, he would have put the phrase “your Royal Highness” in the place of the word “sir.”

Roland, after a moment’s hesitation, sat down. He saw that his coup had failed, because he was unable to back it up by proofs. His dramatic action had been like a brilliant cavalry charge, for a moment successful, but coming to naught because there was no solid infantry to turn the temporary confusion of the enemy into complete rout. Realizing that the battle must be fought over again, the Prince sat back with a sigh of disappointment, a shade of discontent on his handsome face.

“I find myself in rather a quandary,” proceeded the merchant. “If indeed you are the Emperor’s son, it is not for such as I to cross-examine you.”

“Ask me any questions you like, sir. I shall answer them promptly enough.”

“If I beg you to supply proof of the statement you make, you would be likely to reply that as you dared not enter your father’s Palace, you are unable to furnish me with corroboration.”

“Sir, you put the case in better language than I could employ. In more halting terms that is what I should have said.”

“When were you last in the Palace?”

“About the same time, sir, that you took up your residence in prison.”

“Ah, yes; that naturally would be your answer. Now, my young friend, you have shown me that you know nothing of mercantile practice; therefore it may perhaps interest you if I explain some of our methods.”

“Herr Goebel, you may save your breath. Such a recital must not only fail to interest me, but will bore me extremely. I care nothing for your mercantile procedure, and, to be quite plain with you, I despise your trade, and find some difficulty in repressing my contempt for those who practice it.”

“If an emissary of mine,” returned Goebel, unperturbed, “approached a client or customer for the purpose of obtaining a favor, and used as little tact as you do, I should dismiss him.”

“I’m not asking any favors from you.”

“You wish me to hand over to you a thousand thalers, otherwise why came you here?”

Page 15

“I desire to bestow upon you the greatest of boons, namely to open up the Rhine, and bring back prosperity to Frankfort, which you brainless, cowardly merchants have allowed to slip through your fingers, blaming now the Barons, now the Emperor, now the Electors; censuring everybody, in fact, except the real culprits ... yourselves. You speak of the money as a favor, but it is merely an advance for a few weeks, and will be returned to you; yet because I desire to confer this inestimable gift upon you and your city, you expect me to cringe to you, and flatter you, as if I were a member of your own sycophantic league. I refuse to do anything of the kind, and yet, by God, I’ll have the money!”

The merchant, for the first time during their conference, laughed heartily. The young man’s face was aflame with anger, yet the truculent words he used did more to convince Herr Goebel that he belonged to the aristocracy than if he had spoken with the most exemplary humility. Goebel felt convinced he was not the Prince, but some young noble, who, intimate with the Royal Family, and knowing the Emperor’s son to be out of the way, thought it safe to assume his name, the better to carry forward his purpose, whatever that purpose might actually be. That it was to open the Rhine he did not for a moment credit, and that he would ever see his cash again, if once he parted with it, he could not believe.

“At the risk of tiring you, I shall nevertheless proceed with what I was about to say. We merchants, for our own protection, contribute to a fund which might be entitled one for secret service. This fund enables us to procure private information that may be of value in our business. Among other things we need to know are accurate details pertaining to the intentions and doings of our rulers, for whatever our own short-comings may be, the actions of those above us affect business one way or the other. May I read you a short report that came in while I was serving my term of imprisonment?”

“Oh, read what you like,” said Roland indifferently, throwing back his head, and partially closing his eyes, with an air of *ennui*.

The merchant drew towards him a file of papers, and going through them carefully, selected a document, and drew it forth, then, clearing his throat, he read aloud—

“‘At an hour after midnight, on St. Stanislas’ Day, three nobles, one representing the Archbishop of Mayence, the second the Archbishop of Treves, and the third the Archbishop of Cologne, armed with authority from these three Electors and Princes of the Church, entered the Saalhof from the side facing the river, and arrested in his bed the young Prince Roland. They assured the Empress, who protested, that the Prince would be well cared for, and that, as an insurrection was feared in Frankfort, it was considered safer that the person whom they intended to elevate to the throne on the event of the Emperor’s death, should be out of harm’s way, being placed under the direct care of the Archbishop of Mayence. They informed the Empress that the Archbishops would not remove the Prince from the Palace in opposition to the wishes of

either the Emperor or herself, but if this permission was not given, a meeting of the Electors would at once be called, and some one else selected to succeed the present ruler.

Page 16

“’This consideration exerted a great influence upon the Empress, who counseled her son to acquiesce. The young man was led to a boat then in waiting by the river steps of the Palace, and so conveyed down the Main to the Rhine, which was reached just after daybreak. Without landing, and keeping as much as possible to the middle of the river, the party proceeded down the Rhine, past Bingen, to the foot of the crag on which stands the castle of Ehrenfels. The Prince was taken up to the Castle, where he now remains.

“’The Archbishops from their revenues allot to him seven hundred thalers a month, in addition to his maintenance. It is impossible for him to escape from this stronghold unaided, and as the Emperor takes no interest in the matter, and the Empress has given her consent, he is like to be an inmate of Ehrenfels during the pleasure of the Archbishops, who doubtless will not elect him to the throne in succession unless he proves compliant to their wishes. The Prince being a young man of no particular force of character’” (the merchant paused in his reading, and looked across at his *vis-a-vis* with a smile, but the latter appeared to be asleep), “’he will probably succumb to the Archbishops, therefore merchants are advised to base no hopes upon an improvement in affairs, even though the son should succeed the father. Despite the precautions taken, the arrest and imprisonment of the Prince, and even the place of his detention, became rather generally known in Frankfort, but the news is in the form of rumor only, and excites little interest throughout the city.’

“There, Sir Roland, what do you say to that?”

“Oh, nothing much,” replied Roland. “The account might have stated that in the boat were five rowers, who worked lustily until we reached the Rhine, when, the wind being favorable, a sail was hoisted, and with the current assisting the wind, we made excellent time to Ehrenfels. I observe, further, that your secret service keeps you very well informed, and therefore withdraw a tithe of the harsh things I said regarding the stupidity of the merchants.”

“Many thanks for the concession,” said Goebel, replacing the document with its fellows. “Now, as a plain and practical man, what strikes me is this: you need only return to Ehrenfels for two months, and as there is little use for money in that fortress, your maintenance being guaranteed, and seven hundred thalers allowed, you can come away with four hundred thalers more than the sum you demand from me, and thus put your project into force without being under obligations to any despised merchant.”

“True, Herr Goebel, but can you predict what will happen in Frankfort before two months are past? You learn from that document that the shrewd Archbishops anticipate an insurrection, and doubtless they command the force at hand ready to crush it, but during this conflict, which you seem to regard so lightly, does it ever occur to you that the merchants’ palaces along the Fahrgasse may be sacked and burnt?”

Page 17

“That, of course, is possible,” commented the merchant.

“Nay, it is absolutely certain. Civil war means ruin, to innocent and guilty alike.”

“You are in the right. Now, will you tell me how you escaped from Ehrenfels?”

“Yes; if you agree to my terms without further haggling.”

“I shall agree to your terms if I believe your story.”

“It seems impossible, sir, to pin you down to any definite bargain. Is this the way you conduct your business?”

“Yes; unless I am well assured of the good faith of my customer. I offered you ordinary business terms when I asked for security, or for the signature of three responsible merchants to your bond. It is because I am a merchant, and not a speculator, that I haggle, as you term it.”

“Very well, then, I will tell you how I got away, but I begin my recital rather hopelessly, for you always leave yourself a loophole of escape. If you believe my story, you say! Yes: could I weave a romance about tearing my sheets into ropes; of lowering myself in the dark from the battlements to the ground; of an alarm given; of torches flashing; of diving into the Rhine, and swimming under the water until I nearly strangled; of floating down over the rapids, with arrows whizzing round me in the night; of climbing dripping to the farther shore, far from sight of Ehrenfels, then, doubtless, you would believe. But my escape was prosaically commonplace, depending on the cupidity of one man. The material for it was placed in my hands by the Archbishops themselves. Your account states that the Castle is well guarded. So it is, but when the Archbishop needs an augmentation of his force, he withdraws his men from Ehrenfels to Mayence, as my prison is the nearest of his possessions to his capital city, and thus at times it happens that the Castle is bereft of all save the custodian and his family. His eldest son happens to be of my own age, and not unlike me in appearance. None of the guards saw me, except the custodian, and you must remember he was a very complacent jailer, for the reason that he knew well every rising sun might bring with it tidings that I was his Emperor, so he cultivated my acquaintance, to learn in his own thrifty, peasant way what manner of ruler I might become, and I, having no one else to talk to, made much of his company.

“Frequently he impressed upon me that his task of jailer was most irksome to him, but poverty compelling, what could he do? He swore he would accomplish whatever was in his power to mitigate my captivity, and this indeed did; so at last when the Castle was empty I made him a proposal. Now remember, Sir Merchant, that what I tell you is in confidence, and should you break faith with me, I will have you hanged if I become Emperor, or slit your throat with my own sword if I don’t.”

“Go on. I shall tell no one.”

Page 18

“I said to my jailer: ’There are not half a dozen people in this world who know me by sight, and among that half-dozen no Elector is included. Outside the Palace at Frankfort I am acquainted with a sword maker or two, and about a score of good fellows who are friends of theirs, but to them I am merely a fencing-master. Now, seven hundred thalers a month pass through your honest hands to mine, and will continue to do so. Your son seems to be even more silent than yourself, and he is a young fellow whom I suspect knows the difference between a thaler and a button on his own coat. If you do what I wish, there will be some slight risk, but think of the reward immediate and in future! At once you come into an income of seven hundred thalers a month. If I am elected Emperor, I shall ennoble you, and present you with the best post in the land. If you don’t do what I wish, I shall cause your head cut off as the first act of my first day of power.’”

“You did not threaten to slit his throat with your own sword, failing your elevation?” asked the merchant, with a smile.

“No. He was quite safe from my vengeance unless I came to the throne.”

“In that case I should say the custodian need not fear the future. But please go on with your account.”

“I proposed that his son and I should exchange costumes; in short, the young man was to take my place, occupying the suite of rooms assigned to me in the Castle. I told his father there was not the slightest fear of discovery, for if the Archbishop of Mayence sent some one to see that the Prince was safe, or even came himself, all the young man need do was to follow my example and keep silent, for I had said nothing from the time I was roused in my room in the Saalhof until I was lodged in Ehrenfels. I promised, if set at liberty, to keep within touch of Frankfort, where, at the first rumor of any crisis, I could return instantly to Ehrenfels.

“The custodian is a slow-minded man, although not so laggard in coming to an agreement as yourself. He took a week to turn the matter over in his mind, and then made the plunge. He is now jailer to his own son, and that young peasant lives in a style he never dreamed of before. The Archbishops are satisfied, because they believe I cannot escape from the stronghold—like yourself, holding but a poor opinion of my abilities; and their devout Lordships know that outside the fortress no person, not even my mother, wishes me forth. I took in my wallet five hundred thalers, and fared like the peasant I seemed to be, down the Rhine, now on one side, now on the other, until I came to the ancient town of Castra Bonnensia of the Romans, which name the inhabitants now shorten to Bonn. There I found the Archbishop in residence, and not at Cologne, as I had supposed. The town being thronged with soldiers and inquisitive people of Cologne’s court, I returned up the Rhine again, remembering I had gone rather far afield, and although you may not believe it, I called upon my old friend the custodian of Ehrenfels, and enjoyed an excellent meal with him, consuming some of the

seductive wine that is grown on the same side of the river about a league above Ehrenfels."

Page 19

“I dare say,” said the merchant, “that I can give the reason for this apparently reckless visit of yours to Ehrenfels. You were in want of money, the five hundred thalers being spent.”

“Sir, you are exactly in the right, and I got it, too, without nearly so much talk as I have been compelled to waste on the present occasion.”

“What was your object in going down the river instead of turning to Frankfort?”

“I had become interested in my prison, and had studied methods by which it could be successfully attacked. I knew that my father allowed the Barons of the Rhine to override him, and I wondered if his wisdom was greater than I thought. Probably, said I to myself, he knew their castles to be impregnable, but, with the curiosity of youth, I desired to form an opinion of my own. I therefore lodged as a wayfarer at every castle to I could gain admittance, making friends with some underling, and getting a bed on occasion in the stables, although often I lodged within the castle itself. Thus I came to the belief, which I bring to you, that assisted by twenty fearless men I can capture any castle on the Rhine with the exception of three. And now, Herr Goebel, I have said all I intend to say. Do you discredit my story?”

The merchant gazed across at him quizzically for some time without making any reply, then he said:

“Do you think I believe you?”

“Frankly, I do not.”

“If I am unable to give you the gold, I can at least furnish some good advice. Set up as a poet, good Master Roland, and weave for our delectation stories of the Rhine. I think your imagination, if cultivated, would give you a very high place among the romancers of our time.”

With a patience that Herr Goebel had not expected, Roland replied:

“It grieves me to return empty-handed to my twenty friends, who last night bade me a very confident adieu.”

“Yes, they will be disappointed, and I shrewdly suspect that my thousand thalers would not go towards the prosecuting of the expedition you have outlined, but rather in feasting and in wine.”

“Again, sir, you are right. It is unfortunate that I am so often compelled to corroborate your statements, when all the acumen with which you credit my mind is turned towards the task of proving you a purse-proud fool, puffed up in your own conceit, and as short-sighted as an owl in the summer sunlight. However, let us stick to our text. If what I

said had been true, although of course you know it isn't, you have nevertheless enough common sense to be aware that I would certainly show a pardonable reluctance about visiting my father's Palace. It is thronged with spies of the Archbishop, and although, as I have said, I am not very well known, there is a chance that one or another might recognize me, and then, almost instantly, a man on a swift horse would be on his way to Mayence. If I knew that I had been discovered, I should make at once for Ehrenfels, arriving there before an investigation was held. But my twenty comrades would wait for me in vain. Nevertheless, I shall venture into the Saalhof this very afternoon, and bring to you a letter written by my mother certifying that I am her son. Would that convince you?"

Page 20

“Yes; were I sure the signature was genuine.”

“Ah, there you go again! Always a loophole!”

The young man spoke in accents of such genuine despair that his host was touched despite his incredulity.

“Look you here,” he said, bending across the table. “There is, of course, one chance in ten thousand that you are what you say. I have never seen the signature of the Empress, and such a missive could easily be forged by a scholar, which I take you to be. If, then, you wish to convince me, I’ll put before you a test which will be greatly to your advantage, and which I will accept without the loophole.”

“In Heaven’s name, let’s hear what it is.”

“There is something that you cannot forge: the Great Seal of the Realm, attached to all documents signed by the Emperor.”

“I have had no dealings with my father for years,” cried the young man. “I have not even seen him these many months past. I can obtain the signature of my mother to anything I like to write, but not that of my father.”

“Patience, patience,” said the merchant, holding up his hand. “’Tis well known that the Empress can bend the Emperor to her will when she chooses to exert it. You see, in spite of all, I am quite taking it for granted that you are the Prince, otherwise ’twere useless to waste time in this talk. You display all the confidence of youth in speaking of the exploits you propose, and, indeed, it is cheering for a middle-aged person like myself to meet one so confident of anything in these pessimistic days. But have you considered what will happen if something goes wrong during one of your raids?”

“Nothing can go wrong. I feel no fear on that score.”

“I thought as much. Very well, I will tell you what could go wrong. Some Baron may entrap you and your score, and forthwith hang you all from his battlements. Now, it is but common sense to prevent such a termination, if it be possible. Therefore seek out the Empress. Tell her that you and your twenty companions are about to embark on an enterprise greatly beneficial to the land. Say that you go incognito, and that, even should you fail, ’twill bring no discredit to your Royal House. But point out the danger of which I forewarn you. Ask her to get the signature of the Emperor attached to a safe-conduct, together with the device of the Great Seal; then if the Baron who captures you cannot read, he will still know the potency of the picture, and as there is no loophole to my acceptance of this proof, I will, for your convenience, and for my own protection, write the safe-conduct on as sound a bit of parchment as ever was signed in a palace.”

Saying this, Herr Goebel rose, and went to his desk in a corner of the room, where he indited the memorial he had outlined, and, after sprinkling it with sand, presented it to Roland, who read:

“These presents warn him to whom they are presented that Roland the bearer is my son, and that what he has done has been done with my sanction, therefore he and his twenty comrades are to be held scathless, pending an appeal to me in my capital city of Frankfort.

Page 21

“Whomsoever disobeys this instrument forfeits his own life, and that of his family and followers, while his possessions will be confiscated by the State.”

Roland frowned.

“Doesn’t it please you?” asked Goebel, his suspicions returning.

“Well, it seems to me rather a plebeian action, to attack a man’s castle, and then, if captured, crawl behind a drastic threat like this.”

The merchant shrugged his shoulders.

“That’s a sentimental objection, but of course you need not use the document unless you wish, though I think if you see twenty-one looped ropes dangling in the air your hesitation will vanish. Oh, not on your own account,” cried Goebel, as a sign of dissent from his visitor, “but because of those twenty fine young fellows who doubtless wait to drink wine with you.”

“That is true,” said Roland, with a sigh, folding up the stiff parchment, opening his cloak, and thrusting it under his belt, standing up as he did this.

“Bring me that parchment, bearing the Emperor’s signature and the Great Seal, and you will find the golden coins awaiting you.”

“Very well. At what time this evening would it please you to admit me?”

“Friends of mine are coming to-night, but they are not likely to stop long; merely a few handshakes, and a few cups of wine. I shall be ready for you when the Cathedral clock strikes ten.”

With this the long conference ended, and the aged servitor in the hall showed Roland into the Fahrgasse.

As the young man proceeded down the Weckmarkt into the Saalgasse, he muttered to himself:

“The penurious old scoundrel! God keep me in future from dealing with such! To the very last he suspects me of being a forger, and has written this with his own hand, doubtless filling it with secret marks. Still, perhaps it is as well to possess such a safeguard. This is my loophole out of the coming enterprise, I fear we are all cowards, noble and merchant alike.”

He walked slowly past the city front of the Palace, cogitating some means of entering without revealing his identity, but soon found that even this casual scrutiny made him an object of suspicion. He could not risk being accosted, for, if taken to the guard-room

and questioned—searched, perhaps, and the sword found on him—a complication would arise adding materially to the difficulties already in his way. Quickening his pace, he passed through the Fahrthor, and so to the river-bank, where he saw that the side of the Saalhof fronting the Main was guarded merely by one or two sentries, for the mob could not gather on the surface of the waters, as it gathered on the cobble-stones of the Saalgasse and the Fahrthor.

Retracing his steps, the Prince walked rapidly until he came to the bridge, advancing to the iron Cross which commemorates the fowl sacrifice to the devil, as the first living creature venturing upon that ancient structure. Here he leaned against the parapet, gazed at the river facade of the Palace, and studied his problem. There were three sets of steps from the terrace to the water, a broad flight in the center for use upon state occasions, and a narrow flight at either end; the western staircase being that in ordinary use, and the eastern steps trodden by the servants carrying buckets of water from the river to the kitchen.

Page 22

“The nearer steps,” he said to himself, “offer the most feasible opportunity. I’ll try them.”

He counted his money, for here was probably a case for bribery. He found twenty-four gold pieces, and some loose silver. Returning the coins to his pouch, he walked to the land, and proceeded up the river until he reached a wharf where small skiffs were to let. One of these he engaged, and refusing the services of a waterman, stepped in, and drifted down the stream. He detached sword and scabbard from his belt, removed the cloak and wrapped the weapon in it, placing the folded garment out of sight under the covering at the prow. With his paddle he kept the boat close to the right bank, discovering an excellent place of concealment under the arch supporting the steps, through which the water flowed. He waited by the steps for a few moments until a scullion in long gabardine came down and dipped his bucket in the swift current.

“Here, my fine fellow,” accosted Roland, “do you wish to earn a pair of gold pieces?” and he showed the yellow coins in the palm of his hand.

The menial’s eyes glistened, and he cast a rapid glance over his shoulder.

“Yes,” he replied breathlessly.

“Then leave your bucket where it is, and step into this wherry.”

The underling, again with a cautious look around, did as he was ordered.

“Now throw off that outer garment, and give it to me.”

Roland put it on over his own clothes, and flung his bonnet beside the cloak and sword, for the servant was bareheaded.

“Get under that archway, and keep out of sight until you hear me whistle.”

Taking the bucket, Roland mounted the steps, and strode out of the brilliant sunlight into the comparative gloom of the corridor that led to the kitchen. He had been two hours with the merchant, and it was now the time of midday eating. Every one was hurrying to and fro, with no time to heed anything that did not pertain to the business in hand, so placing the bucket in a darkened embrasure, the intruder flung off the gabardine beside it, and searching, found a back stair which he ascended.

Once in the upper regions, he knew his way about, and proceeded directly to his mother’s room, being sure at this hour to find her within. On his unannounced entrance the Empress gave utterance to an exclamation that indicated dismay rather than pleasure, but she hurried forward to meet and embrace him.

“Oh, Roland!” she cried, “what do you here? How came you to the Palace?”

“By way of the river. My boat is under the arch of the servants’ stairway, and I have not a moment to lose.”

“How did you escape from Ehrenfels, and why have you come here? Surely you know the Palace will be the first place searched for you?”

“There will be no search, mother. Take my word for it that no one is aware of my absence from Ehrenfels but the custodian, and for the best of reasons he dare not say a word. Do not be alarmed, I beg of you. I am free by his permission, and shall return to the Castle before he needs me. Indeed, mother, so far from jeopardizing my own safety, I am here to preserve it.”

Page 23

He drew from under his belt Herr Goebel's parchment, and handed it to her.

"In case it should occur to the good Archbishop, or any other noble, to hang me, I thought it best to get such a declaration signed by the Emperor, and decorated with the Great Seal of the Empire. Then, if any attempt is made on my life, as well as on my liberty, I may produce this Imperial decree, and bring my case to Frankfort."

"Surely, surely," exclaimed the agitated lady, her hands trembling as she held the document and tried to read it; "I can obtain your father's signature, but the Great Seal must be attached by the Chamberlain."

"Very good, mother. The Chamberlain will do as his Majesty orders. The seal is even more important than the signature, if it comes to that, and I am sure the Chamberlain will make no objection when the instrument is for the protection of your son's life. It is not necessary to say that I am here, or have anything to do with the matter. But lose not a moment, and give orders that no one shall enter this room."

The empress hastened away with the parchment, while the young man walked impatiently up and down the room. It seemed hours before she returned, but at last she came back with the document duly executed. Roland thrust it under his belt again, and reassuring his mother, who was now weeping on his shoulder, he tried to tear himself away. The Empress detained him until, with fumbling hands, she unlocked a drawer in a cabinet, and took from it a bag that gave forth a chink of metal as she pressed it on her son.

"I must not take it," he said. "I am quite well provided. The generous Archbishops allow me seven hundred thalers a month, which is paid with exemplary regularity."

"There are only five hundred thalers here," replied the Empress. "I wish there were more, but you must accept it, for I should feel easier in my mind to know that you possess even that much. Do they misuse you at Ehrenfels, my son?"

"Oh, no, no, no! I live like a burgomaster. You need feel no fear on my account, mother. Ehrenfels is a delightful spot, with old Bingen just across the water. I like it much better than I did Frankfort, with its howling mobs, and shall be very glad to get quit again of the city."

Then, with a hurried farewell, he left the weeping woman, and descending the back stair, secured the abandoned gabardine, put it on, and so came to the water's edge, entering into possession of his boat again. Returning the craft to its owner, he resumed sword and cloak once more, and found his way to a tavern, where he ordered a satisfactory meal.

In the evening he arrived at the Rheingold, and meeting the landlord in the large, empty, public cellar, asked that worthy if his friends had assembled yet, and was told they were all within the Kaiser cellar.

“Good!” he cried. “I said I would be gone a week, but here I am within a day. If that’s not justifying a man’s word, I should like to know what is. And now, landlord, set forth the best meal you can provide, with a double quantity of wine.”

Page 24

“For yourself, sir?”

“For all, landlord. What else? The lads have had no supper, I’ll warrant.”

“A little black bread has gone the rounds.”

“All the more reason that we should have a huge pasty, steaming hot, or two or three of them if necessary. And your best wine, landlord. That from the Rheingau.”

But the landlord demurred.

“A meal for yourself, sir, as leader, I could venture upon, but feeding a score of hungry men is a different matter. Remember, sir, I have not seen the color of their silver for many a long day, and, since these evil times have set in, I am a poor man.”

“Sordid silver? Out upon silver! unless it is some silvery fish from the river, fresh and firm; and that’s a good idea. We will begin with fish while you prepare the meat. ’Tis gold I deal with to-night, and most of it is for your pouch. Run your hand in here and enjoy the thrill,” and Roland held open the mouth of the bag which contained his treasure.

“Ah!” cried the inn-keeper, his face aglow. “No such meal is spread to-night in Frankfort as will be set before you.”

There was a great shout as Roland entered the Kaiser cellar, and a hurrah of welcome.

“Ha, renegade!” cried one. “Have you shirked your task so soon?”

“Coward, coward, poltroon!” was the cry. “I see by his face he has failed. Never mind them, Roland. Your chair at the head of the table always awaits you. There is a piece of black bread left, and though the wine is thin, it quenches thirst.”

Roland flung off his cloak, hung it and the sword on a peg, and took his seat at the head of the table. Pushing away the flagons that stood near him, he drew the leathern bag from his belt, and poured the shining yellow coins on the table, at the sight of which there arose such a yell that the stout beams above them seemed to quake.

“Apologize!” demanded Roland, when the clamor quieted down. “The man who refuses to apologize, and that abjectly, must take down his sword from the peg and settle with me!”

A shout of apology was the response.

“We grovel at your feet, High Mightiness!” cried the man who had called him poltroon.

“I have taken the liberty of ordering a fish and meat supper, with a double quantity of Rudesheimer wine. Again I offer to fight any man who resents this encroachment on my part.”

“I could spit you with a hand tied behind my back,” cried one, “but I am of a forgiving nature, and will wait instead for the spitted fowl.”

“Most of this money,” continued Roland quietly, “goes, I suspect, to the landlord, as a slight recognition of past kindness, but I am promised a further supply this evening, which will be divided equally among ourselves. I ask you, therefore, to be sparing of the wine.” Here he was compelled to pause for some moments, and listen to groans, hoots, howls, and the rapping of empty flagons on the stout table.

Page 25

The commotion was interrupted by the entrance of the landlord, who brought with him the promised Rhine wine; for, hearing the noise, he supposed it represented impatience of the company at the delay, a mistake which no one thought it worth while to rectify. He promised that the fish would follow in a very few minutes, and went out to see that his word was kept.

“Why should we be sparing of the wine?” asked a capable drinker, who had drained his flagon before asking the question. “With all that money on the table it seems to me a scandalous proviso.”

“’Tis not a command at all,” replied Roland, “but merely a suggestion. I spoke in the interests of fair-play. An appointment was made by me for ten o’clock this evening, and I wish to keep it and remain uninfluenced by wine.”

“What’s her name, Roland?” inquired the wine-bibber.

“I was about to divulge that secret when you interrupted me. The name is Herr Goebel.”

“What! the cloth merchant on the Fahrgasse?”

“Is it cloth he deals in? I didn’t know the particulars of his occupation beyond the facts that he is a merchant, and lives in the Fahrgasse. This morning I enjoyed the privilege of presenting to Herr Goebel a mutually beneficial plan which would give us all something to do.”

“Oh, is Goebel to be our employer? I’m a sword forger, and work for no puny cloth merchant,” said Kurzbold.

“This appointment,” continued Roland, unheeding, “is set for ten o’clock, and I expect to return here before half-past, therefore—”

“Therefore we’re not to drink all the wine.”

“Exactly.”

Their leader sat down as the landlord, followed by an assistant, entered, carrying the paraphernalia for the substantial repast, and proceeded to set the table.

When the hilarious meal was finished, the company sat for another half-hour over its wine, then Roland rose, buckled on his sword, and flung his cloak over his shoulders.

“Roland, I hope you have not sold your soul for this gold?”

“No; but I have pledged your bodies, and my own as well. Greusel, will you act as secretary and treasurer? Scrutinize the landlord’s bill with a generous eye, and pay him

the amount we owe. If anything is left, we will divide it equally," and with that he waved his hand to them, departing amidst a round of cheers, for the active youths were tired of idleness.

Punctuality is the politeness of kings, and as the bells of Frankfort were ringing ten o'clock, Roland knocked at the door of the merchant's house in the Fahrgasse. It was promptly opened by the ancient porter, who, after securing it again, conducted the young man up the solid stairway to the office-room on the first floor.

Ushered in, the Prince found the merchant seated in his usual chair, as if he had never moved from the spot where Roland had left him at noon that day. Half a dozen candles shed their soft radiance over the table, and on one corner of it, close by Herr Goebel's right elbow, the visitor saw a well-filled doeskin bag which he fancied might contain the thousand thalers.

Page 26

“Good even to you, Herr Goebel,” said the young man, doffing his bonnet. “I hope I have not trodden too closely on the heels of my appointment, thus withdrawing you prematurely from the festivities, which I trust you enjoyed all the more that you breathed the air of liberty again.”

“The occasion, sir, was solemn rather than festive, for although I was glad to see my old friends again, and I believe they were glad to see me, the condition of the city is such, and growing rapidly worse, that merchants cannot rejoice when they are gathered together.”

“Ah, well, Herr Goebel, we will soon mend all that. How long will it require to load your boat and choose your crew?”

“Everything can be ready by the evening of the day after to-morrow.”

“You will select one of your largest barges. Remember, it must house twenty-one men besides the crew and the goods.”

“Yes; I shall see that complete arrangements are made for your comfort.”

“Thank you. But do not provide too much luxury. It might arouse suspicion from the Barons who search the boat.”

“But the Barons will see you and your men in the boat.”

“I think not. At least, we don’t intend to be seen. I will call upon you again to-morrow at ten o’clock. Will you kindly order your captain to be here to meet me? I wish you to give him instructions in my presence that he is to do whatever I ask of him. We will join the boat on the Rhine between Ehrenfels and Assmannshausen. Instruct him to wait for us midway between the two places, on the right bank. And now the money, if you please.”

“The money is here,” said the merchant, sitting up a little more stiffly in his chair as he patted the well-stuffed bag. “The money is here if you have brought the instrument that authorizes you to take it.”

“I have brought it with me, mein herr.”

“Then show it to me,” demanded the merchant, adjusting his horn glasses with the air of one who will not allow himself to be hoodwinked.

“With the greatest pleasure,” returned the young man, standing before him. He unfastened his cloak, and allowed it to fall at his feet, then whisked out his sword, and presented the point of it to the merchant’s throat.

Goebel, who had been fumbling with his glasses, suddenly became aware of his danger, and shrank back so far as his chair allowed, but the point of the sword followed him.

“What do you mean by that?” he gasped.

“I mean to show you that in this game iron is superior to gold. Your card is on the table, represented by that bag. Mine is still in my hand, and unplayed, but it takes the trick, I think. I hope you see the uselessness of resistance. You cannot even cry out, for at the first attempt a thrust of this blade cuts the very roots of utterance. It will be quite easy for me to escape, because I shall go quietly out with the bag under my cloak, telling the porter that you do not wish to be disturbed.”

Page 27

“It is the Prince of Thieves you are, then,” said Herr Goebel.

“So it would appear. With your right hand pass that bag of gold across the table, and beg of me to accept it.”

The merchant promptly did what he was told to do.

The young man put his sword back in its place, laughing joyously, but there was no answering smile on the face of Herr Goebel. As he had said, the condition of things in Frankfort, especially in that room, failed to make for merriment. Roland, without being invited, drew up a chair, and sat down at the opposite side of the table.

“Please do not attempt to dash for the door,” he warned, “because I can quite easily intercept you, as I am nearer to it than you are, and more active. Call philosophy to your aid, and take whatever happens calmly. I assure you, ’tis the best way, and the only way.”

He untied the cord, and poured the bulk of the gold out upon the table. The merchant watched him with amazement. For all the robber knew, the door might be opened at any moment, but he went on with numbering the coins as nonchalantly as if seated in the treasury of the Corn Exchange. When he had counted half the sum the bag contained, he poured the loose money by handfuls into the wallet that had held his mother’s contribution, and pushed towards the merchant the bag, in which remained five hundred thalers.

“You are to know,” he said with a smile, abandoning his bent-forward posture, “that when I visited my mother this afternoon, she quite unexpectedly gave me five hundred thalers, so I shall accept from you only half the sum I demanded this morning.”

“Your mother!” cried the merchant. “Who is your mother?”

“The Empress, as I told you. Oh, at last I understand your uneasiness. You wished to see that document! Why didn’t you ask for it? I asked for the money plainly enough. Well, here it is. Examine Seal and sign-manual.”

The merchant minutely scrutinized the Great Seal and the signature above it.

“I don’t know what to think,” stammered Herr Goebel at last, gazing across the table with bewildered face.

“Think of your good fortune. A moment ago you imagined a thousand thalers were lost. Now it is but five hundred thalers invested, and you are a partner with the Royal House of the Empire.”

III

DISSENSION IN THE IRONWORKERS' GUILD

Up to the time of his midnight awakening, Prince Roland had led a care-free, uneventful life. Although he received the general education supposed to be suitable for a youth of his station, he interested himself keenly in only two studies, but as one of these challenged the other, as it were, the result was entirely to the good. He was a very quiet boy, much under the influence of his mother, seeing little or nothing of his easy-going, inebriated father. It was his mother who turned her son's attention towards

Page 28

the literature of his country, and he became an omnivorous reader of the old monkish manuscripts with which the Palace was well supplied. Especially had his mind been attracted by the stories and legends of the Rhine. The mixture of history, fiction, and superstition which he found in these vellum pages, so daintily limned, and so artistically embellished with initial letters in gold and crimson and blue, fascinated him, and filled him with that desire to see those grim strongholds on the mountain-sides by the river, which later on resulted in his journey from Ehrenfels to Bonn, when his ingenuity, and the cupidity of his custodian, freed him from the very slight thraldom in which he was held by the Archbishop of Mayence.

If his attention had been entirely absorbed by the reading of these tomes, he might have become a mere dreamy bookworm, his intellect saturated with the sentimental and romantic mysticism permeating Germany even unto this day, and, as he cared nothing for the sports of boyhood, body might have suffered as brain developed.

But, luckily, he had been placed under the instruction of Rinaldo, the greatest master of the sword that the world had up to that period produced. Rinaldo was an Italian from Milan, whom gold tempted across the Alps for the purpose of instructing the Emperor's son in Frankfort. He was a man of grace and politeness, and young Roland took to him from the first, exhibiting such aptitude in the art of fencing that the Italian was not only proud of one who did such credit to his tuition, but came to love the youth as if he were his own son.

For the sword-making of Germany the Italian expressed the utmost contempt. The coarse weapons produced by the ironworkers of Frankfort needed strength rather than skill in their manipulation. Between the Italian method and the German was all the contrast that exists between the catching of salmon with a delicate line and a gossamer fly, or clubbing the fish to death as did the boatmen at that fishery called the Waag down the Rhine by St. Goar.

Roland listened intently and without defense to the diatribe against his country's weapons and the clumsy method of using them, but although he said nothing, he formed opinions of his own, believing there was some merit in strength which the Italian ignored; so, studying the subject, he himself invented a sword which, while lacking the stoutness of the German weapon, retained some of its stability, and was almost as easily handled as the Italian rapier, without the disadvantage of its extreme frailty.

Thus it came about that young Roland stole away from the Palace and made the acquaintance of the sword makers. The practice of fencing exercises every muscle in the body, and Roland's constant bouts with Rinaldo did more than make him a master of the weapon, with equal facility in his right arm or his left; it produced an athlete of the

first quality; agile and strong, developing his physical powers universally, and not in any one direction.

Page 29

Meanwhile Roland remained deplorably ignorant regarding affairs of State, this being a subject of which his mother knew nothing. The Emperor, who should have been his son's natural teacher, gave his whole attention to the wine-flagon, letting affairs drift towards disaster, allowing the power that deserted his trembling fingers to be grasped by stronger but unauthorized hands. Roland's surreptitious excursions into the city to confer with the sword makers taught him little of politics, for his conversations with these mechanics were devoted entirely to metal-working. He was hustled now and again by the turbulent mob, in going to and fro, but he did not know why it clamored, and, indeed, took little interest in the matter, conscious only that he came more and more to hate the city and loathe its inhabitants. When he could have his own way, he said to himself, he would retire to some country castle which his father owned, and there devote himself to such employment as fell in with his wishes.

But he was to receive a sharp lesson that no man, however highly placed, is independent of his fellows. He was unaware of the commotion that arose round his own name, and of the grim hanging of the leaders who chose him as their supreme head. When, bewildered and sleepy, he was aroused at midnight, and saw three armed men standing by his bedside, he received a shock that did more to awaken him than the grip of alien hands on his shoulders. During that night ride in the boat he said nothing but thought much. He had heard his mother plead for him without for a moment delaying his departure. She, evidently, was powerless. There was then in the land a force superior to that of the Throne. Something that had been said quieted his mother's fears, for at last she allowed him to go without further protest, but weeping a little, and embracing him much. There was no roughness or rudeness on the part of those who conveyed him down the river Main, and finally along the Rhine to Ehrenfels, but rather the utmost courtesy and deference, yet Roland remained silent throughout the long journey, agitated by this new, invisible, irresistible sovereignty animated with the will and power to do what it liked with him.

At the Castle of Ehrenfels he found awaiting him no rigorous imprisonment. He was treated as a welcome guest of an invisible host. It was his conversations with the garrulous custodian, who was a shrewd observer of the passing show, that gradually awakened the young Prince to some familiarity with the affairs of the country. He learned now in what a deplorable state the capital stood, through the ever-increasing exactions of the robber Barons along the Rhine. He asked his instructor why the merchants did not send their goods by some other route, which was a very natural query, but was told there existed no other route. A great forest extended for the most part between Frankfort and Cologne, and through the wilderness were no roads, for even those constructed by the Romans had been allowed to fall into decay; overgrown with trees, Nature thus destroying the neglected handiwork of man; the forest reclaiming its own.

Page 30

“Indeed,” continued the custodian, “for the last ten years things have been going to the devil, for the lack of a strong hand in the capital. A strong hand is needed by nobles and outlaws alike. We want a new Frederick Barbarossa; the hangman’s rope and the torch judiciously applied might be the saving of the country.”

Ehrenfels, belonging to the Archbishop, was not a nest of piracy, and so its guardian could talk in this manner if he chose, but had he uttered these sentiments farther down the Rhine, he would himself have experienced the utility of the hangman’s rope. Roland, knowing by this time who had taken him into custody, said:

“Why do not the three Archbishops put a stop to it? They possess the power.”

The old jailer shrugged his shoulders.

“My chief, the great prelate of Mayence, would do it speedily enough if he stood alone, but the Archbishops of Treves have ever been robbers themselves, and Cologne is little better, therefore they neutralize one another. No two of them will allow the other to act, fearing he may gain in power, and thus upset the balance of responsibility, which I assure your Highness is very nicely adjusted. Each of the three claim allegiance from this Baron or the other, and although the Archbishops themselves may not lay toll directly on the Rhine, their ardent partisans do, which produces a deadlock.”

Thus Roland received an education not to be had in palaces, and, saying little beyond asking an occasional question, he thought much, and came to certain conclusions. He arrived at an ambition to open the lordly Rhine and spent his time gathering knowledge and forming plans.

Twelve hours after receiving the five hundred thalers from the merchant, he again presented himself at the now familiar door in the Fahrgasse. In the room on the first floor he found with Herr Goebel a thick-set, heavily-bearded, weather-beaten man, who stood bonnet in hand while the merchant gave him final instructions.

“Good-morning, Sir Roland,” cried Herr Goebel cheerfully. He exhibited no resentment for his treatment of the night before, and apparently daylight brought with it renewed confidence that the young man might succeed in his mission. There was now no hesitation in the merchant’s manner; alert and decided, all mistrust seemed to have vanished. “This is Captain Blumenfels, whom I put in charge of the barge, and who has gathered together a crew on which he can depend although, of course, you must not expect them to fight.”

“No,” said Roland, “I shall attend to that portion of the enterprise.”

“Now, Captain Blumenfels,” continued Herr Goebel, “this young man is commander. You are to obey him in every particular, just as you would obey me.”

The captain bowed without speaking.

“I shall not detain you any longer, captain, as you will be anxious to see the bales disposed of to your liking on the barge.”

Page 31

The captain thereupon took himself off, and Roland came to the conclusion that he liked this rough-and-ready mariner with so little to say for himself; a silent man of action, evidently.

Herr Goebel turned his attention to Roland.

“I have ordered bales of cloth to the value of a trifle more than four thousand thalers to be placed in the barge,” he said. “The bales are numbered, and I have given the captain an inventory showing the price of each. I suppose you despise our vulgar traffic, and, indeed, I had no thought of asking so highly placed a person as yourself to sell my goods, therefore Blumenfels will superintend the marketing when you reach Cologne—that is, if you ever get so far.”

“Your pardon, Herr Goebel, but I have my own plans regarding the disposal of your goods. I intend to be quit of them long before I see Cologne. Indeed, should I prosper, I hope your boat will set its nose southward for the return journey some distance this side of Coblentz.”

The merchant gazed up at him in astonishment.

“Your design is impossible. There is no sale for cloth nearer than Coblentz. Your remarks prove you unacquainted with the river.”

“I have walked every foot of both sides of the river between Ehrenfels and Bonn. There are many wealthy castles on this side of Coblentz.”

“True, my good sir, true; but how became they wealthy? Simply by robbing the merchants. Are you not aware that each of these castles is inhabited by a titled brigand? You surely do not expect to sell my cloth to the Barons?”

“Why not? Remember how long it is since a cloth-barge went down the Rhine. Think for a moment of the arduous life which these Barons lead, hunting the boar, the bear, and the deer, tearing recklessly through thicket and over forest-covered ground. Why, our noble friends must be in rags by this time, or clad in the skins of the beasts they kill! They will be delighted to see and handle a piece of well-woven cloth once more.”

For a full minute the merchant gaped aghast at this senseless talk so seriously put forward; then a smile came to his lips.

“Prince Roland, I begin to understand you. Your words are on a par with the practical joke you played upon me so successfully last night. Of course, you know as well as I that the Barons will buy nothing. They will take such goods as they want if you but give them opportunity. What you say is merely your way of intimating it is none of my affair how the goods are disposed of, so long as you hand over to me four thousand thalers.”

“Four thousand five hundred, if you please.”

“I shall be quite content with the four thousand, regarding the extra five hundred as paid for services rendered. Now, can I do anything further to aid you?”

“Yes. I wish you to send a man on horseback to Lorch, there to await the barge. Choose a man as silent as your captain; one whom you trust implicitly, for I hope to send back with him four thousand five hundred thalers, and also some additional gold, which I beg of you to keep safely for me until I return.”

Page 32

“Prince Roland, there can be no gold for me at Lorch.”

“Dispatch a trustworthy man in case I receive the money. You will be anxious to know how we prosper, and I can at least forward a budget of news.”

“But should there be gold, he cannot return safely with it to Frankfort.”

“Oh, yes, if he keeps to the eastern bank of the Rhine. There is no castle between Lorch and Frankfort except Ehrenfels, and that, being the property of the Archbishop, may be passed safely.”

“Very well. The man shall await you at Lorch. Inquire for Herr Kruger at Mergler’s Inn.”

That night, in the Kaiser cellar, another excellent supper was spread before the members of the metal-workers’ league. It was quite as hilarious as the banquet of the night before; perhaps more so, because now, for the first time in months, the athletic young men were well fed, with money in their pouches. Each was clad in a new suit of clothes. Nothing like uniformity in costume had been attempted, there being but one day in which to replenish the wardrobes, which involved the acquiring of garments already made. However no trouble was experienced about this, for each branch of the metal-workers had its own recognized outfit, which was kept on hand in all sizes by various dealers catering to the wants of artisans, from apprentices to masters of their trade. The costumes were admirably adapted to the use for which they were intended. There was nothing superfluous in their make-up, and, being loosely cut, they allowed ample play to stalwart limbs. For dealing with metal the wearers required a cloth tightly woven, of a texture as nearly as possible resembling leather, and better accouterment for a rough-and-tumble, freebooter’s excursion could not have been found, short of coats of mail, or, failing that, of leather itself.

Roland appeared in the trousers and doublet of a sword maker, and his comrades cheered loudly when he threw off his cloak and displayed for the first time that he was actually one of themselves. Hitherto something in the fashioning of his wearing apparel had in a manner differentiated him from the rest of the company, but now nothing in his dress indicated that he was leader of the coterie, and this pleased the independent metal-workers.

The previous night, after the landlord’s bill was generously liquidated, each man had received upwards of thirty thalers. Roland then related to them his adventure with the merchant, and the result of his sword-play in the vicinity of Herr Goebel’s throat. Two accomplishments he possessed endeared Roland to his comrades: first, the ability to sing a good song; and second, his talent for telling an interesting story, whether it was a personal adventure, a legend of the Rhine, or some tale of the gnomes which, as every one knows, haunt the gloomy forests in the mountain regions. His account of the evening spent with Herr Goebel aroused much laughter and applause, which greatly

augmented when the material advantages of the interview were distributed among the guild.

Page 33

This evening he purposed making a still more important disclosure; thus when the meal was finished, and the landlord, after replenishing the flagons, had retired, the new sword maker rose in his place at the head of the table.

“I crave your strict attention for a few minutes. Although I refused to confide my plans to Herr Goebel, I consider it my duty to inform you minutely of what is before us, and if I speak with some solemnity, it is because I realize we may never again meet around this table. We depart from Frankfort to-morrow upon a hazardous expedition, and some of us may not return.”

“Oh, I say, Roland,” protested Conrad Kurzbold, “don’t mar a jovial evening with a note of tragedy. It’s bad art, you know.”

Kurzbold was one of the three actual sword makers, and had been president of the guild until he gave place to Roland. He was the oldest of the company; an ambitious man, a glib talker, with great influence among his fellows, and a natural leader of them. What he said generally represented the opinion of the gathering.

“For once, Kurzbold, I must ask you to excuse me,” persisted Roland. “It is necessary that on this, the last, opportunity I should place before you exactly what I intend to do. I am very anxious not to minimize the danger. I wish no man to follow me blindfold, thus I speak early in the evening, that you may not be influenced by the enthusiasm of wine in coming to a decision. I desire each man here to estimate the risk, and choose, before we separate to-night, whether or not he will accompany the expedition.

“Here is the compact made with Herr Goebel: I promised that, with the help of my comrades, I would endeavor to open the Rhine to mercantile traffic. On the strength of such promise he gave me the money.”

At this announcement rose a wild round of applause, and with the thunder of flagons on the table, and the shouting of each member, no single voice could make itself heard above the tumult. These lads had no conception of the perils they were to face, and Roland alone remained imperturbable, becoming more and more serious as the uproar went on. When at last quiet was restored, he continued, with a gravity in striking contrast to the hilarity of his audience:

“Herr Goebel is filling his largest barge with bales of cloth, and he has engaged an efficient crew, and a capable captain who will assume charge of the navigation. The barge will proceed to-morrow night down the Main, leaving Frankfort as unostentatiously as possible, while we march across the country to Assmannshausen, and there join this craft. It is essential that no hint of our intention shall spread abroad in gossipy Frankfort, therefore, depending on Captain Blumenfels to get his boat clear of the city without observation, and before the moon rises, I ask you to leave to-morrow separately by different gates, meeting me at Hochst, something more than two leagues down the

river. I dare say you all know the Elector’s palace, whose beautiful tower is a landmark for the country round.”

Page 34

“I protest against such a rendezvous,” objected Kurzbold. “Make it the tavern of the Nassauer Hof, Roland. We shall all be thirsty after a walk of two leagues.”

“Not at that time in the morning, I hope,” said Roland, “for I shall await you in the shadow of the tower at nine o’clock. Let every man drink his fill to-night, for I intend to lead a sober company from Hochst to-morrow.”

“Oh, you’re optimistic, Roland,” cried John Gensbein. “Give us till twelve o’clock to cool our heads.”

“Drink all you wish this evening,” repeated Roland, “but to-morrow we begin our work, with a long day’s march ahead of us, so nine is none too early for a start from Hochst.”

“Sufficient to the day is the wine thereof,” said Conrad Kurzbold, rising to his feet. “Wine, blessed liquor as it is, possesses nevertheless one defect, which blot on its escutcheon is that it cannot carry over till next day, except in so far as a headache is concerned, and a certain dryness of the mouth. It is futile to bid us lay in a supply to-night that will be of any use to-morrow morning. For my part, I give you warning, Roland, that I shall make directly for the Nassauer Hof, or for the Schone Aussicht, where they keep most excellent vintages.”

To this declaration Roland made no reply, but continued his explanatory remarks.

“We shall join the barge, as I have said, above Assmannshausen, probably at night, and then cross directly over the river. The first castle with which I intend to deal is that celebrated robber’s roost, Rheinstein, standing two hundred and sixty feet above the water. Disembarking about a league up the river from Rheinstein, before daybreak we will all lie concealed in the forest within sight of the Castle gates. When the sun is well risen, Captain Blumenfels will navigate his boat down the river, and as it approaches Rheinstein we shall probably enjoy the privilege of seeing the gates open wide, as the company from the Castle descend precipitously to the water. While they rifle the barge we shall rifle the Castle, overpowering whoever we may find there, and taking in return for the cloth they steal such gold or silver as the treasury affords. We will then imprison all within the Castle, so that a premature alarm may not be given. If we are hurried, we may lock them in cellars, or place them in dungeons, then leave the Castle with our booty, but I do not purpose descending to the river until we have traversed a league or more of the mountain forest, where we may remain concealed until the barge appears, and so take ship again.

“The next castle is Falkenberg, the third Sonneck, both on the same side of the river as Rheinstein, and within a short distance from the stronghold, but the plan with each being the same as that already outlined, it is not necessary for me to repeat it.”

“An excellent arrangement!” cried several; but John Gensbein spoke up in criticism.

Page 35

“Is there to be no fighting?” he asked. “I expected you to say that after we had secured the gold we would fall on the robbers to the rear, and smite them hip and thigh.”

“There is likely to be all the fighting you can wish for,” replied Roland, “for at some point our scheme may go awry. It is not my intention to attack, but I expect you to fight like heroes in our own defense.”

“I agree with Herr Roland,” put in Conrad Kurzbold, rising to his feet. “If we purpose to win our way down to Cologne, it is unnecessary to search for trouble, because we shall find enough of it awaiting us at one point or another. But Roland stopped his account at what seems to me the most interesting juncture. What is the destination of the gold we loot from the castles?”

“The first call upon our accumulation will be the payment of four thousand five hundred thalers to Herr Goebel.”

“Oh, damn the merchant!” cried Conrad. “We are risking our lives, and I don’t see why he should reach out his claws. He will profit enough through our exertions if we open the Rhine.”

“True; but that was the bargain I made with him. We risk our lives, as you say, but he risks his goods, besides providing barge, captain, and crew. He also furnished us with the five hundred thalers now in our pockets. We must deal honestly with the man who has supported us in the beginning.”

“Oh, very well,” growled Kurzbold, “have it your own way; but in my opinion the merchants should combine and raise a fund with which to reward us for our exertions if we succeed. Still, I shall not press my contention in the face of an overwhelming sentiment against me. However, I should like to speak to our leader on one matter which it seemed ungracious to mention last night. The merchant offered him a thousand thalers in gold, and he, with a generosity which I must point out to him was exercised at our expense, returned half that money to Herr Goebel. I confess that all I received has been spent; my hand is lonesome when it enters my pouch. I should be glad of that portion which might have been mine (and when I speak for myself, I speak for all) were it not for the misplaced prodigality of our leader who, possessing the money, was so thoughtless of our fellowship that he actually handed over five hundred thalers to a man who had not the slightest claim upon it.”

“Herr Kurzbold,” said Roland, with some severity, “many penniless nights passed over our heads in this room. If you know so much better than I how to procure money, why did you not do so? I should not venture to criticise a man who, without any effort on my part, placed thirty thalers at my disposal.”

There was a great clamor at this, every one except Kurzbold, who stood stubbornly in his place, and Gensbein, who sat next to him, becoming vociferous in defense of their leader.

“It is uncomrade-like,” cried Ebearhard above the din, “to spend the money and then growl.”

Page 36

“I speak in the interests of us all,” shouted Kurzbold. “In the interests of our leader, no less than ourselves,” but the others howled him down.

Roland, holding up his right hand, seemed to request silence and obtained it.

“I am rather glad,” he said, “that this discussion has arisen, because there is still time to amend our programme. Herr Goebel’s barge will not be loaded until to-morrow night, so the order may even yet be countermanded. The five hundred thalers which belonged to me I say nothing about, but the five hundred advanced by Herr Goebel must be returned to him unless we are in perfect unanimity.”

At this suggestion Kurzbold sat down with some suddenness.

“I told you, when I left this room, promising to find the money within a week, that one condition was the backing of my fellows. You empowered me to pledge the efforts of our club as though it contained but one man. If that promise is not to be kept in spirit as well as in letter, I shall retire from the position I now hold, and you may elect in my stead Conrad Kurzbold, John Gensbein, or any one else that pleases you. But first I must be in a position to give back intact Herr Goebel’s money; then, as I have divulged to you my plans, Conrad Kurzbold may approach him, and make better terms than I was able to arrange.”

There were cries of “Nonsense! Nonsense!” “Don’t take a little opposition in that spirit, Roland.” “We are all free-speaking comrades, you know.” “You are our leader, and must remain so.”

Kurzbold rose to his feet for the third time.

“Literally and figuratively, my friend Roland has me on the hip, for my hip-pocket contains no money, and it is impossible for me to refund. I imagine, if the truth were told, we are all more or less in the same condition, for we have had equipment to buy, and what-not.”

“Also Hochheimer,” said one, at which there was a laugh, as Kurzbold was noted for his love of good wine. Up to this point Roland had carried the assemblage with him, but now he made an injudicious remark that instantly changed the spirit of the room.

“I am astonished,” he said, “that any objection should be made to the fair treatment of Herr Goebel, for you are all of the merchant class, and should therefore hold by one of your own order.”

He could proceed no farther. Standing there, pale and determined, he was simply stormed down. His ignorance of affairs, of which on several occasions the merchant himself had complained, led him quite unconsciously to touch the pride of his hearers. It was John Gensbein who angrily gave expression to the sentiment of the meeting.

“To what class do *you* belong, I should like to know? Do you claim affinity with the merchant class? If you do, you are no leader of ours. I inform you, sir, that we are skilled artisans, with the craft to turn out creditable work, while the merchants are merely the vendors of our products. Which, therefore, takes the higher place in a community, and which deserves it better: he who with artistic instinct unites the efforts of brain and hand to produce wares that are at once beautiful and useful, or he who merely chaffers over his counter to get as much lucre as he can for the creations that come from our benches?”

Page 37

To Roland's aristocratic mind, every man who lacked noble blood in his veins stood on the same level, and it astonished him that any mere plebeian should claim precedence over another. He himself felt immeasurably superior to those present, sensible of a fathomless gulf between him and them, which he, in his condescension, might cross as suited his whim, but over which none might follow him back again; and this, he was well aware, they would be the first to admit did they but know his actual rank.

For a moment he was tempted to acknowledge his identity, and crush them by throwing the crown at their heads, but some hitherto undiscovered stubbornness in his nature asserted itself, arousing a determination to stand or fall by whatever strength of character he might possess.

"I withdraw that remark," he said, as soon as he could obtain a hearing. "I not only withdraw it, but I apologize to you for my folly in making it. It was merely thoughtlessness on my part, and, resting on your generosity, I should like you to consider the words unsaid."

Once more eighteen of the twenty swung round to his side. Roland now turned his attention to Conrad Kurzbold, ignoring John Gensbein, who had sat down flushed after his declamation, bewildered by the mutability of the many as Coriolanus had been before him.

"Herr Kurzbold," began Roland sternly, "have you any further criticism to offer?"

"No; but I stand by what I have already said."

"Well, I thank you for your honest expression of that determination, and I announce that you cannot accompany this expedition."

Again Roland instantaneously lost the confidence of his auditors, and they were not slow in making him of the fact.

"This is simply tyranny," said Ebearhard. "If a man may not open his mouth without running danger of expulsion, then all comradeship is at an end, and I take it that good comradeship is the pivot on which this organization turns. I do not remember that we ever placed it in the power of our president merely by his own word to cast out one of us from the fellowship. I may add, Roland, that you seem to harbor strange ideas concerning rank and power. I have been a member of this guild much longer than you, and perhaps understand better its purpose. Our leader is not elected to govern a band of serfs. Indeed, and I say it subject to correction from my friends, the very opposite is the case. Our leader is our servant, and must conduct himself as we order. It is not for him to lay down the law to us, but whatever laws exist for our governance, and I thank Heaven there are few of them, must be settled in conclave by a majority of the league."

“Right! Right!” was the unanimous cry, and when Ebearhard sat down all were seated except Roland, who stood at the end of the table with pale face and compressed lips.

“We are,” he said, “about to set out against the Barons of the Rhine, entrenched in their strong castles. Hitherto these men have been completely successful, defying alike the Government and the people. It was my hope that we might reverse this condition of things. Now, Brother Ebearhard, name me a single Baron along the whole length of the Rhine who would permit one of his men-at-arms to bandy words with him on any subject whatever.”

Page 38

“I should hope,” replied Ebearhard, “that we do not model our conduct after that of a robber.”

“The robbers, I beg to point out to you, Ebearhard, are successful. It is success we are after, also a portion of that gold of which Herr Kurzbold has pathetically proclaimed his need.”

“Do you consider us your men-at-arms, then, in the same sense that a Rhine Baron would employ the term?”

“Certainly.”

“You claim the liberty of expelling any one you choose?”

“Yes; I claim the liberty to hang any of you if I find it necessary.”

“Oh, the devil!” cried Ebearhard, sitting down as if this went beyond him. He gazed up and down the table as much as to say, “I leave this in your hands, gentlemen.”

The meeting gave immediate expression of its agreement with Ebearhard.

“Gentlemen,” said Roland, “I insist that Conrad Kurzbold apologizes to me for the expressions he has used, and promises not again to offend in like manner.”

“I’ll do nothing of the sort,” asserted Kurzbold, with equal firmness.

“In that case,” exclaimed Roland, “I shall retire, and I ask you to put me in a position to repay Herr Goebel the money I extracted from him. I resign the very thankless office of so-called leadership.”

At this several wallets came out upon the table, but their contents clinked rather weakly. The majority of the guild sat silent and sobered by the crisis that had so unexpectedly come upon them. Joseph Greusel, seeing that no one else made a move, uprose, and spoke slowly. He was a man who never had much to say for himself; a listener rather than a talker, in whom Roland reposed great confidence, believing him to be one who would not flinch if trial came, and he had determined to make Greusel his lieutenant if the expedition was not wrecked before it set out.

“My friends,” said Greusel gloomily, “we have arrived at a deadlock, and I should not venture to speak but that I see no one else ready to make a suggestion. I cannot claim to be non-partisan in the matter. This crisis has been unnecessarily brought about by what I state firmly is a most ungenerous attack on the part of Conrad Kurzbold.”

There were murmurs of dissent, but Greusel proceeded stolidly, taking no notice.

“It is not disputed that Kurzbold accepted the money from Roland last night, spent it to-day, and now comes penniless amongst us, quite unable to refund the amount when his unjust remarks produce their natural effect. He is like a man who makes a wager knowing he hasn’t the money to pay should he lose. If Roland retires from this guild, I retire also, ashamed to keep company with men who uphold a trick worthy of a ruined gambler.”

“My dear Joseph,” cried Ebearhard, springing up with a laugh, “you were misnamed in your infancy. You should have been called Herod, practically justifying a slaughter of us innocents.”

Page 39

“I stand by Benjamin,” growled Gruesel, “the youngest and most capable of our circle; the one who produced the money while all the rest of us talked.”

“You never talked till now, Joseph,” said Ebearhard, still trying to ease the situation with a laugh, “and what you say is not only deplorably severe, but uttered, as I will show you, upon entirely mistaken grounds. We did not, and do not, support Conrad Kurzbold in what he said at first. Now you rate us as if we were no better than thieves. Dishonest gamblers, you call us, and Lord knows what else, and then you threaten withdrawal. I submit that your diatribe is quite undeserved. We all condemn Kurzbold for censuring Roland’s generosity to the merchant, unanimously upholding Roland in that action, and have said so plainly enough. What we object to is this: Roland arrogates to himself power which he does not possess, of peremptorily expelling any member whose remarks displease him. Surely you cannot support him in that any more than we.”

“Let us take one thing at a time,” resumed Greusel, “not forgetting from whom came the original provocation. I must know where we stand. I therefore move a vote of censure on Conrad Kurzbold for his unmerited attack upon our president anent his dealings with Herr Goebel.”

“I second that with great pleasure,” said Ebearhard.

“Now, as we cannot ask our leader to put that motion, I shall take the liberty of submitting it myself,” continued Greusel. “All in favor of the vote of censure which you have heard, make it manifest by standing up.”

Every one arose except Roland, Gensbein, and Kurzbold.

“There, we have removed that obstacle to a clear understanding of the case, and before I formally deliver this vote of censure to Herr Kurzbold, I request him to reconsider his position, and of his own motion to make such delivery unnecessary.

“If it is the case that Roland assumes authority to expel whom he pleases from this guild, I shall not support him.”

“It *is* the case! It *is* the case!” shouted several.

“Pardon me, comrades; I have the floor,” continued Greusel. “I am not attempting oratory, but trying to disentangle a skein in which we have involved ourselves. I wish to receive neither applause nor hissing until I have finished the business. You say it is the case. I say it is not. Roland gave Herr Kurzbold the alternative either of apologizing or of paying over the money, so that it might be returned to the merchant. As I understand the matter, our president does not insist on Kurzbold leaving the guild, but merely announces his own withdrawal from it. You have allowed Kurzbold to put you in the position of being compelled to choose between himself and Roland. If you are logical

men you cannot pass a vote of censure on Kurzbold, and then choose him instead of Roland. I therefore move a vote of confidence in our chief, the man who has produced the money, a thousand thalers

Page 40

in all, half of which was his own, and has divided it equally amongst us, when the landlord's bill was paid, withholding not a single thaler, nor arrogating—I think that was your word, friend Ebearhard—to himself a stiver more of the money than each of the others received. While Kurzbold has prated of comradeship, Roland has given us an excellent example of it, and I think he deserves our warmest thanks and our cordial support. I therefore submit to you the following motion: This meeting tenders to the president its warmest thanks for his recent efforts on behalf of the guild, and begs to assure him of its most strenuous assistance in carrying out the project he has put before it to-night."

"Joseph," said Ebearhard, rising, with his usual laugh, "you are a very clever man, although you usually persist in hiding your light under a bushel. I desire to associate myself with the expressions you have used, and therefore second your motion."

"I now put the resolution which you have all heard," said Greusel, "and I ask those in favor of it to stand."

Every one stood up promptly enough except the two recalcitrants, and of those two John Gensbein showed signs of hesitation and uneasiness. He half rose, sat down again; then, apparently at the urging of the man next him, stood up, a picture of irresolution. Kurzbold, finding himself now alone, laughed, and got upon his feet, thus making the vote unanimous. As the company seated itself, Greusel turned to the president.

"Sir, it is said that all's well that ends well. It gives me pleasure to tender you the unanimous vote of thanks and confidence of the iron-workers' guild, and before calling upon you to make any reply, if such should be your intention, I will ask Conrad Kurzbold to say a few words, which I am sure we shall all be delighted to hear."

Kurzbold rose bravely enough, in spite of the fact that Joseph Greusel's diplomacy had made a complete separation between him and all the others.

"I should like to say," he began, with an air of casual indifference, "that my first mention of the money was wholly in jest. Our friend Roland took my remarks seriously, which, of course, I should not have resented, and there is little use in recapitulating what followed. As, however, my utterances gave offense which was not intended by me, I have no hesitation in apologizing for them, and withdrawing the ill-advised sentences. No one here feels a greater appreciation of what our president has done than I, and I hope he will accept my apology in the same spirit in which it is tendered."

"Now, Master of the Guild," said Greusel, and Roland took the floor once more.

“I have nothing to say but ‘Thank you.’ The antagonists whom we hope to meet are men brave, determined, and ruthless. If any one in this company holds rancor against me, I ask him to turn it towards the Barons, and punish me after the expedition is accomplished. Let us tolerate no disagreements in face of the foe.”

Page 41

The young man took his cloak and sword from the peg on which they hung, passed down along the table, and thrust across his hand to Kurzbold, who shook it warmly. Arriving at the door, Roland turned round.

“I wish to see Captain Blumenfels, and give him final instructions regarding our rendezvous on the Rhine, so good-night. I hope to meet you all under the shadow of the Elector’s tower in Hochst to-morrow morning at nine,” and with that the president departed, being too inexperienced to know that soft words do not always turn away wrath, and that mutiny is seldom quelled with a handshake.

IV

THE DISTURBING JOURNEY OF FATHER AMBROSE

The setting summer sun shone full on the western side of Sayn Castle, sending the shadow of that tenth-century edifice far along the greensward of the upper valley. Upon a balcony, perched like a swallow’s nest against the eastern end of Sayn Castle, a lovely girl of eighteen leaned, meditating, with arms resting on the balustrade, the harshness of whose stone surface was nullified by the soft texture of a gaudily-covered robe flung over it. This ample cloth, brought from the East by a Crusading ancestor of the girl, made a gay patch of scarlet and gold against the somber side of the Castle.

The youthful Countess Hildegunde von Sayn watched the slow oncoming of a monk, evidently tired, who toiled along the hillside deep in the shadow of the Castle, as if its cool shade was grateful to him. Belonging, as he did, to the very practical Order of the Benedictines, whose belief was in work sanctioned by prayer, the Reverend Father did not deny himself this temporary refuge from the hot rays of the sun, which had poured down upon him all day.

Looking up as he approached the stronghold, and seeing the girl, little dreaming of the frivolous mission she would propose, he waved his hand to her, and she responded gracefully with a similar gesture.

Indeed, however strongly the monk might disapprove, there was much to be said in favor of the resolution to which the young lady had come. She was well educated, probably the richest heiress in Germany, and carefully as the pious Sisters of Nonnenwerth Convent may have concealed the fact from her, she was extremely beautiful, and knew it, and although the valley of the Saynbach was a very haven of peace and prosperity, the girl became just a trifle lonely, and yearned to know something of life and the Court in Frankfort, to which her high rank certainly entitled her.

It is true that very disquieting rumors had reached her concerning the condition of things in the capital city; nevertheless she determined to learn from an authoritative source

whether or not it was safe to take up a temporary residence in Frankfort, and for this purpose the reluctant Father Ambrose would journey southward.

Page 42

Father Ambrose was more than sixty years old, and if he had belonged to the world, instead of to religion, would have been entitled to the name Henry von Sayn. His presence in the Benedictine Order was proof of the fact that money will not accomplish everything. His famous, or perhaps we should say infamous, ancestor, Count Henry III. of Sayn, who died in 1246, was a robber and a murderer, justly esteemed the terror of the Rhine. Concealed as it was in the Sayn valley, half a league from the great river, the situation of his stronghold favored his depredations. He filled his warehousing rooms with merchandise from barges going down the river, and with gold seized from unhappy merchants on their way up. He thought no more of cutting a throat than of cutting a purse, and it was only when he became amazingly wealthy that the increase of years brought trouble to a conscience which all men thought had ceased to exist. Thereupon, for the welfare of his soul, he built the Abbey of Sayn, and provided for the monks therein. Yet, when he came to die, he entertained fearsome, but admittedly well-founded doubts regarding his future state, so he proceeded to sanctify a treasure no longer of any use to him, by bequeathing it to the Church, driving, however, a bargain by which he received assurance that his body should rest quietly in the tomb he had prepared for himself within the Abbey walls.

He was buried with impressive ceremony, and the monks he had endowed did everything to carry out their share of the pact. The tomb was staunchly built with stones so heavy that no ordinary ghost could have emerged therefrom, but to be doubly sure a gigantic log was placed on top of it, strongly clamped down with concealed bands of iron, and, so that this log might not reveal its purpose, the monks cunningly carved it into some semblance of Henry himself, until it seemed a recumbent statue of the late villainous Count.

But despite such thoughtfulness their plan failed, for when next they visited the tomb the statue lay prone, face downwards, as if some irresistible, unseen power had flung it to the stone flags of the floor. Replacing the statue, and watching by the tomb, was found to be of little use. The watchers invariably fell asleep, and the great wooden figure, which during their last waking moments lay gazing towards the roof, was now on its face on the monastery floor, peering down in the opposite direction, and this somehow was regarded by the brethren as a fact of ominous significance.

The new Count von Sayn, heir to the title and estate of the late Henry III. was a gloomy, pious man, very different indeed from his turbulent predecessor. Naturally he was much perturbed by the conduct of the wooden statue. At first he affected disbelief in the phenomena despite the assurances of the monks, and later on the simple brethren deeply regretted they had made any mention of the manifestations. The new Count himself took up the task of watching, and paced all night before the tomb of the third Henry. He was not a man to fall asleep while engaged on such a somber mission, and the outcome of his vigil was so amazing that in the morning he gathered the brethren together in the great hall of the Abbey, that he might relate to them his experience.

Page 43

The wooden statue had turned over, and fallen to the floor, as was its habit, but on this occasion it groaned as it fell. This mournful sound struck terror into the heart of the lonely watcher, who now, he confessed, regretted he had not accepted the offer of the monks to share his midnight surveillance. The courage of the House of Sayn is, however, a well-known quality, and, notwithstanding his piety, the new holder of the title was possessed of it, for although admitting a momentary impulse towards flight, and the calling for assistance which the monks would readily have given, he stood his ground, and in trembling voice asked what he could do to forward the contentment of his deceased relative.

The statue replied, still face downward on the stone floor, that never could the late wicked Count rest in peace unless the heir to his titles and lands should take upon himself the sins Henry had committed during his life, while a younger member of the family should become a monk of the Benedictine Order, and daily intercede for the welfare of his soul.

“With extreme reluctance,” continued the devout nobleman, “I gave my assent to this unwelcome proposal, providing only that it should receive the sanction of the Abbot and brethren of the Monastery of Sayn, hoping by a life of continuous rectitude to annul, in some measure at least, the evil works of Henry III.; and that holy sanction I now request, trusting if given it may remove any doubts regarding the righteousness of my promise.”

Here the Count bowed low to the enthroned Abbot and, with less reverence, to the assembled brethren. The Abbot rose to his feet, and in a few well-chosen words complimented the nobleman on the sacrifice he made, predicting that it would redound greatly to his spiritual welfare. Speaking for himself, he had no hesitation in giving the required sanction, but as the Count made it a proviso that the brethren should concur, he now requested their acquiescence.

This was accorded in silent unanimity, whereupon Count von Sayn, deeply sighing as one accepting a burden almost too heavy to bear, spoke with a tremor of grief in his voice.

“It is not for me,” he said, “to question your wisdom, nor shrink from my allotted task. After all, I am but human, and up to this decisive moment had hoped, alas! in vain, that some one more worthy than I might be chosen in my place. The most grievous part of the undertaking, so far as I am concerned, was outlined in the last words spoken by the wooden statue. The evil deeds my ancestor has committed will in time be obliterated by the prayers of the younger member of my family who becomes a monk, but the accumulated gold carries with it a continual curse, which can be wiped off each coin only by that coin benefiting the merchants who have been robbed. The contamination of this metal, therefore, I must bear, for it adds to the agony of my ancestor that, little realizing what he was doing, he bequeathed this

Page 44

poisonous dross to the Abbey he founded. I am required to lend it in Frankfort, upon undoubted security and suitable usury, that it may stimulate and fertilize the commerce of the land, much as the contents of a compost heap, disagreeable in the senses, and defiling to him who handles it, when spread upon the fields results in the production of flower, fruit, and food, giving fragrance, delight, and sustenance to the human frame."

The count, bowing for the third time to the conclave, passed from its presence with mournful step and sorrowful countenance; whereupon the brethren, seeing themselves thus denuded of wealth they had hoped to enjoy, gave utterance to a groan doubtless much greater in volume than that emitted by the carven statue, which wooden figure may be seen to-day in the museum of the modern Castle of Sayn by any one who cares to spend the fifty pfennigs charged for admission.

All that has been related happened generations before the time when the Countess Hildegunde reigned as head of the House of Sayn, but Father Ambrose formed a link with the past in that he was the present scion of Sayn who, as a Benedictine, daily offered prayer for the repose of the wicked Henry III. The gold which Henry's immediate successor so craftily deflected from the monks seemed to be blessed rather than cursed, for under the care of that subtle manager it multiplied greatly in Frankfort, and scandal-mongers asserted that besides receiving the usury exacted, the pietistic Count tapped the treasure-casks of upward-sailing Rhine merchants quite as successfully, if more quietly, than the profane Henry had done. Thus the House of Sayn was one of the richest in Germany.

The aged monk and the youthful Countess were distant relatives, but he regarded her as a daughter, and her affection was given to him as to a father, in other than the spiritual sense.

In his youth Ambrose the Benedictine, because of his eloquence in discourse, and also on account of his aristocratic rank, officiated at the court in Frankfort. Later, he became spiritual and temporal adviser to that great prelate, the Archbishop of Cologne, and the Archbishop, being guardian of the Countess von Sayn, sent Father Ambrose to the castle of his ancestor to look after the affairs of Sayn, both religious and material. Under his gentle rule the great wealth of his House increased, although he, the cause of prosperity, had no share in the riches he produced, for, as has been written of the Benedictines:

"It was as teachers of ... scientific agriculture, as drainers of fens and morasses, as clearers of forests, as makers of roads, as tillers of the reclaimed soil, as architects of durable and even stately buildings, as exhibiting a visible type of orderly government, as establishing the superiority of peace over war as the normal condition of life, as students in the library which the rule set up in every monastery, as the masters in

schools open not merely to their own postulants but to the children of secular families also, that they won their high place in history as benefactors of mankind."

Page 45

* * * * *

“Oh, Father Ambrose,” cried the girl, when at last he entered her presence, “I watched your approach from afar off. You walked with halting step, and shoulders increasingly bowed. You are wearing yourself out in my service, and that I cannot permit. You return this evening a tired man.”

“Not physically tired,” replied the monk, with a smile. “My head is bowed with meditation and prayer, rather than with fatigue. Indeed, it is others who do the harassing manual labor, while I simply direct and instruct. Sometimes I think I am an encumberer in the vineyard, lazily using brain instead of hand.”

“Nonsense!” cried the girl, “the vineyard would be but a barren plantation without you; and speaking of it reminds me that I have poured out, with my own hand, a tankard of the choicest, oldest wine in our cellars, which I allow no one but yourself to taste. Sit down, I beg of you, and drink.”

The wise old man smiled, wondering what innocent trap was being set for him. He raised the tankard to his lips, but merely indulged in one sip of the delectable beverage. Then he seated himself, and looked at the girl, still smiling. She went on speaking rapidly, a delicate flush warming her fair cheeks.

“Father, you are the most patient and indefatigable of agriculturists, sparing neither yourself nor others, but there is danger that you grow bucolic through overlong absence from the great affairs of this world.”

“What can be greater, my child, than increasing the productiveness of the land; than training men to supply all their needs from the fruitful earth?”

“True, true,” admitted the girl, her eyes sparkling with eagerness, “but to persist overlong even in well-doing becomes ultimately tedious. If the laborer is worthy of his hire, so, too, is the master. You should take a change, and as I know your fondness for travel, I have planned a journey for you.”

The old man permitted himself another sip of the wine.

“Where?” he asked.

“Oh, an easy journey; no farther than the royal city of Frankfort, there to wander among the scenes of your youth, and become interested for a time in the activities of your fellow-men. You have so long consorted with those inferior to you in intellect and learning that a meeting with your equals—though I doubt if there are any such even in Frankfort—must prove as refreshing to your mind as that old wine would to your body, did you but obey me and drink it.”

Father Ambrose slowly shook his head.

“From what I hear of Frankfort,” he said, “it is anything but an inspiring town. In my day it was indeed a place of cheer, learning, and prosperity, but now it is a city of desolation.”

“The rumors we hear, Father, may be exaggerated; and even if the city itself be doleful, which I doubt, there is sure to be light and gayety in the precincts of the Court and in the homes of the nobility.”

Page 46

“What have I to do with Court or palaces? My duty lies here.”

“It may be,” cried the girl archly, “that some part of your duty lies there. If Frankfort is indeed in bad case, your sage advice might be of the greatest benefit. Prosperity seems to follow your footsteps, and, besides, you were once a chaplain in the Court, and surely you have not lost all interest in your former charge?”

Again that quiet, engaging smile lit up the monk’s emaciated features, and then he asked a question with that honest directness which sometimes embarrassed those he addressed:

“Daughter Hildegunde, what is it you want?”

“Well,” said the girl, sitting very upright in her chair, “I confess to loneliness. The sameness of life in this castle oppresses me, and in its continuous dullness I grow old before my time. I wish to enjoy a month or two in Frankfort, and, as doubtless you have guessed, I send you forth as my ambassador to spy out the land.”

“In such case, daughter, you should present your petition to that Prince of the Church, the Archbishop of Cologne, who is your guardian.”

“No, no, no, no!” cried the girl emphatically; “you are putting the grapes into the barrel instead of into the vat. Before I trouble the worthy Archbishop with my request, I must learn whether it is practicable or not. If the city is indeed in a state of turbulence, of course I shall not think of going thither. It is this I wish to discover, but if you are afraid.” She shrugged her shoulders and spread out her hands.

And now the old monk came as near to laughing as he ever did.

“Clever, Hildegunde, but unnecessary. You cannot spur me to action by slighting the well-known valor of our race. I will go where and when you command me, and report to you faithfully what I see and hear. Should the time seem favorable for you to visit Frankfort, and if your guardian consents, I shall raise not even one objection.”

“Oh, dear Father, I do not lay this as a command upon you.”

“No; a request is quite sufficient. To-morrow morning I shall set out.”

“Along the Rhine?” queried the girl, so eagerly that the old man’s eyes twinkled at the celerity with which she accepted his proposition.

“I think it safer,” he said, “to journey inland over the hills. The robbers on the Rhine have been so long bereft of the natural prey that one or other of them may forget I am Father Ambrose, a poor monk, remembering me only as Henry of the rich House of Sayn, and therefore hold me for ransom. I would not willingly be a cause of strife, so I

shall go by way of Limburg on the Lahn, and there visit my old friend the Bishop, and enjoy once more a sight of the ancient Cathedral on the cliff by the river."

When the young Countess awoke next morning, and reviewed in her mind the chief event of the preceding day, remembering the reluctance of Father Ambrose to undertake the quest she had outlined without the consent of his overlord the Archbishop, a feeling of compunction swept over her. She berated her own selfishness, resolving to send her petition to her guardian, the Archbishop, and abide by his decision.

Page 47

When breakfast was finished, she asked her lady-in-waiting to request the presence of Father Ambrose, but instead of the monk came disturbing news.

“The seneschal says that Father Ambrose left the Castle at daybreak this morning, taking with him frugal rations for a three days’ journey.”

“In which direction did he go?” asked the lady of Sayn.

“He went on horseback up the valley, after making inquiries about the route to Limburg on the Lahn.”

“Ah!” said the Countess. “He spoke yesterday of taking such a journey, but I did not think he would leave so early.”

This was the beginning of great anxiety for the young lady of the Castle. She knew at once that pursuit was useless, for daybreak comes early in summer, and already the good Father had been five hours on his way—a way that he was certain to lose many times before he reached the capital city. An ordinary messenger might have been overtaken, but the meditative Father would go whither his horse carried him, and when he awoke from his thoughts and his prayers, would make inquiries, and so proceed. A day or two later came a message that he had achieved the hospitality of Limburg’s bishop, but after that arrived no further word.

Nearly two weeks had elapsed when, from the opposite direction, Hildegunde received a communication which added to her already painful apprehension. It was a letter from her guardian in Cologne, giving warning that within a week he would call at her Castle of Sayn.

“Matters of great import to you and me,” concluded the Archbishop, “are toward. You will be called upon to meet formally my two colleagues of Mayence and Treves, at the latter’s strong Castle of Stolzenfels, above Coblentz. From the moment we enter that palace-fortress, I shall, temporarily, at least, cease to be your guardian, and become merely one of your three overlords. But however frowningly I may sit in the throne of an Elector, believe me I shall always be your friend. Tell Father Ambrose I wish to consult with him the moment I arrive at your castle, and that he must not absent himself therefrom on any pretext until he has seen me.”

Here was trouble indeed, with Father Ambrose as completely disappeared as if the dragons of the Taunus had swallowed him. Never before on his journeys had he failed to communicate with her, even when his travels were taken on account of the Archbishop, and not, as in this case, on her own. She experienced the darkest forebodings from this incredible silence. Imagine, then, her relief, when exactly two weeks from the day he had left Schloss Sayn, she saw him coming down the valley. As when she last beheld him, he traveled on foot, leading his horse, that had gone lame.

Throwing etiquette to the wind, she flew down the stairway, and ran to meet her thrice-welcome friend.

She realized with grief that he was haggard, and the smile he called up to greet her was wan and pitiful.

Page 48

“Oh, Father, Father!” she cried, “what has happened to you? I have been nearly distraught with doubt and fear, hearing nothing of you since your message from Limburg.”

“I was made a prisoner,” said the old man quietly, “and allowed to communicate with no one outside my cell. ’Tis a long and sad story, and, worse than all one that bodes ill for the Empire. I should have arrived earlier in the day, but my poor, patient beast has fallen lame.”

“Yes!” said the girl indignantly, “and you spare him instead of yourself!”

The monk laid his left hand affectionately on her shoulder.

“You would have done the same, my dear,” he said, and she looked up at him with a sweet smile. They were kin, and if she censured any quality in him, the comment carried something of self-reproach.

A servitor took away the lame horse; another waited on Father Ambrose in his small room, which was simple as that of a monastery cell, and as meagerly furnished. After a slight refection, Father Ambrose received peremptory command to rest for three full hours, the lady of the Castle saying it was impossible for her to receive him until that time had elapsed. The order was welcome to the tired monk, although he knew how impatient Hildegunde must be to unpack his budget of news, and he fell asleep even as he gave instructions that he should be awakened at nine.

Descending at that time, the supper hour of the Castle, he found a dainty meal awaiting him, flanked by a flagon of that rare wine which he sipped so sparingly.

“I lodged with my brethren in their small and quiet monastery on the opposite side of the Main from Frankfort, in that suburb of the workingmen which is called Sachsenhausen. Even if my eyes had not seen the desolation of the city, with the summer grass growing in many of its streets, the description given of its condition by my brethren would have been saddening enough to hear. All authority seems at an end. The nobles have fled to their country estates, for defense in the city is impossible should once a universal riot break out, and thinking men look for an insurrection when continued hunger has worn down the patience of the people. Up to the present sporadic outbreaks have been cruelly suppressed, starving men falling mutilated before the sword-cuts of the soldiers; but now disaffection has penetrated the ranks of the Army itself, through short rations and deferred pay, and when the people learn that the military are more like to join them than oppose, destruction will fall upon Frankfort. The Emperor sits alone in drunken stupor, and it is said cannot last much longer, he who has lasted too long already; while the Empress is as much a recluse as a nun in a convent.”

“But the young Prince?” interrupted the Countess. “What of him? Is there no hope if he comes to the throne?”

“Ah!” cried the monk, with a long-drawn sigh, dolefully shaking his head.

Page 49

“But, Father Ambrose, you knew him as a lad, almost as a young man. I have heard you speak highly of his promise.”

“He denied me; denied his own identity; threatened my life with his sword, and finally flung me into the most loathsome dungeon in all Frankfort!”

The girl uttered an ejaculation of dismay. If so harsh an estimate of the heir-presumptive came from so mild and gentle a critic as Father Ambrose, then surely was this young man lower in the grade of humanity than even his bestial father.

“And yet,” said the girl to herself, “what else was to be expected? Go on,” she murmured; “tell me from the beginning.”

“One evening, crossing the old bridge from Frankfort to Sachsenhausen, I saw approach me a swaggering figure that seemed familiar, and as he drew nearer I recognized Prince Roland, son of the Emperor, despite the fact that he held his cloak over the lower part of his face, as if, in the gathering dusk, to avoid recognition.

“‘Your Highness!’ I cried in surprise. On the instant his sword was out, and as the cloak fell from his face, displaying lips which took on a sinister firmness, I saw that I was not mistaken in so accosting him. He threw a quick glance from side to side, but the bridge, like the silent streets, was deserted. We stood alone, beside the iron Cross, and there under the Figure of Christ he denied me, with the sharp point of his sword against my breast.

“‘Why do you dare address me by such a title?’

“‘You are Prince Roland, son of the Emperor.’

“The sword-point pressed more sharply.

“‘You lie!’ he cried, ’and if you reiterate that falsehood, you will pay the penalty instantly with your life, despite your monkish cowl. I am nobody. I have no father.’

“‘May I ask, then, sir, who you are?’

“’You may ask, but there is no reason for me to answer. Nevertheless, to satisfy your impertinent curiosity, I inform you that I am an ironworker, a maker of swords, and if you desire a taste of my handiwork, you have but to persist in your questioning. I lodge in the laboring quarter of Sachsenhausen, and am now on my way into Frankfort, which surely I have the right to enter free from any inquiry unauthorized by the law.’

“‘In that case I beg your pardon,’ said I. ’The likeness is very striking. I had once the honor to be chaplain at Court, where frequently I saw the young Prince in company with that noble lady, noble in every sense of the word, his mother, the Empress.’

“I watched the young man narrowly as I said this, and despite his self-control, he winced perceptibly, and I thought I saw a gleam of recognition in his eyes. He thrust the sword back into its scabbard, and said with a light laugh:

“”Tis I that should beg your pardon for my haste and roughness. I assure you I honor the cloth you wear, and would not willingly offer it violence. We are all liable to make mistakes at times. I freely forgive yours and trust you will extend a like leniency to mine.’

Page 50

“With that he doffed his hat, and left me standing there.”

“Surely,” said the Countess, deeply interested in the recital, “so far as speech was concerned he made amends?”

“Yes, my daughter; such speech never came from the lips of an ironworker.”

“You are convinced he was the Prince?”

“Never for one instant did I doubt it.”

“Be that as it may, Father Ambrose, why should not the young man walk the streets of his own capital city, and even explore the laborers’ quarter of Sachsenhausen, if he finds it interesting to do so? Is it not his right to wear a sword, and go where he lists; and is it such a very heinous thing that, being accosted by a stranger, he should refuse to make the admission demanded? You took him, as one might say, unaware.”

The monk bowed his head, but did not waste time in offering any defense of his action.

“I followed him,” he went on, “through the narrow and tortuous streets of Frankfort, an easy adventure, because darkness had set in, but even in daylight my course would have been safe enough, for never once did he look over his shoulder, or betray any of that suspicion characteristic of our laboring classes.”

“I think that tells in his favor,” persisted the girl.

“He came to the steps of the Rheingold, a disreputable drinking cellar, and disappeared from my sight down its steps. A great shout greeted him, and the rattle of tankards on a table, as he joined what was evidently his coterie. Standing outside, I heard song and ribaldry within. The heir-presumptive to the throne of the Empire was too obviously a drunken brawler; a friend and comrade of the lowest scum in Frankfort.

“After a short time he emerged alone, and once more I followed him. He went with the directness of a purposeful man to the Fahrgasse, the street of the rich merchants, knocked at a door, and was admitted. Along the first-floor front were three lighted windows, and I saw his form pass the first two of these, but from my station in the street could not witness what was going on within. Looking about me, I found to my right a narrow alley, occupied by an outside stairway. This I mounted, and from its topmost step I beheld the interior of the large room on the opposite side of the way.

“It appeared to me that Prince Roland had been expected, for the elderly man seated at the table, his calm face toward me, showed no surprise at the Prince’s entrance. His Highness sat with his back towards me, and for a time it seemed that nothing was going forward but an amiable conversation. Suddenly the Prince rose, threw off his cloak, whisked out his sword, and presented its point at the throat of the merchant.

“It was clear, from the expression of dismay on the merchant’s face, that this move on the part of his guest was entirely unexpected, but its object was speedily manifested. The old man, with trembling hand, pushed across the table to his assailant a well-filled bag, which the Prince at once untied. Pouring out a heap of yellow gold, he began with great deliberation to count the money, which, when you consider his precarious situation, showed the young man to be old in crime. Some portion of the gold he returned to the merchant; the rest he dropped into an empty bag, which he tied to his belt.

Page 51

“I did not wait to see anything more, but came down to the foot of the stairs, that I might learn if Roland took his money to his dissolute comrades. He came out, and once more I followed him, and once more he led me to the Rheingold cellar. On this occasion, however, I took step by step with him until we entered the large wineroom at the foot of the stairs, he less than an arm’s length in front of me, still under the illusion that he was alone. Prince though he was, I determined to expostulate with him, and if possible persuade a restitution of the gold.

“‘Your Highness!’ I began, touching him lightly on the shoulder.

“Instantly he turned upon me with a savage oath, grasped me by the throat, and forced me backward against the cellar wall.

“‘You spying sneak!’ he cried. ’In spite of my warning you have been hounding my footsteps!’

“The moment I attempted to reply, he throttled me so as to choke every effort at utterance. There now approached us, with alarm in his wine-colored face, a gross, corpulent man, whom the Prince addressed as proprietor of the place, which doubtless he was.

“‘Landlord,’ said Roland very quietly, ’this unfortunate monk is weak in the head, and although he means no harm with his meddling, he may well cause disaster to my comrades and myself. Earlier in the evening he accosted on the bridge, but I spared him, hoping never to see his monkish costume again. You may judge the state of his mind when I tell you he accuses me of being the Emperor’s son, and Heaven only knows what he would estimate to be the quality of my comrades were he to see them.’

“Two or three times I attempted to speak, but the closing of his fingers upon my throat prevented me, and even when they were slightly relaxed I was scarcely able to breathe.”

The Countess listened with the closest attention, fixing upon the narrator her splendid eyes, and in them, despite their feminine beauty and softness, seemed to smoulder a deep fire of resentment at the treatment accorded her kinsman, a luminant of danger transmitted to her down the ages from ancestors equally ready to fight for the Sepulcher in Palestine or for the gold on the borders of the Rhine. In the pause, during which the monk wiped from his wrinkled brow the moisture brought there by remembrance of the indignity he had undergone, kindliness in the eyes of the Countess overcame their menace, and she said gently:

“I am quite confident, Father, that such a ruffian could not be Prince Roland. He was indeed the rude mechanic he proclaimed himself. No man of noble blood would have acted thus.”

“Listen, my child, listen,” resumed Father Ambrose. “Turning to the landlord, the Prince asked:

“’Is there a safe and vacant room in your establishment where I could bestow this meddlesome priest for a few days?’

“‘There is a wine vault underneath this drinking cellar,’ responded the landlord.

Page 52

“‘Does anyone enter that vault except yourself?’

“‘No one,’

“’Will you undertake charge of the priest, seeing that he communicates with none outside?’

“‘Of a surety, Captain,’

“‘Good. I will pay you well, and that in advance.’”

“This ruffian was never the Prince,” interrupted the Countess firmly.

“I beg you to listen, Hildegunde, and my next sentence will convince you. The Prince continued:

“’Not only prevent his communication with others, but do not listen to him yourself. He will endeavor to persuade you that his name is Father Ambrose, and that he is a monk in good standing with the Benedictine Order. If he finds you care little for that, he may indeed pretend he is of noble origin himself; that he is Henry von Sayn, and thus endeavor to work on whatever sympathy you may feel for the aristocrats. But I assure you he is no more a Sayn than I am Prince Roland.’

“‘Indeed, Captain,’ replied the host, ’I have as little liking for an aristocrat as for a monk, so you may depend that I will keep him safe enough until you order his release.’

“Now, my dear Hildegunde, you see there was no mistake on my part. This young man asserted he knew nothing of me, and indeed, I believed he had forgotten the time of my chaplaincy at the Court, often as he listened to my discourses, yet all the time he knew me, and now, with an effrontery that seems incredible, he showed no hesitation in proving me right when I accosted him as son of the Emperor. I must in justice, however, admit that he instructed the landlord when he paid him, to treat me with gentleness, and to see that I had plenty to eat and drink. When three days had expired, I was to be allowed my liberty.

“‘He can do no harm then,’ concluded the Prince, in his talk with the landlord, ‘for by that time I shall have succeeded or failed.’

“I was led down a narrow, broken stairway by the proprietor, and thrust into a dark and damp cellar, partially filled with casks of wine, and there I remained until set at liberty a few days ago.

“I returned at once to the Benedictine Monastery where I had lodged, expecting to find my brethren filled with anxiety concerning me, but such was not the case. Any one man is little missed in this world, and my comrades supposed that I was invited to the Court,

and had forgotten them as I saw they had forgotten me, so I said nothing of my adventure, but mounted my waiting horse and journeyed back to the Castle of Sayn."

For a long time there was silence between the two, then the younger spoke.

"Do you intend to take any action regarding your unauthorized imprisonment?"

"Oh, no," replied the forgiving monk.

"Is it certain that this dissolute young man will be chosen Emperor?"

"There is a likelihood, but not a certainty."

"Would not the election of such a person to the highest position in the State prove even a greater misfortune to the land than the continuance of the present regime, for this young man adds to his father's vice of drunkenness the evil qualities, of dishonesty, cruelty, ribaldry, and a lack of respect for the privileges both of Church and nobility?"

Page 53

“Such indeed is my opinion, daughter.”

“Then is it not your duty at once to acquaint the three Archbishops with what you have already told me, so that the disaster of his election may be avoided?”

“It is a matter to which I gave deep thought during my journey thither, and I also invoked the aid of Heaven in guiding me to a just conclusion.”

“And that conclusion, Father?”

“Is to say nothing whatever about my experiences in Frankfort.”

“Why?”

“Because it is not given to a humble man like myself, occupying a position of no authority, to fathom what may be in the minds of those great Princes of the Church, the Archbishops. In effect they rule the country, and it is possible that they prefer to place on the throne a drunken nonentity who will offer no impediment to their ambitions, rather than to elect a moral young man who might in time prove too strong for them.”

“I am sure no such motive would actuate the Archbishop of Cologne.”

“His Lordship of Cologne, my child, dare not break with their Lordships of Treves and Mayence, so you may be sure that if these two wish to elect Prince Roland Emperor, nothing I could say to the Archbishop of Cologne would prevent that choice.”

“Oh, I had forgotten, in the excitement of listening to your adventures, but talking of the Archbishop reminds me his Highness of Cologne will visit us to-morrow, and he especially wishes to see you. You may imagine my anxiety when I received his message a few days ago, knowing nothing of your whereabouts.”

“Wishes to see me?” ejaculated Father Ambrose, wrinkling a perplexed brow. “I wonder what for. Can he have any knowledge of my visit to Frankfort?”

“How could he?”

“The Archbishops possess sources of enlightenment that we wot not of. If he charges me with being absent from my post, I must admit the fact.”

“Of course. Let me confess to him as soon as he arrives; your journey was entirely due to my persistence. I alone am to blame.”

The old man slowly shook his head.

“I am at least equally culpable,” he said. “I shall answer truthfully any question asked me, but I hope I am not in the wrong if I volunteer no information.”

The girl rose.

“You could do no wrong, Father, even if you tried; and now good-night. Sleep soundly and fear nothing. On the rare occasions when the good Archbishop was angry with me, I have always managed to placate him, and I shall not fail in this instance.”

Father Ambrose bade her good-night, and left the room with the languid air of one thoroughly tired. As the young Countess stood there watching his retreat and disappearance, her dainty little fist clenched, and her eyebrows came together, bringing to her handsome face the determined expression which marked the countenances of some of her Crusader ancestors whose portraits decorated the walls.

Page 54

“If ever I get that ruffian Prince Roland into my power,” she said to herself, “I will make him regret his treatment of so tolerant and forbearing a man as Father Ambrose.”

V

THE COUNTESS VON SAYN AND THE ARCHBISHOP OF COLOGNE

It was high noon when that great Prince of the Church, the Archbishop of Cologne, arrived at Castle Sayn, with a very inconsiderable following, which seemed to indicate that he traveled on no affair of State, for on such occasions he led a small army. The lovely young Countess awaited him at the top of the Castle steps, and he greeted her with the courtesy of a polished man of the world, rather than with the more austere consideration of a great Churchman. Indeed, it seemed to the quick apprehension of the girl that as he raised her fair hand to his lips his obeisance was lower, more deferential, than their differing stations in life justified.

He shook hands with Father Ambrose in the manner of old friend accosting old friend, and nothing in his salutation indicated displeasure of any sort in the background.

Perhaps, then, that sense of uneasiness felt by both the aged Father Ambrose and the youthful Countess Hildegunde in the Archbishop’s presence came from their consciousness of conspiracy, resulting in the ill-fated journey to Frankfort. Nevertheless, all that afternoon the two were oppressed by the shadow of some impending danger, and the good spirits of the Archbishop seemed to them assumed for the occasion, and indeed in this they were not far wrong. His Lordship of Cologne was keenly apprehensive regarding an important conference set down for the next day, and the exuberance of an essentially serious man in such a crisis is prone to be overdone.

Father Ambrose, who, in the midst of luxury and plenty, lived with the abstemiousness of an anchorite, and always partook of his scant refreshment alone in his cell, was invited by the Archbishop to a seat at the table in the dining-hall.

“So long as you cast no look of reproach upon me for my enjoyment of Sayn’s most excellent cuisine, and my appreciation of its unequaled cellar, I shall not comment on your dinner of parched peas and your unexhilarating tankard of water. Besides, I wish to consult with Ambrose the librarian of Sayn, touching the archives of this house, rather than with Ambrose the superintendent of farms, or Father Ambrose the monk.”

During the midday meal the Archbishop led, and at times monopolized, the conversation.

“While you were under the tutelage of the good Sisters at Nonnenwerth Convent, Hildegunde, the Abbess frequently spoke of your proficiency in historical studies. Did you ever turn your attention to the annals of your own House?”

“No, Guardian. From what I heard casually of my ancestors a record of their doings would be scarcely the sort of reading recommended to a young girl.”

Page 55

“Ah, very true, very true,” agreed the Archbishop. “Some of the Counts of Sayn led turbulent lives, and except with a battle-ax it was difficult to persuade them not to meddle with the goods and chattels of their neighbors. A strenuous line they proved in those olden days; but many noble women have adorned the Castle of Sayn whose lives shine out like an inspiration against the dark background of medieval tumult. Did you ever hear of your forebear, the gracious Countess Matilda von Sayn, who lived some hundreds of years ago? Indeed, the letters I have been reading, written in her quaint handwriting, are dated about the middle of the thirteenth century. I cannot learn whether she was older or younger than the Archbishop of Cologne of that period, and thus I wish to enlist the interest of Father Ambrose in searching the archives of Sayn for anything pertaining to her. The Countess sent many epistles to the Archbishop which he carefully preserved, while documents of much more importance to the Archbishopric were allowed to go astray.

“Her letters breathe a deep devotion to the Church, and a warm kindliness to its chief ornament of that day, the then Archbishop of Cologne. She was evidently his most cherished adviser, and in points of difficulty her counsel exhibits all the clarity of a man’s brain, to which is added a tenderness and a sense of justice entirely womanly. I could not help fancying that this great prelate’s success in his Archbishopric was largely due to the disinterested advice of this noble woman. It is clearly to be seen that the Countess was the benignant power behind the throne, and she watched his continued advancement with a love resembling that lavished on a favorite son. Her writings now and then betray an affection of a quality so motherly that I came to believe she was much older than the great Churchman, but then there is the fact that she long outlived him, so it is possible she may have been the younger.”

“Why, my Lord, are you about to weave us a romance?”

The Archbishop smiled, and for a moment placed his hand upon hers, which rested on the table beside him.

“A romance, perhaps, between myself and the Countess of long ago, for as I read these letters I used much of their contents for my own guidance, and found her precepts as wise to-day as they were in 1250, and to me ... to me,” the Archbishop sighed, “she seems to live again. Yes, I confess my ardent regard for her, and if you call that romance, it is surely of a very innocent nature.”

“But the other Archbishop? Your predecessor, the friend of Matilda; what of him?”

“There, Hildegunde, I have much less evidence to go upon, for his letters, if they exist, are concealed somewhere in the archives of Sayn Castle.”

“To-morrow,” cried the girl, “I shall robe myself in the oldest garments I possess, and will rummage those dusty archives until I find the letters of him who was Archbishop in 1250.”

Page 56

“I have bestowed that task upon one less impulsive. Father Ambrose is the searcher, and he and I will put our wise old heads together in consultation over them before entrusting them to the perusal of that impetuous young noblewoman, the present Countess von Sayn.”

The impetuous person referred to brought down her hand with a peremptory impact upon the table, and exclaimed emphatically:

“My Lord Archbishop, I shall read those letters to-morrow.”

Once more the Archbishop placed his hand on hers, this time, however, clasping it firmly in his own. There was no smile on his face as he said gravely:

“My lady, to-morrow you will face three living Archbishops, more difficult, perhaps, to deal with than one who is dust.”

“Three!” she cried, startled, a gleam of apprehension troubling her fine eyes. “My Lords of Mayence, Treves, and yourself? Are they coming here?”

“The conclave of the Archbishops will be held at Castle Stolzenfels, the Rhine residence of my brother of Treves.”

“Why is this Court convened?”

“That will be explained to you, Hildegunde, by his Highness of Mayence. I did not intend to speak to you about this until later, so I will merely say that there is nothing to fear. I, being your guardian, am sent to escort you to Stolzenfels, and as we ride there together I wish to place before you some suggestions which you may find useful when the meeting takes place.”

“I shall faithfully follow any advice you give me, my Lord.”

“I am sure of it, Hildegunde, and you will remember that I speak as guardian, not as Councilor of State. My observations will be requests and not commands. You see, we have reversed the positions of my predecessor and the Countess Matilda. It was always she who tendered advice, which he invariably accepted. Now I must take the role of advice-giver; thus you and I transpose the parts of the former Archbishop of Cologne, and the former Countess of Sayn, who, I am sorry to note, have been completely banished from your thoughts by my premature announcement regarding the three living Archbishops.”

“Oh, not at all, not at all! I am still thinking of those two. Have you told me all you know about them?”

“Far from it. Although I was handicapped in my reconstitution of their friendship by lack of the Archbishop’s letters, he had nevertheless made a note here and there upon the communications he received from the Countess. Throughout the letters certain paragraphs are marked with a cross, as if for reperusal, these paragraphs being invariably most delicately and charmingly written. But now I come to the last very important document, the only one of which a copy has been kept, written in the Archbishop’s own hand.

Page 57

“In the year 1250, the Countess von Sayn had ceded to him the Rhine town of Linz. Linz seems to have been a rebellious and troublesome fief, which the Sayns held by force of arms. When it came into the possession of the Archbishop, the foolish inhabitants, remembering that Cologne was a long distance down the river compared with the up-river journey to Sayn, broke out into open revolt. The Archbishop sent up his army, and most effectually crushed this outbreak, severely punishing the rebels. He returned from this subdued town to his own city of Cologne, and whether from the exposure of the brief campaign, or some other cause, he was taken ill and shortly after died.

“The new Archbishop was installed, and nearly two years passed, so far as I can learn, before the Countess Matilda made claim that the town of Linz should come again within her jurisdiction, saying that this restitution had been promised by the late Archbishop. His successor, however, disputed this claim. He possessed, he said, the deed of gift making over the town of Linz to his predecessor, and this document was definite enough. If then, it was the intention of the late Archbishop to return Linz to the House of Sayn, the Countess doubtless held some document to that effect, and in this case he would like to know its purport.

“The Countess replied that an understanding had existed between the late Archbishop and herself regarding the subjugation of the town of Linz and its return to her after the rebellion was quelled. But for the untimely death of the late Archbishop she did not doubt that his part of the contract would have been kept long since. Nevertheless, she did possess a document, in the late Archbishop’s own hand, setting out the terms of their agreement, and of this manuscript she sent a copy.

“The crafty Archbishop, without casting doubt on the authenticity of the copy, said that of course it would be illegal for him to act upon it. He must have the original document. Matilda replied, very shrewdly, that on her part she could not allow the original document to quit her custody, as upon it rested her rights to the town of Linz. She would, however, exhibit this document to any ecclesiastical committee her correspondent might appoint, and the members of the committee so chosen should be men well acquainted with the late Archbishop’s writing and signature. In reply the Archbishop regretted that he could not accept her suggestion. The people of Cologne, believing that their overlord had rightfully acquired Linz, cheerfully consented to make good their title by battle, thus having, as it were, bought the town with their blood, and indeed, a deplorable sacrifice of life, it would become a dangerous venture to give up the town unless indisputable documentary evidence might be exhibited to them showing that such a bargain was made by the deceased prelate.

“But before proceeding farther in this matter, he asked the Countess if she were prepared to swear that the copy forwarded to him was a full and faithful rendition of the original. Did it contain every word the late Archbishop had written in that letter?

Page 58

“To this the Countess made no reply, and allowed to lapse any title she might have to the town of Linz.”

“I think,” cried the girl indignantly, “that my ancestress was in the right, refusing further communication with this ignoble Churchman who dared to impugn her good faith.”

The Archbishop smiled at her vehemence.

“I shall make no attempt to defend my astute predecessor. A money-lender’s soul tenanted his austere body, but what would you say if his implication of the Countess Matilda’s good faith was justified?”

“You mean that the copy which she sent of the Archbishop’s letter was fraudulent? I cannot believe it.”

“Not fraudulent. So far as it went her copy was word perfect. She neglected to add, however, a final sentence, and rather than make it public forfeited her rightful claim to great possessions. Of the Archbishop’s communications to her there remains in our archives a copy of this last epistle written in his own hand. I cannot imagine why he added the final clauses to what was in essence an important business communication. The premonition he admits may have set his thoughts upon things not of this world, but undoubtedly he believed that he would live long enough to conquer the rebels of Linz, and restore to the Countess her property. This is what he wrote, and she refused to publish:

“’Matilda, I feel that my days are numbered, and that their number is scant. To all the world my life seems to have been successful beyond the wishes of mortal man, but to me it is a dismal failure, in that I die bachelor Archbishop of Cologne, and you are the spinster Countess von Sayn.’”

VI

TO BE KEPT SECRET FROM THE COUNTESS

There are few favored spots occupied by blue water and greensward over which a greater splendor is cast by the rising sun on a midsummer morning than that portion of the Rhine near Coblentz, and as our little procession emerged from the valley of the Saynbach every member of it was struck with the beauty of the flat country across the Rhine, ripening toward a yellow harvest, flooded by the golden glory of the rising sun.

Their route led to the left by the foot of the eastern hills, and not yet along the margin of the great river. Gradually, however, as they journeyed in a southerly direction, the highlands deflected them westward until at last there was but scant room for the road between rock and water. Always they were in the shade, a comforting feature of a

midsummer journey, an advantage, however, soon to be lost when they crossed the Rhine by the ferry to Coblentz. The distance from Sayn Castle to Schloss Stolzenfels was a little less than four leagues, so their early start permitted a leisurely journey.

The Archbishop and the Countess rode side by side. Following them at some distance came Father Ambrose, deep in his meditations, and paying little attention to the horse he rode, which indeed, faithful animal, knew more about the way than did his rider. Still farther to the rear rode half a dozen mounted lancemen, two and two, the scant escort of one who commanded many thousands of armed men.

Page 59

“How lovely and how peaceful is the scene,” said the Countess. “How beautiful are the fields of waving grain; their color of dawn softened by the deep green of interspersed vineyards, and the water without a ripple, like a slumbering lake rather than a strong river. It seems as though anger, contention, and struggle could not exist in a realm so heavenly.”

“‘Seems’ is the word to use,” commented the Archbishop gravely, “but the unbroken placidity of the river you so much admire is a peace of defeat. I had much rather see its flood disturbed by moving barges and the turmoil of commerce. It is a peace that means starvation and death to our capital city, and, indeed, in a lesser degree, to my own town of Cologne, and to Coblentz, whose gates we are approaching.”

“But surely,” persisted the girl, “the outlook is improving, when you and I travel unmolested with a mere handful of men to guard us. Time was when a great and wealthy Archbishop might not stir abroad with less than a thousand men in his train.”

The Archbishop smiled.

“I suppose matters mend,” he said, “as we progress in civilized usage. The number of my escort, however, is not limited by my own modesty, but stipulated by the Court of Archbishops. Mayence travels down the Rhine and Treves down the Moselle, each with a similar following at his heels.”

“You are pessimistic this lovely morning, my Lord, and will not even admit that the world is beautiful.”

“It all depends on the point of view, Hildegunde. I regard it from a position toward the end of life, and you from the charming station of youth: the far-apart outlook of an old man and a young girl.”

“Nonsense, Guardian, you are anything but old. Nevertheless I am much disappointed with your attitude this morning. I fully expected to be complimented by you.”

“Doesn’t my whole attitude breathe of compliment?”

“Ah, but I expected a particular compliment to-day!”

“What have I overlooked?”

“You overlooked the fact that yesterday you aroused my most intense curiosity regarding the journey we are now taking together, and the conference which is to follow. Despite deep anxiety to learn what is before me I have not asked you a single question, nor even hinted at the subject until this moment. Now, I think I should be rewarded for my reticence.”

“Ah, Countess, you are an exception among women, and I merely withheld the well-earned praise until such time as I could broach the subject occupying my mind ever since we left the Castle. With the awkwardness of a man I did not know how to begin until you so kindly indicated the way.”

“Perhaps, after all, I make a false claim, because I have guessed your secret, and therefore my deep solicitude is assumed.”

“Guessed it?” queried the Archbishop, a shade of anxiety crossing his face.

“Yes. Your story of the former Archbishop and the Countess Matilda gave me a clue. You have discovered a document proving my right to the town of Linz on the Rhine.”

Page 60

The Archbishop bowed his head, but said nothing.

“Your sense of justice urges you to make amends, but such a long time has elapsed that my claim is doubtless outlawed, and you do not quite know how restoration may be effected. You have, I take it, consulted with one or other of your colleagues, Mayence or Treves, or perhaps with both. They have made objection to your proposed generosity, and put forward the argument that you are but temporary trustee of the Cologne Archbishopric; that you must guard the rights of your successor; and this truism could not help but appeal to that quality of equity which distinguishes you, so a conference of the prelates has been called, and a majority of that Court will decide whether or not the town of Linz shall be tendered to me. Perhaps a suggestion will be made that I allow things to remain as they are, in which case I shall at once refuse to accept the town of Linz. Now, Guardian, how near have I come to solving the mystery?”

They rode along in silence together, the Archbishop pondering on the problem of her further enlightenment. At last he said:

“Cologne is ruled by its Archbishop, wisely or the reverse as the case may be. The Archbishop, much as he reveres the opinion of his distinguished colleagues, would never put them to the inconvenience of giving a decision on any matter not concerning them. Linz’s fate was settled when the handwriting of my predecessor, prelate of 1250 A.D., convinced me that this Rhine town belonged to the House of Sayn. Restitution has already been accomplished in due legal form, and when next the Countess Hildegunde rides through Linz, she rides through her own town.”

“I shall never, never accept it, Guardian.”

“It is yours now, Countess. If you do not wish to hold the town, use it as a gift to the fortunate man you marry. And now, Hildegunde, this long-postponed advice I wish to press upon your attention, must be given, for we are nearing the ferry to Coblentz, and between that town and Stolzenfels we may have company. Of the three Archbishops you will meet to-day, there is only one of whom you need take account.”

“Oh, I know that,” cried the girl, “his Lordship of Cologne!”

The Archbishop smiled, but went on seriously:

“Where two or three men are gathered together, one is sure to be leader. In our case the chief of the trio supposed to be equal is his Highness of Mayence. Treves and I pretend not to be under his thumb, but we are: that is to say, Treves holds I am under his thumb, and I hold Treves is under his thumb, and so when one or the other of us join the Archbishop of Mayence, there is a majority of the Court, and the third member is helpless.”

“But why don’t you and Treves join together?”

“Because each thinks the other a coward, and doubtless both are right. The point of the matter is that Mayence is the iron man of the combination; therefore I beg you beware of him, and I also entreat you to agree with the proposal he will make. It will be of tremendous advantage to you.”

Page 61

“In that case, my Lord, how could I refuse?”

“I hope, my child, you will not, but if you should make objection, do so with all the tact at your disposal. In fact, refrain wholly from objection if you can, and plead for time to consider, so that you and I may consult together, thus affording me opportunity of bringing arguments to bear that may influence your decision.”

“My dear Guardian, you alarm me by the awesome way in which you speak. What fateful choice hangs over my head?”

“I have no wish to frighten you, my daughter, and, indeed, I anticipate little chance of disagreement at the conference. I merely desire that you shall understand something of Mayence. He is a man whom opposition may drive to extremity, and being accustomed to crush those who disagree with him, rather than conquer by more diplomatic methods, I am anxious you should not be led into any semblance of dissent from his wishes. By agreement between Mayence, Treves, and myself, I am not allowed to enlighten you regarding the question at issue. I perhaps strain that agreement a little when I endeavor to put you on your guard. If, at any point in the discussion, you wish a few moments to reflect, glance across the table at me, and I shall immediately intervene with some interruption which must be debated by the three members of the Court. Of course, I shall do everything in my power to protect you should our grim friend Mayence lose his temper, as may happen if you thwart him.”

“Why am I likely to thwart him?”

“Why indeed? I see no reason. I am merely an old person perhaps over-cautious. Hence this warding off of a crisis which I hope will never arise.”

“Guardian, I have one question to ask, and that will settle the matter here on the border of the Rhine, before we reach Stolzenfels. Do you thoroughly approve, with your heart, mind, and conscience, of the proposition to be made to me?”

“I do,” replied the Archbishop, in a tone of conviction that none could gainsay. “Heart and soul, agree.”

“Then, Guardian, your crisis that never came vanishes. I shall tell his Lordship of Mayence, in my sweetest voice and most ingratiating manner, that I will do whatever he requests.”

Here the conversation ceased, for the solitude now gave way to a scene of activity, as they came to the landing alongside which lay the floating bridge, a huge barge, capable of carrying their whole company at one voyage. Several hundred persons, on horseback or on foot, gathered along the river-bank, raised a cheer as the Archbishop appeared. The Countess thought they waited to greet him, but they were merely

travelers or market people who found their journey interrupted at this point. An emissary of the Archbishop had commanded the ferry-boat to remain at its eastern landing until his Lordship came aboard. When the distinguished party embarked, the crew instantly cast off their moorings, and the tethered barge, impelled by the swift current, gently swung across to the opposite shore.

Page 62

A great concourse of people greeted their arrival at Coblentz, and if vociferous shouts and hurrahs are signs of popularity, the Archbishop had reason to congratulate himself upon his reception. The prelate bowed and smiled, but did not pause at Coblentz, and, to the evident disappointment of the multitude, continued his way up the Rhine. When the little cavalcade drew away from the mob, the Countess spoke:

“I had no thought,” she said, “that Coblentz contained so many inhabitants.”

“Neither does it,” replied the Archbishop.

“Then is this simply an influx of people from the country, and is the conclave of the Archbishops of such importance that it draws so many sightseers?”

“The Court held by the Archbishops on this occasion is very important. I suspect, however, that those are no sightseers, for the general public is quite unaware that we meet to-day. They who cheered so lustily just now are, I think, men of Treves.”

“Do you mean soldiers?”

“Aye. Soldiers in the dress of ordinary townsmen, but I dare say they all know where to find their weapons should a war-cry arise.”

“Do you imply that the Archbishop of Treves has broken his compact? I understood that your escort was limited to the few men following you.”

His Lordship laughed.

“The Archbishop of Treves,” he said, “is not a great strategist, yet I surmise he is ready in case of trouble to seize the city of Coblentz.”

“What trouble could arise?”

“The present moment is somewhat critical, for the Emperor lies dying in Frankfort. We three Electors hope to avoid all commotion by having our plans prepared and acting upon them promptly. But the hours between the death of an Emperor and the appointment of his successor are fateful with uncertainty. I suppose the good Sisters at Nonnenwerth taught you about the Election of an Emperor?”

“Indeed, Guardian, I am sorry to confess that if they did I have forgotten all about it.”

“There are seven Electors; four high nobles of the Empire and three Archbishops, Lords Temporal and Lords Spiritual. The present Count Palatine of the Rhine is, like my friend Treves, completely under the dominion of the Archbishop of Mayence, so the three Lords Spiritual, with the aid of the Count Palatine, form a majority of the Electoral Court.”

“I understand. And now I surmise that you assemble at Stolzenfels to choose our future Emperor.”

“No; he has already been chosen, but his name will not be announced to any person save one before the Emperor dies.”

“Doubtless that one is the Count Palatine.”

“No, Countess, he remains ignorant; and I give you warning, Madam, I am not to be cross-questioned by indirection. You should be merciful: I am but clay in your hands, yet there is certain information I am forbidden to impart, so I will merely say that if the Archbishop happens to be in good-humor this afternoon, he is very likely to tell you who will be the future Emperor.”

Page 63

The girl gave an exclamation of surprise.

“To tell me? Why should he do so?”

“I said I was not to be cross-examined any further. I tremble now with apprehension lest I have let slip something I should not, therefore we will change the subject to one of paramount importance; namely, our midday meal. I intended to stop at Coblentz for that repast, but the Archbishop of Treves, whose guests we are, was good enough to accept a menu I suggested, therefore we will sit at table with him.”

“You suggested a menu?”

“Yes; I hope you will approve of it. There is some excellent Rhine salmon, with a sauce most popular in Treves, a sauce that has been celebrated for centuries. Next some tender venison from the forest behind Stolzenfels, which is noted for its deer. There are, beside, cakes and various breads, also vegetables, and all are to be washed down by delicate Oberweseler wine. How does my speis-card please you, Countess?”

“I am committing it to memory, Guardian, so that I shall know what to prepare for you when next you visit my Castle of Sayn.”

“Oh, this repast is not in my honor, but in yours. I feared you might object to the simplicity of it. It is upon record that this meal was much enjoyed by a young lady some centuries ago, at this very Castle of Stolzenfels, shortly after it was completed. Indeed, I think it likely she was the noble castle’s first guest. Stolzenfels was built by Arnold von Isenberg, the greatest Archbishop that ever ruled over Treves, if I may except Archbishop Baldwin, the fighter. Isenberg determined to have a stronghold on the Rhine midway between Mayence and Cologne, and he made it a palace as well as a fortress, taking his time about it—in all seventeen years. He began its erection in 1242, and so was building at the time your ancestress Matilda ceded Linz to the Archbishop of Cologne, therefore I imagine Cologne probably wished to have a stronghold within striking distance of Treves’ new castle.

“One of the first to visit Stolzenfels was a charming young English girl named Isabella, who was no other than the youngest daughter of John, King of England. Doubtless she came here with an imposing suite of attendants, and I surmise that the great prelate’s castle saw impressive pageants and festivities, for the chronicler, after setting down the menu whose excellence I hope to test to-day, adds:

“’They ate well, and drank better, and the Royal maiden danced a great deal.’

“Her brother then occupied the English throne. He was Henry III., and of course much attention was paid over here to his dancing sister.”

“Why, Guardian, what you say gives a new interest to old Stolzenfels. I have never been within the Castle, but now I shall view it with delight, wondering through which of the rooms the English Princess danced. Why did Isabella come from England all the way to the Rhine?”

“She came to meet the three Archbishops.”

Page 64

“Really? For what purpose?”

“That they might in ecclesiastical form, and upon the highest ecclesiastical authority, announce her betrothal.”

“Announce in Stolzenfels the betrothal of an English Princess, the daughter of one king and sister of another! Did she, then, marry a German?”

“Yes; she married the Emperor, Frederick II.; Frederick of Hohenstaufen.”

Slowly the girl turned her head, and looked steadfastly at the Archbishop, who was gazing earnestly up the road as if to catch a glimpse of the Castle which had been the scene of the events he related. Her face became pale, and a questioning wonder rose in her eyes. What did the Archbishop really mean by this latest historical recital? True, he was a man who had given much study to ancient lore; rather fond of exhibiting his proficiency therein when he secured patient listeners. Could there be any secret meaning in his story of the English Princess who danced? Was there any hidden analogy between the journey of the English Isabella, and the short trip taken that day by Hildegunde of Sayn? She was about to speak when the Archbishop made a slight signal with his right hand, and a horseman who had followed them all the way from Coblentz now spurred up alongside of his Lordship, who said sharply to the newcomer:

“How many of Treves’ men are in Coblentz?”

“Eight hundred and fifty, my Lord.”

“Enough to capture the town?”

“Coblentz is already in their possession, my Lord.”

“They seem to be unarmed.”

“Their weapons are stored under guard in the Church of St. Castor, and can be in the hands of the soldiers within a few minutes after a signal is rung by the St. Castor’s bells.”

“Are there any troops in Coblentz from Mayence?”

“No, my Lord.”

“How many of my men have been placed behind the Castle of Stolzenfels?”

“Three thousand are concealed in the forest near the hilltop.”

“How many men has my Lord of Mayence within call?”

“Apparently only the scant half-dozen that reached Stolzenfels with him yesterday.”

“Are you sure of that?”

“Scouts have been sent all through the forest to the south, and have brought us no word of an advancing company. Other scouts have gone up the river as far as Bingen, but everything is quiet, and it would have been impossible for his Lordship to march a considerable number of men from any quarter towards Stolzenfels without one or other of our hundred spies learning of the movement.”

“Then doubtless Mayence depends on his henchman Treves.”

“It would seem so, my Lord.”

“Thank you; that will do.”

The rider saluted, turned his horse towards the north, and galloped away, and a few moments later the little procession came within sight of Stolzenfels, standing grandly on its conical hill beside the Rhine, against a background of green formed by the mountainous forests to the rear.

Page 65

This conversation, which she could not help but hear, had driven entirely from the mind of Hildegunde the pretty story of the English Princess.

“Why, Guardian!” she said, “we seem to be in the midst of impending civil war.”

The Archbishop smiled.

“We are in the midst of an assured peace,” he replied.

“What! with Coblentz practically seized, and three thousand of your men lurking in the woods above us?”

“Yes. I told you that Treves was no strategist. I suppose he and Mayence imagine that by seizing the town of Coblentz they cut off my retreat to Cologne. They know it would be useless in a crisis for me to journey up the river, as I should then be getting farther and farther from my base of supplies both in men and provisions, therefore the Archbishop of Mayence has neglected to garrison that quarter.”

“But, Guardian, you are surely entrapped, with Coblentz thus held?”

“Not so, my child, while I command three thousand men to their eight hundred.”

“But that means a battle!”

“A battle that will never take place, Hildegunde, because I shall seize something much more valuable than any town, namely, the persons of the two Archbishops. With their Lordships of Treves and Mayence in my custody, cut off from communication with their own troops, I have slight fear of a leaderless army. The very magnitude of the force at my command is an assurance of peace.”

They now arrived at the branching hill-road leading up to the gates of Stolzenfels just above them, and conversation ceased, but the Countess was fated to remember before the afternoon grew old the final words Cologne spoke so confidently.

VII

MUTINY IN THE WILDERNESS

It was a lovely morning in July when Prince Roland walked into the shadow of the handsome tower which to-day is all that survives of the Elector’s palace at Hochst, on the river Main. He found Greusel there awaiting him, but none of the others. When the two had greeted one another, the Prince said:

“Joseph, I determined several days ago to appoint you my lieutenant on this expedition.”

“If you take my advice, Roland, you will do nothing of the kind.”

“Why?”

“Because it may be looked upon as favoritism, and so promote jealously in the ranks, which is a thing to avoid.”

“Whom would you suggest for the place?”

“Conrad Kurzbold.”

“What! and run the risk of divided authority? I am determined to be commander, you know.”

“Kurzbold, even if made lieutenant, would be as much under your orders as the rest of us. He is an energetic man, and you may thus direct his energy along the right path. From being a critic, he will become one of the criticised, giving him something to think about. Then your appointment of him would show that you bear no ill-feeling for what he said last night.”

Page 66

“You appear to think, Greusel, that it is the duty of a commander to curry favor with his following.”

“No; but I regard tact as a useful quality. You see, you are not in the position of a general with an army. The members of the guild can depose you whenever they like and elect a successor, or they may desert you in a body, and you have no redress. Your methods should not be drastic, but rather those of a man who seeks election to some high office.”

“I fear I am not constituted for such a role, Greusel.”

“If you are to succeed in the task you have undertaken, Roland, you must adapt yourself to your situation as it actually is, and not as you would wish to have it. I stood by you yesterday evening, and succeeded in influencing the others to do the same, yet there is no denying that you spoke to those men in a most overbearing manner. Why, you could not have been more downright had you been an officer of the Emperor himself. What passed through my mind as I listened was, ’Where did this youth get his swagger?’ You ordered Kurzbold out of the ranks, you know.”

“Then why favor my action?”

“Because I was reluctant to see a promising marauding adventure wrecked at the very outset for lack of a few soothing words.”

Roland laughed heartily. The morning was inspiring, and he was in good fettle.

“Your words to Kurzbold were anything but soothing.”

“Oh, I was compelled to crush him. He was the cause of the disturbance, and therefore I had no mercy so far as the affair impinged upon him. But the others, with the exception of Gensbein perhaps, are good, honest, sweet-tempered fellows, whom I did not wish to see misled. I think you must put out of your mind all thought of punishment, no matter what the offense against your authority may be.”

“Then how would you deal with insubordination when it arises?”

“I should trust to the good sense of the remaining members of your company to make it uncomfortable for the offender.”

“But suppose they don’t?”

Greusel shrugged his shoulders.

“In that case you are helpless, I fear. At any rate, talking of hanging, or the infliction of any other punishment, is quite futile so long as you do not possess the power to carry

out your sentence. To return to my simile of the general: a general can order any private in his army to be hanged, and the man is taken out and hanged accordingly, but if one of the guild is to be executed, he must be condemned by an overwhelming vote of his fellows, because even if a bare majority sentenced one belonging to the minority it would mean civil war among us. Suppose, for example, it was proposed to hang you, and eleven voted for the execution and nine against it. Do you think we nine would submit to the verdict of the eleven? Not so. I am myself the most peaceful of men, but the moment it came to that point, I should run my sword through the proposer of the execution before he had time to draw his weapon. In other words, I'd murder him to lessen the odds, and then we'd fight it out like men."

Page 67

“Why didn’t you say all this last night, Greusel?”

“Last night my whole attention was concentrated on inducing Kurzbold to forget that you had threatened the company with a hangman’s rope. Had he remembered that, I could never have carried the vote of confidence. But you surely saw that the other men were most anxious to support you if your case was placed fairly before them, a matter which, for some reason, you thought it beneath your dignity to attempt.”

“My dear Joseph, your wholesale censure this morning does much to nullify the vote I received last night.”

“My dear Roland, I am not censuring you at all; I am merely endeavoring to place facts before you so that you will recognize them.”

“Quite so, but what I complain of is that these facts were not exhibited in time for me to shoulder or shirk the responsibility. I do not believe that military operations can be successfully carried on by a little family party, the head of which must coddle the others in the group, and beg pardon before he says ‘Devil take you!’ I would not have accepted the leadership last night had I known the conditions.”

“Well, it is not yet too late to recede. The barge does not leave Frankfort until this evening, and it is but two leagues back to that city. Within half an hour at the farthest, every man of us will be assembled here. Now is the time to have it out with them, because to-morrow morning the opportunity to withdraw will be gone.”

“It is too late even now, Greusel. If last night the guild could not make up the money we owe to Goebel, what hope is there that a single coin remains in their pockets this morning? Do I understand, then, that you refuse to act as my lieutenant?”

“No; but I warn you it will be a step in the wrong direction. You are quite sure of me; and as merely a man-at-arms, as you called us last night, I shall be in a better position to speak in your favor than if I were indebted to you for promotion from the ranks.”

“I see. Therefore you counsel me to nominate Kurzbold?”

“I do.”

“Why not Gensbein, who was nearly as mutinous as Kurzbold?”

“Well, Gensbein, if you prefer him.”

“He showed a well-balanced mind last night, being part of the time on one side and part on the other.”

“My dear commander, we were all against you last night, when you spoke of hanging, and even when you only went as far as expulsion.”

“Yes, I suppose you were, and the circumstances being such as you state, doubtless you were justified. I am to command, then, a regiment that may obey or not, according to the whim of the moment; a cheering prospect, and one I had not anticipated. When I received the promise of twenty men that they would carry out faithfully whatever I undertook on their behalf, I expected them to stand by it.”

“I think you are unjust, Roland. No one has refused, and probably no one will. If any one disobeys a command, then you can act as seems best to you, but I wish you fully to realize the weakness of your status should it come to drastic punishment.”

Page 68

“Quite so, quite so,” said Roland curtly. He clasped his hands behind his back, and without further words paced up and down along the bank of the river, head bowed in thought.

Ebearhard was the next arrival, and he greeted Greusel cordially, then one after another various members of the company came upon the scene. To the new-comers Roland made no salutation, but continued his meditating walk.

At last the bell in the tower pealed forth nine slow, sonorous strokes, and Roland raised his head, ceasing his perambulations. Greusel looked anxiously at him as he came forward to the group, but his countenance gave no indication whether or not he had determined to abandon the expedition.

“Are we all here?” asked Roland.

“No,” was the reply; “Kurzbold, Eiselbert, Rasselstein, and Gensbein have not arrived yet.”

“Then we will wait for them a few moments longer,” said the commander, with no trace of resentment at their unpunctuality, and from this Greusel assumed that he not only intended to go on, but had taken to heart the warning given him. Ebearhard and a comrade walked up the road rapidly toward Frankfort, hoping for some sign of the laggards, and Roland resumed his stroll beside the river. At last Ebearhard and his companion returned, and the former approached Roland.

“I see nothing of those four,” he said. “What do you propose to do?”

Roland smiled.

“I think sixteen good men, all of a mind, will accomplish quite as much as twenty who are divided in purpose. I propose, therefore, to go on, unless you consider the missing four necessary, in which case we can do nothing but wait.”

“I am in favor of going forward,” said Ebearhard; then turning to the rest, who had gathered themselves around their captain, he appealed to them. All approved of immediate action.

“Do you intend to follow the river road, Captain?” asked Ebearhard.

“Yes, for two or three leagues, but after that we strike across the country.”

“Very well. We can proceed leisurely along the road, and our friends may overtake us if they have any desire to do so.”

“Right!” said Roland. “Then let us set out.”

The seventeen walked without any company formation through the village, then, approaching a wayside tavern, they were hailed by a loud shout from the drinkers in front of it. Kurzbold was the spokesman for the party of four, which he, with his comrades, made up.

“Come here and drink success to glory,” he shouted. “Where have you lads been all the morning?”

“The rendezvous,” said Roland sternly, “was at the Elector’s tower.”

“My rendezvous wasn’t. I have been here for more than an hour,” said Kurzbold. “I told you last night that when I arrived at Hochst I should be thirsty, and would try to mitigate the disadvantage at a tavern.”

“Yes,” said Ebearhard, with a laugh, “we can all see you have succeeded in removing the disadvantage.”

Page 69

“Oh, you mean I’m drunk, do you? I’ll fight any man who says I’m drunk. It was a tremendous thirst caused by the dryness of my throat from last night, and the dust on the Frankfort road this morning. It takes a great deal of wine to overcome two thirsts. Come along, lads, and drink to the success of the journey. No hard feeling. Landlord, set out the wine here for seventeen people, and don’t forget us four in addition.”

The whole company strolled in under the trees that fronted the tavern, except Roland, who stood aloof.

“Here’s a salute to you, Captain,” cried Kurzbold. “I drink wine with you.”

“Not till we return from a successful expedition,” said Roland.

“Oh, nonsense!” hiccoughed Kurzbold. “Don’t think that your office places you so high above us that it is *infra dig*. to drink with your comrades.”

To this diatribe Roland made no reply, and the sixteen, seeing the attitude of their leader, hesitated to raise flagon to lip. The diplomatic Ebearhard seized a measure of wine and approached Roland.

“Drink with us, Commander,” he said aloud; and then in a whisper, “Greusel and I think you should.”

“Thank you, comrade,” said Roland, taking the flagon from him. “And now, brethren, I give you a toast.”

“Good, good, good!” cried Kurzbold, with drunken hilarity. “Here’s to the success of the expedition. That’s the toast, I make no doubt, eh, Captain?”

“The sentiment is included in the toast I shall offer you. Drink to the health of Joseph Greusel, whom I have this morning appointed my lieutenant. If we all conduct ourselves as honorably and capably as he, our project is bound to prosper.”

Greusel, who was seated at a table, allowed his head to sink into his hands. Here was his advice scouted, and a direct challenge flung in the face of the company. He believed now that, after all, Roland had resolved to return to Frankfort, money or no money. If he intended to proceed to the Rhine, then even worse might happen, for it was plain he was bent on rule or ruin. Instantly the challenge was accepted. Kurzbold stood up, swaying uncertainly, compelled to maintain his upright position by grasping the top of the table at which he had been seated.

“Stop there, stop there!” he cried. “No man drinks to that toast just yet. Patience, patience! all things in their order. If we claim the power to elect our captain, by the cock-crowned Cross of the old bridge we have a right to name the lieutenant! This is a question for the companionship to decide, and a usurpation on the part of Roland.”

“Sit down, you fool!” shouted Ebearhard savagely. “You’re drunk. The Captain couldn’t have made a better selection. What say you, comrades?”

A universal shout of “Aye!” greeted the question, and even Kurzbold’s three comrades joined in it.

“And now, gentlemen, no more talk. Here’s to the health of the new lieutenant, Joseph Greusel.”

Page 70

The toast was drunk enthusiastically, all standing, with the exception of Kurzbold, who came down in his seat with a thud.

“All right!” he cried, waving his hand. “All right; all right! That’s what I said. Greusel’s good man, and now he’s elected by the companionship, he’s all right. I drink to him. Drink to anybody, I will!”

In groping round for the flagon, he upset it, and then roared loudly for the landlord to supply him again.

“Now, comrades,” said Roland sharply, “fall in! We’ve a long march ahead of us. Come, Greusel, we must lead the van, for I wish to instruct you in your duties.”

It was rather a straggling procession that set out from Hochst.

“Perhaps,” began Roland, as he strode along beside Greusel, “I should make some excuse for not following the advice you so strenuously urged upon me this morning regarding the appointment of a lieutenant. The truth is I wished to teach you a lesson, and could not resist the temptation of proving that a crisis firmly and promptly met disappears, whereas if you compromise with it there is a danger of being overwhelmed.”

“I admit. Commander, that you were successful just now, and the reason is that most of our brigade are sane and sober this morning. But wait until to-night, when the wine passes round several times, and if you try conclusions with them then you are likely to fail.”

“But the wine won’t pass round to-night.”

“How can you prevent it?”

“Wait, and you will see,” said Roland, with a laugh.

By this time they arrived at a fork in the road, one section going southwest and the other straight west. The left branch was infinitely the better thoroughfare, for the most part following the Main until it reached the Rhine. Roland, however, chose the right-hand road.

“I thought you were going along by the river,” said his lieutenant.

“I have changed my mind,” replied Roland, without further explanation.

At first Kurzbold determined to set the pace. He would show the company he was not drunk, and tax them to follow him, but, his stout legs proving unable to carry out this excellent resolution, he gradually fell to the rear. As the sun rose higher, and grew hotter, the pace began to tell on him, and he accepted without protest the support of two

comrades who had been drinking with him at Hochst. He retrograded into a condition of pessimistic dejection as the enthusiasm of the wine evaporated. A little later he wished to lie down by the roadside and allow a cruel and unappreciative world to pass on its own way, but his comrades encouraged him to further efforts, and in some manner they succeeded in dragging him along at the tail of the procession.

As they approached the village of Zeilsheim, Roland requested his lieutenant to inform the marchers that there would be no halt until *mittagessen*.

Page 71

Zeilsheim is rather more than a league from Hochst, and Kurzbold allowed himself to wake up sufficiently to maintain that the distance earned another drink, but his supporters dragged him on with difficulty past those houses which displayed a bush over the door. At the larger town of Hofheim, five leagues from Frankfort, the same command was passed down the ranks, and at this there was some grumbling, for the day had become very hot, and the way was exceedingly trying, up hill and down dale.

Well set up as these city lads were, walking had never been their accustomed exercise. The interesting Taunus mountains, which to-day constitute an exercise ground full of delights to the pedestrian, forming, as they do, practically a suburb of Frankfort, were at that time an unexplored wilderness, whose forests were infested by roving brigands, where no man ventured except at the risk of an untimely grave. The mediaeval townsman rarely trusted himself very far outside the city gates, and our enterprising marauders, whom to outward view seemed stalwart enough to stand great fatigue, proved so soft under the hot sun along the shadeless road that by the time they reached Breckenheim, barely six leagues from Frankfort, there was a mopping of brows and a general feeling that the limit of endurance had been reached.

At Breckenheim Roland called a halt for midday refreshment, and he was compelled to wait nearly half an hour until the last straggler of his woebegone crew limped from the road on to the greensward in front of the *Weinstaube* which had been selected for a feeding-place. Black bread and a coarse kind of country cheese were the only provisions obtainable, but of these eatables there was an ample supply, and, better than all to the jaded wayfarers, wine in abundance, of good quality, too, for Breckenheim stands little more than a league to the north of the celebrated Hochheim.

The wanderers came in by ones and twos, and sank down upon the benches before the tavern, or sprawled at full length on the short grass, where Kurzbold and his three friends dropped promptly off into sleep. A more dejected and amenable gang even Roland could not have wished to command. Every ounce of fight, or even discussion, was gone from them. They cared not where they were, or what any one said to them. Their sole desire was to be let alone, and they took not the slightest interest even in the preparing of their frugal meal. A mug of wine served to each mitigated the general depression, although Kurzbold showed how far gone he was by swearing dismally when roused even to drink the wine. He said he was resolved to lead a temperate life in future, but nevertheless managed to dispose of his allowance in one long, parched draught.

Greusel approached his chief.

“There will be some difficulty,” he said, “when this meal has to be paid for. I find that the men are all practically penniless.”

“Tell them they need anticipate no trouble about that,” replied Roland. “I have settled the bill, and will see that they do not starve or die of thirst before we reach the Rhine.”

Page 72

“It is proposed,” continued Greusel, “that each man should give all the money he possesses into a general fund to be dealt with by a committee the men will appoint. What do you say to this?”

“There is nothing to say. I notice that the proposal was not made until the proposers’ pouches were empty.”

“They know that some of us have money,” Greusel went on, “myself, for instance, and they wish us to share as good comrades should—at least, that is their phrase.”

“An admirable phrase, yet I don’t agree with it. How much money have you, Greusel?”

“The thirty thalers are practically intact, and Ebearhard has about the same.”

“Well, fifty thalers lie safe in my pouch, but not a coin goes into the treasury of any committee the men may appoint. If they choose a committee, let them finance it themselves.”

“There will be some dissatisfaction at that decision, Commander.”

“I dare say. Still, as you know, I am always ready to do anything conducive to good feeling, so you may inform them that you and Ebearhard and myself, that is, three of us, will contribute to the committee’s funds an amount equal to that subscribed by the other eighteen. Such lavishness on our part ought to satisfy them.”

“It won’t, Commander, because there’s not a single kreuzer among the eighteen.”

“So be it. That’s as far as I am willing to go. Appeal to their reasoning powers, Greusel. If each of the eighteen contributes one thaler, we three will contribute six thalers apiece. Ask them whether they do not think we are generous when we do six times more than any one of them towards providing capital for a committee.”

“’Tis not willingness they lack, Commander, but ability.”

“They are not logical, Joseph. They prate of comradeship, and when it comes to an exercise of power they demand equality. How, then, can they, with any sense of fairness, prove ungrateful to us when we offer to bear six times the burden they are asked to shoulder?”

The lieutenant said no more, but departed to announce the decision to the men, and either the commander’s reasoning overcame all opposition, or else the company was too tired to engage in a controversy.

When the black bread and cheese were served, with a further supply of wine, all sat up and ate heartily. The banquet ended, Greusel made an announcement to the men.

There would now be an hour's rest, he said, before taking to the road again. The meal and the wine had been paid for by the commander, so no one need worry on that account, but if any man wished more wine he must pay the shot himself. However, before the afternoon's march was begun flagons of wine would be served at the commander's expense. This information was received in silence, and the men stretched themselves out on the grass to make the most of their hour of rest. Roland strolled off alone to view the village. The lieutenant and Ebearhard sat together at a table, conversing in low tones.

Page 73

“Well,” said Ebearhard, “what do you think of it all?”

“I don’t know what to think,” replied Greusel. “If the Barons of the Rhine could see us, and knew that we intended to attack them, I imagine there would be a great roar of laughter.”

Ebearhard emulated the Barons, and laughed. He was a cheerful person.

“I don’t doubt it,” he said; “and talking of prospects, what’s your opinion of the Commander?”

“I am quite adrift on that score also. This morning I endeavored to give him some good advice. I asked him not to appoint me lieutenant, but to choose Kurzbold or Gensbein from among the malcontents, for I thought if responsibility were placed on their shoulders we should be favored with less criticism.”

“A very good idea it seems to me,” remarked Ebearhard.

“Well, you saw how promptly he ignored it, yet after all there may be more wisdom in that head of his than I suspected. Look you how he has made a buffer of me. He gives no commands to the men himself, but merely orders me to pass along the word for this or that. He appears determined to have his own way, and yet not to bring about a personal conflict between himself and his following.”

“Do you suppose that to be cowardice on his part?”

“No; he is not a coward. He doubtless intends that I shall stand the brunt of any ill-temper on the part of the men. Should disobedience arise, it will be my orders that are disobeyed, not his. If the matter is of no importance one way or the other, I take it he will say nothing, but I surmise that when it comes to the vital point, he will brush me aside as though I were a feather, and himself confront the men regardless of consequences. This morning I thought they would win in such a case, but, by the iron Cross, I am not so confident now. Remember how he sprung my appointment on the crowd, counting, I am sure, on your help. He said to me, when we were alone by the tower, that you were the most fair-minded man among the lot, and he evidently played on that, giving them not a moment to think, and you backed him up. He carried his point, and since then has not said a word to them, all orders going through me, but I know he intended, as he told you, to take the river road, instead of which he has led us over this hilly district until every man is ready to drop. He is himself very sparing of wine, and is in fit condition. I understand he has tramped both banks of the Rhine, from Ehrenfels to Bonn, so this walk is nothing to him. At the end of it he was off for a stroll, and here are these men lying above the sod like the dead underneath it.”

Page 74

“I cannot make him out,” mused Ebearhard. “What has been his training? He appears to be well educated, and yet in some common matters is ignorant as a child, as, for instance, not knowing the difference in status between a skilled artisan and a chaffering merchant! What can have been his up-bringing? He is obviously not of the merchant class, yet he persuades the chief of our merchants, and the most conservative, to engage in this wild goose chase, and actually venture money and goods in supporting him. This expedition will cost Herr Goebel at least five thousand thalers, all because of the blandishments of a youth who walked in from the street, unintroduced. Then he is not an artisan of any sort, for when he joined us his hands were quite useless, except upon the sword-hilt.”

“He said he was a fencing-master,” explained Greusel.

“I know he did, and yet when he was offered a fee to instruct us he wouldn’t look at it. The first duty of a fencing-master, like the rest of us, is to make money. Roland quite evidently scorns it, and at the last instructs us for nothing. Fencing-masters don’t promote freebooting expeditions, and, besides, a fencing-master is always urbane and polite, cringing to every one. I have watched Roland closely at times, trying to study him, and in doing so have caught momentary glimpses of such contempt for us, that, by the good Lord above us, it made me shrivel up. You know, Greusel, that youth has more of the qualities usually attributed to a noble than those which go to the make-up of any tradesman.”

“He is a puzzle to me,” admitted Greusel, “and if this excursion does not break up at the outset, I am not sure that it will be a success.”

Noticing a look of alarm in Ebearhard’s eyes, Greusel cast a glance over his shoulder, and saw Roland standing behind him. The young man said quietly:

“It hasn’t broken up at the outset, for we are already more than five leagues from Frankfort. Our foray must be a success while I have two such wise advisers as I find sitting here.”

Neither of the men replied. Both were wondering how much their leader had overheard. He took his place on the bench beside Ebearhard, and said to him:

“I wish you to act as my second lieutenant. If anything happens to me, Greusel takes my place and you take his. This, by the way, is an appointment, rather than an election. It is not to be put before the guild. You simply act as second lieutenant, and that is all there is about it.”

“Very good, Commander,” said Ebearhard.

“Greusel, how much money have you?”

“Thirty thalers.”

“Economical man! Will you lend me the sum until we reach Assmannshausen?”

“Certainly.” Greusel pulled forth his wallet, poured out the gold, and Roland took charge of it.

“And you, Ebearhard? How are you off for funds?”

“I possess twenty-five thalers.”

Page 75

“May I borrow from you as well?”

“Oh, yes.”

“I was thinking,” continued the young man, as he put away the gold, “that this committee idea of the men has merits of its own; therefore I have formed myself into a committee, appointed, not elected, and will make the disbursements. How much money does our company possess?”

“Not a stiver, so far as I can learn.”

“Ah, in that case there is little use in my attempting a collection. Now, as I was saying, Greusel, if anything happens to me, you carry on the enterprise along the lines I have laid down. The first thing, of course, is to reach Assmannshausen.”

“Nothing can happen to you before we arrive there,” hazarded Greusel.

“I’m not so sure. The sun is very powerful to-day, and should it beat me down, let me lie where I fall, and allow nothing to interrupt the march. Once at Assmannshausen, you two must keep a sharp lookout up the river. When you see the barge, gather your men and lead them up to it. It is to await us about half a league above Assmannshausen.”

The three conversed until the hour was consumed, then Roland, throwing his cloak over his arm, rose, and said to his lieutenant:

“Just rouse the men, if you please; and you, Ebearhard, tell the landlord to give each a flagon of wine. We take the road to Wiesbaden. I shall walk slowly on ahead, so that you and the company may overtake me.”

With this the young leader sauntered indifferently away, leaving to his subordinates the ungracious task of setting tired men to their work again. Greusel looked glum, but Ebearhard laughed.

Some distance to the east of Wiesbaden the leader deflected his company from the road, and thus they passed Wiesbaden to the left, arriving at the village of Sonnenberg. The straggling company made a halt for a short time, while provisions were purchased, every man carrying his own share, which was scantly sufficient for supper and breakfast, and a quantity of wine was acquired to gratify each throat with about a liter and a half; plenty for a reasonable thirst, but not enough for a carouse.

The company grumbled at being compelled to quit Sonnenberg. They had hoped to spend the night at Wiesbaden, and vociferously proclaimed themselves satisfied with the amount of country already traversed. Their leader said nothing, but left Greusel and Ebearhard to deal with them. He paid for the provisions and the wine, and then, with his cloak loosely over his arm, struck out for the west, as if the declining sun were his goal.

The rest followed him slowly, in deep depression of spirits. They were in a wild country, unknown to any of them. The hills had become higher and steeper, and there was not even a beaten path to follow; but Roland, who apparently knew his way, trudged steadily on in advance even of his lieutenants. A bank of dark clouds had risen in the east, the heat of the day being followed by a thunderstorm that growled menacingly above the Taunus mountains, evidently accompanying a torrent of rain, although none fell in the line of march.

Page 76

The sun had set when the leader brought his company down into the valley of the Walluf, about two and a half leagues from Sonnenberg. Here the men found themselves in a wilderness through which ran a brawling stream. Roland announced to them that this would be their camping place for the night. At once there was an uproar of dissent. How were they to camp out without tents? A heavy rain was impending. Listen to the thunder, and taking warning from the swollen torrent.

“Wrap your cloaks around you,” said Roland, “and sleep under the trees. I have often done it myself, and will repeat the experience to-night. If you are not yet tired enough to ensure sound slumber, I shall be delighted to lead you on for another few leagues.”

The men held a low-voiced, sullen consultation, gathered in a circle. They speedily decided upon returning to Sonnenberg, which it was the unanimous opinion of the company they should never have left. Townsmen all, who had not in their lives spent a night without a roof over their heads, such accommodation as their leader proposed they should endure seemed like being cast away on a desert island. The mystery of the forest affrighted them. For all they could tell the woods were full of wild animals, and they knew that somewhere near lurked outlaws no less savage. The eighteen, ignoring Greusel and Ebearhard, who stood on one side, watching their deliberations with anxious faces, moved in a body upon their leader, who sat on the bank of the torrent, his feet dangling down towards the foaming water.

“We have resolved to return to Sonnenberg,” said the leader of the conclave.

“An excellent resolution,” agreed Roland cheerfully. “It is a pleasant village, and I have passed through it several times. By the way, Wiesbaden, which is much larger, possesses the advantage to tired men of being half a league nearer.”

The spokesman seemed taken aback by Roland’s nonchalant attitude.

“We do not know the road to Wiesbaden, and, indeed, are in some doubt whether or no we can find our way to Sonnenberg with darkness coming on.”

“Then if I were you, I shouldn’t attempt it. Why not eat your supper, and drink your wine in this sheltering grove?”

“By that time it will be as dark as Erebus,” protested the spokesman.

“Then remain here, as I suggested, for the night.”

“No; we are determined to reach Sonnenberg. A storm impends.”

“In that case, gentlemen, don’t let me detain you. The gloom thickens as you spend your time in talk.”

“Oh, that’s all very well, but when we reach Sonnenberg we shall need money.”

“So you will.”

“And we intend to secure it.”

“Quite right.”

“We demand from you three thalers for each man.”

“Oh, you want the money from me?”

“Yes, we do.”

“That would absorb all the funds I possess.”

Page 77

“No matter. We mean to have it.”

“You propose to take it from me by force?”

“Yes.”

“Ah, well, such being the case, perhaps it would be better for me to yield willingly?”

“I think so.”

“I quite agree with you. There are eighteen of you, all armed with swords, while I control but one blade.”

Saying this he unfastened his cloak, which he had put on in the gathering chill of the evening, and untying from his belt a well-filled wallet, held it up to their gaze.

“As this bag undisputedly belongs to me, I have a right to dispose of it as I choose. I therefore give it to the brook, whose outcry is as insistent as yours, and much more musical.”

“Stop, Roland, stop!” shouted Ebearhard, but the warning came too late. The young man flung the bag into the torrent, where it disappeared in a smother of foam. He rose to his feet and drew his sword.

“If you wish a fight now, it will be for the love of it, no filthy lucre being at stake.”

“By Plutus, you are an accursed fool!” cried the spokesman, making no further show of aggression now that nothing but steel was to be gained by a contest.

“A fool; yes!” said Roland. “And therefore the better qualified to lead all such. Now go to Sonnenberg, or go to Hades!”

The men did neither. They sat down under the trees, ate their supper, and drank their wine.

“Will you dine with me?” said Roland, approaching his two gloomy lieutenants, who stood silent at some distance from the circle formed by the others.

“Yes,” said Greusel sullenly, “but I would have dined with greater pleasure had you not proven the spokesman’s words true.”

“You mean about my being a fool? Oh, you yourself practically called me that this morning. Come, let us sit down farther along the stream, where they cannot overhear what we say.”

This being done, Roland continued cheerfully:

“I may explain to you that a week ago I had only a wallet of my own, but before leaving on this journey I called upon my mother, and she presented me with another bag. I foresaw during *mittagessen* that a demand would be made upon us for money, therefore I borrowed all that you two possessed. Walking on ahead, I prepared for what I knew must come, filling the empty wallet with very small stones picked up along the road. That wallet went into the stream. It is surprising how prone human nature is to jump at conclusions. Why should any of you think that I am simpleton enough to throw away good money? Dear, dear, what a world this is, to be sure!”

Half an hour later all were lying down enveloped in their cloaks, sleeping soundly because of their fatigue, despite being out of doors. Next morning there was consternation in the camp, real or pretended. Roland was nowhere to be found, nor did further search reveal his whereabouts.

VIII

Page 78

THE MISSING LEADER AND THE MISSING GOLD

Probably because of the new responsibility resting upon him, Joseph Greusel was the first to awaken next morning. He let his long cloak fall from his shoulders as he sat up, and gazed about him with astonishment. It seemed as if some powerful wizard of the hills had spirited him away during the night. He had gone to sleep in a place of terror. The thunder rolled threateningly among the peaks of Taunus, and the reflection of the lightning flash, almost incessant in its recurrence, had lit up the grove with an unholy yellow glare. The never-ceasing roar of the foaming torrent, which in the darkness gleamed with ghostly pallor, had somehow got on his nerves. Under the momentary illumination of the lightning, the waves appeared to leap up at him like a pack of hungry wolves, flecked with froth, and the noise strove to emulate the distant thunder. The grove itself was ominous in its gloom, and sinister shapes seemed to be moving about among the trees.

How different was the aspect now! The sun was still beneath the eastern horizon. The cloudless sky gave promise of another warm day, and the air, of crystalline clearness, was inspiring to breathe. To Greusel's mind, tinged with religious feeling, the situation in which he found himself seemed like a section of the Garden of Eden. The stream, which the night before had been to his superstitious mind a thing of terror, was this morning a placid, smiling, rippling brook that a man might without effort leap across.

He rubbed his eyes in amazement, thinking the mists of sleep must be responsible for this magic transformation, until he remembered the distant thunderstorm of the night before among the eastern mountains, and surmised that a heavy rainfall had deluged these speedily drained peaks and valleys.

"What a blessed thing," he said to himself fervently, "is the ever-recurring morning. How it clears away the errors and the passions of darkness! It is as if God desired to give man repeated opportunities of reform, and of encouragement. How sane everything seems now, as compared with the turbulence of the sulphurous night."

As he rose he became aware of an unaccustomed weight by his side, and putting down his hand was astonished to encounter a bag evidently filled with coin. It had been tied by its deerskin thong to his belt, just as was his own empty wallet. He sat down again, drew it round to the front of him, and unfastened it. Pouring out the gold, he found that the wallet contained a hundred and fifteen thalers, mostly in gold, with the addition of a few silver coins. At once it occurred to him that these were Roland's sixty thalers, his own thirty, and Ebearhard's twenty-five. For some reason, probably fearing the men would suspect the ruse practiced on them the night before, Roland had made him treasurer of the company. But why should he have done it surreptitiously?

Page 79

Readjusting the leathern sack, he again rose to his feet, but now cast his cloak about him, thus concealing the purse. Ebearhard lay sound asleep near him. Farther away the eighteen remaining members of the company were huddled closely together, as if they had gone to rest in a room too small for them, although the whole country was theirs from which to choose sleeping quarters.

Remembering how the brook had decreased in size, and was now running clear and pellucid, he feared that the bag of stones Roland had so dramatically flung into it might be plainly visible. He determined to rouse his commander, and seek the bag for some distance downstream; for he knew that when the men awakened, all night-fear would have departed from them, and seeing the shrinkage of the brook they might themselves institute a search.

On looking round for Roland he saw no sign of him, but this caused little disquietude, for he supposed that the leader had risen still earlier than himself, wishing to stroll through the forest, or up and down the rivulet.

Greusel, with the purpose of finding the bag, and in the hope, also, of encountering his chief, walked down the valley by the margin of the waterway. Peering constantly into the limpid waters, he discovered no trace of what he sought. Down and down the valley, which was wooded all the way, he walked, and sometimes he was compelled to forsake his liquid guide, and clamber through thickets to reach its border again.

At last he arrived at a little waterfall, and here occurred a break in the woods, causing him to stand entranced by the view which presented itself. Down the declivity the forest lasted for some distance, then it gave place to ever-descending vineyards, with here and there a house showing among the vines. At the foot of this hill ran a broad blue ribbon, which he knew to be the Rhine, although he had never seen it before. Over it floated a silvery gauze of rapidly disappearing mist. The western shore appeared to be flat, and farther along the horizon was formed by hills, not so lofty as that on which he stood, but beautiful against the blue sky, made to seem nearer than they were by the first rays of the rising sun, which tipped the summits with crimson.

Greusel drew a long breath of deep satisfaction. He had never before realized that the world was so enchanting and so peaceful. It seemed impossible that men privileged to live in such a land could find no better occupation than cutting one another’s throats.

The gentle plash of the waterfall at his right hand accentuated the stillness. From his height he glanced down into the broad, pellucid pool, into whose depths the water fell, and there, perfectly visible, lay the bag of bogus treasure. Cautiously he worked his way down to the gravelly border of the little lake, flung off his clothes, and plunged head-first into this Diana’s pool. It was a delicious experience, and he swam round and round the circular

Page 80

basin, clambered up on the gravel and allowed the stream to fall over his glistening shoulders, reveling in Nature's shower-bath. Satisfied at length, he indulged in another rainbow plunge, grasped the bag, and rose again to the surface. Coming ashore, he unloosened the swollen thongs, poured out the stones along the strand, then, after a moment's thought, he wrung the water out of the bag itself, and tied it to his belt, for there was no predicting where the men would wander when once they awoke, and if he threw it away among the bushes, it might be found, breeding first wonder how it came there, and then suspicion of the trick.

Greusel walked back to camp by the other bank of the stream. Although the early rays of the sun percolated through the upper branches of the trees above them, the eighteen prone men slept as if they were but seven. He sprang over the brook, touched the recumbent Ebearhard with his foot, and so awoke him. This excellent man yawned, and stretched out his arms above his head.

"You're an early bird, Greusel," he said. "Have you got the worm?"

"Yes, I have," replied the latter. "I found it in the basin of a waterfall nearly a league from here," and with that he drew aside his cloak, showing the still wet but empty bag.

For a few moments Ebearhard did not understand. He rose and shook himself, glancing about him.

"Great Jove!" he cried, "this surely isn't the stream by which we lay down last night? Do you mean to tell me that thread of water struck terror into my heart only a few hours ago? I never slept out of doors before in all my life, and could not have imagined it would produce such an effect. I see what you mean now. You have found the bag which Roland threw into the foaming torrent."

"Yes; I was as much astonished at the transformation as you when I awoke, and then it occurred to me that when our friends saw the reduction of the rivulet, they would forthwith begin a treasure-hunt, so I determined to obliterate the evidence."

"Was the bag really full of stones?"

"Oh, yes."

"Well, that is a lesson to me. I believe after all that Roland is helplessly truthful, but last night I thought he befooled us. I was certain it was the bag of coin he had thrown away, and becoming ashamed of himself, had lied to us."

"How could you imagine that? He showed us both the bag of money."

“He produced a bag full of something, but I, being the doubting Thomas of the group, was not convinced it contained money.”

“Ah, that reminds me, Ebearhard; here is the bag we saw last night. I discovered it attached to my belt this morning.”

“He attached it to the wrong belt, then, for you believed him. He should have tied it to mine. What reason does he give for presenting it to you?”

“Ah, now you touch a point of anxiety in my own mind. I have seen nothing of Roland this morning. I surmised that he had arisen before me, and expected to meet him somewhere down the stream, but have not done so.”

Page 81

“He may have gone farther afield. As you found the bag, he of course, missed it, and probably continued his search.”

“I doubt that, because I came upon a point of view reaching to the Rhine and the hills beyond. I could trace the stream for a considerable distance, and watched it for a long time, but there appeared to be nothing alive in the forest.”

“You don’t suppose he has gone back to Frankfort, do you?”

“I am at loss what to think.”

“If he has abandoned this gang of malcontents, I should be the last to blame him. The way these pigs acted yesterday was disgraceful, ending up their day with rank mutiny and threats of violence. By the iron Cross, Greusel, he has forsaken this misbegotten lot, and it serves them perfectly right, prating about comradeship and carrying themselves like cut-throats. This is Roland’s method of returning our money, for I suppose that bag contains your thirty thalers and my twenty-five.”

“Yes, and his own sixty as well. Poor disappointed devil, generous to the last. It was he who obtained all the money at the beginning, then these drunken swine spend it on wine, and prove so generous and brave that eighteen of them muster courage enough to face one man, and he the man who had bestowed the gold upon them.”

“Greusel, the whole situation fills me with disgust. I propose we leave the lot sleeping there, go to Wiesbaden for breakfast, and then trudge back to Frankfort. It would serve the brutes right.”

“No,” said Greusel quietly; “I shall carry out Roland’s instructions.”

“I thought you hadn’t seen him this morning?”

“Not a trace of him. You heard his orders at Breckenheim.”

“I don’t remember. What were they?”

“That if anything happened to him, I was to drive the herd to Assmannshausen. I quite agree with you, Ebearhard, that he is justified in deserting this menagerie, but, on the other hand, you and I have stood faithfully by him, and it doesn’t seem to me right that he should leave us without a word. I don’t believe he has done so, and I expect any moment to see him return.”

“You’re wrong, Greusel. He’s gone. That purse is sufficient explanation, and as you recall to my mind his instructions, I believe something of this must have suggested itself to him even that early in the day. He has divested himself of every particle of money in

his possession, turning it over to you, but instead of returning to Frankfort he has made his way over the hills to Assmannshausen, and will await us there."

"What would be the object of that?"

"One reason may be that he will learn whether or not you have enough control over these people to bring them to the Rhine. He will satisfy himself that your discipline is such as to improve their manners. It may be in his mind to resign, and make you leader, if you prove yourself able to control them."

"Suppose I fail in that?"

Page 82

“Well, then—this is all fancy, remember—I imagine he may look round Assmannshausen to find another company who will at least obey him.”

“What you say sounds very reasonable. Still, I do not see why he should have left two friends like us without a word.”

“A word, my dear Greusel, would have led to another, and another, and another. One of the first questions asked him would be ’But what are Ebearhard and I to do?’ That’s exactly what he doesn’t wish to answer. He desires to know what you will do of your own accord. He is likely rather hopeless about this mob, but is giving you an opportunity, and then another chance. Why, his design is clear as that rivulet there, and as easily seen through. You will either bring those men across the hills, or you won’t. If you and I are compelled to clamber over to Assmannshausen alone, Roland will probably be more pleased to see us than if we brought this rogues’ contingent straggling at our heels. He will appoint you chief officer of his new company, and me the second. If you doubt my conclusions, I’ll wager twenty-five thalers against your thirty that I am in the right.”

“I never gamble, Ebearhard, especially when certain to lose. You are a shrewder man than I, by a long bowshot.”

In a work of fiction it would of course be concealed till the proper time came that all of these men were completely wrong in their prognostications regarding the fate of Roland, but this being history it may be stated that the young man had not the least desire to test Greusel’s ability, nor would his lieutenants find him awaiting them when they reached Assmannshausen.

“Hello! Rouse up there! What have we for breakfast? Has all the wine been drunk? I hope not. My mouth’s like a brick furnace!”

It was the brave Kurzbold who spoke, as he playfully kicked, not too gently, those of his comrades who lay nearest him. He was answered by groans and imprecations, as one by one the sleeping beauties aroused themselves, and wondered where the deuce they were.

“Who has stolen the river?” cried Gensbein.

“Oh, stealing the river doesn’t matter,” said a third. “It’s only running water. Who drank all the wine? That’s a more serious question.”

“Well, whoever’s taken away the river, I can swear without searching my pouch has made no theft from me, for I spent my last stiver yesterday.”

“Don’t boast,” growled Kurzbold. “You’re not alone in your poverty. We’re all in the same case. Curse that fool of a Roland for throwing away good money just when it’s most needed.”

“Good money is always most needed,” exclaimed the philosophic Gensbein.

He rose and shook himself, then looked down at the beautiful but unimportant rivulet.

“I say, lads, were we as drunk as all that last night? Was there an impassable torrent here or not?”

“How could we be drunk, you fool, on little more than a liter of wine each,” cried Kurzbold.

Page 83

“Please be more civil in your talk,” returned his friend. “You were drunk all day. The liter and a half was a mere nightcap. If you are certain there was a torrent, then I must have been in the same condition as yourself.”

The spokesman of the previous night, who had been chided for not springing on Roland before he succeeded in doing away with the treasure, here uttered a shout.

“This water,” he said, “is clear as air. You can see every pebble at the bottom. Get to work, you sleepyheads, and search down the stream. We’ll recover that bag yet, and then it’s back to Sonnenberg for breakfast. Whoever finds it, finds it for the guild; a fair and equal division amongst us. That is, amongst the eighteen of us. I propose that Roland, Greusel, and Ebearhard do not share. They were all in the plot to rob us.”

“Agreed!” cried the others, and the treasure-hunt impetuously began.

Greusel and Ebearhard watched them disappear through the forest down the stream.

“Greusel,” said Ebearhard, “what a deplorable passion is the frantic quest for money in these days, especially money that we have not earned. Our excited treasure-hunters do not realize that at such a moment in the early morning the only subject worth consideration is breakfast. Being unsparing and prodigal last night, it would take a small miracle of the fishes to suffice them to-day. There is barely enough for two hungry men, and as we are rid of these chaps for half an hour at least, I propose we sit down to our first meal.”

Greusel made no comment upon this remark, but the advice commended itself to him, for he followed it.

Some time after they had finished breakfast, the unsuccessful company returned by twos and threes. Apparently they had not wandered so far as the waterfall, for no one said anything of the amazing view of the Rhine. Indeed, it was plain that they considered themselves involved in a boundless wilderness, and were too perplexed to suggest a way out. After a storm of malediction over the breakfastless state of things, and a good deal of quarreling among themselves anent who had been most greedy the night before, they now turned their attention to the silent men who were watching them.

“Where’s Roland?” they demanded.

“I don’t know,” replied Greusel.

“Didn’t he tell you where he was going?”

“We have not seen him this morning,” explained Ebearhard gently. “He seems to have disappeared in the night. Perhaps he fell into the stream. Perhaps, on the other hand,

he has deliberately deserted us. He gave us no hint of his intentions last night, and we are as ignorant as yourselves regarding his whereabouts."

"This is outrageous!" cried Kurzbold. "It is the duty of a leader to provide for his following."

"Yes; if the following follows."

"We have followed," said Kurzbold indignantly, "and have been led into this desert, not in the least knowing where in Heaven's name we are. And now to be left like this, breakfastless, thirsty—" Here Kurzbold's language failed him, and he drew the back of his hand across parched lips.

Page 84

“When you remember, gentlemen,” continued Ebearhard, in accents of honey, “that your last dealings with your leader took place with eighteen swords drawn; when you recollect that you expressed your determination to rob him, and when you call to mind that you brave eighteen threatened him with personal violence if he resisted this brigandage on your part, I cannot understand why you should be surprised at his withdrawal from your fellowship.”

“Oh, you always were a glib talker, but the question now is what are we to do?”

“Yes, and that is a question for you to decide,” said Ebearhard. “When you mutinied last night, you practically deposed Roland from the leadership. To my mind, he had no further obligations towards you, so, having roughly taken the power into your own hands, it is for you to deal with it as you think best. I should never so far forget myself as to venture even a suggestion.”

“As I hinted to you,” said Kurzbold, “you are talking too much. You are merely one of ourselves, although you have kept yourself separate from us. Greusel has been appointed lieutenant by our unanimous vote, and if his chief proves a poltroon, he is the man to act. Therefore, Joseph Greusel, I ask on behalf of the company what you intend to do?”

“Before I can answer that question,” replied Greusel, “I must know whether or not you will act as you did yesterday?”

“What do you mean by that?” Several, speaking together, put the question.

“I wish to know whether you will follow cheerfully and without demur where I lead? I refuse to act as guide if I run the risk of finding eighteen sword-points at my throat when I have done my best.”

“Oh, you talk like a fool,” commented Kurzbold. “We followed Roland faithfully enough until he brought us into this impasse. You make entirely too much of last night’s episode. None of us intended to hurt him, as you are very well aware, and besides, we don’t want a leader who is frightened, and runs away at the first sign of danger.”

“Make up your minds what you propose to do,” said Greusel stubbornly, “and give me your decision; then you will receive mine.”

Greusel saw that although Kurzbold talked like the bully he was, the others were rather subdued, and no voice but his was raised in defense of their previous conduct.

“There is one thing you must tell us before we can come to a decision,” went on Kurzbold. “How much money have you and Ebearhard?”

“At midday yesterday I had thirty thalers, and Ebearhard had twenty-five. While you were all sleeping on the grass, after our meal at Breckenheim, Roland asked us for the money.”

“You surely were not such idiots as to give it to him?”

“He was our commander, and we both considered it right to do what he asked of us.”

“He said,” put in Ebearhard, “that your suggestion about a finance committee was a good one, and that he had determined to be that committee. He asked us if any of you had money, but I told him I thought it was all spent, which probably accounts for his restricting the application to us two.”

Page 85

“Then we are here in an unknown wilderness, twenty men, hungry, and without a florin amongst us,” wailed Kurzbold, and the comments of those behind him were painful to hear.

“I am glad that at last you thoroughly appreciate our situation, and I hope that in addition you realize it has been brought about not through any fault of Roland’s, who gave in to your whims and childishness until you came to the point of murder and robbery. Therefore blame yourselves and not him. You now know as much of our position as I do, so make up your minds about the next step, and inform me what conclusion you come to.”

“You’re a mighty courageous leader,” cried Kurzbold scornfully, and with this the hungry ones retired some distance into the grove, from whence echoes of an angry debate came to the two men who sat by the margin of the stream. After a time they strode forward again. Once more Kurzbold was the spokesman.

“We have determined to return to Frankfort.”

“Very good.”

“I suppose you remember enough of the way to lead us at least as far as Wiesbaden. Beyond that point we can look to ourselves.”

“I should be delighted,” said Greusel, “to be your guide, but unfortunately I am traveling in the other direction with Ebearhard.”

“Why, in the name of starvation?” roared Kurzbold. “You know no more of the country ahead of us than we do. By going back we can get something to eat, and a drink, at one of the farmhouses we passed this side of Sonnenberg.”

“How?” inquired Greusel.

“Why, if they ask for payment we will give them iron instead of silver. No man need starve with a sword by his side.”

“Granted that this is feasible, and that the farmers yield instead of raising the country-side against you, when you reach Frankfort what are you going to do? Eat and drink with the landlord of the Rheingold until he becomes bankrupt? You must remember that it was Roland who liquidated our last debt there, without asking or receiving a word of thanks, and he did that not a moment too soon, for the landlord was at the end of his resources and would have closed his tavern within another week.”

Kurzbold stormed at this harping on the subject of Roland and his generosity, but those with him were hungry, and they now remembered, too late, that what Greusel said was strictly true. If Roland had put in an appearance then, he would have found a most

docile company to lead. They were actually murmuring against Kurzbold, and blaming him and his clan for the disaster that had overtaken them.

“Why will you not come back with us?” pleaded the penitents, with surprising mildness.

Page 86

“Because the future in Frankfort strikes me as hopeless. Not one amongst us has the brains of Roland, whom we have thrown out. Besides, it is nine and a half long leagues to Frankfort, and only three and a half leagues to Assmannshausen. I expect to find Roland there, and although I know nothing of his intentions, I imagine he has gone to enlist a company of a score or thereabouts that will obey his commands. There is some hope by going forward to Assmannshausen; there is absolutely none in retreating to Frankfort. Then, as I said, Assmannshausen is little more than three leagues away; a fact worth consideration by hungry men. On the Rhine we are in the rich wine country, where there is plenty to eat and drink, probably for the asking, whereas if we turn our faces towards the east we are marching upon starvation.”

The buzz of comment aroused by this speech proved to the two men that Kurzbold stood once more alone. Greusel, without seeming to care which way the cat jumped, had induced that unreasoning animal to leap as he liked. His air of supreme indifference aroused Ebearhard’s admiration, especially when he remembered that under his cloak there rested a hundred and fifteen thalers in gold and silver.

“But you know nothing of the way,” protested Kurzbold. “None of us are acquainted with the country to the west.”

“We don’t need to be acquainted with it,” said Greusel. “We steer westward by glancing at the sun now and then, and cannot go astray, because we must come to the Rhine; then it’s either up or down the river, as the case may be, to reach Assmannshausen.”

“To the Rhine! To the Rhine!” was now the universal cry.

“Before we begin our journey,” said Greusel, as if he accepted the leadership with reluctance, “I must have your promise that you will obey me without question. I am not so patient a man as Roland, but on my part I guarantee you an excellent meal and good wine as soon as we reach Assmannshausen.”

“How can you promise that,” growled Kurzbold, “when you have given away your money?”

“Because, as I told you, I expect to meet Roland there.”

“But he threw away his bag.”

“Yes; I told him it was a foolish thing to do, and perhaps that is why he left without saying a word, even to me. He is an ingenious man. Assmannshausen is familiar to him, and I dare say he would not have discarded his money without knowing where to get more.”

“To the Rhine! To the Rhine! To the Rhine!” cried the impatient host, gathering up their cloaks, and tightening their belts, as the savage does when he is hungry.

“To the Rhine, then,” said Greusel, springing across the little stream in company with Ebearhard.

“You did that very well, Greusel,” complimented the latter.

“I would rather have gone alone with you,” replied the new leader, “for I have condemned myself to wear this heavy cloak, which is all very well to sleep in, but burdensome under a hot sun.”

Page 87

“The sun won’t be so oppressive,” predicted his friend, “while we keep to the forest.”

“That is very true, but remember we are somewhere in the Rheingau, and that we must come out into the vineyards by and by.”

“Don’t grumble, Greusel, but hold up your head as a great diplomatist. Roland himself could not have managed these chaps so well, you flaunting hypocrite, the only capitalist amongst us, yet talking as if you were a monk sworn to eternal poverty.”

Greusel changed the subject.

“Do you notice,” he said, “that we are following some sort of path, which we must have trodden last evening, without seeing it in the dusk.”

“I imagine,” said Ebearhard, “that Roland knew very well where he was going. He strode along ahead of us as if sure of his ground. I don’t doubt but this will lead us to Assmannshausen.”

Which, it may be remarked, it did not. The path was little more than a trail, which a sharp-eyed man might follow, and it led up-hill and down dale direct to the Archbishop’s Castle of Ehrenfels.

The forest lasted for a distance that the men in front estimated to be about two leagues, then they emerged into open country, and saw the welcome vines growing. Climbing out of the valley, they observed to the right, near the top of a hill, a small hamlet, which had the effect of instantaneously raising the spirits of the woebegone company.

“Hooray for breakfast!” they shouted, and had it not been for their own fatigue, and the steepness of the hill, they would have broken into a run.

“Halt!” cried Greusel sternly, standing before and above them. At once they obeyed the word of command, which caused Ebearhard to smile.

“You will climb to the top of this hill,” said Greusel, “and there rest under command of my lieutenant, Ebearhard. As we now emerge into civilization, I warn you that if we are to obtain breakfast it must be by persuasion, and not by force. Therefore, while you wait on the hilltop, I shall go alone into the houses on the right, and see what can be done towards providing a meal for eighteen men. Ebearhard and I will fast until we reach Assmannshausen. On the other hand, you should be prepared for disappointment; loaves of bread are not to be picked up on the point of a sword. If I return and order you to march on unfed, you must do so as cheerfully as you can.”

This ultimatum called forth not a word of opposition, and Ebearhard led the van while Greusel deflected up the hill to his right, the sooner to reach the village.

He learned that the name of the place was Anton-Kap; that the route he had been following would take him to Ehrenfels, and that he must adopt a reasonably rough mountain-road to the right in order to reach Assmannshausen.

By somewhat straining the resources of the place, which proved to possess no inn, he collected bread enough for the eighteen, and there was no dearth of wine, although it proved a coarse drink that reflected little credit on the reputation of the Rheingau. He paid for this meal in advance, saying that they were all in a hurry to reach Assmannshausen, and wished to leave as soon as the frugal breakfast was consumed.

Page 88

Mounting a small elevation to the west of the village, he signaled to the patient men to come on, which they lost no time in doing. The bread was eaten and the wine drunk without a word being said by any one. And now they took their way down the hill again, crossed the little Geisenheim stream, and up once more, traversing a high table-land giving them a view of the Rhine, finally descending through another valley, which led them into Assmannshausen, celebrated for its red wine, a color they had not yet met with.

Assmannshausen proved to be a city as compared with the hamlets they had passed, yet was small enough to make a thorough search of the place a matter that consumed neither much effort nor time. Greusel led his men to a *Weinstaube* a short distance out of the village, and, to their delight, succeeded in establishing a credit for them to the extent of one liter of wine each, with a substantial meal of meat, eggs, and what-not. Greusel and Ebearhard left them there in the height of great enjoyment, all the more delightful after the hunger and fatigue they had encountered, for the three and a half leagues had proved almost without a single stretch of level land. The two officers inquired for Roland, without success, at the various houses of entertainment which Assmannshausen boasted, then canvassed every home in the village, but no one had seen anything of the man they described.

Coming out to the river front, deeply discouraged, the two gazed across the empty water, from which all enlivening traffic had departed. It was now evident to both that Roland had not entered Assmannshausen, for in so small and gossipy a hamlet no stranger could even have passed through without being observed.

“Well, Joseph,” asked Ebearhard, “what do you intend to do?”

“There is nothing to do but to wait until our money is gone. It is absolutely certain that Roland is not here. Can it be possible that after all he returned?”

“How could he have done so? We know him to have been without money; therefore why to Frankfort, even if such a trip were possible for a penniless man?”

“I am sorry now,” said Greusel despondently, “that I did not follow a suggestion that occurred to me, which was to take the men direct down the valley where we encamped, to the banks of the Rhine, and there make inquiries.”

“You think he went that way?”

“I did, until you persuaded me out of it.”

“Again I ask what could be his object?”

“It seems to me that this mutiny made a greater impression on his mind than I had supposed. After all, he is not one of us, and never has been. You yourself pointed that

out when we were talking of him at Breckenheim. If you caught glances of contempt for us while we were all one jolly family in the Kaiser cellar, what must be his loathing for the guild after such a day as yesterday?”

“That’s true. You must travel with a man before you learn his real character.”

Page 89

“Meaning Roland?”

“Meaning this crew, guzzling up at the tavern. Meaning you, meaning me; yes, and meaning Roland also. I never knew until yesterday and to-day what a capable fellow you were, and when I remember that I nominated Kurzbold for our leader before Roland appeared on the scene, I am amazed at my lack of judgment of men. As for Roland himself, my opinion of him has fallen. Nothing could have persuaded me that he would desert us all without a word of explanation, no matter what happened. My predictions regarding his conduct are evidently wrong. What do you think has actually occurred?”

“It’s my opinion that the more he thought over the mutiny, the angrier he became; a cold, stubborn anger, not vocal at all, as Kurzbold’s would be. I think that after fastening the money to my belt he went down the valley to the Rhine. He knows the country, you must remember. He would then either wait there until the barge appeared, or more likely would proceed up along the margin of the river, and hail the boat when it came in sight. The captain would recognize him, and turn in, and we know the captain is under his command. At this moment they are doubtless poling slowly up the Rhine to the Main again, and will thus reach Frankfort. Herr Goebel has confidence in Roland, otherwise he would never have risked so much on his bare word. He will confess to his financier that he has been mistaken in us, and doubtless tell him all that happened, and the merchant will appreciate that, even though he has lost his five hundred thalers, Roland would not permit him to lose his goods as well.”

“Do you suppose Roland will enlist another company?”

“It is very likely, for Herr Goebel trusts him, and, goodness knows, there are enough unemployed men in Frankfort for Roland to select a better score than we have proved to be.”

It was quite certain that Roland was not in Assmannshausen, yet Greusel was a prophet as false as Ebearhard.

IX

A SOLEMN PROPOSAL OF MARRIAGE

When Roland wrapped his cloak about him, and lay down on the sward at some distance from the spot where his officers already slept, he found that he could not follow their example. Although, he had remained outwardly calm when the attack was made upon him, his mind was greatly perturbed over the outlook. He reviewed his own conduct, wondering whether it would be possible for him so to amend it that he could acquire the respect and maintain the obedience of his men. If he could not accomplish this, then was his plan foredoomed to failure. His cogitations drove away sleep, and he

called to mind the last occasion on which he made this same spot his bedroom. Then he had slumbered dreamlessly the night through. He was on the direct trail between Ehrenfels Castle and the town of Wiesbaden, the route over which supplies had been carried to the Castle time and again when the periodical barges from Mayence failed to arrive. It had been pointed out to him by the custodian of the Castle when the young man first became irked by the confined limits of the Schloss, and frequently since that time he had made his way through the forest to Wiesbaden and back.

Page 90

Never before had he seen the little Walluf so boisterous, pretending that it was important, and he quite rightly surmised that the cause was a sudden downpour in the mountains farther east. The distant mutterings of thunder having long since ceased, he recognized that the volume of the stream was constantly lessening. As the brook gradually subsided to its customary level, the forest became more and more silent. The greater his endeavor to sleep, the less dormant Roland felt, and all his senses seemed unduly quickened by this ineffectual beckoning to somnolence. He judged by the position of the stars, as he lay on his back, that it was past midnight, when suddenly he became aware of a noise to the west of him, on the other side of the brook. Sitting up, and listening intently, he suspected, from the rustle of the underbrush, that some one was following the trail, and would presently come upon his sleeping men.

He rose stealthily, unsheathed his sword, leaped across the rivulet, and proceeded with caution up the acclivity, keeping on the trail as best he could in the darkness. He was determined to learn the business of the wayfarer, without disturbing his men, so crept rapidly up the hill. Presently he saw the glimmer of a light, and conjectured that some one was coming impetuously down, guided by a lanthorn swinging in his hand. Roland stood on guard with sword extended straight in front of him, and the oncomer's breast was almost at the point of it when he hauled himself up with a sudden cry of dismay, as the lanthorn revealed an armed man holding the path.

"I have no money," were the first words of the stranger.

"Little matter for that," replied Roland. "'Tis information I wish, not gear. Why are you speeding through the forest at night, for no sane man traverses this path in the darkness?"

"I could not wait for daylight," said the stranger, breathing heavily. "I carry a message of the greatest importance. Do not delay me, I beg of you. I travel on affairs of State; Imperial matters, and it is necessary I should reach Frankfort in time, or heads may fall."

"So serious as that?" asked Roland, lowering the point of his sword, for he saw the messenger was unarmed. "Whom do you seek?"

"That I dare not tell you. The message concerns those of the highest, and I am pledged to secrecy. Be assured, sir, that I speak the truth."

"Your voice sounds honest. Hold up the lanthorn at arm's length, that I may learn if your face corresponds with it. Ha, that is most satisfactory! And now, my hurrying youth, will you reveal your mission, or shall I be compelled to run my sword through your body?"

"You would not learn it even then," gasped the young man, shrinking still farther up the hill.

Roland laughed.

“That is true enough,” he said, “therefore shall I not impale you, but will instead relate to you the secret you carry. You are making not for Frankfort—”

Page 91

“I assure you, sir, by the sacred Word, that I am, and grieve my oath does not allow me to do your bidding, even though you would kill me, which is easily done, since I am unarmed.”

“You pass through Frankfort, I doubt not, but your goal is a certain small room in the neighboring suburb of Sachsenhausen, and he whom you seek is a youth of about your own age, named Roland. You travel on the behest of your father, who was much agonized in mind when you left him, and he, I take it, is custodian of Ehrenfels Castle.”

“In God’s name!” cried the youth, aghast, “how did you guess all that?”

Again Roland laughed quietly.

“Why, Heinrich,” he said, “your agitation causes you to forget old friends. Hold up your lanthorn again, and learn whether or not you recognize me, as I recognized you.”

“Heaven be praised! Prince Roland!”

“Yes; your journey is at an end, my good Heinrich, thank the fortune that kept me awake this night. Do you know why you are sent on this long and breathless journey?”

“Yes, Highness. There has come to the Castle from the Archbishop of Mayence a lengthy document for you to sign, and you are informed that the day after to-morrow their Lordships of Mayence, Treves, and Cologne, meet together at the Castle to hold some conversation with you.”

“By my sword, then, Heinrich, had you found me in Sachsenhausen we had never attained Ehrenfels in time.”

“I think I could have accomplished it,” replied the young man. “I should have reached Wiesbaden before daybreak, and there bought the fastest horse that could be found. My father told me to time myself, and if by securing another horse at Frankfort for you I could not make the return journey speedily enough, I was to engage a boat with twenty rowers, if necessary, and convey you to Ehrenfels before the Archbishops arrived.”

“Then, Heinrich, you must have deluded me when you said you had no money.”

“No, Highness, I have none, but I carry an order for plenty upon a merchant in Wiesbaden, who would also supply me with a horse.”

“Heinrich, there are many stars burning above us to-night, and I have been watching them, but your star must be blazing the brightest of all. Sit you down and rest until I return. Make no noise, for there are twenty others asleep by the stream. My cloak is at the bottom of the hill, and I must fetch it. I shall be with you shortly, so keep your candle alight, that I may not miss you.”

With that Roland returned rapidly down the slope, untying his bag of money as he descended. Cautiously he fastened it to the belt of Greusel, then, snatching his cloak from the ground, he sprang once more across the stream, and climbed to the waiting Heinrich.

It was broad daylight before they saw the towers of Ehrenfels, and they found little difficulty in rousing Heinrich's father, for he had slept as badly that night as Roland himself.

Page 92

The caretaker flung his arms around the young prisoner.

“Oh, thank God, thank God!” was all he could cry, and “Thank God!” again he repeated. “Never before have I felt my head so insecure upon my shoulders. Had you not been here when they came, Highness, their Lordships would have listened to no explanation.”

“Really you were in little danger with such a clever son. The Archbishops would never have suspected that he was not I, for none of the three has ever seen me. I am quite sure Heinrich would have effected my signature excellently, and answered to their satisfaction all questions they might ask. So long as he complied with their wishes, there would be no inquiries set afoot, for none would suspect the change. Indeed, custodian, you have missed the opportunity of your life in not suppressing me, thus allowing your son to be elected Emperor.”

“Your Highness forgets that my poor boy cannot write his own name, much less yours. Besides, it would be a matter of high treason to forge your signature, so again I thank God you are here. Indeed, your Highness, I am in great trouble about my son.”

“Oh, the danger is not so serious as you think.”

“’Tis not the danger, Highness. That it is his duty to face, but he takes advantage of his position as prisoner. He knows I dare refuse him nothing, and he calls for wine, wine, wine, spending his days in revelry and his nights in stupor.”

“You astonish me. Why not cudgel the nonsense out of him? Your arm is strong enough.”

“I dare not lay stick on him, and I beg you to breathe nothing of what I have told you, for he holds us both in his grasp, and he knows it. If I called for help to put him in a real dungeon, he would blurt out the whole secret.”

“In that case you must even make terms with him. ’Twill be for but a very short time, and after that we will reform him. He was frightened enough of my sword in the forest, and I shall make him dance to its point once this crisis is over.”

“I shall do the best I can, Highness. But you must have been on your way to Ehrenfels. Had you heard aught of what is afoot?”

“Nothing. ’Twas mere chance that Heinrich and I met in the forest, and he was within a jot of impinging himself upon my sword in his hurry. I stood in the darkness, while he himself held a light for the better convenience of any chance marauder who wished to undo him.”

“Unarmed, and without money,” said the custodian, “I thought he was safer than otherwise. But you are surely hungry, Highness. Advance then within, and I will see to your needs.”

So presently the errant Prince consumed an excellent, if early breakfast, and, without troubling to undress, flung himself upon a couch, sleeping dreamlessly through the time that Greusel and Ebearhard were conjuring up motives for him, of which he was entirely innocent.

When Roland woke in the afternoon, he had quite forgotten that a score of men who, nominally, at least, acknowledged him master, were wondering what had become of him. He called the custodian, and asked for a sight of the parchments that his Lordship of Mayence had sent across the river for his perusal. He found the documents to be a very carefully written series of demands disguised under the form of requests.

Page 93

The pledges which were asked of the young Prince were beautifully engrossed on three parchments, each one a duplicate of the other two. If Roland accepted them, they were to be signed next day, in presence of the three Archbishops. Two certainties were impressed upon him when he had read the scroll: first, the Archbishops were determined to rule; and second, if he did not promise to obey they would elect some other than himself Emperor on the death or deposition of his father. The young man resolved to be acquiescent and allow the future to settle the question whether he or the Archbishops should be the head of the Empire. A strange exultation filled him at the prospect, and all thought of other things vanished from his mind.

Leaving the parchments on the table in the knights' hall, where he had examined them, he mounted to the battlements to enjoy the fresh breeze that, no matter how warm the day, blows round the towers of Ehrenfels. Here a stone promenade, hung high above the Rhine, gave a wonderful view up and down the river and along the opposite shore. From this elevated, paved plateau he could see down the river the strongholds of Rheinstein and Falkenberg, and up the river almost as far as Mayence. He judged by the altitude of the sun that it was about four o'clock in the afternoon. The sight of Rheinstein should have suggested to him his deserted company, for that was the first castle he intended to attack, but the prospect opened up to him by the communication of the Archbishops had driven everything else from his mind.

Presently the cautious custodian joined him in his eyrie, and Roland knew instinctively why he had come. The old man was wondering whether or not he would make difficulties about signing the parchments. He feared the heedless impetuosity and conceit of youth; the natural dislike on the part of a proud young prince to be restricted and bound down by his elders, and the jailer could not conceal his gratification when the prisoner informed him that of course he would comply with the desires of the three prelates.

"You see," he continued, with a smile, "I must attach my signature to those instruments in order to make good my promises to you."

He was interrupted by a cry of astonishment from his aged comrade.

"Will wonders never cease!" cried the old man. "Those merchants in Frankfort must be irredeemable fools. Look you there, Highness! Do you see that barge coming down the river, heavily laden, as I am a sinner, for she lies low in the water. It is one of the largest of the Frankfort boats, and those hopeful simpletons doubtless imagine they can make their way through to Cologne with enough goods left to pay for the journey. 'Tis madness! Why, the knights of Rheinstein and Falkenberg alone will loot them before they are out of our sight. If they think to avoid those rovers by hugging our shore, their mistake will be apparent before they have gone far."

Page 94

Roland gazed at the approaching craft, and instantly remembered that he was responsible for its appearance on the Rhine. He recognized Herr Goebel's great barge, with its thick mast in the prow, on which no sail was hoisted because the wind blew upstream. On recollecting his deserted men, he wondered whether or not Greusel had brought them across the hills to Assmannshausen. Had they yet discovered that Joseph carried the bag of gold? He laughed aloud as he thought of the scrimmage that would ensue when this knowledge came to them. But little as he cared for the eighteen, he experienced a pang of regret as he estimated the predicament in which both Greusel and Ebearhard had stood on learning he had left them without a word. Still, even now he could not see how any explanation on his part was possible without revealing his identity, and that he was determined not to do.

Turning round, he said abruptly to the custodian:

"Were the seven hundred thalers paid to you each month?"

"Of a surety," was the reply.

"That will be two thousand one hundred thalers altogether. Did you spend the money?"

"I have not touched a single coin. That amount is yours, and yours alone, Prince Roland. If I have been of service I am quite content to wait for my reward, or should I not be here, I know you will remember my family."

"May the Lord forget me if I don't. Still, the twenty-one hundred thalers are all yours, remember, but I beg of you to lend me a thousand, for I possess not a single gold piece in my bag. Indeed, if it comes to that, I do not possess even a bag. I had two yesterday, but one I gave away and the other I threw away."

The old man hurried down, and presently returned with the bag of money that Roland had asked of him. Before this happened, however, Roland, watching the barge, saw it round to, and tie up at the shore some distance above Assmannshausen. He took the gold, and passed down the stone stair to the courtyard.

"I shall return," he said, "before the sun sets," and without more ado, this extraordinary captive left his prison, and descended the hill in the direction of the barge.

After greeting Captain Blumenfels, he learned that the boat had been delayed by running on a sandbank in the Main during the night, but they had got it off at daybreak, and here they were. As, standing on the shore, Roland talked with the captain on the barge, he saw approaching from Assmannshausen two men whom he recognized. Telling the captain he might not be ready for several days, he walked along the shore to meet his astonished friends, who, as was usual with them, jumped at an erroneous

conclusion, and supposed that he arrived on the barge which they had seen rounding to for the purpose of taking up her berth by the river-bank.

Greusel and Ebearhard stood still until he came up to them.

“Good afternoon, gentlemen. Are you here alone, or have you brought the mob with you?”

Page 95

“Your capable lieutenant, sir,” said Ebearhard, before his slower companion could begin to frame a sentence, “allowed the men to think they were having their own way, but in reality diverted them into his, so they are now enjoying a credit of one liter each at the tavern of the Golden Anker.”

“That,” said Roland, “is but as a drop of water in a parched desert. Have they discovered you hold the money, Greusel?”

“No, not yet; but I fear they will begin to suspect by and by. I suppose you went down the valley of the brook to the Rhine, and overhauled the barge there?”

“I suppose so,” said Roland. “What else did you think I could do?”

“I was sure you had done that, but I feared you would turn the barge back to Frankfort.”

“I never thought of such a thing. Indeed, the captain told me he met difficulty enough navigating the shallow Main, and I think he prefers the deeper Rhine. Of course, you know why I left you.”

The men looked at each other without reply, and Roland laughed.

“I see you have been harboring dark suspicions, but the case is very simple. The pious monks tell us that the Scriptures say if a man asks us to go one league with him, we should go two. My good friends of the guild last night made a most reasonable request, namely, that I should bestow upon them three thalers each, and surely, to quote the monks again, the laborer is worthy of his hire.”

“Oh, that is the way you look upon it, then,” said Greusel.

“From a scriptural point of view, yes; and I am going to better the teachings of my young days by giving each of the men ten times the amount he desired. Thirty thalers each are waiting in this bag for them.”

“By my sword!” cried Ebearhard, “if that isn’t setting a premium on mutiny it comes perilously close.”

“Not so, Ebearhard; not so. You and Greusel did not mutiny, therefore to each of you I give a hundred and thirty thalers, which is the thirty thalers the mutineers receive, and a hundred thalers extra, as a reward of virtue because you did not join them. After all, there is much to be said for the men’s point of view. I had led them ruthlessly under a burning July sun, along a rough and shadeless road, then dragged them away from the ample wine-vaults of Sonnenberg; next guided them on through brambles, over streams, into bogs and out again; and lastly, when they were dog-tired, hungry and ill-tempered, I carelessly pointed to a section of the landscape, and said, ’There, my dear chaps, is your bedroom’; lads who had never before slept without blankets and a roof.

No wonder they mutinied; but even then, by the love of God for His creatures, they did not actually attack me when I stood up with drawn sword in my hand."

"Of course you have that at least to be thankful for," said Ebearhard. "Eighteen to one was foul odds."

"I be thankful! Surely you are dreaming, Ebearhard. Why should I be thankful, except that I escaped the remorse for at least killing a dozen of them!"

Page 96

Ebearhard laughed heartily.

“Oh, if so sure of yourself as all that, you need no sympathy from me.”

“You thought I would be outmatched? By the Three Kings! do you imagine me such a fool as to teach you artisans the higher qualities of the sword? There would have been a woeful surprise for the eighteen had they ventured another step farther. However, that’s all past and done with, and we’ll say no more about it. Let us sit down here on the sward, and indulge in the more agreeable recreation of counting money.”

He spread his cloak on the grass, and poured out the gold upon it.

“I am keeping two hundred thalers for myself, as leader of the expedition, and covetous. Here are your hundred and thirty thalers, Greusel, and yours, Ebearhard. You will find remaining five hundred and forty, which, if divided with reasonable accuracy, should afford thirty thalers to each of our precious eighteen.”

“Aren’t you coming with us to Assmannshausen, that you may give this money to the men yourself?” asked Greusel.

“No; that pleasure falls to my lieutenants, first and second. One may divide the money while the other delivers the moral lecture against mutiny, illustrated by the amount that good behavior gains. Say nothing to the men about the barge being here, merely telling them to prepare for action. Now that you are in funds, engage a large room, exclusively for yourselves, at the Golden Anker. Thus you will be the better able to keep the men from talking with strangers, and so prevent any news of our intentions drifting across the river to Rheinstein or Falkenberg. You might put it to them, should they object to the special room, that you are reconstituting, as it were, the Kaiser cellar of Frankfort in the village of Assmannshausen. Go forward, therefore, with your usual meetings of the guild, as it was before I lowered its tone by becoming a member. Knowing the lads as I do, I suggest that you make your bargain with them before you deliver the money. No promise; no thirty thalers. And now, good-by. I shall be exceedingly busy for some days arranging for a further supply of money, so do not seek me out no matter what happens.”

With this Roland shook hands, and returned to Ehrenfels Castle.

* * * * *

The three sumptuous barges of the Archbishops hove in sight at midday, two coming up the river and one floating down. They maneuvered to the landing so that all reached it at the same time, and thus the three Archbishops were enabled to set foot simultaneously on the firm ground, as was right and proper, no one of them obtaining precedence over the other two. On entering the Castle of Ehrenfels in state, they

proceeded to the large hall of the knights, and seated themselves in three equal chairs that were set along the solid table. Here a repast was spread before them, accompanied by the finest wine the Rheingau produced, and although the grand prelates ate lustily, they were most sparing in their drink, for when they acted in concert none dared risk putting himself at a disadvantage with the others. They would make up for their abstinence when each rested in the security of his own castle.

Page 97

The board being cleared, Roland was summoned, and bowing deeply to each of the three he took his place, modestly standing on the opposite side of the table. The Archbishop of Mayence, as the oldest of the trio, occupied the middle chair; Treves, the next in age, at his right hand, and Cologne at his left. A keen observer might have noticed that the deferential, yet dignified, bearing of the young Prince made a favorable impression upon these rulers who, when they acted together, formed a power that only nominally was second in the realm.

It was Mayence who broke the silence.

“Prince Roland, some months ago turbulence in the State rendered it advisable that you, as a probable nominee to the throne, should be withdrawn from the capital to the greater safety which this house affords. I hope it has never been suggested to you that this unavoidable detention merited the harsh name of imprisonment?”

“Never, your Lordships,” said Roland, with perfect truth.

The three slightly inclined their heads, and Mayence continued:

“I trust that in the carrying out of our behests you have been put to no inconvenience during your residence in my Castle of Ehrenfels, but if you find cause for complaint I shall see to it that the transgressor is sharply punished.”

“My Lord, had such been the case I should at once have communicated with your Lordship at Mayence. The fact that you have received no such protest from me answers your question, but I should like to add emphasis to this reply by saying I have met with the greatest courtesy and kindness within these walls.”

“I speak for my brothers and myself when I assert we are all gratified to hear the expression that has fallen from your lips. There was sent for your perusal a document in triplicate. Have you found time to read it?”

“Yes, my Lord, and I beg to state at once that I will sign it with the greater pleasure since in any case, if called to the high position you propose, I should have consulted your Lordships on every matter that I deemed important enough to be worthy of your attention, and in no instance could I think of setting up my own opinion against the united wisdom of your Lordships.”

For a few minutes there ensued a whispered conversation among the three, then Mayence spoke again:

“Once more I voice the sentiments of my colleagues, Prince Roland, when I assure you that the words you have just spoken give us the utmost satisfaction. In the whole world to-day there is no prouder honor than that which it is in the Electors’ power to bestow

upon you, and it is a blessed augury for the welfare of our country when the energy and aspiration of youth in this high place associates itself with the experience of age."

Here he made a signal, and the aged custodian, who had been standing with his back against the door, well out of earshot, for the conversation was carried on in the most subdued and gentle tones, hurried forward, and Mayence requested him to produce the documents entrusted to his care. These were spread out before the young man, who signed each of them amidst a deep silence, broken only by the scratching of the quill.

Page 98

Up to this point Roland had been merely a Prince of the Empire; now, to all practical purposes, he was heir-apparent to the throne. This distinction was delicately indicated by Mayence, who asked the attendant to bring forward a chair, and then requested the young man to seat himself. Roland had supposed the ceremonies at an end, but it was soon evident that something further remained, for the three venerable heads were again in juxtaposition, and apparently there was some whispered difference as to the manner of procedure. Then Cologne, as the youngest of the three, was prevailed upon to act as spokesman, and with a smile he regarded the young man before he began.

“I reside farther than my two colleagues from your fair, if turbulent, city of Frankfort, and perhaps that is one reason why I know little of the town and its ways from personal observation. You are a young man who, I may say, has greatly commended himself to us all, and so in whatever questions I may put, you will not, I hope, imagine that there is anything underneath them which does not appear on the surface.”

Roland drew a long breath, and some of the color left his face.

“What in the name of Heaven is coming now,” he said to himself, “that calls for so ominous a prelude? It must be something more than usually serious. May the good Lord give me courage to face it!”

But outwardly he merely inclined his head.

“We have all been young ourselves, and I trust none of us forget the temptations, and perhaps the dangers, that surround youth, especially when highly placed. I am told that Frankfort is a gay city, and doubtless you have mixed, to some extent at least, in its society.” Here the Archbishop paused, and, as he evidently expected a reply, Roland spoke:

“I regret to say, my Lord, that my opportunities for social intercourse have hitherto been somewhat limited. Greatly absorbed in study, there has been little time for me to acquire companions, much less friends.”

“What your Highness says, so far from being a drawback, as you seem to imagine, is all to the good. It leaves the future clear of complications that might otherwise cause you embarrassment.” Here the Archbishop smiled again, and Roland found himself liking the august prelate. “It was not, however, of men that I desired to speak, but of women.”

“Oh, is that all?” cried the impetuous youth. “I feared, my Lord, that you were about to treat of some serious subject. So far as women are concerned, I am unacquainted with any, excepting only my mother.”

At this the three prelates smiled in differing degrees; even the stern lips of Mayence relaxing at the young man's confident assumption that consideration of women was not a matter of importance.

"Your Highness clears the ground admirably for me," continued Cologne, "and takes a great weight from my mind, because I am entrusted by my brethren with a proposal which I have found some difficulty in setting forth. It is this. The choice of an Empress is one of the most momentous questions that an Emperor is called upon to decide. In all except the highest rank personal preference has much to do with the selection of a wife, but in the case of a king do you agree with me that State considerations must be kept in view?"

Page 99

“Undoubtedly, my Lord.”

“This is a matter to which we three Electors have given the weightiest consideration, finally agreeing on one whom we believe to possess the necessary qualifications; a lady highly born, deeply religious, enormously wealthy, and exceedingly beautiful. She is related to the most noble in the land. I refer to Hildegunde Lauretta Priscilla Agnes, Countess of Sayn. If there is any reason why your preference should not coincide with ours, I beg you quite frankly to state it.”

“There is no reason at all, your Lordships,” cried Roland, with a deep sigh of relief on learning that his fears were so unfounded. “I shall be most happy and honored to wed the lady at any time your Lordships and she may select.”

“Then,” said the Archbishop of Mayence, rising to his feet and speaking with great solemnity, “you are chosen as the future Emperor of our land.”

X

A CALAMITOUS CONFERENCE

The prelate and his ward were met at the doors of Stolzenfels by the Archbishop of Treves in person, and the welcome they received left nothing to be desired in point of cordiality. There were many servants, male and female, about the Castle, but no show of armed men.

The Countess was conducted to a room whose outlook fascinated her. It occupied one entire floor of a square tower, with windows facing the four points of the compass, and from this height she could view the Rhine up to the stern old Castle of Marksburg, and down past Coblentz to her own realm of Sayn, where it bordered the river, although the stronghold from which she ruled this domain was hidden by the hills ending in Ehrenbreitstein.

When she descended on being called to *mittagessen*, she was introduced to a sister of the Archbishop of Treves, a grave, elderly woman, and to the Archbishop’s niece, a lady about ten years older than Hildegunde. Neither of these grand dames had much to say, and the conversation at the meal rested chiefly with the two Archbishops. Indeed, had the Countess but known it, her presence there was a great disappointment to the two noblewomen, for the close relationship of the younger to the Archbishop of Treves rendered it impossible that she should be offered the honor about to be bestowed upon the younger and more beautiful Countess von Sayn.

The Archbishop of Mayence, although a resident of the Castle, partook of refreshment in the smallest room of the suite reserved for him, where he was waited upon by his own servants and catered for by his own cook.

Page 100

When the great Rhine salmon, smoking hot, was placed upon the table, Cologne was generous in his praise of it, and related again, for the information of his host and household, the story of the English Princess who had partaken of a similar fish, doubtless in this same room. Despite the historical bill of fare, and the mildly exhilarating qualities of the excellent Oberweseler wine, whose delicate reddish color the sentimental Archbishop compared to the blush on a bride's cheeks, the social aspect of the midday refection was overshadowed by an almost indefinable sense of impending danger. In the pseudogenial conversation of the two Archbishops there was something forced: the attitude of the elderly hostess was one of unrelieved gloom. After a few conventional greetings to her young guest, she spoke no more during the meal. Her daughter, who sat beside the Countess on the opposite side of the table from his Lordship of Cologne, merely answered "Yes" or "No" to the comments of the lady of Sayn praising the romantic situation of the Castle, its unique qualities of architecture, and the splendid outlook from its battlements, eulogies which began enthusiastically enough, but finally faded away into silence, chilled by a reception so unfriendly.

Thus cast back upon her own thoughts, the girl grew more and more uneasy as the peculiar features of the occasion became clearer in her own mind. Here was her revered, beloved friend forcing hilarity which she knew he could not feel, breaking bread and drinking wine with a colleague while three thousand of his armed men peered down on the roof that sheltered him, ready at a signal to pounce upon Stolzenfels like birds of prey, capturing, and if necessary, slaying. She remembered the hearty cheers that welcomed them on their arrival at Coblentz, yet every man who thus boisterously greeted them, waving his bonnet in the air, was doubtless an enemy. The very secrecy, the unknown nature of the danger, depressed her more and more as she thought of it; the fierce soldiers hidden in the forest, ready to leap up, burn and kill at an unknown sign from a Prince of religion; the deadly weapons concealed in a Church of Christ: all this grim reality of a Faith she held dear had never been hinted at by the gentle nuns among whom she lived so happily for the greater part of her life.

At last her somber hostess rose, and Hildegunde, with a sigh of relief, followed her example. The Archbishop of Cologne gallantly held back the curtain at the doorway, and bowed low when the three ladies passed through. The silent hostess conducted her guest to a parlor on the same floor as the dining-room; a parlor from which opened another door connecting it with a small knights' hall; the *kleine Rittersaal* in which the Court of the Archbishops was to be held.

The Archbishop's sister did not enter the parlor, but here took formal farewell of Countess von Sayn, who turned to the sole occupant of the room, her kinsman and counselor, Father Ambrose.

Page 101

“Were you not asked to dine with us?” she inquired.

“Yes; but I thought it better to refuse. First, in case the three Archbishops might have something confidential to say to you; and second, because at best I am poor company at a banquet.”

“Indeed, you need not have been so thoughtful: first, as you say, there were not three Archbishops present, but only two, and neither said anything to me that all the world might not hear; second, the rest of the company, the sister and the niece of Treves, were so doleful that you would have proved a hilarious companion compared with them. Did my guardian make any statement to you yesterday afternoon that revealed the object of this coming Court?”

“None whatever. Our conversation related entirely to your estate and my management of it. We spoke of crops, of cultivation, and of vineyards.”

“You have no knowledge, then, of the reason why we are summoned hither?”

“On that subject, Hildegunde, I am as ignorant as you.”

“I don’t think I am wholly in the dark,” murmured the Countess, “although I know nothing definite.”

“You surmise, in spite of your guardian’s disclaimer, that the discussion will pertain to your recovery of the town of Linz?”

“Perhaps; but not likely. Did you say anything of your journey to Frankfort?”

“Not a word. I understood from you that no mention should be made of my visit unless his Lordship asked questions proving he was aware of it, in which case I was to tell the truth.”

“You were quite right, Father. Did my guardian ask you to accompany us to Stolzenfels?”

“Assuredly, or I should not have ventured.”

“What reason did he give, and what instructions did he lay upon you?”

“He thought you should have by your side some one akin to you. His instructions were that in no circumstances was I to offer any remark upon the proceedings. Indeed, I am not allowed to speak unless in answer to a question directly put to me, and then in the fewest possible words.”

Hildegunde ceased her cross-examination, and seated herself by a window which gave a view of the steep mountain-side behind the Castle, where, sheltered by the thick, dark forest, she knew that her guardian's men lay in ambush. She shuddered slightly, wondering what was the meaning of these preparations, and in the deep silence became aware of the accelerated beating of her heart. She felt but little reassured by the presence of her kinsman, whose lips moved without a murmur, and whose grave eyes seemed fixed on futurity, meditating the mystery of the next world, and completely oblivious to the realities of the earth he inhabited.

She turned her troubled gaze once more to the green forest, and after a long lapse of time the dual reveries were broken by the entrance of an official gorgeously appareled. This functionary bowed low, and said with great solemnity:

Page 102

“Madam, the Court of my Lords the Archbishops awaits your presence.”

* * * * *

The *kleine Rittersaal* occupied a fine position on the river-side front of Stolzenfels, its windows giving a view of the Rhine, with the strong Castle of Lahneck over-hanging the mouth of the Lahn, and the more ornamental Schloss Martinsburg at the upper end of Oberlahnstein. The latter edifice, built by a former Elector of Mayence, was rarely occupied by the present Archbishop, but, as he sat in the central chair of the Court, he had the advantage of being able to look across the river at his own house should it please him to do so.

The three Archbishops were standing behind the long table when the Countess entered, thus acknowledging that she who came into their presence, young and beautiful, was a very great lady by right of descent and rank. She acknowledged their courtesy by a graceful inclination of the head, and the three Princes of the Church responded each with a bow, that of Mayence scarcely perceptible, that of Treves deferential and courtly, that of Cologne with a friendly smile of encouragement.

In the center of the hall opposite the long table had been placed an immense chair, taken from the grand *Rittersaal*, ornamented with gilded carving, and covered in richly-colored Genoa velvet. It looked like a throne, which indeed it was, used only on occasions when Royalty visited the Castle. To this sumptuous seat the scarcely less gorgeous functionary conducted the girl, and when she had taken her place, the three Archbishops seated themselves. The glorified menial then bent himself until his forehead nearly touched the floor, and silently departed. Father Ambrose, his coarse, ill-cut clothes of somber color in striking contrast to the richness of costume worn by the others, stood humbly beside the chair that supported his kinswoman.

The Countess gave a quick glance at the Archbishop of Mayence, then lowered her eyes. Cologne she had known all her life; Treves she had met that day, and rather liked, although feeling she could not esteem him as she did her guardian, but a thrill of fear followed her swift look at the man in the center.

“A face of great strength,” she said to herself, “but his thin, straight lips, tightly compressed, seemed cruel, as well as determined.” With a flash of comprehension she understood now her guardian’s warning not to thwart him. It was easy to credit the acknowledged fact that this man dominated the other two. Nevertheless, when he spoke his voice was surprisingly mild.

Page 103

“Madam,” he said, “we are met here in an hour of grave anxiety. The Emperor, who has been ill for some time, is now upon his death-bed, and the physicians who attend him inform me that at any moment we may be called upon to elect his successor. That successor has already been chosen; chosen, I may add, in an informal manner, but his selection is not likely to be canceled, unless by some act of his own which would cause us to reconsider our decision. Our adoption was made very recently in my castle of Ehrenfels, and we are come together again in the Castle of my brother Treves, not in our sacred office as Archbishops, but in our secular capacity as Electors of the Empire, to determine a matter which we consider of almost equal importance. It is our privilege to bestow upon you the highest honor that may be conferred on any woman in the realm; the position of Empress.

“When you have signified your acceptance of this great elevation, I must put to you several questions concerning your future duties to the State, and these are embodied in a document which you will be asked to sign.”

The Countess did not raise her eyes. While the Archbishop was speaking the color flamed up in her cheeks, but faded away again, and her guardian, who watched her very intently across the table, saw her face become so pale that he feared she was about to faint. However, she rallied, and at last looked up, not at her dark-browed questioner, but at the Archbishop of Cologne.

“May I not know,” she said, in a voice scarcely audible, “who is my future husband?”

“Surely, surely,” replied her guardian soothingly, “but the Elector of Mayence is our spokesman here, and you must address your question to his Lordship.”

She now turned her frightened eyes upon Mayence, whose brow had become slightly ruffled at this interruption, and whose lips were more firmly closed. He sat there imperturbable, refusing the beseechment of her eyes, and thus forced her to repeat her question, though to him it took another form.

“My Lord, who is to be the next Emperor?”

“Countess von Sayn, I fear that in modifying my opening address to accord with the comprehension of a girl but recently emerged from convent life, I have led you into an error. The Court of Electors is not convened for the purpose of securing your consent, but with the duty of imposing upon you a command. It is not for you to ask questions, but to answer them.”

“You mean that I am to marry this unknown man, whether I will or no?”

“That is my meaning.”

The girl sat back in her chair, and the moisture that had gathered in her eyes disappeared as if licked up by the little flame that burned in their depths.

“Very well,” she said. “Ask your questions, and I will answer them.”

“Before I put any question, I must have your consent to my first proposition.”

“That is quite unnecessary, my Lord. When you hear my answer to your questions, you will very speedily withdraw your first proposition.”

Page 104

The Elector of Treves, who had been shifting uneasily in his chair, now leaned forward, and spoke in an ingratiating manner.

“Countess, you are a neighbor of mine, although you live on the opposite side of the river, and I am honored in receiving you as my guest. As guest and neighbor, I appeal to you on our behalf: be assured that we wish nothing but your very greatest good and happiness.” The spark in her eyes died down, and they beamed kindly on the courtier Elector. “You see before you three old bachelors, quite unversed in the ways of women. If anything that has been said offends you, pray overlook our default, for I assure you, on behalf of my colleagues and myself, that any one of us would bitterly regret uttering a single word to cause you disquietude.”

“My disquietude, my Lord, is caused by the refusal to utter the single name I have asked for. Am I a peasant girl to be handed over to the hind that makes the highest offer?”

“Not so. No such thought entered our minds. The name is, of course, a secret at the present moment, and I quite appreciate the reluctance of my Lord of Mayence to mention it, but I think in this instance an exception may safely be made, and I now appeal to his Lordship to enlighten the Countess.”

Mayence answered indifferently:

“I do not agree with you, but we are here three Electors of equal power, and two can always outvote one.”

The Elector of Cologne smiled slightly; he had seen this comedy enacted before, and never objected to it. The carrying of some unimportant point in opposition to their chief always gave Treves a certain sense of independence.

“My Lord of Cologne,” said the latter, bending forward and addressing the man at the other end of the table “do you not agree with me?”

“Certainly,” replied Cologne, with some curtness.

“In that case,” continued Treves, “I take it upon myself to announce to you, Madam, that the young man chosen for our future ruler is Prince Roland, only son of the dying Emperor.”

The hands of the Countess nervously clutched the soft velvet on the arms of her chair.

“I thank you,” she said, addressing Treves, and speaking as calmly as though she were Mayence himself. “May I ask you if this marriage was proposed to the young man?”

Treves looked up nervously at the stern face of Mayence, who nodded to him, as much as to say:

“You are doing well; go on.”

“Yes,” replied Treves.

“Was my name concealed from him?”

“No.”

“Had he ever heard of me before?”

“Surely,” replied the diplomatic Treves, “for the fame of the Countess von Sayn has traveled farther than her modesty will admit.”

“Did he agree?”

“Instantly; joyfully, it seemed to me.”

“In any case, he has never seen me,” continued the Countess. “Did he make any inquiry, whether I was tall or short, old or young, rich or poor, beautiful or ugly?”

Page 105

“He seemed very well satisfied with our choice.”

Treves had his elbows on the table, leaning forward with open palms supporting his chin. He had spoken throughout in the most ingratiating manner, his tones soft and honeyed. He was so evidently pleased with his own diplomacy that even the eye of the stern Mayence twinkled maliciously when the girl turned impulsively toward the other end of the table, and cried:

“Guardian, tell me the truth! I know this young man accepted me as if I were a sack of grain, his whole mind intent on one thing only: to secure for himself the position of Emperor. Is it not so?”

“It is not so, Countess,” said Cologne solemnly.

“Prince Roland, it is true, made no stipulation regarding you.”

“I was sure of it. Any Gretchen in Germany would have done just as well. I was merely part of the bargain he was compelled to make with you, and now I announce to the Court that no power on earth will induce me to marry Prince Roland. I claim the right of my womanhood to wed only the man whom I love, and who loves me!”

Mayence gave utterance to an exclamation that might be coarsely described as a snort of contempt. The Elector of Treves was leaning back in his chair discomfited by her abrupt desertion of him. The Elector of Cologne now leaned forward, dismayed at the turn affairs had taken, deep anxiety visible on his brow.

“Countess von Sayn,” he began, and thus his ward realized how deeply she had offended, “in all my life I never met any young man who impressed me so favorably as Prince Roland of Germany. If I possessed a daughter whom I dearly loved, I could wish her no better fortune than to marry so honest a youth as he. The very point you make against him should have told most strongly in his favor with a young girl. My reading of his character is that so far as concerns the love you spoke of, he knows as little of it as yourself, and thus he agreed to our proposal with a seeming indifference which you entirely misjudge. If you, then, have any belief in my goodwill towards you, in my deep anxiety for your welfare and happiness, I implore you to agree to the suggestion my Lord of Mayence has made. You speak of love knowing nothing concerning it. I call to your remembrance the fact that one noble lady of your race may have foregone the happiness that love perhaps brings, in her desire for the advancement of one whom she loved so truly that she chose for her guide the more subdued but steadier star of duty. The case is presented to you, my dear, in different form, and I feel assured that duty and love will shine together.”

As the venerable Archbishop spoke with such deep earnestness, in a voice she loved so well, the girl buried her face in her hands, and he could see the tears trickle between

her fingers. A silence followed her guardian's appeal, disturbed only by the agitated breathing of Hildegunde.

The cold voice of the Elector of Mayence broke the stillness, like a breath from a glazier:

Page 106

“Do you consent, Madam?”

“Yes,” gasped the girl, her shoulders quivering with emotion, but she did not look up.

“I fear that the object of this convocation was like to be forgotten in the gush of sentiment issuing from both sides of me. This is a business meeting, and not a love-feast. Will you do me the courtesy, Madam, of raising your head and answering my question?”

The girl dashed the tears from her eyes, and sat up straight, grasping with nervous hands the arms of the throne, as if to steady herself against the coming ordeal.

“I scarcely heard what you said. Do you consent to marry Prince Roland of Germany?”

“I have consented,” she replied firmly.

“Will you use your influence with him that he may carry out the behests of the three Archbishops?”

“Yes, if the behests are for the good of the country.”

“I cannot accept any qualifications, therefore I repeat my question. Will you use your influence with him that he may carry out the behests of the three Archbishops?”

“I can have no influence with such a man.”

“Answer my question, Madam.”

“Say yes, Hildegunde,” pleaded Cologne.

She turned to him swimming eyes.

“Oh, Guardian, Guardian!” she cried, “I have done everything I can, and all for you; all for you. I cannot stand any more. This is torture to me. Let me go home, and another day when I am calmer I will answer your questions!”

The perturbed Archbishop sat back again with a deep sigh. The ignorance of women with which his colleague of Treves had credited all three was being amazingly dispelled. He could not understand why this girl should show such emotion at the thought of marrying the heir to the throne, when assured the young man was all that any reasonable woman could desire.

“Madam, I pray you give your attention to me,” said the unimpassioned voice of Mayence. “I have listened to your conversation with my colleagues, and the patience I exhibited will, I hope, be credited to me. This matter of business”—he emphasized the

word—“must be settled to-day, and to clear away all misapprehension, I desire to say that your guardian has really no influence on this matter. It was settled before you came into the room. You are merely allowed a choice of two outcomes: first, marriage with Prince Roland; second, imprisonment in Pfalz Castle, situated in the middle of the Rhine.”

“What is that?” demanded the Countess.

“I am tired of repeating my statements.”

“You would imprison me—me, a Countess of Sayn?”

Again the tears evaporated, and in their place came the smoldering fire bequeathed to her by the Crusaders, and, if the truth must be known, by Rhine robbers as well.

“Yes, Madam. A predecessor of mine once hanged one of your ancestors.”

“It is not true,” cried the girl, in blazing wrath. “’Twas the Emperor Rudolph who hanged him; the same Emperor that chastised an Archbishop of Mayence, and brought him, cringing, to his knees, begging for pardon, which the Emperor contemptuously flung to him. You dare not imprison me!”

Page 107

“Refuse to marry Prince Roland, and learn,” said the Archbishop very quietly.

The girl sprang to her feet, a-quiver with anger.

“I do refuse! Prince Roland has hoodwinked the three of you! He is a libertine and a brawler, consorting with the lowest in the cellars of Frankfort; a liar and a thief, and not a brave thief at that, but a cutthroat who holds his sword to the breast of an unarmed merchant while he filches from him his gold. Added to that, a drunkard as his father is; and, above all, a hypocrite, as his father is not, yet clever enough, with all his vices, to cozen three men whose vile rule has ruined Frankfort, and left the broad Rhine empty of its life-giving commerce;” she waved her hand toward the vacant river.

The Archbishop of Cologne was the first to rise, horror-stricken.

“The girl is mad!” he murmured.

Treves rose also, but Mayence sat still, a sour smile on his lips, yet a twinkle of admiration in his eyes.

“No, my poor Guardian, I am not mad,” she cried, regarding him with a smile, her wrath subsiding as quickly as it had risen. “What I say is true, and it may be that our meeting, turbulent as it has been, will prevent you from making a great mistake. He whom you would put on the throne is not the man you think.”

“My dear ward!” cried Cologne, “how can you make such accusations against him? What should a girl living in seclusion as you live, know of what is passing in Frankfort.”

“It seems strange, Guardian, but it is true, nevertheless. Sit down again, I beg of you, and you, my Lord of Treves. Even my Lord of Mayence will, I think, comprehend my abhorrence when such a proposal was made to me, and I hope, my Lord, you will forgive my outburst of anger just now.”

She heard the trembling Treves mutter:

“Mayence never forgives.”

“Now, Father Ambrose, come forward.”

“Why?” asked Ambrose, waking from his reverie.

“Tell them your experiences in Frankfort.”

“I am not allowed to speak,” objected the monk.

“Speak, speak!” cried Cologne. “What, sir, have you had to do with this girl’s misleading?”

“I thought,” he said wistfully to his kinswoman, “that I was not to mention my visit to Frankfort unless my Lord the Archbishop brought up the subject.”

“Have you not been listening to these proceedings?” cried the girl impatiently. “The subject is brought up before three Archbishops, instead of before one. Tell their Lordships what you know of Prince Roland.”

Father Ambrose, with a deep sigh, began his recital, to which Treves and Cologne listened with ever-increasing amazement, while the sullen Mayence sat back in his chair, face imperturbable, but the thin lips closing firmer and firmer as the narrative went on.

When the monologue ended, his Reverence of Cologne was the first to speak:

“In the name of Heaven, why did you not tell me all this yesterday?”

Page 108

Father Ambrose looked helplessly at his kinswoman, but made no reply.

“I forbade him, my Lord,” said the girl proudly, and for the first time addressing him by a formal title, as if from now on he was to be reckoned with her enemies. “I alone am responsible for the journey to Frankfort and its consequences, whatever they may be. You invoked the name of Heaven just now, my Lord, and I would have you know that I am convinced Heaven itself intervened on my behalf to expose the real character of Prince Roland, who has successfully deluded three men like yourselves, supposed to be astute!”

The Archbishop turned upon her sorrowful eyes, troubled yet kindly.

“My dear Countess,” he said, “I have not ventured to censure you; nevertheless I am, or have been, your guardian, and should, I think, have been consulted before you committed yourself to an action that threatens disaster to our plans.”

The girl replied, still with the hauteur so lately assumed:

“I do not dispute my wardship, and have more than once thanked you for your care of me, but at this crisis of my life—a crisis transforming me instantly from a girl to a woman—you fail me, seeing me here at bay. I wished to spend a month or two at the capital city, but before troubling you with such a request I determined to learn whether or not the state of Frankfort was as disturbed as rumor alleged. Finding matters there to be hopeless, the project of a visit was at once abandoned, and knowing nothing of the honor about to be conferred on Prince Roland, I thought it best to keep what had been discovered regarding his character a secret between the Reverend Father and myself. I dare say an attempt will be made to cast doubt on the Reverend Father’s story, and perhaps my three judges may convince themselves of its falseness, but they cannot convince me, and I tell you finally and formally that no power on earth will induce me to marry a marauder and a thief!”

This announcement effectually silenced the one friend she possessed among the three. Mayence slowly turned his head, and looked upon the colleague at his right, as much as to say, “Do you wish to add your quota to this inconsequential talk?”

Treves, at this silent appeal, leaned forward, and spoke to the perturbed monk, who knew that, in some way he did not quite understand, affairs were drifting towards a catastrophe.

“Father Ambrose,” began the Elector of Treves, “would you kindly tell us the exact date when this encounter on the bridge took place?”

“Saint Cyrille’s Day,” replied Father Ambrose.

“And during the night of that day you were incarcerated in the cellar among the wine-casks?”

“Yes, my Lord.”

“Would it surprise you to know, Father Ambrose, that during Saint Cyrille’s Day, and for many days previous to that date, Prince Roland was a close prisoner in his Lordship of Mayence’s strong Castle of Ehrenfels, and that it was quite impossible for you to have met him in Frankfort, or anywhere else?”

Page 109

“Nevertheless, I did meet him,” persisted Father Ambrose, with the quiet obstinacy of a mild man.

Treves smiled.

“Where did you lodge in Frankfort, Father?”

“At the Benedictine Monastery in Sachsenhausen.”

“Do the good brethren supply their guests with a potent wine? Frankfort is, and always has been, the chief market of that exhilarating but illusion-creating beverage.”

The cheeks of the Countess flushed crimson at this insinuation on her kinsman’s sobriety. The old monk’s hand rested on the arm of her throne, and she placed her own hand upon his as if to encourage him to resent the implied slander. After all, they were two Sayns hard pressed by these ruthless potentates. But Ambrose answered mildly:

“It may be that the monastery contains wine, my Lord, and doubtless the wine is good, but during my visit I did not taste it.”

Cross-examination at an end, the Lord of Mayence spoke scarcely above a whisper, a trace of weariness in his manner.

“My Lords,” he said, “we have wandered from the subject. The romance by Father Ambrose is but indifferently interesting, and nothing at all to the point. Even a child may understand what has happened, for it is merely a case of mistaken identity, and my sympathy goes out entirely towards the unknown; a man who knew his own mind, and being naturally indignant at an interference both persistent and uncalled for, quite rightly immured the meddler among the casks, probably shrewd enough to see that this practicer of temperance would not interfere with their integrity.

“Madam, stand up!”

The Countess seemed inclined to disobey this curt order, but a beseeching look from her now thoroughly frightened guardian changed her intention, and she rose to her feet.

“Madam, the greatest honor which it is in the power of this Empire to bestow upon a woman has been proffered to you, and rejected with unnecessary heat. I beg therefore, to inform you, that in the judgment of this Court you are considered unworthy of the exalted position which, before knowing your true character, it was intended you should fill. The various calumnies you have poured upon the innocent head of Prince Roland amount in effect to high treason.”

“Pardon, my Lord!” cried the Archbishop of Cologne, “your contention will hold neither in law nor in fact. High treason is an offense that can be committed only against the realm

as a whole, or against its ruler in person. Prince Roland is not yet Emperor of Germany, and however much we may regret the language used in his disparagement, it has arisen through a misunderstanding quite patent to us all. A good but dreamy man made a mistake, which, however deplorable, has been put forward with a sincerity that none of us can question; indeed, it was the intention of Father Ambrose to keep his supposed knowledge a secret, and you both saw with what evident reluctance he spoke when commanded to

Page 110

do so by my colleague of Treves. Whatever justice there may be in disciplining Father Ambrose, there is none at all for exaggerated censure upon my lady, the Countess of Sayn, and before pronouncing a further censure I beg your Lordship to take into consideration the circumstances of the case, by which a young girl, without any previous warning or preparation, is called upon suddenly to make the most momentous decision of her life. I say it is to her ladyship's credit that she refused the highest station in the land in the interests of what she supposes to be, however erroneously, the cause of honesty, sobriety, and, I may add, of Christianity; qualities for which we three men should stand."

"My Lord," objected Treves, "we meet here as temporal Princes, and not as Archbishops of the Church."

"I know that, my brother of Treves, and my appeal is to the temporal law. Prince Roland, despite his high lineage, is merely a citizen of the Empire, and a subject of his Majesty, the Emperor. It is therefore impossible that the crime of treason can be committed against him."

During this protest and discussion the Elector of Mayence had leaned back again in his usual attitude of tired indifference; his keen eyes almost closed. When he spoke he made no reference to what either of his two confreres had said.

"Madam," he began, without raising his voice, "it is the sentence of this Court that you shall be imprisoned during its pleasure in the Castle of Pfalzgrafenstein, which stands on a rock in the middle of the Rhine. Under the guardianship of the Pfalzgraf von Stahleck, who will be responsible for your safe keeping, I hope you will listen to the devout counsel of his excellent wife to such effect that when next you are privileged to meet a Court so highly constituted as this you may be better instructed regarding the language with which it should be addressed. You are permitted to take with you two waiting-women, chosen by yourself from your own household, but all communication with the outside world is forbidden. You said something to the effect that this Court dared not pronounce such sentence against you, but if you possessed that wisdom you so conspicuously lack, you might have surmised that a power which ventured to imprison the future Emperor of this land would not hesitate to place in durance a mere Countess von Sayn."

The Countess bowed her head slightly, and without protest sat down again. The Elector of Cologne arose.

"My Lord, I raised a point of law which has been ignored."

“This is the proper time to raise it,” replied Mayence, “and you shall be instantly satisfied. This Court is competent to give its decision upon any point of law. If my Lord of Treves agrees with me, your objection is disallowed.”

“I agree,” said the Elector of Treves.

“My Lord of Cologne,” said Mayence, turning towards the person addressed, “the decision of the Court is against you.”

Page 111

Hildegunde was already learning a lesson. Although dazed by the verdict, she could not but admire the quiet, conversational tone adopted by the three men before her, as compared with her own late vehemence.

“The decision of the Court is not unexpected,” said Cologne, “and I regret that I am compelled to appeal.”

“To whom will you appeal?” inquired Mayence mildly, “The Emperor, as you know, is quite unfit for the transaction of public business, and even if such were not the case, would hesitate to overturn a decision given by a majority of this Court.”

“I appeal,” replied Cologne, “to a power that even Emperors must obey; the power of physical force.”

“You mean,” said Mayence sadly, “to the three thousand men concealed in the forest behind this house in which you are an honored guest?”

The Elector of Cologne was so taken aback by this almost whispered remark that he was momentarily struck speechless. A sudden pallor swept the usual ruddiness from his face. The Lord of Mayence gently inclined his head as if awaiting an answer, and when it did not come, went on impassively:

“I may inform you, my Lord, that my army occupies the capital city of Frankfort, able and ready to quell any disturbance that may be caused by the announcement of the Emperor’s death, but there are still plenty of seasoned troops ready to uphold the decisions of this Court. When your spies scoured the country in the forests, and along the river almost to the gates of my city of Mayence, they appeared to labor under the illusion that I could move my soldiers only overland. Naturally, they met no sign of such an incursion, because I had requisitioned a hundred barges which I found empty in the river Main by Frankfort. These were floated down the Main to Mayence, and there received their quota of a hundred men each. The night being dark they came down the Rhine, it seems, quite unobserved, and are now concealed in the mouth of the river Lahn directly opposite this Castle.

“When my flag is hoisted on the staff of the main tower this flotilla will be at the landing below us within half an hour. You doubtless have made similar arrangements for bringing your three thousand down upon Stolzenfels, but the gates of this Castle are now closed. Indeed, Stolzenfels was put in condition to withstand a siege very shortly after you and your ward entered it, and it is garrisoned by two hundred fighting men, kindly provided at my suggestion by my brother of Treves. I doubt if its capture is possible, even though you gave the signal, which we will not allow. Of course, your plan of capturing Treves and myself was a good one could it be carried out, for a man in jeopardy will always compromise, and as I estimate you are in that position I should be glad to know what arrangement you propose.”

The Archbishop of Cologne did not reply, but stood with bent head and frowning brow. It was the Countess von Sayn who, rising, spoke:

Page 112

“My Lord Archbishop of Mayence,” she said, “I could never forgive myself if through action of mine a fatal struggle took place between my countrymen. I have no desire to enact the part of Helen of Troy. I am therefore ready and willing to be imprisoned, or to marry Prince Roland of Frankfort, whichever alternative you command, so long as no disadvantage comes to my friend, his Lordship of Cologne.”

“Madam,” said Mayence suavely, “there are not *now* two alternatives, as you suppose.”

“In such case, your Highness, I betake myself instantly to Pfalz Castle, and I ask that my guardian be allowed to escort me on the journey.”

“Madam, your determination is approved, and your request granted, but, as the business for which the three Electors were convened is not yet accomplished, I request you to withdraw until such time as an agreement has been arrived at. Father Ambrose is permitted to accompany you.”

The gallant Elector of Treves sprang at once to his feet, pleading for the privilege of conducting the Countess to the apartments of his sister and her daughter. As the door to the ante-room opened the Elector of Cologne, whose eyes followed his departing ward, did not fail to observe that the lobby was thronged with armed men, and he realized now, if he had not done so from Mayence’s observation, how completely he was trapped. Even had a hundred thousand of his soldiers stood in readiness on the hills, it was impossible for him to give the signal bringing them to his rescue.

A few minutes later the Elector of Treves returned, and took his place at Mayence’s right hand. The latter spoke as though the conference had been unanimous and amiable.

“Now that we three are alone together, I think we shall discuss our problems under a feeling of less apprehension if the small army in the forest is bade God-speed on its way to Cologne. Such being the case,” he went on, turning to Cologne, “would you kindly write an order to that effect to your commander. Inform him that we three Electors wish to review your troops from the northern balcony, and bid them file past from the hills to the river road. They are to cross the Moselle by the old bridge, and so return to your city. You will perhaps pledge faith that no signal will be made to your officers as they pass us. I make this appeal with the greater confidence since you are well aware three thousand men would but destroy themselves in any attempt to capture this Castle, with an army of ten thousand on their flank to annihilate them. Do you agree?”

“I agree,” replied Cologne.

He wrote out the order required, and handed it to Mayence, who scrutinized the document with some care before passing it on to Treves. Mayence addressed Cologne in his blandest tones:

“Would you kindly instruct our colleague how to get that message safely into the hands of your commander.”

“If he will have it sent to the head of my small escort, ordering him to take it directly up the hill behind this Castle until he comes to my sentinels, whom he knows personally, they will allow him to pass through, and deliver my written command to the officer in charge.”

Page 113

This being done, and Treves once more returned, Mayence said:

“I am sure we all realize that the Countess von Sayn, however admirable in other respects, possesses an independent mind and a determined will rendering her quite unsuited for the station we intended her to occupy. I think her guardian must be convinced now, even though he had little suspicion of it before, that this lady would not easily be influenced by any considerations we might place before her. The regrettable incidents of this conference have probably instilled into her mind a certain prejudice against us.”

Here, for the first time, the Elector of Cologne laughed.

“It is highly probable, my Lord,” he said, “and, indeed, your moderate way of putting the case is unanswerable. Her ladyship as an Empress under our influence is out of the question. I therefore make a proposal with some confidence, quite certain it will please you both. I venture to nominate for the position of Empress that very demure and silent lady who is niece of my brother the Elector of Treves.”

Treves strangled a gasp in its birth, but could not suppress the light of ambition that suddenly leaped into his eyes. The elevation of his widowed sister’s child to the Imperial throne was an advantage so tremendous, and came about so unexpectedly, that for the moment his slow brain was numbed by the glorious prospect. It seemed incredible that Cologne had actually put forward such a proposition.

The eyes of Mayence veiled themselves almost to shutting point, but in no other manner did emotion show. Like a flash his alert mind saw the full purport of the bombshell Cologne had so carelessly tossed between himself and his henchman. Cologne, having lost everything, had now proved clever enough to set by the ears those who overruled him by their united vote. If this girl were made Empress she would be entirely under the influence of her uncle, of whose household she had been a pliant member ever since childhood. Yet what was Mayence to do? Should he object to the nomination, he would at once obliterate the unswerving loyalty of Treves, and if this happened, Treves and Cologne, joining, would outvote him, and his objection would prove futile. He would enrage Treves without carrying his own point, and he knew that he held his position only because of the dog-like fidelity of the weaker man. Slow anger rose in his heart as he pictured the conditions of the future. Whatever influence he sought to exert upon the Emperor by the indirect assistance of the Empress, must be got at through the complacency of Treves, who would gradually come to appreciate his own increased importance.

All this passed through the mind of Mayence, and his decision had been arrived at before Treves recovered his composure.

“It gives me great pleasure,” said the Elector of Mayence, firmly suppressing the malignancy of his glance towards the man seated on his left,—“it gives me very great pleasure indeed to second so admirable a nomination, the more so that I am thus permitted to offer my congratulations to an esteemed colleague and a valued friend. My Lord of Treves, I trust that you will make this nomination unanimous, for, to my delight, his Lordship of Cologne anticipated, by a few moments the proposal I was about to submit to you.”

Page 114

“My Lord,” stammered Treves, finding his voice with difficulty, “I—I—of course will agree to whatever the Court decides. I—I thank you, my Lord, and you too, my brother of Cologne.”

“Then,” cried Mayence, almost joyfully, “the task for which we are convened is accomplished, and I declare this Court adjourned.”

He rose from his chair. The overjoyed Prince at his right took no thought of the fact that their chairman had not called upon the lady that she might receive the decision of the conclave and answer the questions to be put to her, but Cologne perceived the omission, and knew that from that moment Mayence would set his subtility at work to nullify the nomination. Even though his bombshell had not exploded, and the two other Electors were apparently greater friends than ever, Cologne had achieved his immediate object, and was satisfied.

Through the open windows came the sound of the steady tramping of disciplined men, and the metallic clash of armor and arms in transit.

“Ah, now,” cried Mayence, “we will enjoy the advantage of reviewing the brave troops of Cologne. Lead the way, my Lord of Treves. You know the Castle better than we do.”

The proud Treves, treading on air, guided his guests to the northern balcony.

XI

GOLD GALORE THAT TAKES TO ITSELF WINGS

In the thick darkness Roland paced up and down the east bank of the Rhine at a spot nearly midway between Assmannshausen and Ehrenfels. The night was intensely silent, its stillness merely accentuated by the gentle ripple of the water current against the barge’s blunt nose, which pointed upstream. Standing motionless as a statue, the massive figure of Captain Blumenfels appeared in deeper blackness against the inky hills on the other side of the Rhine. Long sweeps lay parallel to the bulwarks of the barge, and stalwart men were at their posts, waiting the word of command to handle these exaggerated oars, in defiance of wind and tide. On this occasion, however, the tide only would be against them, for the strong southern breeze was wholly favorable. Their voyage that night would be short, but strenuous; merely crossing the river, and tying up against the opposite bank; but the Rhine swirled powerfully round the rock of Ehrenfels above them, and the men at the sweeps must pull vigorously if they were not to be carried down into premature danger.

Roland, who when they left Frankfort was in point of time the youngest member of the guild, now seemed, if one could distinguish him through the gloom of the night, to have become years older, and there was an added dignity in his bearing, for, although now

but a potential freebooter, he had received assurance that he would be eventually elected Emperor.

Page 115

He had sent word that morning to Greusel at the Golden Anker, bidding him get together his men, and lead them up to the barge not later than an hour before the moon rose, for Roland was anxious to reach the other side of the Rhine unseen from either shore. He cautioned Greusel to make his march a silent one, and this order Joseph at first found some difficulty in carrying out, but in any case he need have entertained no fear. The strong red wine of Assmannshausen is a potent liquid, and the inhabitants of the town were accustomed to song and laughter on the one street of the place at all hours of the night.

When they arrived, the men were quiet enough, and speedily stowed themselves away in their quarters at the stern of the barge, whereupon Roland, the last to spring aboard, waved his hand at the captain to cast off. The nose of the boat was shoved away from land, and then the powerful sweeps dipped into the water. Slowly but surely she made her way across the river; silent and invisible from either bank. The current, however, swept them down opposite the twinkling lights of Assmannshausen, after which, in the more tranquil waters of the western shore, they rowed steadily upstream for about half a league, and then, with ropes tied round trees growing at the water's edge, laid up for the remainder of the night.

Roland now counseled his company to enjoy what sleep was possible, as they would be roused at the first glint of daybreak; so, with great good-nature, each man wrapped himself up in his cloak and lay down on the cabin floor.

When the eastern sky became gray, the slumberers were awakened, and a ration of bread and wine served to each. The captain already had received his instructions, and the men discarding their cloaks, followed their leader into the still gloomy forest. Here, with as little noise as might be, they climbed the steep wooded hill, and arriving at something almost like a path, a hundred yards up from the river, they turned to the right, and so marched, no man speaking above a whisper.

The forest became lighter and lighter, and at last Roland, holding up his hand to sign caution, turned to the left from the path, and farther up into the unbroken forest. They had traversed perhaps a league when another silent order brought them to a standstill, and peering through the trees to the east, the men caught glimpses of the grand, gray battlements of that famous stronghold, Rheinstein, seeing at the corner nearest them a square tower, next a machicolated curtain of wall, and a larger square tower almost as high as the first hanging over the precipice that descended to the Rhine. Inside this impregnable enclosure rose the great bulk of the Castle itself, and near at hand the massive square keep, with an octagonal turret on the southeast corner, the top of which was the highest point of the stronghold, although a round tower rising directly over the Rhine was not much lower.

Page 116

Roland, advancing through the trees, but motioning his men to remain where they were, peered across to the battlements and down at the entrance gate.

Baron von Hohenfels sat so secure in his elevated robber's nest, which he deemed invincible—and, indeed, the cliff on which it stood, nearly a hundred yards high, made it so if approached from the Rhine—that he kept only one man on watch, and this sentinel was stationed on the elevated platform of the round tower. Roland saw him yawn wearily as he leaned against his tall lance, and was glad to learn that even one man kept guard, for at first he feared that all within the Castle were asleep, the round tower, until Roland had shifted his position to the north, being blotted out by the nearer square donjon keep. Now satisfied, he signaled his men to sit down, which they did. He himself took up a position behind a tree, where, unseen, he could watch the man with the lance.

So indolent was the sentry that Roland began to fear the barge would pass by unnoticed. Not for months had any sailing craft appeared on the river, and doubtless the warden regarded his office as both useless and wearisome. Brighter and brighter became the eastern sky, and at last a tinge of red appeared above the hills across the silent Rhine. Suddenly the guardian straightened up, then, shading his eyes with his right hand, he leaned over the battlements, peering to the south. A moment later the stillness was rent by a lusty shout, and the man disappeared as if he had fallen through a trap-door. Presently the notes of a bugle echoed within the walls, followed by clashes of armor and the buzzing sound of men, as though a wasp's nest had been disturbed. Half a dozen came into sight on top of the various towers and battlements, glanced at the river, and vanished as hastily as the sentinel had done.

At last the gates came ponderously open, and the first three men to emerge were on horseback, one of them hastily getting into an outer garment, but the well-trained horses, who knew their business quite as thoroughly as their riders, for they were accustomed to plunge into the river if any barge disobeyed the order commanding it to halt, turned from the gate, and dashed down the steep road that descended through the forest. The men-at-arms poured forth with sword or pike, and in turn went out of sight. They appeared to be leaderless, dashing forward in no particular formation, yet, like the horses, they knew their business. All this turmoil was not without its effect on Roland's following, who edged forward on hands and knees to discover what was going on, everyone breathless with excitement; but they saw their leader cool and motionless, counting on his fingers the number of men who passed out, for he knew exactly how many fighters the Castle contained.

"Not yet, not yet!" he whispered.

Finally three lordly individuals strode out; officers their more resplendent clothing indicated them to be, and the trio followed the others.

Page 117

“Ha!” cried Roland, “old Baron Hugo drank too deeply last night to be so early astir.”

He was speaking aloud now.

“Take warning from that, my lads, and never allow wine to interfere with business. Follow me, but cautiously, one after the other in single file, and look to your footing. ’Tis perilous steep between here and the gate;” and, indeed, so they found it, but all reached the level forecourt in safety, and so through the open portal.

“Close and bar those gates,” was the next command, instantly obeyed.

Down the stone steps of the Castle, puffing and grunting, came a gigantic, obese individual, his face bloated with excess, his eyes bleary with the lees of too much wine. He was struggling into his doublet, assisted by a terrified old valet, and was swearing most deplorably. Seeing the crowd at the gate, and half-blindly mistaking them for his own men, he roared:

“What do you there, you hounds? To the river, every man of you, and curse your leprous, indolent souls! Why in the fiend’s name—” But here he came to an abrupt stop on the lowest step, the sting of a sword’s point at his throat, and now, out of breath, his purple face became mottled.

“Good morning to you, Baron Hugo von Hohenfels. These men whom you address so coarsely obey no orders but mine.”

“And who, imp of Satan, are you?” sputtered the old man.

“By profession a hangman. From our fastnesses in the hills, seeing a barge float down the river, we thought it likely you would leave the Castle undefended, and so came in to execute the Prince of Robbers.”

The Baron was quaking like a huge jelly. It was evident that, although noted for his cruelty, he was at heart a coward.

“You—you—you—” he stammered, “are outlaws! You are outlaws from the Hunsruck.”

“How clever of you, Baron, to recognize us at once. Now you know what to expect. Greusel, unwind the rope I gave you last night. I will show you its purpose.”

Greusel did as he was requested without comment, but Ebearhard approached closely to his chief, and whispered:

“Why resort to violence? We have no quarrel with this elephant. ’Tis his gold we want, and to hang him is a waste of time.”

“Hush, Ebearhard,” commanded Roland sternly. “The greater includes the less. I know this man, and am taking the quickest way to his treasure-house.”

Ebearhard fell back, but by this time the useful Greusel had made a loop of the rope, and threw it like a cravat around the Baron’s neck.

“No, no, no!” cried the frightened nobleman. “’Tis not my life you seek. That is of no use to such as you; and, besides, I have never harmed the outlaws.”

“That is a lie,” said Roland. “You sent an expedition against us just a year ago.”

“’Twas not I,” protested Hohenfels, “but the pirate of Falkenberg. Still, no matter. I’ll buy my life from you. I am a wealthy man.”

Page 118

“How much?” asked Roland, hesitating.

“More than all of you can carry away.”

“In gold?”

“Of a surety in gold.”

“Where are the keys of your treasury?”

“In my chamber. I will bring them to you,” and the Baron turned to mount the steps again.

“Not so,” cried Roland. “Stand where you are, and send your man for them. If they are not here before I count twoscore, you hang, and nothing will save you.”

The Baron told the trembling valet where to find the keys.

“Greusel, you and Ebearhard accompany him, and at the first sign of treachery, or any attempt to give an alarm, run him through with your swords. Does your man know where the treasury is?” he continued to the Baron.

“Oh, yes, yes!”

“How is your gold bestowed?”

“In leathern bags.”

“Good. Greusel, take sixteen of the men, and bring down into the courtyard all the gold you can carry. Then we will estimate whether or not it is sufficient to buy the Baron’s life, for I hold him in high esteem. He is a valuable man. See to it that there is no delay, Greusel, and never lose sight of this valet. Bring him back, laden with gold.”

They all disappeared within the Castle, led by the old servitor.

“Sit you down, Baron,” said Roland genially. “You seem agitated, for which there is no cause should there prove to be gold enough to outweigh you.”

The ponderous noble seated himself with a weary sigh.

“And pray to the good Lord above us,” went on Roland, “that your men may not return before this transaction is completed, for if they do, my first duty will be to strangle you. Even gold will not save you in that case. But still, you have another chance for your life, should such an untoward event take place. Shout to them through the closed gates that they must return to the edge of the river until you join them; then, if they obey, you are

spared. Remember, I beg of you, the uselessness of an outcry, for we are in possession of Rheinstein, and you know that the Castle is unassailable from without."

The Baron groaned.

"Do not be hasty with your cord," he said dejectedly. "I will follow your command."

The robbers, however, did not return, but the treasure-searchers did, piling the bags in the courtyard, and again Hohenfels groaned dismally at the sight. Roland indicated certain sacks with the point of his sword, ordering them to be opened. Each was full of gold.

"Now, my lads," he cried, "oblige the Baron by burdening yourselves with this weight of metal, then we shall make for the Hunsruck. Open the gates. Lead the men to the point where we halted, Greusel, and there await me."

The rich company departed, and Roland beguiled the time and the weariness of the Baron by a light and interesting conversation to which there was neither reply nor interruption. At last, having allowed time for his band to reach their former halting-place, he took the rope from the Baron's neck, tied the old robber's hands behind him, then bound his feet, cutting the rope in lengths with his sword. He served the trembling valet in the same way, shutting him up within the Castle, and locking the door with the largest key in the bunch, which bunch he threw down beside his lordship.

Page 119

“Baron von Hohenfels,” he said, “I have kept my word with you, and now bid farewell. I leave you out-of-doors, because you seem rather scant of breath, for which complaint fresh air is beneficial. Adieu, my lord Baron.”

The Baron said nothing as Roland, with a sweep of his bonnet, took leave of him, climbed the steep path and joined his waiting men. He led them along the hillside, through the forest for some distance, then descended to the water’s edge. The river was blank, so they all sat down under the trees out of sight, leaving one man on watch. Here Roland spent a very anxious half-hour, mitigated by the knowledge that the men of Rheinstein were little versed in woodcraft, and so might not be able to trace the fugitives. It was likely they would make a dash in quite the opposite direction, towards the Hunsruck, because Hohenfels believed they were outlaws from that district, and did not in any way associate them with the plundered barge.

But if the robbers of Rheinstein took a fancy to sink the barge, an act only too frequently committed, then were Roland and his company in a quandary, without food, or means of crossing the river. However, he was sure that Captain Blumenfels would follow his instructions, which were to offer no resistance, but rather to assist the looters in their exactions.

“Within a league,” said Roland to his men, “stand three pirate castles: Rheinstein, which we have just left; Falkenberg, but a short distance below, and then Sonneck. If nothing happens to the barge, I expect to finish with all three before nightfall; for, the strongholds being so close together, we must work rapidly, and not allow news of our doings to leap in advance of us.”

“But suppose,” said Kurzbold, “that Hohenfels’ men hold the barge at the landing for their own use?”

“We will wait here for another half-hour,” replied Roland, “and then, if we see nothing of the boat, proceed along the water’s edge until we learn what has become of her. I do not think the thieves will interfere with the barge, as they have not been angered either by disobedience of their orders to land, or resistance after the barge is by the shore. Besides, I count on the fact that the officers, at least, will be anxious to let the barge proceed, hoping other laden boats may follow, and, indeed, I think for this reason they will be much more moderate in their looting than we have been.”

Before he had finished speaking, the man on watch by the water announced the barge in sight, floating down with the current. At this they all emerged from the forest. Captain Blumenfels, carefully scanning the shore, saw them at once, and turned the boat’s head towards the spot where they stood.

The bags of gold were bolted away in the stout lockers extending on each side of the cabin. While this was being done, Roland gave minute instructions to the captain

regarding the next item in the programme, and once more entered the forest with his men.

Page 120

The task before them was more difficult than the spoiling of Rheinstein, because the huge bulk of Falkenberg stood on a summit of treeless rock; the Castle itself, a gigantic, oblong gray mass, with a slender square campanile some distance from it, rising high above its battlements on the slope that went down towards the Rhine, forming thus an excellent watch-tower. But although the conical hill of rock was bare of the large trees that surrounded Rheinstein, there were plenty of bowlders and shrubbery behind which cover could be sought. On this occasion the marauding guild could not secure a position on a level with the battlements of the Castle, as had been the case behind Rheinstein, and, furthermore, they were compelled to make their dash for the gate up-hill.

But these disadvantages were counterbalanced by the fact that Falkenberg was situated much higher than Rheinstein, and was farther away from the river, so that when the garrison descended to the water's edge it could not return as speedily as was the case with Hohenfels' men. Rheinstein stood directly over the water, and only two hundred and sixty feet above it, while, comparatively speaking, Falkenberg was back in the country. Still all these castles had been so long unmolested, and considered themselves so secure, that adequate watching had fallen into abeyance, and at Falkenberg guard was kept by one lone man on the tall campanile. The attacking party saw no one on the battlements of the Castle, so worked their way round the hill until the man on the tower was hidden from them by the bulk of the Castle itself, and thus they crawled like lizards from bush to bush, from stone to stone, and from rock-ledge to rock-ledge, taking their time, and not deserting one position of obscurity until another was decided upon. The fact that the watchman was upon the Rhine side of the Castle greatly favored a stealthy approach from any landward point.

At last the alarm was given; the gate opened, and, as it proved, every man in the Castle went headlong down the hill. The amateur cracksmen therefore had everything their own way, and while this at first seemed an advantage, they speedily found it the reverse, for although they wandered from room to room, the treasure could not be discovered. The interior of Falkenberg was unknown to Roland, this being one of the strongholds where he had been compelled to sleep in an outhouse. At last they found the door to the treasure-chamber, for Roland suggested it was probably in a similar position to that at Rheinstein, and those who had accompanied Hohenfels' valet made search according to this hint, and were rewarded by coming upon a door so stoutly locked that all their efforts to force it open were fruitless.

Deeply disappointed, with a number of the men grumbling savagely, they were compelled to withdraw empty handed, warned by approaching shouts that the garrison was returning, so the men crawled away as they had come, and made for the river, where on this occasion the boat already awaited them.

Page 121

The lord of Falkenberg proved as moderate in his exactions as the men of Rheinstein. Many bales had been cut open, and the thieves, with the knowledge of cloth-weavers, selected in every case only the best goods, but of these had taken merely enough for one costume each.

Although the company had made so early a beginning, it was past noon by the time they reached the barge on the second occasion. A substantial meal was served, for every man was ravenously hungry, besides being disgusted to learn that there were ups and downs even in the trade of thievery.

Early in the afternoon they made for the delicate Castle of Sonneck, whose slender turrets stood out beautifully against the blue sky. Here excellent cover was found within sight of the doorway, for Sonneck stood alone on its rock without the protection of a wall.

In this case the experience of Rheinstein was repeated, with the exception that it was not the master of the Castle they encountered, but a frightened warder, who, with a sharp sword to influence him, produced keys and opened the treasury. Not nearly so large a haul of gold was made as in the first instance, yet enough was obtained to constitute a most lucrative day's work, and with this they sought the barge in high spirits.

They waited in the shadow of the hills until dusk, then quietly made their way across the river behind the shelter of the two islands, and so came to rest alongside the bank, just above the busy town of Lorch, scarcely two leagues down the river from the berth they had occupied the night before. After the barge was tied up, Roland walked on deck with the captain, listening to his account of events from the level of the river surface. It proved that, all in all, Roland could suggest no amendment of the day's proceedings. So far as Blumenfels was concerned, everything had gone without a hitch.

As they promenaded thus, one of the men came forward, and said, rather cavalierly:

"Commander, your comrades wish to see you in the cabin."

Roland made no reply, but continued his conversation with the captain until he learned from that somewhat reticent individual all he wished to know. Then he walked leisurely aft, and descended into the cabin, where he found the eighteen seated on the lockers, as if the conclave were a deliberate body like the Electors, who had come to some momentous decision.

"We have unanimously passed a resolution," said Kurzbold, "that the money shall be divided equally amongst us each evening. You do not object, I suppose?"

"No; I don't object to your passing a resolution."

“Very good. We do not wish to waste time just now in the division, because we are going to Lorch, intending to celebrate our success with a banquet. Would Greusel, Ebearhard, and yourself care to join us?”

“I cannot speak for the other two,” returned Roland quietly; “but personally I shall be unable to attend, as there are some plans for the future which need thinking over.”

Page 122

“In that case we shall not expect you,” went on Kurzbold, who seemed in no way grieved at the loss of his commander’s company.

“Perhaps,” suggested John Gensbein, “our chief will drop in upon us later in the evening. We learned at Assmannshausen that the Krone is a very excellent tavern, so we shall sup there.”

“How did you know we were to stop at Lorch?” asked Roland, wondering if in any way they had heard he was to meet Goebel’s emissary in this village.

“We were not sure,” replied Gensbein, “but we made inquiries concerning all the villages and castles down the Rhine, and have taken notes.”

“Ah, in that case you are well qualified as a guide. I may find occasion to use the knowledge thus acquired.”

“We are all equally involved in this expedition,” said Kurzbold impatiently, “and you must not imagine yourself the only person to be considered. But we lose time. What we wish at the present moment is that you will unlock one of these chests, and divide amongst us a bag of gold. The rest is to be partitioned when we return this evening; and after that, Herr Roland, we shall not need to trouble you by asking for more money.”

“Are the thirty thalers I gave you the other day all spent, Herr Kurzbold?”

“No matter for that,” replied this insubordinate ex-president. “The money in the lockers is ours, and we demand a portion of it now, with the remainder after the banquet.”

Without another word, Roland took the bunch of keys from his belt, opened one of the lockers, lifted out a bag of gold, untied the thongs, and poured out the coins on the lid of the chest, which he locked again.

“There is the money,” he said to Kurzbold. “I shall send Greusel and Ebearhard to share in its distribution, and thus you can invite them to your banquet. My own portion you may leave on the lid of the locker.”

With that he departed up on deck again, and said to his officers:

“Kurzbold, on behalf of the men, has demanded a bag of gold. You will go to the cabin and receive your share. They will also invite you to a banquet at the Krone. Accept that invitation, and if possible engage a private room, as you did at Assmannshausen, to prevent the men talking with any of the inhabitants. Keep them roystering there until all the village has gone to bed; then convoy them back to the barge as quietly as you can. A resolution has been passed that the money is to be divided amongst our warriors on their return, but I imagine that they will be in no condition to act as accountants when I have the pleasure of beholding them again, so if anything is said about the

apportionment, suggest a postponement of the ceremony until morning. I need not add that I expect you both to drink sparingly, for this is advice I intend to follow myself."

Page 123

Roland paced the deck deep in thought until his difficult contingent departed towards the twinkling lights of the village, then he went to the cabin, poured his share of the gold into his pouch, and followed the company at a distance into Lorch. He avoided the Krone, and after inquiring his way, stopped at the much smaller hostelry, Mergler's Inn. Here he gave his name, and asking if any one waited for him, was conducted upstairs to a room where he found Herr Kruger just about to sit down to his supper. A stout lad nearing twenty years of age stood in the middle of the room, and from his appearance Roland did not need the elder man's word for it that this was his son.

"I took the precaution of bringing him with me," said Kruger, "as I thought two horsemen were better than one in the business I had undertaken."

"You were quite right," returned Roland, "and I congratulate you upon so stalwart a traveling companion. With your permission I shall order a meal, and sup with you, thus we may save time by talking while we eat, because you will need to depart as speedily as possible."

"You mean in the darkness? To-night?"

"Yes; as soon as you can get away. There are urgent reasons why you should be on the road without delay. How came you here?"

"On horseback; first down the Main, then along the Rhine."

"Very well. In the darkness you will return by the way you came, but only as far as the Castle of Ehrenfels, three leagues from here. There you are to rouse up the custodian, and in safety spend the remainder of the night. To-morrow morning he will furnish you a guide to conduct you through the forest to Wiesbaden, and from thence you know your way to Frankfort, which you should reach not later than evening."

At this point the landlord, who had been summoned, came in.

"I will dine with my friends here," said Roland. "I suppose I need not ask if you possess some of the good red wine of Lorch, which they tell me equals that of Assmannshausen?"

"Of the very best, mein Herr, the product of my own vineyard, and I can therefore guarantee it sound. As for equaling that of Assmannshausen, we have always considered it superior, and, indeed, many other good judges agree with us."

"Then bring me a stoup of it, and you will be enabled to add my opinion to that of the others."

When the landlord produced the wine, Roland raised it to his lips, and absorbed a hearty draught.

“This is indeed most excellent, landlord, and does credit alike to your vines and your inn. I wish to send two large casks of so fine a wine to a merchant of my acquaintance in Frankfort, and my friend, Herr Kruger, has promised to convey it thither. If you can spare me two casks of such excellent vintage, they will make an evenly balanced burden for the horse.”

“Surely, mein Herr.”

“Choose two of those long casks, landlord, with bung-holes of the largest at the sides. Do you possess such a thing as a pack-saddle?”

Page 124

“Oh, yes.”

“And you, my young friend,” he said, turning to Kruger’s son, “rode here on a saddle?”

“No,” interjected his father; “I ride a saddle, but my son was forced to content himself with a length of Herr Goebel’s coarse cloth, folded four times, and strapped to the horse’s back.”

“Then the cloth may still be used as a cushion for the pack-saddle, and you, my lad, will be compelled to walk, to which I dare venture you are well accustomed.”

The lad grinned, but made no objection.

“Now, landlord, while we eat, fill your casks with wine, then place the pack-saddle on the back of this young man’s horse, and the casks thereon, for I dare say you have men expert in such a matter.”

“There are no better the length of the Rhine,” said the landlord proudly.

“Lay the casks so that the bung-holes are upward, and do not drive the bungs more tightly in place than is necessary, for they are to be extracted before Frankfort is reached, that another friend of mine may profit by the wine. When this is done, bring me word, and let me know how much I owe you.”

The landlord gone, the three men fell to their meal.

“There is more gold,” said Roland, “than I expected, and it is impossible even for two of you to carry it in bags attached to your belts. Besides, if you are molested, such bestowal of it would prove most unsafe. A burden of wine, however, is too common either to attract notice or arouse cupidity. I propose, then, when we leave here, to bring you to the barge belonging to Herr Goebel, and taking out the bungs, we will pour the gold into the barrels, letting the wine that is displaced overflow to the ground. Then we will stoutly drive in the bungs, and should the guards question you at the gates of Frankfort, you may let them taste the wine if they insist, and I dare say it will contain no flavor of the metal.”

“A most excellent suggestion,” said Herr Kruger with enthusiasm. “An admirable plan; for I confess I looked forward with some anxiety to this journey, laden down with bags of gold under my cloak.”

“Yes. You are simply an honest drinker, tired of the white wine of Frankfort, and providing yourself with the stronger fluid that Lorch produces. I am sure you will deliver the money safely to Herr Goebel, somewhat in drink, it is true, but, like the rest of us, none the worse for that when the fumes are gone.”

The repast finished, and all accounts liquidated, the trio left the inn, and, leading the two horses, reached the barge without observation. Here the bungs were removed from the casks, and the three men, assisted by the captain, quietly and speedily opened bag after bag, pouring the coins down into the wine; surely a unique adulteration, astonishing even to so heady a fluid as the vintage of Lorch. From the whole amount Roland deducted two thousand thalers, which he divided equally between two empty bags.

Page 125

“This thousand thalers,” said he to Kruger, “is to be shared by your son and yourself, in addition to whatever you may receive from Herr Goebel. The other you will hand to the custodian of Ehrenfels Castle, saying it came from his friend Roland, and is recompense for the money he lent the other day. That will be an effective letter of introduction to him. Say that I ask him to send his son with you as guide through the forest to Wiesbaden; and so good-night and good luck to you.”

It was long after midnight when the guild came roystering up the bank of the Rhine to the barge. The moon had risen, and gave them sufficient light to steer a reasonably straight course without danger of falling into the water. Ebearhard was with them, but Greusel walked rapidly ahead, so that he might say a few words to his chief before the others arrived.

“I succeeded in preventing their talking with any stranger, but they have taken aboard enough wine to make them very difficult and rather quarrelsome if thwarted. When I proposed that they should leave the counting until to-morrow morning they first became suspicious, and then resented the imputation that they were not in fit condition for such a task. I recommend, therefore, that you allow them to divide the money to-night. It will allay their fear that some trick is to be played upon them, and if you hint at intoxication, they are likely to get out of hand. As it does not matter when the money is distributed, I counsel you to humor them to-night, and postpone reasoning until to-morrow.”

“I’ll think about it,” said Roland.

“They have bought several casks of wine, and are taking turns in carrying them. Will you allow this wine to come aboard, even if you determine to throw it into the water to-morrow?”

“Oh, yes,” said Roland, with a shrug of the shoulders. “Coax them into the cabin as quietly as possible, and keep them there if you can, for should they get on deck, we shall lose some of them in the river.”

Greusel turned back to meet the bellowing mob, while Roland roused the captain and his men.

“Get ready,” he said to Blumenfels, “and the moment I raise my hand, shove off. Make for this side of the larger island, and come to rest there for the remainder of the night. Command your rowers to put their whole force into the sweeps.”

This was done accordingly, and well done, as was the captain’s custom. The late moon threw a ghostly light over the scene, and the barren island proved deserted and forbidding, as the crew tied up the barge alongside. Most of the lights in Lorch had gone out, and the town lay in the silence of pallid moonbeams like a city of the dead. Roland stood on deck with Greusel and Ebearhard by his side, the latter relating the

difficulties of the evening. There had been singing in the cabin during the passage across, then came a lull in the roar from below, followed by a shout that betokened danger. An instant later the crowd came boiling up the short stair to the deck, Kurzbold in command, all swords drawn, and glistening in the moonlight.

Page 126

“You scoundrel!” he cried to Roland, “those lockers are full of empty bags.”

“I know that,” replied Roland, quietly. “The money is in safe keeping, and will be honestly divided at the conclusion of this expedition.”

“You thief! You robber!” shouted Kurzbold, flourishing his weapon.

“Quite accurate,” replied Roland, unperturbed. “I was once called a Prince of Thieves when I did not deserve the title. Now I have earned it.”

“You have earned the penalty of thieving, and we propose to throw you into the Rhine.”

“Not, I trust, before you learn where the money is deposited.”

Drunk as they were, this consideration staggered them, but Kurzbold was mad with rage and wine.

“Come on, you poltroons!” he shouted. “There are only three of them.”

“Draw your swords, gentlemen,” whispered Roland, flashing his own blade in the moonlight.

Greusel and Ebearhard obeyed his command.

XII

THE LAUGHING RED MARGRAVE OF FURSTENBERG

Ebearhard laughed, and took two steps forward. Whenever affairs became serious, one could always depend on a laugh from Ebearhard.

“Excuse me, Commander,” he said, “but you placed Greusel and me in charge of this pious and sober party; therefore I, being the least of your officers, must stand the first brunt of our failure to keep these lambs peaceable for the night. Greusel, stand behind me, and in front of the Commander. I, being reasonably sober, believe I can cut down six of the innocents before they finish with me. You will attend to the next six, leaving exactly half a dozen for Roland to eliminate in his own fashion. Now, Herr Conrad Kurzbold, come on.”

“We have no quarrel with you,” said Kurzbold. “Stand aside.”

“But I force a quarrel upon you, undisciplined pig. Defend yourself, for, by the Three Kings, I am going to tap your walking wine-barrel!”

Kurzbold, however, retreating with more haste than caution, one or two behind him were sent sprawling, and the half-dozen which were Roland's portion tumbled over one another down the steep ladder into the cabin.

Ebearhard laughed again when the last man disappeared.

"I think," he said to Roland, "that you will meet no further trouble from our friends. They evidently broke open the lockers, alarmed because Greusel and I asked for a postponement of the counting, probably intending to make the division without our assistance."

"Have you hidden the money?" asked Greusel.

"Not exactly," replied Roland; "but, in case anything should happen to me, I will tell you what I have done with it."

When he finished his recital, he added:

"I will give each of you a letter to Herr Goebel, identifying you. He is entitled to four thousand five hundred thalers of the money. The balance you will divide among those of us who survive."

Page 127

Roland slept on deck, wrapped in his cloak. His two lieutenants took turn in keeping watch, but nothing except snores came up from the cabin. The mutineers were not examples of early rising next morning. The sun gave promise of another warm day, and Roland walked up and down the deck, anxiety printed on his brow. He had made up his mind to knock at the door of the Laughing Baron, a giant in stature, reported to be the most ingenious, most cruel, and bravest of all the robber noblemen of the Rhine, whose Castle was notoriously the hardest nut to crack along the banks of that famous river. For several reasons it would not be wise to linger much longer in the neighborhood of Lorch. The three castles they had entered the day before were still visible on the western bank. News of the raid would undoubtedly travel to Furstenberg, also within sight down the river, and thus the hilarious Margrave would be put on his guard, overjoyed at the opportunity of trapping the moral marauders. Furstenberg was also a fief of Cologne, and any molestation of it would involve the meddler, if identified, in complications with the Church and the Archbishop.

It was necessary, therefore, to move with caution, and to retreat, if possible, unobserved. These difficulties alone were enough to give pause to the most intrepid, but Roland was further handicapped by his own following. How could he hope to accomplish any subtle movement requiring silence, prompt obedience, and great alertness, supported by men whose brains were muddled with drink, and whose conduct was saturated with conspiracy against him? They had wine enough on board to continue their orgy, and he was quite unable to prevent their carouse. With a deep sigh he realized that he would be compelled to forego Furstenberg, and thus leave behind him a virgin citadel, which he knew was bad tactics from a military point of view.

During his meditations his men were coming up from the fuming cabin into the fresh air and the sunlight. They appeared by twos and threes, yawning and rubbing their eyes, but no one ventured to interrupt the leader as, with bent head, he paced back and forth on the deck. The men, indeed, seemed exceedingly subdued. They passed with almost overdone nonchalance from the boat to the island, and sauntered towards its lower end, from which, in the clear morning air, the grim fortress of Furstenberg could be plainly discerned diagonally across the river. It was Ebearhard who broke in upon Roland's reverie.

"Our friends appear very quiet this morning, but I observe they have all happened to coincide upon the northern part of the island as a rendezvous for their before-breakfast walk. I surmise they are holding a formal meeting of the guild, but neither Greusel nor I have been invited, so I suppose that after last night's display we two are no longer considered their brethren. This meekness on their part seems to me more dangerous than last night's flurry. I think they will demand from you a knowledge of what has been done with the gold. Have you decided upon your answer?"

Page 128

“Yes; it is their right to know, so I shall tell them the truth. By this time Kruger is on his way somewhere between Ehrenfels and Wiesbaden. He will reach Frankfort to-night, and cannot be overtaken.”

“Is there not danger that they will desert in a body, return to Frankfort, and demand from Herr Goebel their share of the spoil?”

“No matter for that,” returned Roland. “Goebel will not part with a florin except under security of such letters as I purpose giving you and Greusel, and even then only when you have proven to him that I am dead.”

“That is all very well,” demurred Ebearhard, “but don’t you see what a dangerous power you put into the hands of the rebels? Goebel is merely a merchant, and, though rich, politically powerless. He has already come into conflict with the authorities, and spent a term in prison. Do not forget that the Archbishops have refused to take action against these robber Barons. Our men, if there happen to be one of brains among them, can easily terrify Goebel into parting with the treasure by threatening to confess their own and his complicity in the raids. Consider what an excellent case they can put forward, stating quite truly that they joined this expedition in ignorance of its purport, but on the very first day, learning what was afoot, they deserted their criminal leader, and are now endeavoring to make restitution. Goebel is helpless. If he says that they first demanded the gold from him, they as strenuously deny it, and their denial must be believed, because they come of their own free-will to the authorities. The merchant, already tainted with treason, having suffered imprisonment, and narrowly escaped hanging, proves on investigation to be up to the neck in this affair. There is no difficulty in learning that his barge went down the river, manned by a crew of his own choosing. Of course, it need never come to this, because Goebel, being a shrewd man, could at once see in what jeopardy he stood, and convinced from the men’s own story that they were part, at least, of your contingent, would deliver up the treasure to them. Don’t you see he must do so to save his own neck?”

Roland pondered deeply on what had been said to him, but for the moment made no reply. Greusel, who joined them during the conversation, remaining silent until Ebearhard had finished, now spoke:

“I quite agree with all that has been said.”

“What, then, would you advise me to do?” asked Roland.

“I have been talking with one or two of the men,” said Greusel. “(They won’t speak to Ebearhard because he drew his sword on them.) I find they believe you took advantage of their absence to bury the gold in what you suppose to be a safe place. They are sure you are acquainted with no one in Lorch to whom you could safely entrust it, and of

course do not suspect an emissary from Frankfort. I should advise you to say that arrangements have been made for every man to get his share so long as

Page 129

nothing untoward happens to you. This will preserve your life should they go so far as to threaten it, and compel them to stay on with us. After all, we are merely artisans, and not fighting men. I am convinced that if ever we are really attacked, we shall make a very poor showing, even though we carry swords. Remember how the men tumbled over one another in their haste to get out of reach when Ebearhard flourished his blade."

"I think Greusel's suggestion is an excellent one," put in Ebearhard.

"Very well," said Roland, "I shall adopt it, although I had made up my mind fully to enlighten them."

"There is one more matter that I should like to speak to you about," continued Ebearhard. "Both at Assmannshausen, and at Lorch last night, we heard a good deal anent Furstenberg. It is the most dangerous castle on the Rhine to meddle with. The Laughing Baron, as they call him, although he is a Margrave, is the only man who dared to stop a king on his way down the Rhine, and hold him for ransom."

"Yes," said Roland; "Adolf of Nassau, on his way to be crowned at Aix-la-Chapelle."

"Quite so. Well, this huge ruffian—I never can remember his name; can you, Greusel?"

"No, it beats me."

"Margrave Hermann von Katznellenbogenstahleck," said Roland, so solemnly that Ebearhard laughed and even Greusel smiled.

"That's the individual," agreed Ebearhard, "and you must admit the name itself is a formidable thing to attack, even without the giant it belongs to."

"Banish all apprehension," said Roland. "I have already decided to remain here through the day, and drop quietly down the river to-night in the darkness past Furstenberg."

"I think that is a wise decision," said Ebearhard.

"'Tis against all military rules," demurred Roland, "but nevertheless with such an army as I lead it seems the only way. Do the men know that Furstenberg is our point of greatest danger?"

"Yes; but they do not know so much as I. Last night I left them in Greusel's charge, being alarmed about what I heard of Furstenberg, and engaged a boatman to take me over there before the moon rose. I discovered that the Laughing Baron has caused a chain to be buoyed up just below the surface of the water, running diagonally up the

river more than half-way across it, so that any boat coming down is caught and drawn into the landing, for the main flood of the Rhine, as you know, runs to the westward of this island. The boatman who ferried me knew about this chain, but thought it had been abandoned since traffic stopped. He says it runs right up into the Castle, and the moment a barge strikes against it, a big bell is automatically rung inside the stronghold, causing the Baron to laugh so loudly that they sometimes hear him over in Lorch."

"This is very interesting, Ebearhard, and an excellent feat of scouting must be set down to your credit. Say nothing to the men, because, although we give Furstenberg the go-by on this occasion, I shall pay my respects to Herman von Katznellenbogenstahleck on my return, and the knowledge you bring me will prove useful."

Page 130

“Ha!” cried Greusel, “here are our infants returning, all in a body, Kurzbold at their head as usual. I imagine this morning they are going to depend on rhetoric, and allow their swords to remain in scabbard. They have evidently come to some momentous decision.”

The three retired to the prow of the boat as the guild clambored on at the stern. The captain and two of his men had taken the skiff belonging to the barge, and were absent at Lorch, purchasing provisions. Roland stood at the prow of the barge, slightly in advance of his two lieutenants, and awaited the approach of Kurzbold, with seventeen men behind him.

“Commander,” said the spokesman, with nothing of the late truculence in his tone, “we have just held a meeting of the guild, and unanimously agreed to ask you one question, and offer you one suggestion.”

“I shall be pleased,” replied Roland, “to answer the first if I think it desirable, and take the second into consideration.”

He inclined his head to the delegation, and received a low bow in return. This was a most auspicious beginning, showing a certain improvement of method on the part of the majority.

“The question is, Commander, what have you done with the gold we captured yesterday?”

“A very proper inquiry,” replied Roland, “that it gives me much pleasure to answer. I have placed the money in a custody which I believe to be absolute, arranging that if nothing happens to me, this money shall be properly divided in my presence.”

“Do you deny, sir, that the money belongs to us?”

“Part of it undoubtedly does, but I, as leader of the expedition, am morally, if not legally, responsible to you all for its safe keeping. Our barge has stopped three times so far, and Captain Blumenfels tells me that he has had no real violence to complain of, but as we progress farther down the river, we are bound to encounter some Baron who is not so punctilious; for instance, the Margrave von Katznellenbogenstahleck, whose stronghold you doubtless saw from the latest meeting-place of the guild. Such a man as the Margrave is certain to do what you yourselves did without hesitation last night, that is, break open the lockers, and if gold were there you may depend it would not long remain in our possession after the discovery.”

“You miss, or rather, evade the point, Commander. Is the gold ours, or is it yours?”

“I have admitted that part of it is yours.”

“Then by what right do you assert the power to deal with it, lacking our consent? If you will pardon me for saying so, you, the youngest of our company, treat the rest of us as though we were children.”

“If I possessed a child that acted at once so obstreperously and in so cowardly a manner as you did last night, I should cut a stick from the forest here, and thrash him with such severity that he would never forget it. As I have not done this to you, I deny that I treat you like children. The truth is that, although the youngest, I am your commander. We are engaged in acts of war, therefore military law prevails, and not the code of Justinian. It is my duty to protect your treasure and my own, and ensure that each man shall receive his share. After the division you may do what you please with the money, for you will then be under the common law, and I should not presume even to advise concerning its disposal.”

Page 131

“You refuse to tell us, then, what you have done with the gold?”

“I do. Now proceed with your suggestion.”

“I fear I put the case too mildly when I called it a suggestion, considering the unsatisfactory nature of your reply to my question, therefore I withdraw the word ‘suggestion,’ and substitute the word ‘command.’”

Kurzbold paused, to give his ultimatum the greater force. Behind him rose a murmur of approval.

“Words do not matter in the least. I deal with deeds. Out, then, with your command!” cried Roland, for the first time exhibiting impatience.

“The command unanimously adopted is this: the Castle of Furstenberg must be left alone. We know more of that Castle than you do, especially about its owner and his garrison. We have been gathering information as we journeyed, and have not remained sulking in the barge.”

“Well, that is encouraging news to hear,” said Roland. “I thought you were engaged in sampling wine.”

“You hear the command. Will you obey?”

“I will not,” said Roland decisively.

Ebearhard took a step forward to the side of his chief, and glanced at him reproachfully. Greusel remained where he was, but neither man spoke.

“You intend to attack Furstenberg?”

“Yes.”

“When?”

“This afternoon.”

Kurzbold turned to his following:

“Brethren,” he said, “you have heard this conversation, and it needs no comment from me.”

Apparently the discussion was to receive no comment from the others either. They stood there glum and disconcerted, as if the trend of affairs had taken an unexpected turn.

“I think,” said one, “we had better retire and consult again.”

This was unanimously agreed to, and once more they disembarked upon the island, and moved forward to their Witenagemot. Still Greusel and Ebearhard said nothing, but watched the men disappear through the trees. Roland looked at one after another with a smile.

“I see,” he said, “that you disapprove of my conduct.”

Greusel remained silent, but Ebearhard laughed and spoke.

“You came deliberately to the conclusion that it was unwise to attack Furstenberg. Now, because of Kurzbold’s lack of courtesy, you deflect from your own mature judgment, and hastily jump into a course opposite to that which you marked out for yourself after sober, unbiased thought.”

“My dear Ebearhard, the duty of a commander is to give, and not to receive, commands.”

“Quite so. Command and suggestion are merely words, as you yourself pointed out, saying that they did not matter.”

“In that, Ebearhard, I was wrong. Words do matter, although Kurzbold wasn’t clever enough to correct me. For example, I hold no man in higher esteem than yourself, yet you might use words that would cause me instantly to draw my sword upon you, and fight until one or other of us succumbed.”

Page 132

Ebearhard laughed.

“You put it very flatteringly, Roland. Truth is, you’d fight till I succumbed, my swordsmanship being no match for yours. I shall say the words, however, that will cause you to draw your sword, and they are: Commander, I will stand by you whatever you do.”

“And I,” said Greusel curtly.

Roland shook hands in turn with the two men.

“Right,” he cried. “If we are fated to go down, we will fall with banners flying.”

After a time the captain returned with his supplies, but still the majority of the guild remained engaged in deliberation. Evidently discussion was not proceeding with that unanimity which Kurzbold always insisted was the case.

At noon Roland requested the captain to send some of his men with a meal for those in prolonged session, and also to carry them a cask which had been half-emptied either that morning or the night before.

“They will enjoy a picnic under the trees by the margin of the river,” said Roland, as he and his two backers sat down in the empty cabin to their own repast.

“Do you think they are purposely delaying, so that you cannot cross over this afternoon?”

“’Tis very likely,” said Roland. “I’ll wait here until the sun sets, and then when they realize that I am about to leave them on an uninhabited island, without anything to eat, I think you will see them scramble aboard.”

“But suppose they don’t,” suggested Greusel. “There are at least three of them able to swim across this narrow branch of the Rhine, and engage a boatman to take them off, should their signaling be unobserved.”

“Again no matter. My plan for the undoing of the castles does not depend on force, but on craft. We three cannot carry away as much gold as can twenty-one, but our shares will be the same, and then we are not likely to find again so full a treasury as that at Rheinstein. My belief that these chaps would fight was dispelled by their conduct last night. Think of eighteen armed men flying before one sword!”

“Ah, you are scarce just in your estimate, Commander. They were under the influence of wine.”

“True; but a brave man will fight, drunk or sober.”

Although the sun sank out of sight, the men did not return. There had been more wine in the cask than Roland supposed, for the cheery songs of the guild echoed through the sylvan solitude. Roland told the captain to set his men at work and row round the top of the island into the main stream of the Rhine. The revelers had evidently appointed watchmen, for they speedily came running through the woods, and followed the movements of the boat from the shore, keeping pace with it. When the craft reached the opposite side of the island, the rowers drew in to the beach.

“Are you coming aboard?” asked Roland pleasantly.

“Will you agree to pass Furstenberg during the night?” demanded Kurzbold.

Page 133

“No.”

“Do you expect to succeed, as you did with the other castles?”

“Certainly; otherwise I shouldn’t make the attempt.”

“I was wrong,” said Kurzbold mildly, “in substituting the word ‘command’ for ‘suggestion,’ which I first employed. There are many grave reasons for deferring an attempt on Furstenberg. In the heat of argument these reasons were not presented to you. Will you consent to listen to them if we go on board?”

“Yes; if you, on your part, will unanimously promise to abide by my decision.”

“Do you think,” said Kurzbold, “that your prejudice against me, which perhaps you agree does exist—”

“It exists,” confessed Roland.

“Very well. Will you allow that prejudice to prevent you from rendering a decision in the men’s favor?”

“No. If they present reasons that convince Greusel and Ebearhard against the attack on Furstenberg, I shall do what these two men advise, even although I myself believe in a contrary course. Thus you see, Herr Kurzbold, that my admitted dislike of you shall not come into play at all.”

“That is quite satisfactory,” said Kurzbold. “Will you tie up against the farther shore until your decision is rendered?”

“With pleasure,” replied Roland; and accordingly the raiders tumbled impetuously on board the barge, whereupon the sailors bent to their long oars, and quickly reached the western bank, at a picturesque spot out of sight of any castle, where the trees came down the mountain-side to the water’s edge. Here the sailors, springing ashore, tied their stout ropes to the tree-trunks, and the great barge lay broadside on to the land, with her nose pointing down the stream.

“You see,” said Roland to his lieutenants, “without giving way in the least I allow you two the decision, and so I take it Furstenberg or ourselves will escape disaster on this occasion.”

“Aside from all other considerations,” replied the cautious Greusel, “I think it good diplomacy on this occasion to agree with the men, since they have stated their case so deferentially. They are improving, Commander.”

“It really looks like it,” he agreed. “You and Ebearhard had better go aft, and counsel them to begin the conference at once, for if we are to attack we must do so before darkness sets in. I’ll remain here as usual at the prow.”

Some of the men were strolling about the deck, but the majority remained in the cabin, down whose steps the lieutenants descended. Roland’s impatience increased with the waning of the light.

Suddenly a cry that was instantly smothered rose from the cabin, then a shout:

“Treachery! Look out for yourself!”

Roland attempted to stride forward, but four men fell on him, pinioning his arms to his side, preventing the drawing of his weapon. Kurzbold, with half a dozen others, mounted on deck.

“Disarm him!” he commanded, and one of the men drew Roland’s sword from its sheath, flinging it along the deck to Kurzbold’s feet. The others now came up, bringing the two lieutenants, both gagged, with their arms tied behind them. Roland ceased his struggles, which he knew to be fruitless.

Page 134

“We wish an amicable settlement of this matter,” said Kurzbold, addressing the lieutenants, “and regret being compelled to use measures that may appear harsh. I do this only to prevent unnecessary bloodshed. Earlier in the day,” he continued, turning to Roland, “when we found all appeals to you were vain, we unanimously deposed you from the leadership, which is our right, and also our duty.”

“Not under martial law,” said Roland.

“I beg to point out that there was no talk of martial law before we left Frankfort. It was not till later that we learned we had appointed an unreasoning tyrant over us. We have deposed him, and I am elected in his place, with John Gensbein as my lieutenant. We will keep you three here until complete darkness sets in, then put you ashore unarmed. Bacharach, on this side of the Rhine, is to be our next resting-place, and doubtless so clever a man as you, Roland, may say that we choose Bacharach because it is named for Bacchus, the god of drunkards. Nevertheless, to show our good intentions towards you, we will remain there all day to-morrow. You can easily reach Bacharach along the hilltops before daybreak. We have written a charter of comradeship which all have signed except yourselves. If at Bacharach you give us your word to act faithfully under my leadership, we will reinstate you in the guild, and return your swords. By way of recompense for this leniency, we ask you to direct the captain to obey my commands as he has done yours.”

“Captain Blumenfels,” said Roland to the honest sailor, who stood looking on in amaze at this turn of affairs, “you are to wait here until it is completely dark. See that no lights are burning to give warning to those in Furstenberg; and, by the way,” added Roland, turning to his former company, “I advise you not to drink anything until you are well past the Castle. If you sing the songs of the guild within earshot of Furstenberg, you are like to sing on the other side of your mouths before morning. Don’t forget that Margrave Hermann von Katznellenbogenstahleck is the chief hangman of Germany.” Then once more to the captain:

“As the Castle of Furstenberg stands high above the river, and well back from it, you will be out of sight if you keep near this shore. However, you can easily judge your distance, because the towers are visible even in the darkness against the sky. No man on the ramparts of the Castle can discern you down here on the black surface of the water, so long as you do not carry a light.”

“Roland, my deposed friend,” said Kurzbold, “I fear you bear resentment, for you are giving the captain orders instead of telling him to obey mine.”

“Kurzbold, you are mistaken. I resign command with great pleasure, and, indeed, Greusel and Ebearhard will testify that I had already determined to pass Furstenberg unseen. As my former lieutenants are disarmed, surely the company, with eighteen

swords, is not so frightened as to keep them gagged and bound. 'Tis no wonder you wish to avoid the Laughing Baron, if that is all the courage you possess."

Page 135

Stung by these taunts, Kurzbold gruffly ordered his men to release their prisoners, but when the gags were removed, and before the cords were cut, he addressed the lieutenants:

“Do you give me your words not to make any further resistance, if I permit you to remain unbound?”

“I give you my word on nothing, you mutinous dog!” cried Greusel; “and if I did, how could you expect me to keep it after such an example of treachery from you who pledged your faith, and then broke it? I shall obey my Commander, and none other.”

“I am your Commander,” asserted Kurzbold.

“You are not,” proclaimed Greusel.

Ebearhard laughed.

“No need to question me,” he said. “I stand by my colleagues.”

“Gag them again,” ordered Kurzbold.

“No, no!” cried Roland. “We are quite helpless. Give your words, gentlemen.”

Gloomily Greusel obeyed, and merrily Ebearhard. Darkness was now gathering, and when it fell completely the three men were put off into the forest.

“You have not yet,” said Kurzbold to Roland, “ordered the captain to obey me. I do not object to that, but it will be the worse for him and his men if they refuse to accept my instructions.”

“Do you know this district, Captain Blumenfels?” asked Roland.

“Yes, mein Herr.”

“Is there a path along the top that will lead us behind Furstenberg on to Bacharach?”

“Yes, mein Herr, but it is a very rough track.”

“Is it too far for you to guide us there, and return before the moon rises?”

“Oh no, mein Herr, I can conduct you to the trail in half an hour if you consent to climb lustily.”

“Very good. Herr Kurzbold, if you are not impatient to be off, and will permit the captain to direct us on our way, I will tell him to obey you.”

“How long before you can return, captain?” asked Kurzbold.

“I can be back well within the hour, mein Herr.”

“You will obey me if the late Commander orders you to do so?”

“Yes, mein Herr.”

“Captain,” said Roland, “I inform you in the hearing of these men that Herr Kurzbold occupies my place, and is to be obeyed by you until I resume command.”

Kurzbold laughed.

“You mean until you are re-elected to membership in the guild, for we do not propose to make you commander again. Now, captain, to the hill, and see that your return is not delayed.”

The four men disappeared into the dark forest.

“Captain,” said Roland, when they reached the track, “I have taken you up here not that I needed your guidance, for I know this land as well as you do. You will obey Kurzbold, of course, but if he tells you to make for Lorch, allow your boat to drift, and do not get beyond the middle of the river until opposite Furstenberg. There is a buoyed chain—”

“I know it well,” interrupted the captain. “I have many times avoided it, but twice became entangled with it, in spite of all my efforts, and was robbed by the Laughing Baron.”

Page 136

“Very well; I intend you to be entrapped by that chain to-night. Offer no resistance, and you will be safe enough. Do not attempt to help these lads should they be set upon, and it will be hard luck if I am not in command again before midnight. Keep close to this shore, but if they order you into the middle of the river, or across it, dally, my good Blumenfels, dally, until you are stopped by the chain for the third time.”

When the captain returned to his barge, he found Kurzbold pacing the deck in a masterly manner, impatient to be off. For once the combatants, with an effort, were refraining from drink.

“We will open a cask,” said Kurzbold, “as soon as we have passed the Schloss.”

He ordered the captain to follow the shore as closely as was safe, and take care that they did not come within sight of Furstenberg’s tall, round tower. All sat or reclined on the dark deck, saying no word as the barge slid silently down the swift Rhine. Suddenly the speed of the boat was checked so abruptly that one or two of the standing men were flung off their feet. From up on the hillside there tolled out the deep note of a bell. The barge swung round broadside on the current, and lay there with the water rushing like hissing serpents along its side, the bell pealing out a loud alarm that seemed to keep time with the shuddering of the helpless boat.

“What’s wrong, captain?” cried Kurzbold, getting on his feet again and running aft.

“I fear, sir, ’tis an anchored chain.”

“Can’t you cut it?”

“That is impossible, mein Herr.”

“Then get out your sweeps, and turn back. Where are we, do you think?”

“Under the battlements of Furstenberg Castle.”

“Damnation! Put some speed into your men, and let us get away from here.”

The captain ordered his crew to hurry, but all their efforts could not release the boat from the chain, against which it ground up and down with a tearing noise, and even the un-nautical swordsmen saw that the current was impelling it diagonally toward the shore, and all the while the deep bell tolled on.

“What in the fiend’s name is the meaning of that bell?” demanded Kurzbold.

“It is the Castle bell, mein Herr,” replied the captain.

Before Kurzbold could say anything more the air quivered with shout after shout of laughter. Torches began to glisten among the trees, and there was a clatter of horses' hoofs on the echoing rock. A more magnificent sight was never before presented to the startled eyes of so unappreciative a crowd. Along the zigzag road, and among the trees, spluttered the torches, each with a trail of sparks like the tail of a comet. The bearers were rushing headlong down the slope, for woe to the man who did not arrive at the water's edge sooner than his master.

Page 137

The torchlight gleamed on flashing swords and glittering points of spears, but chief sight of all was the Margrave Hermann von Katznellenbogenstahleck, a giant in stature, mounted on a magnificent stallion, as black as the night, and of a size that corresponded with its prodigious rider. The Margrave's long beard and flowing hair were red; scarlet, one may say, but perhaps that was the fiery reflection from the torches. Servants, scullions, stablemen carried the lights; the men-at-arms had no encumbrance but their weapons, and the business-like way in which they lined up along the shore was a study in discipline, and a terror to any one unused to war. Above all the din and clash of arms rang the hearty, stentorian laughter of the Red Margrave actually echoing back in gusts of fiendish merriment from the hills on the other side of the Rhine.

Now the boat's nose came dully against the ledge of rock, to whose surface the swaying chain rose dripping from the water, sparkling like a jointed snake under the torchlight.

"God save us all!" cried the Margrave, "what rare show have we here? By my sainted patron, the Archbishop, merchants under arms! Whoever saw the like? Ha! stout Captain Blumenfels, do I recognize you? Once more my chain has caught you. This makes the third time, does it not, Blumenfels?"

"Yes, your Majesty."

"You may as well call me 'your Holiness' as 'your Majesty.' I'm contented with my title, the 'Laughing Baron,' Haw-haw-haw-haw! And so your merchants have taken to arms again? The lesson at the Lorely taught them nothing! Are there any ropes aboard, captain?"

"Plenty, my lord."

"Then fling a coil ashore. Now, my tigers," he roared to his men-at-arms, "hale me to land those damned shopkeepers."

With a clash of armor and weapons the brigands threw themselves on the boat, and in less time than is taken to tell it, every man of the guild was disarmed and flung ashore. Here another command of the Red Margrave gave them the outlaw's knot, as he termed it, a most painful tying-up of the body and the limbs until each victim was rigid as a red of iron. They were flung face downwards in a row, and beaten black and blue with cudgels, despite their screams of agony and appeals for mercy.

"Now turn them over on their backs," commanded the Margrave, and it was done. The glare of the pitiless torches fell upon contorted faces. The Baron turned his horse athwart the line of helpless men, and spurred that animal over it from end to end, but the intelligent horse, more merciful than its rider, stepped with great daintiness, despite its unusual size, and never trod on one of the prostrate bodies. During what followed,

the Red Baron, shaking with laughter, marched his horse up and down over the stricken men.

“Now, unload the boat, but do not injure any of the sailors! I hope to see them often again. You cannot tell how we have missed you, captain. What are you loaded with this time? Sound Frankfort cloth?”

Page 138

“Yes, your Majesty—I mean, my lord.”

“No, you mean my Holiness, for I expect to be an Archbishop yet, if all goes well,” and his laughter echoed across the Rhine. “Uplift your hatches, Blumenfels, and tell your men to help fling the goods ashore.”

Delicately paced the fearful horse over the prone men, snorting, perhaps in sympathy, from his red nostrils, his jet-black coat a-quiver with the excitement of the scene. The captain obeyed the Margrave with promptness and celerity. The hatches were lifted, and his sailors, two and two, flung on the ledge of rock the merchant’s bales. The men-at-arms, who proved to be men-of-all-work, had piled their weapons in a heap, and were carrying the bales a few yards inland. Through it all the Baron roared with laughter, and rode his horse along its living pavement, turning now at this end and now at the other.

“Do not be impatient,” he cried down to them, “’twill not take long to strip the boat of every bale, then I shall hang you on these trees, and send back your bodies in the barge, as a lesson to Frankfort. You must return, captain,” he cried, “for you cannot sell dead bodies to my liege of Cologne.”

As he spoke a ruddy flush spread over the Rhine, as if some one had flashed a red lantern upon the waters. The glow died out upon the instant.

“What!” thundered the Margrave, “is that the reflection of my beard, or are Beelzebub and his fiends coming up from below for a portion of the Frankfort cloth? I will share with good brother Satan, but with no one else. Boil me if I ever saw a sight like that before! What was it, captain?”

“I saw nothing unusual, my lord.”

“There, there!” exclaimed the Margrave, and as he spoke it seemed that a crimson film had fallen on the river, growing brighter and brighter.

“Oh, my lord,” cried the captain, “the Castle is on fire!”

“Saints protect us!” shouted the Red Margrave, crossing himself, and turning to the west, where now both hearing and sight indicated that a furnace was roaring. The whole western sky was aglow, and although the flames could not be seen for the intervening cliff, every one knew there was no other dwelling that could cause such an illumination.

Spurring his horse, and calling his men to come on, the nobleman dashed up the steep acclivity, and when the last man had departed, Roland, followed by his two lieutenants, stepped from the forest to the right down upon the rocky plateau.

XIII

“A SENTENCE; COME, PREPARE!”

“Captain,” said Roland quietly, “bring your crew ashore, and fling these bales on board again as quickly as you can.”

An instant later the sailors were at work, undoing their former efforts.

“In mercy’s name, Roland,” wailed one of the stricken, “get a sword and cut our bonds.”

“All in good time,” replied Roland. “The bales are more valuable to me than you are, and we have two barrels of gold at the foot of the cliff to bring in, if they haven’t sunk in the Rhine. Greusel, do you and Ebearhard take two of the crew, launch the small boat, and rescue the barrels if you can find them.”

Page 139

“Mercy on us, Roland! Mercy!” moaned his former comrades.

“I have already wasted too much mercy upon you,” he said. “If I rescue you now, I shall be compelled to hang you in the morning as breakers of law, so I may as well leave you where you are, and allow the Red Margrave to save me the trouble. The loss of his castle will not make him more compassionate, especially if he learns you were the cause of it. You will then experience some refined tortures, I imagine; for, like myself, he may think hanging too good for you. I should never have fired his castle had it not been for your rebellion.”

The men on the ground groaned but made no further appeal. Some of them were far-seeing enough to realize that an important change had come over the young man they thought so well known to them, who stood there with an air of indifference, throwing out a suggestion now and then for the more effective handling of the bales; suggestions carrying an impalpable force of authority that caused them to be very promptly obeyed. They did not know that this person whom they had regarded as one of themselves, the youngest at that, treating him accordingly, had but a day or two before received a tremendous assurance, which would have turned the head of almost any individual in the realm, old or young; the assurance that he was to be supreme ruler over millions of creatures like themselves; a ruler whose lightest word might carry their extinction with it.

Yet such is the strange littleness of human nature that, although this potent knowledge had been gradually exercising its effect on Roland’s character, it was not the rebellion of the eighteen or their mutinous words that now made him hard as granite towards them. It was the trivial fact that four of them had dared to manhandle him; had made a personal assault upon him; had pinioned his helpless arms, and flung his sword, that insignia of honor, to the feet of Kurzbold, leader of the revolt.

The Lord’s Anointed, he was coming to consider himself, although not yet had the sacred ointment been placed upon his head. A temporal Emperor and a vice-regent of Heaven upon earth, his hand was destined to hold the invisible hilt of the Almighty’s sword of vengeance. The words “I will repay” were to reach their fulfillment through his action. Notwithstanding his youth, or perhaps because of it, he was animated by deep religious feeling, and this, rather than ambition, explained the celerity with which he agreed to the proposals of the Archbishops.

The personage the prisoners saw standing on the rock-ledge of Furstenberg was vastly different from the young man who, a comrade of comrades, had departed from Frankfort in their company. They beheld him plainly enough, for there was now no need of torches along the foreshore; the night was crimson in its brilliancy, and down the hill came a continuous roar, like that of the Rhine Fall seventy leagues away.

Page 140

Into this red glare the small boat and its four occupants entered, and Roland saw with a smile that two well-filled casks formed its freight. The bales were now aboard the barge again, and the Commander ordered the crew to help the quartette in the small boat with the lifting of the heavy barrels. Greusel and Ebearhard clambered over the side, and came thus to the ledge where Roland stood, as the crew rolled the barrels down into the cabin.

“Lieutenants,” said the Commander, “select two stout battle-axes from that heap. Follow the chain up the hill until you reach that point where it is attached to the thick rope. Cut the rope with your axes, and draw down the chain with you, thus clearing a passage for the barge.”

The two men chose battle-axes, then turned to their leader.

“Should we not get our men aboard,” they said, “before the barge is free?”

“These rebels are prisoners of the Red Margrave. They belong to him, and not to me. Where they are, there they remain.”

The lieutenants, with one impulse, advanced to their Commander, who frowned as they did so. A cry of despair went up from the pinioned men, but Kurzbold shouted:

“Cut him down, Ebearhard, and then release us. In the name of the guild I call on you to act! He is unarmed; cut him down! ’Tis foul murder to desert us thus.”

The cutting down could easily have been accomplished, for Roland stood at their mercy, weaponless since the *emeute* on the barge. Notwithstanding the seriousness of the occasion, the optimistic Ebearhard laughed, although every one else was grave enough.

“Thank you, Kurzbold, for your suggestion. We have come forward, not to use force, but to try persuasion. Roland, you cannot desert to death the men whom you conducted out of Frankfort.”

“Why can I not?”

“I should have said a moment ago that you will not, but now I say you cannot. Kurzbold has just shown what an irreclaimable beast he is, and on that account, because birth, or training, or something has made you one of different caliber, you cannot thus desert him to the reprisal of that red fiend up the hill.”

“If I save him now, ’twill be but to hang him an hour later. I am no hangman, while the Margrave is. I prefer that he should attend to my executions.”

Again Ebearhard laughed.

“’Tis no use, Roland, pretending abandonment, for you will not abandon. I thoroughly favor choking the life out of Kurzbold, and one or two of the others, and will myself volunteer for the office of headsman, carrying, as I do, the ax, but let everything be done decently and in order, that a dignified execution may follow on a fair trial.”

“Commander,” shouted the captain from the deck of the barge, “make haste, I beg of you. The rope connecting with the Castle has been burnt, and the chain is dragging free. The current is swift, and this barge heavy. We shall be away within the minute.”

Page 141

“Get your crew ashore on the instant,” cried Roland, “and fling me these despicable burdens aboard. A man at the head, another at the heels, and toss each into the barge. Is there time, captain, to take this heap of cutlery with us as trophies of the fray?”

“Yes,” replied the captain, “if we are quick about it.”

The howling human packages were hurled from ledge to barge; the strong, unerring sailors, accustomed to the task, heaved no man into the water. Others as speedily fell upon the heap of weapons, and threw them, clattering, on the deck. All then leaped aboard, and Roland, motioning his lieutenants to precede him, was the last to climb over the prow.

The chain came down over the stones with a clattering run, and fell with a great splash into the river. The barge, now clear, swung with the current stern foremost; the sailors got to their oars, and gradually drew their craft away from the shore. A little farther from the landing, those on deck, looking upstream, enjoyed an uninterrupted view of the magnificent conflagration. The huge stone Castle seemed to glow white hot. The roof had fallen in, and a seething furnace reddened the midnight sky. Like a flaming torch the great tower roared to the heavens. The whole hilltop resembled the crater of an active volcano. Timber floors and wooden partitions, long seasoned, proved excellent material for the incendiaries, and even the stones were crumbling away, falling into the gulf of fire, sending up a dazzling eruption of sparks, as section after section tumbled into this earthly Hades.

The long barge floated placidly down a river resembling molten gold. The boat was in disarray, covered with bales of cloth not yet lowered into the hold, cluttered here and there with swords, battle-axes, and spears. In the various positions where they had been flung lay the helpless men, some on their faces, some on their backs. The deck was as light as if the red setting sun were casting his rays upon it. Roland seated himself on a bale, and said to the captain:

“Turn all these men face upward,” and the captain did so.

“Ebearhard, you said execution should take place after a fair trial. There is no necessity to call witnesses, or to go through any court of law formalities. You two are perfectly cognizant of everything that has taken place, and no testimony will either strengthen or weaken that knowledge. As a preliminary, take Kurzbold, the new president, and Gensbein, his lieutenant, from among that group, and set them apart. Two members of the crew will carry out this order,” which was carried out accordingly.

Roland rose, walked along the prostrate row, and selected, apparently at haphazard, four others, then said to the members of his crew:

“Place these four men beside their leader. Left to myself,” he continued to his lieutenants, “I should hang the six. However, I shall take no hand in the matter. I appoint you, Joseph Greusel, and you, Gottlieb Ebearhard, as judges, with power of life and death. If your verdict on any or all of the accused is death, I shall use neither the ax nor the cord, but propose flinging them into the river, and if God wills them to reach the shore alive, their binding will be no hindrance to escape.”

Page 142

Kurzbold and his lieutenant broke out into alternate curses and appeals, protesting that Greusel and Ebearhard had not been expelled from the guild, and calling upon them by their solemn oath of brotherhood to release them now that they possessed the power. To these appeals the newly-appointed judges made no reply, and for once Ebearhard did not laugh.

The other four directed their supplications to Roland himself. They had been misled, they cried, and deeply regretted it. Already they suffered punishment of a severity almost beyond power of human endurance, and they feared their bones were broken with the cudgeling, since which assault their bonds grievously tortured them. All swore amendment, and their grim commander still remaining silent, they asked him in what respect they were more guilty than the dozen others whom seemingly he intended to spare. At last Roland replied.

“You four,” he said sternly, “dared to lay hands upon me, and for that I demand from the judges a sentence of death.”

Even his two lieutenants gazed at him in amazement, that he should make so much of an action which they themselves had endured and nothing said of it. Surely the laying-on of hands, even in rudeness, was not a capital crime, yet they saw to their astonishment that Roland was in deadly earnest.

The leader turned a calm face toward their scrutiny, but there was a frown upon his brow.

“Work while ye have the light,” he said. “Judges, consider your decision, and deliver your verdict.”

Greusel and Ebearhard turned their backs on every one, walked slowly aft, and down into the cabin. Roland resumed his seat on the bale of cloth, elbows on his knees, and face in his hands. All appeals had ceased, and deep silence reigned, every man aboard the boat in a state of painful tension. The fire in the distant castle lowered and lowered, and darkness was returning to the deck of the barge. At last the judges emerged from the cabin, and came slowly forward.

It was Greusel who spoke.

“We wish to know if only these six are on trial?”

“Only these six,” replied Roland.

“Our verdict is death,” said Greusel. “Kurzbold and Gensbein are to be thrown into the Rhine bound as they lie, but the other four receive one chance for life, in that the cords shall be cut, leaving their limbs free.”

This seeming mercy brought no consolation to the quartette, for each plaintively proclaimed that he could not swim.

“I thank you for your judgment,” said Roland, “which I am sure you must have formed with great reluctance. Having proven yourself such excellent judges, I doubt not you will now act with equal wisdom as advisers. A phrase of yours, Ebearhard, persists in my mind, despite all efforts to dislodge it. You uttered on the ledge of rock yonder something to the effect that we left Frankfort as comrades together. That is very true, and

Page 143

unless you override my resolution, I have come to the conclusion that if any of us are fated to die, the penalty shall be dealt by some other hand than mine. The twelve who lie here are scarcely less guilty than the six now under sentence, and I propose, therefore, to put ashore on the east bank Kurzbold and Gensbein, one a rogue, the other a fool. The sixteen who remain have so definitely proven themselves to be simpletons that I trust they will not resent my calling them such. If however, they abandon all claim to the comradeship that has been so much prated about, swearing by the Three Kings of Cologne faithfully to follow me, and obey my every word without cavil or argument, I will pardon them, but the first man who rebels will show that my clemency has been misplaced, and I can assure them that it shall not be exercised again. Captain, your sailors are familiar with knotted ropes. Bid them release all these men except the six condemned."

The boatmen, with great celerity, freed the prostrate captives from their bonds, but some of the mutineers had been so cruelly used in the cudgeling that it was necessary to assist them to their feet. The early summer daybreak was at hand, its approach heralded by the perceptible diluting of the darkness that surrounded them, and a ghastly, pallid grayness began to overspread the surface of the broad river. Down the stream to the west the towers of Bacharach could be faintly distinguished, looking like a dream city, the lower gloom of which was picked out here and there by points of light, each betokening an early riser.

It was a deeply dejected, silent group that stood in this weird half-light, awaiting the development of Roland's mind regarding them; he, the youngest of their company, quiet, unemotional, whose dominion no one now thought of disputing.

"Captain," he continued, "steer for the eastern shore. I know that Bacharach is the greatest wine mart on the Rhine, and well sustains the reputation of the drunken god for whom it is named, but we will nevertheless avoid it. There is a long island opposite the town, but a little farther down. I dare say you know it well. Place that island between us and Bacharach, and tie up to the mainland, out of view from the stronghold of Bacchus. He is a misleading god, with whom we shall hold no further commerce.

"Now, Joseph Greusel, and Gottlieb Ebearhard, do you two administer the oath of the Three Kings to these twelve men; but before doing so, give each one his choice, permitting him to say whether he will follow Kurzbold on the land or obey me on the water."

Here Kurzbold broke out again in trembling anger:

"Your pretended fairness is a sham, and your bogus option a piece of your own sneaking dishonesty. What chance have we townsmen, put ashore, penniless, in an

unknown wilderness, far from any human habitation, knowing nothing of the way back to Frankfort? Your fraudulent clemency rescues us from drowning merely to doom us to starvation."

Page 144

The daylight had so increased that all might see the gentle smile coming to Roland's lips, and the twinkle in his eye as he looked at the wrathful Kurzbold.

"A most intelligent leader of men are you, Herr Conrad. I suppose this dozen will stampede to join your leadership. They must indeed be proud of you when they learn the truth. I shall present to each of you, out of my own store of gold that came from the castle you so bravely attacked last night, one half the amount that is your due. This will be more money than any of you ever possessed before; each portion, indeed, excelling the total that you eighteen accumulated during your whole lives. I could easily bestow your share without perceptible diminution of the fund we three, unaided, extracted from the coffers of the Red Margrave. The reason I do not pay in full is this. When you reach Frankfort, I must be assured that you will keep your foolish tongues silent. If any man speaks of our labors, I shall hear of it on my return, and will fine that man his remaining half-share.

"It distresses me to expose your ignorance, Kurzbold, but I put you ashore amply provided with money, barely two-thirds of a league from Lorch, where you spent so jovial an evening, and where a man with gold in his pouch need fear neither hunger nor thirst. Lorch may be attained by a leisurely walker in less than half an hour; indeed, it is barely two leagues from this spot to Assmannshausen, and surely you know the road from that storehouse of red wine to the capital city of Frankfort, having once traversed it. A child of six, Kurzbold, might be safely put ashore where you shall set foot on land. Therefore, lieutenants, let each man know he will receive a bag of coin, and may land unmolested to accompany the brave and intelligent Kurzbold."

As he finished this declamation, that caused even some of the beaten warriors to laugh at their leader, the barge came gently alongside the strand, well out of sight of Bacharach. Each of the dozen swore the terrible, unbreakable oath of the Three Kings to be an obedient henchman to Roland.

"You may," said Roland, "depart to the cabin, where a flagon of wine will be served to every man, and also an early breakfast. After that you are permitted to lie down and relax your swollen limbs, meditating on the extract from Holy Writ which relates the fate of the blind when led by the blind."

When the dozen limped away, the chief turned to his prisoners.

"Against you four I bear resentment that I thought could not be appeased except by your expulsion, but reflection shows me that you acted under instruction from the foolish leader you selected, and therefore the principal, not the agent, is most to blame. I give you the same choice I have accorded to the rest. Unloose them, captain; and while this is being done, Greusel, get two empty bags from the locker, open one of the casks, and place in each bag an amount which you estimate to be one half the share which is Kurzbold's due."

Page 145

The four men standing up took the oath, and thanked Roland for his mercy, hurrying away at a sign from him to their bread and wine.

“Send hither,” cried Roland after them, “two of the men who have already refreshed themselves, each with a loaf of bread and a full flagon of wine. And now, captain, release Kurzbold and Gensbein.”

When these two stood up and stretched themselves, the bearers of bread and wine presented them with this refreshment, and after they had partaken of it, Greusel gave them each a bag of gold, which they tied to their belts without a word, while Greusel and Ebearhard waited to escort them to land.

“We want our swords,” said Kurzbold sullenly.

Ebearhard looked at his chief, but he shook his head.

“They have disgraced their swords,” he said, “which now by right belong to the Margrave Hermann von Katznellenbogenstahleck. Put them ashore, lieutenant.”

It was broad daylight, and the men had all come up from the cabin, standing in a silent group at the stern. Kurzbold, on the bank, foaming at the mouth with fury, shook his fist at them, roaring:

“Cowards! Pigs! Dolts! Asses! Poltroons!”

The men made no reply, but Ebearhard’s hearty laugh rang through the forest.

“You have given us your titles, Kurzbold,” he cried. “Send us your address whenever you get one!”

“Captain,” said Roland, “cast off. Cross to this side of that island, and tie up there for the day. Set a man on watch, relieving the sentinel every two hours. We have spent an exciting night, and will sleep till evening.”

“Your honor, may I first stow away these bales, and dispose of the battle-axes, spears, and broadswords, so to clear the deck?”

“You may do that, captain, at sunset. As for the bales, they make a very comfortable couch upon which I intend to rest.”

XIV

THE PRISONER OF EHRENFELS

There is inspiration in the sight of armed men marching steadily together; men well disciplined, keeping step to the measured clank of their armor. Like a great serpent the soldiers of Cologne issued from the forest, coming down two and two, for the path was narrow. They would march four abreast when they reached the river road, and the evolutions which accomplished this doubling of the columns, without changing step or causing confusion, called forth praise from the two southern Archbishops.

A beautiful tableau of amity and brotherly love was presented to the troops as they looked up at the three Archbishops standing together on the balcony in relief against the gray walls of the Castle. The officers, who were on horseback, raised their swords sky-pointing from their helmets, for they recognized their overlord and his two notable confreres. With the motion of one man the three Archbishops acknowledged the salute. The troops cheered and cheered as the anaconda made its sinuous way down the mountain-side, and company after company came abreast the Castle. The Archbishops stood there until the last man disappeared down the river road on his way to Coblentz.

Page 146

“May I ask you,” said Mayence, addressing Treves, “to conduct me to the flat roof of your Castle? Will you accompany us?” he inquired of Cologne.

Cologne and Treves being for once in agreement, the latter led the way, and presently the three stood on the broad stone plateau which afforded a truly striking panorama of the Rhine. The July sun sinking in the west transformed the river into a crimson flood, and at that height the cool evening breeze was delicious. Cologne stood with one hand on the parapet, and gazed entranced at the scene, but the practical Mayence paid no attention whatever to it.

“Your troublesome guest, Treves, has one more request to make, which is that you order his flag hoisted to the top of that pole.”

Treves at once departed to give this command, while Cologne, with clouded brow, turned from his appreciation of the view.

“My Lord,” he said, “you have requested the raising of a signal.”

“Yes,” was the reply.

“A signal which calls your men from the Lahn to the landing at Stolzenfels?”

“Yes,” repeated Mayence.

“My Lord, I have kept my promise not only to the letter, but in the spirit as well. My troops are marching peaceably away, and will reach their barracks some time to-morrow. Although I exacted no promise from you, you implied there was a truce between us, and that your army, like my company, was not to be called into action of any kind.”

“Your understanding of our pact is concisely stated, even though my share in that pact remained unspoken. A truce, did you say? Is it not more than that? I hoped that my seconding of the nomination you proposed proved me in complete accord with your views.”

“I am not in effect your prisoner, then?”

“Surely not; so contrary to the fact is such an assumption that I implore you to accept my hospitality. The signal, which I see is now at the mast-head, calls for one barge only, and that contains no soldier, merely a captain and his ten stout rowers, whom you may at this moment, if you turn round, see emerging from the mouth of the Lahn. I present to you, and to the Countess von Sayn, my Schloss of Martinsburg for as long as you may require it. It is well furnished, well provisioned, and attended to by a group of capable servants, who are at your command. I suggest that you cross in my barge, in company with the Countess and her kinsman, the Reverend Father. You agree, I take

it, to convoy the lady safely to her temporary restraint in Pfalz. It was her own request, you remember."

"I shall convoy her thither."

"I am trusting to you entirely. The distance is but thirteen leagues, and can be accomplished easily in a day. Once on the other side of the river she may despatch her kinsman, or some more trustworthy messenger, to her own Castle, and thus summon the two waiting-women who will share her seclusion."

"Is it your intention, my Lord, that her imprisonment shall—?"

Page 147

The Archbishop of Mayence held up his thin hand with a gesture of deprecation.

“I use no word so harsh as ‘imprisonment.’ The penance, if you wish so to characterize it, is rather in the nature of a retreat, giving her needed opportunity for reflection, and, I hope, for regret.”

“Nevertheless, my Lord, your action seems to me unnecessarily severe. How long do you propose to detain her?”

“I am pained to hear you term it severity, for her treatment will be of the mildest description. I thought you would understand that no other course was open to me. So far as I am personally concerned, she might have said what pleased her, with no adverse consequences, but she flouted the highest Court of the realm, and such contempt cannot be overlooked. As for the duration of her discipline, it will continue until the new Emperor is married, after which celebration the Countess is free to go whither she pleases. I shall myself call at Pfalz four days from now, that I may be satisfied the lady enjoys every comfort the Castle affords.”

“And also, perhaps, to be certain she is there immured.”

Mayence’s thin lips indulged in a wry smile.

“I need no such assurance,” he said, “since my Lord of Cologne has pledged his word to see that the order of the Court is carried out.”

The conversation was here interrupted by the return of Treves. Already the great barge was half-way across the river. The surging, swift current swept it some distance below Stolzenfels, and the rowers, five a side, were working strenuously to force it into slower waters. Lord, lady, and monk crossed over to the mouth of the Lahn, and the barge returned immediately to convey across horses and escort.

As the valley of the Lahn opened out it presented a picture of quiet sylvan beauty, apparently uninhabited by any living thing. The Archbishop of Cologne rose, and, shading his eyes from the still radiant sun, gazed intently up the little river. No floating craft was anywhere in sight. He turned to the captain.

“Where is the flotilla from Mayence?” he asked.

“Flotilla, my Lord?”

“Yes; a hundred barges sailed down from Mayence in the darkness either last night or the night before, taking harbor here in the Lahn.”

“My Lord, even one barge, manned as this is, could not have journeyed such a distance in so short a time, and, indeed, for a flotilla to attempt the voyage, except in daylight,

would have been impossible. No barges have come down the Rhine for months, and had they ventured the little Lahn is too shallow to harbor them."

"Thank you, captain. I appear to be ignorant both of the history and the geography of this district. If I were to ask you and your stout rowers to take me down through the swiftest part of the river to Coblentz, how soon would we reach that town?"

"Very speedily, my Lord, but I could undertake no such voyage except at the command of my master. He is not one to be disobeyed."

Page 148

“I quite credit that,” said Cologne, sitting down again, the momentary desire to recall his marching troops, that had arisen when he saw the empty Lahn, dying down when he realized how effectually he had been outwitted.

When the horses were brought across, Father Ambrose, at the request of the Countess, rode back to Sayn, and sent forward the two waiting-women whom she required, and so well did he accomplish his task that they arrived at Schloss Martinsburg before ten of the clock that night. At an early hour next morning the little procession began its journey up the Rhine, his Lordship and the Countess in front; the six horsemen bringing up the rear.

The lady was in a mood of deep dejection; the regret which Mayence had anticipated as result of imprisonment already enveloped her. It was only too evident that the Archbishop of Cologne was bitterly disappointed, for he rode silently by her side making no attempt at conversation. They rested for several hours during midday, arriving at Caub before the red sun set, and now the Countess saw her pinnacled prison lying like an anchored ship in midstream.

At Caub they were met by a bearded, truculent-looking ruffian, who introduced himself to the Archbishop as the Pfalzgraf von Stahleck.

“You take us rather by surprise, Prince of Cologne,” he said. “It is true that my overlord, the Archbishop of Mayence, called upon me several days ago while descending the Rhine in his ten-oared barge, and said there was a remote chance that a prisoner might shortly be given into my care. This had often happened before, for my Castle covers some gruesome cells that extend under the river,—cells with secret entrances not easily come by should any one search the Castle. It is sometimes convenient that a prisoner of State should be immured in one of them when the Archbishop has no room in his own Schloss Ehrenfels, so I paid little attention, and merely said the prisoner would receive a welcome on arrival. This morning there came one of the Archbishop’s men from Stolzenfels, and both my wife and myself were astonished to learn that the prisoner would be here this evening under your escort, my Lord, and that it was a woman we were to harbor. Further, she was to be given the best suite of rooms we had in the Castle, and to be treated with all respect as a person of rank. Now, this apartment is in no state of readiness to receive such a lady, much less to house one of the dignity of your Lordship.”

“It does not matter for me,” replied the Archbishop. “Being, as I may say, part soldier, the bed and board of an inn is quite acceptable upon occasion.”

“Oh no, your Highness, such a hardship is not to be thought of. The Castle of Gutenfels, standing above us, is comfortable as any on the Rhine. Its owner, the Count Palatine, is fellow-Elector of yours, and a very close friend of my overlord of Mayence, and I am told they vote together whenever my overlord needs his assistance.”

Page 149

“That is true,” commented Cologne.

“My overlord sent word that anything I needed for the accommodation of her ladyship, he recognizing that my warning had been short, I should requisition from the Count Palatine, so at midday I went up to call upon him, not saying anything, of course, about State prisoners, male or female. The moment he heard that you, my Lord, were visiting this neighborhood, he begged me to tender to you, and to all your companions or following, the hospitality of his Castle for so long as you might honor him with your presence.”

“The Count Palatine is very gracious, and I shall be glad to accept shelter and refreshment.”

“He would have been here to greet your Highness, but I was unable to inform him at what hour you would arrive, so I waited for you myself, and will be pleased to guide you to the gates of Gutenfels.”

The conversation was interrupted by a great clatter of galloping horses, descending the hill with reckless speed, and at its foot swinging round into the main street of the town.

“Ha!” cried the amateur jailer, “here is the Count Palatine himself;” and thus it is our fate to meet the fourth Elector of the Empire, who, added to the three Archbishops, formed a quorum so potent that it could elect or depose an Emperor at will.

The cavalry of the Count Palatine was composed of fifty fully-armed men, and their gallop through the town roused the echoes of that ancient bailiwick, which, together with the Castle, belonged to the Palatinate. The powerful noble extended a cordial welcome to his fellow-Elector, and together they mounted to the Castle of Gutenfels.

At dinner that night the Count Palatine proved an amiable host. Under his geniality the charming Countess von Sayn gradually recovered her lost good spirits, and forgot she was on her way to prison. After all, she was young, naturally joyous, and loved interesting company, especially that of the two Electors, who were well informed, and had seen much of the world. The Archbishop also shook off some of his somberness; indeed, all of it as the flagons flowed. Being asked his preference in wine, he replied that yesterday he had been regaled with a very excellent sample of Oberweseler.

“That is from this neighborhood,” replied the Count. “Oberwesel lies but a very short distance below, on the opposite side of the river, but we contend that our beverage of Caub is at least equal, and sometimes superior. You shall try a good vintage of both. How did you come by Oberweseler so far north as Stolzenfels?”

“Simply because I was so forward, counting on the good nature of my friend of Treves, that I stipulated for Oberweseler.”

“Ah! I am anxious to know why.”

“For reasons of history, not of the palate. A fair English Princess was guest of Stolzenfels long ago, and this wine was served to her.”

“In that case,” returned the Count, “I also shall fall back on history, and first order brimming tankards of old Caub. Really, Madam,” he said, turning to Hildegunde, “we should have had Royalty here to meet you, instead of two old wine-bibbers like his Highness and myself.”

Page 150

The girl looked startled at this mention of Royalty, bringing to her mind the turbulent events of yesterday. Nevertheless, with great composure, she smiled at her enthusiastic host.

“Still,” went on the Count, “if we are not royal ourselves, ’tis a degree we are empowered to confer, and, indeed, may be very shortly called upon to bestow. That is true from what I hear, is it not, your Highness?”

“Yes,” replied the Archbishop gravely.

“Well, as I was about to say, this Castle belonged to the Falkensteins, and was sold by them to the Palatinate. Rumor, legend, history, call it what you like, asserts that the most beautiful woman ever born on the Rhine was Countess Beatrice of Falkenstein. But when I drink to the toast I am about to offer I shall, Madam,” he smiled at Hildegunde, “assert that the legend no longer holds, a contention I am prepared to maintain by mortal combat. Know then that the Earl of Cornwall, who was elected King of Germany in 1257, met Beatrice of Falkenstein in this Castle. The meeting was brought about by the Electors themselves, who, stupid matchmakers, attempted to coerce each into a marriage with the other. Beatrice refused to marry a foreigner.

“The Chronicles are a little vague about the most interesting part of the negotiations, but minutely plain about the outcome. In some manner the Earl and Beatrice met, and he became instantly enamored of her. This is the portion so deplorably slurred by these old monkish writers. I need hardly tell you that the Earl himself succeeded where the seven Electors failed. Beatrice became Cornwall’s wife and Queen of Germany, and they lived happily ever afterwards.

“I give you the toast!” cried the chivalrous Count Palatine, rising. “To the cherished memory of the Royal lovers of Gutenfels!”

The Archbishop’s eyes twinkled as he looked across the table at Hildegunde.

“This seems to be a time of Royal betrothals,” he said, raising his flagon.

“‘Seems’ is the right word, Guardian,” replied the Countess.

Then she sipped the ancient wine of Caub.

Next morning Hildegunde was early afoot. Notwithstanding her trouble of mind, she had slept well, and awakened with the birds, so great is the influence of youth and health. During her last conscious moments the night before, as she lay in the stately bed of the most noble room the Castle contained, she bitterly accused herself for the disastrous failure of the previous day. The Archbishop of Cologne had given her good counsel that was not followed, and his disappointment with the result, generously as he endeavored to conceal it, was doubtless the deeper because undiscussed. Thinking of coming

captivity, a dream of grim Pfalz was expected, but instead the girl's spirit wandered through the sweet seclusion of Nonnenwerth, living again that happy, earlier time, free from politics and the tramp of armed men.

Page 151

In the morning the porter, at her behest, withdrew bolt, bar, and chain, allowing exit into the fresh, cool air, and skirting the Castle, she arrived at a broad terrace which fronted it. A fleecy mist extending from shore to shore concealed the waters of the Rhine, and partially obliterated the little village of Caub at the foot of the hill. Where she stood the air was crystal clear, and she seemed to be looking out on a broad snow-field of purest white. Beyond Caub its surface was pierced by the dozen sharp pinnacles of her future prison, looking like a bed of spikes, upon which one might imagine a giant martyr impaled by the verdict of a cruel Archbishop.

Gazing upon this nightmare Castle, whose tusks alone were revealed, the girl formulated the resolution but faintly suggested the night before. On her release should ensue an abandonment of the world, and the adoption of a nun's veil in the convent opposite Drachenfels, an island exchanged for an island; turmoil for peace.

At breakfast she met again the jovial Count Palatine, and her more sober guardian, who both complimented her on the results of her beauty rest, the one with great gallantry, the other with more reserve, as befitted a Churchman. The Archbishop seemed old and haggard in the morning light, and it was not difficult to guess that no beauty sleep had soothed his pillow. It wrung the girl's heart to look at him, and again she accused herself for lack of all tact and discretion, wishing that her guardian took his disappointment more vengefully, setting her to some detested task that she might willingly perform.

The hospitable Count, eager that they should stop at least another night under his roof, pressed his invitation upon them, and the Archbishop gave a tacit consent.

"If the Countess is not too tired," said Cologne, "I propose that she accompany me on a little journey I have in view farther up the river. We will return here in the evening."

"I should be delighted," cried Hildegunde, "for all sense of fatigue has been swept away by a most restful night."

The good-natured Count left them to their own devices, and shortly afterwards guardian and ward rode together down the steep declivity to the river. The mist was already driven away, except a wisp here and there clinging to the gray surface of the water, trailing along as if drawn by the current, for the air was motionless, and there was promise of a sultry day. They proceeded in silence until a bend in the Rhine shut Caub and its sinister water-prison out of sight, and then it was the girl who spoke.

"Guardian," she said, "have I offended you beyond forgiveness?"

A gentle smile came to his lips as he gazed upon her with affection.

“You have not offended me at all, my dear,” he said, “but I am grieved at thwarting circumstance.”

“I have been thinking over circumstances too, and hold myself solely to blame for their baffling opposition. I will submit without demur to whatever length of imprisonment may please, and, if possible, soften the Archbishop of Mayence. After my release I shall ask your consent that I may forthwith join the Sisterhood at Nonnenwerth. I wish to divide my wealth equally between yourself and the convent.”

Page 152

The Archbishop shook his head.

“I could not accept such donation.”

“Why not? The former Archbishop of Cologne accepted Linz from my ancestress Matilda.”

“That was intended to be but a temporary loan.”

“Well; call my benefaction temporary if you like, to be kept until I call for it, but meanwhile to be used at your discretion.”

“It is quite impossible,” said the Archbishop firmly.

“Does that mean you will not allow me to adopt the religious life?”

“It means, my child, that I should not feel justified in permitting this renunciation of the world until you knew more of what you were giving up.”

“I know enough already.”

“You think so, but your experience of it is too recent for us to expect unbiased judgment this morning. I should insist on a year, at least, and preferably two years, part of that time to be spent in Frankfort and in Cologne. I anticipate a great improvement in Frankfort when the new Emperor comes to the throne. If at the end of two years you are still of the same mind, I shall offer no further opposition.”

“I shall never change my intention.”

“Perhaps not. I am told that the determination of a woman is irrevocable, so a little delay does not much matter. Meanwhile, another problem passes my comprehension. I have thought and thought about it, and am convinced there is a misunderstanding somewhere, which possibly will be cleared away too late. I am quite certain that Father Ambrose did not meet Prince Roland in Frankfort.”

“Do you, then, dispute the word of Father Ambrose?” asked the girl, quickly checking the accent of indignation that arose in her voice, for humility was to be her role ever after.

“Father Ambrose is at once both the gentlest and most truthful of men. He has undoubtedly seen somebody rob a merchant in Frankfort. He has undoubtedly been imprisoned among wine-casks; but that this thief and this jailer was Roland is incredible to me who know the young man, and physically impossible, for Prince Roland at that time was himself a prisoner, as, indeed, he is to-day. Prince Roland cannot be liberated from Ehrenfels without an order signed by Mayence, Treves, and myself. I alone have

not the power to encompass his freedom, and Mayence is equally powerless although he is owner of the Castle. Some scoundrel is walking the streets of Frankfort pretending to be Roland."

"In that case, my Lord, he would not deny his identity when accosted on the bridge."

"A very clever point, my dear, but it does not overcome my difficulty. There might be a dozen reasons why the rascal would not incriminate himself to any stranger who thus took him by surprise. However, it is useless to argue the question, for I persuade you as little as you persuade me. The practical thing is to fathom the misunderstanding, and remove it. Will you assist me in this?"

Page 153

“Willingly, if I can, Guardian.”

“Very well. I must first inform you that your imprisonment is likely to be very short. You are to know that the harmony supposed to exist in Stolzenfels is largely mythical: I left behind me the seeds of discord. I proposed that the glum niece of Treves, whom you met at our historic lunch, should be the future Empress. This nomination was seconded by Mayence himself, and received with unconcealed joy by my brother of Treves.”

“Then for once the Court was unanimous? I think your choice an admirable one.”

“The Archbishop of Mayence does not agree with you, my dear.”

“Then why did he second your nomination?”

“Because he is so much more clever than Treves, who a few minutes later would have been the seconder.”

“Why should his Lordship of Mayence think one thing and act another?”

“Why is he always doing it? No one can guess what Mayence really thinks, if he is judged by what he says. Were Treves’ niece to become Empress, her uncle would speedily realize his power, and Mayence would lose his leadership. Could Mayence to-day secretly promote you to the position of Empress, he would gladly do so.”

“But won’t he at once look for some one else?”

“Certainly. That choice is now occupying his mind. His seconding of the nomination was merely a ruse to gain time, but if he proposes any one else he will find both Treves and myself against him. His only hope of circumventing the ambition of Treves is that something may happen, causing you to change your mind concerning Prince Roland.”

“You forget, Guardian,” protested the girl, “that his Lordship of Mayence said he would not permit me to marry Prince Roland after the way I had spoken and acted.”

“He said that, my dear, under the influence of great resentment against you, but Mayence never allows resentment or any other feeling to stand in the way of his own interests. If you wrote him a contrite letter regretting your defiance of him, and expressing your willingness to bow to his wishes, I am very sure he would welcome the communication as a happy solution of the quandary in which he finds himself.”

“You wish me to do this, Guardian?” she asked wistfully.

“Not until you are satisfied that Prince Roland is innocent of the charges you make against him.”

“How can I receive such assurance?”

“Ah, now you come to the object of this apparently purposeless journey. I have had much experience in the world you are so anxious to renounce, and although I have seen the wicked prosper for a time, yet my faith has never been shaken in an overruling Providence, and what happened last night set me thinking so deeply that daylight stole in upon my meditations.”

“Oh, my poor Guardian, I knew you had not slept, and all because of a worthless creature like myself, and a wicked creature, too, for I did not see the hand of Providence so visible to you.”

Page 154

“Surely, my dear, a moment’s thought would reveal it to you. Remember how we came almost to the door of the prison, when a temporary reprieve was handed to us by that coarse reprobate, the Pfalzgraf. Your suite of rooms was not yet ready, and thus we found bestowed upon us another free day; a day of untrammeled liberty, quite unlooked for. Now, much may be done in a day. An Empire has been lost and won within a few hours. With this gift came a revelation. That wine-blotched Pfalzgraf would have shown no consideration for you: to him a prisoner is a prisoner, to be cast anywhere, lock the door, and have done, but a wholesome fear had been instilled into him by his overlord. The Archbishop of Mayence had taken thought for your comfort, ordering that the best rooms in the Castle should be placed at your disposal. Hence, after all that had passed, his Lordship felt no malignancy against you, and I dare say would have been glad to rescind the order for your imprisonment, were it not that he would never admit defeat.”

“Oh, Guardian, what an imagination is yours! I am sure his Lordship of Mayence will never forgive me.”

“His Lordship of Mayence, my dear, is in a dilemma from which no one except yourself can extricate him.”

“His own cleverness will extricate him.”

“Perhaps. Still, I’m not troubling about him. My thoughts are much too selfish for that. I wish you to lift me from *my* uncertainty.”

“You mean about Prince Roland? I shall do whatever you ask of me.”

“I place no command, but I proffer a suggestion.”

“It shall be a command, nevertheless.”

“We have left your own prison far behind, and are approaching that of Prince Roland. To the door of that detaining Castle I propose to lead you. I am forbidden by my compact with the other Electors to see Prince Roland or to hold any communication with him. The custodian of the Castle, who knows me well, will not refuse any request I make, even if I ask to see the young man himself. He will therefore not hesitate to admit you when I require him to do so. To take away any taint of surreptitiousness about my action, interfering, as one might say, with another man’s house, I shall this evening write to the Archbishop of Mayence, tell him exactly what I have done, and why.”

“Do you intend, then, that I should see Prince Roland and talk with him?”

“Yes.”

“My dear Guardian!” cried the girl, her face flushing red, “what on earth can I say to him? How am I to excuse my intrusion?”

“A prisoner, I fancy, does not resent intrusion, especially if the intruder is—” The old man smiled as he looked at the girl, whose blush grew deeper and deeper; then, seeing her confusion, he added: “There are many things to say. Introduce yourself as the ward of his Lordship of Cologne; reveal that your guardian has confided to you that Prince Roland is to be the future Emperor;

Page 155

ask for some assurance from him that the property descending to you from your ancestors shall not be molested; or perhaps, better still, with the same introduction, tell him the story of Father Ambrose. Add that this has disquieted you: demand the truth, hearken to what the youth says for himself, thank him, and withdraw. It needs no long conversation, though I am prepared to hear that he wished to lengthen your stay. I am certain that five minutes face to face with him will completely overturn all Father Ambrose has said to his disparagement, and a few simple words from him will probably dispel the whole mystery. If someone is personating him in Frankfort it is more than likely he knows who it is."

They traveled a generous furlong together in silence, the girl's head bowed and her brow troubled. At last, as if with an effort, she cleared doubt away, and raised her head.

"I will do it," she said decisively.

The Archbishop heaved a deep sigh of relief. He knew now he was out of the wood.

"Is this Assmannshausen we are coming to?" she asked, as if to hint that the subject on which they had talked so earnestly was finally done with.

"No; this is Lorch, and that is the Castle of Nollich standing above it."

"I hope," said the girl, with a sigh of weariness, "that no English Princess about to marry an Emperor lodged there, or no Englishman who was to become an Emperor—"

The Archbishop interrupted the plaint with a hearty laugh, the first he had enjoyed for several days.

"The English seem an interfering race," she went on. "I wish they would attend to their own affairs."

"Nollich is uncontaminated," said the Archbishop, "though in olden days a reckless knight on horseback rode up to secure his lady-love, and I believe rode down again with her, and his route is still called the Devil's Ladder."

"Did the marriage turn out so badly?"

"No; I believe they lived happily ever after; but the ascent was so cliff-like that mountain sprites are supposed to have given their assistance."

"How much farther is Assmannshausen?"

"Less than two leagues. We will stop there and refresh ourselves. Are you tired?"

“Oh no; not in the least. I merely wish the ordeal was past.”

“You are a brave girl, Hildegunde.”

“I am anything but that, Guardian. Still, do not fear I shall flinch.”

After partaking of the midday meal at Assmannshausen, the Countess proposed that they should leave their horses in the stable, and walk the short third of a league to Ehrenfels, and to this her guardian agreed.

He found more difficulty with the custodian than had been expected. The man objected, trembling. Without a written order from his master he dare not allow any one to visit the prisoner. He would be delighted to oblige his Lordship of Cologne, but he was merely a poor wretch who had no option in the matter.

Page 156

“Very well,” said Cologne. “I have just come from your master, who is stopping with my brother Treves at Stolzenfels. If you persist I must then request lodgings from you until such time as a speedy messenger can bring your master hither. This journey may cause him great inconvenience, and should such be the case, I fear you will fare ill with him.”

“That may be, my Lord, but I must do my duty.”

“Are you sure you have already done it on all occasions?” asked the Archbishop severely.

The man’s face became ghastly in its pallor.

“I don’t know what you mean, my Lord.”

“Then I will quickly tell you what I mean. It is rumored that Prince Roland has been seen on the streets of Frankfort.”

“How—how could that be, my Lord?”

“That is exactly what I wish to know. I believe the Prince is not in your custody.”

“I assure you, my Lord,” said the now thoroughly frightened man, “that his Highness is in his room.”

“Very well; then conduct this lady thither. Although she does not know the Prince, a relative of hers who does asserts that he met his Highness in Frankfort. I said this was impossible if you had done that duty you prate so much about. The lady merely wishes to ask him for some explanation of this affair, so make your choice. Shall she go up with you now, or must I send for the other two Archbishops?”

There was but one comforting phrase in this remark, namely, that the lady did not know the Prince. Still, it was a dreadful risk, yet the custodian hesitated no longer. He took down a bunch of keys, and asked the Countess to follow him. Ascending the stair, he unlocked the door, and stood aside for the Countess to pass through.

Some one with wildly tousled hair sat sprawling in a chair; arms on the table, and head sunk forward down upon them. A full tankard of wine within his reach, and a flagon had been overset, sluicing the table with its contents, which still fell drip, drip, drip, to the floor.

The young man raised his head, aroused by the harsh unlocking of the door, and with the crash it made as his father flung it hard against the stone wall for the purpose of giving him warning, but the youth was in no condition to profit by this thoughtfulness, nor

to understand the signals his father made from behind the frightened girl. He clutched wildly at the overturned flagon, and with an oath cried:

“Bring me more wine, you old—”

Staggering to his feet, he threw the flagon wide, then slipped on the spilled wine and fell heavily to the floor, roaring defiance at the world.

The panic-stricken girl shrank back, crying to the jailer:

“Let me out! Close the door quickly, and lock it!” an order obeyed with alacrity.

When Hildegunde emerged to the court her guardian asked no question. The horror in her face told all.

“I am sorry, my Lord,” said the cringing custodian, “but his Highness is drunk.”

Page 157

“Does this—does this happen often?”

“Alas! yes, my Lord.”

“Poor lad, poor lad! The sins of the fathers shall be visited on the children to the third and fourth generation. Hildegunde, forgive me. Let us away and forget it all.”

The next morning the Countess began her imprisonment in Pfalz.

XV

JOURNEYS END IN LOVERS’ MEETING

Roland slept until the sun was about an hour high over the western hills. He found the captain waiting patiently for him to awake, and then that useful martinet instantly set his crew at tying up the bales which had been torn open, placing them once more in the hold. He was about to do the same with the weapons captured from Furstenberg, but Greusel stepped forward, and asked him to put pikes, battle-axes, and the long swords into the cabin.

Roland nodded his approval, saying:

“They may prove useful instruments in case of an attack on the barge. Our own swords are just a trifle short for adding interest to an assault.”

When once more the hatches were down, and the deck clear, supper was served. Shortly after sunset, Roland told the captain to cast off, directing him to keep to the eastern shore, passing between what might be called the marine Castle of Pfalz and the village of Caub, with the strictest silence he could enjoin upon his crew. Pfalz stands upon a rock in the Rhine, a short distance up the river from Caub, while above that village on the hill behind are situated the strong, square towers of Gutenfels.

“Don’t you intend to pay a call upon Pfalzgrafenstein?” asked Ebearhard. “It is notoriously the most pestilent robber’s nest between Mayence and Cologne.”

“No,” said Roland. “On this occasion Pfalz shall escape. You see, Ebearhard, on our first trip down the Rhine it is not my intention to fight if I can avoid conflict. The plan which proved successful with the four castles we have visited is impossible so far as Pfalz is concerned. If we attempted to enter this waterschloss by stealth, we would be discovered by those levying contributions on the barge. There is no cover to conceal us, so I shall give Pfalz the go-by, and also Gutenfels, because the latter is not a robber castle, but is owned by the Count Palatine, a true gentleman and no thief. The next object of our attentions will be Schonburg, on the western side of the river, near Oberwesel.”

As the grotesque, hexagonal bulk of the Pfalz, with its numerous jutting corners and turrets, and over all the pentagonal tower, appeared dimly in the center of the Rhine, under the clear stars, the captain ordered his men to lie flat on the deck, himself following their example. Roland and his company were already seated in the cabin, and the great barge, lying so low in the water as to be almost invisible with its black paint, floated noiseless as a dream down the swift current.

Page 158

Without the slightest warning came a shock, and every man on the lockers was flung to the floor of the cabin, with cries of dismay, for too well they recognized the preliminary to their disasters of the night before. Roland sprang up on deck, and found the boat swinging round broadside to the current, which had swept it so near to the Castle that at first it seemed to have struck against one of the outlying rocks. The fantastic form of the Pfalz hung over them, looking like some weird building seen in a nightmare, its sharp, pointed pinnacles outlined against the starlit sky.

The captain, muttering sonorous German oaths, ordered his men to the sweeps, but Roland saw at once that they were too close to the ledge of rock for any chance of escape. He hurried down into the cabin.

“Every man his sword, and follow me as silently as possible!”

Up on deck again, Roland said to the captain:

“Let your rowers help the chain to bring the barge alongside, but when the robbers appear, pretend to be getting away, although you must instantly obey them when ordered to cease your efforts.”

The prow of the boat ground against the solid rock, jammed in between the stout chain and the low cliff. Roland was the first to spring ashore, and the rest nimbly followed him. With every motion of the barge the bell inside the Castle rang, and now they could hear the bestirring of the garrison, and clashing of metal, although the single door of the Pfalz had not yet been opened. This door stood six feet above the plateau of rock, and could be entered or quitted only by means of a ladder.

Roland led his men to a place of effective concealment along the western wall of the Pfalz, only just in time, for as he peered round the corner, his men standing back against the wall to the rear, he saw the flash of torches from the now-open door, and the placing of a stout ladder at a steep angle between the threshold and the floor of rock below. Most of the garrison, however, did not wait for this convenience, but leaped impetuously from doorway to rock. Others slid down the ladder, and all rushed headlong towards the barge, which made its presence known by the grinding of its side against the rock, and also by the despairing orders of the captain, and the hurrying footsteps of his men on deck.

More leisurely down the ladder came two officers, followed by one whom Roland recognized as lord of the Castle, Pfalzgraf Hermann von Stahleck, a namesake and relative of the Laughing Baron of Furstenberg, and quite as ruthless a robber as he.

“Cease your efforts at the prow,” shouted the Pfalzgraf to the captain when he had descended the ladder, “and concentrate your force at the stern, swinging your boat round broadside on to the landing.”

The captain obeyed, and presently the boat lay in such position as the nobleman desired. Now there was a great commotion as, at a word from the Pfalzgraf, the garrison fell on the barge, and began to wrench off the hatches, a task which they well knew how to perform.

Page 159

“Follow as quietly as possible,” whispered Roland to the two lieutenants behind him, who, under their breath, passed on word to the men. Roland ran nimbly up the ladder. No guard was set where none had ever been needed before. Greusel was the last to ascend, then the ladder was pulled up, and the massive door swung shut, bolted and chained.

The invaders found torches stuck here and there along the wall, and the picturesque courtyard, with its irregular balconies and stairways, seemed, in the flickering light, more spacious than was actually the case.

Although for the moment in safety, Roland experienced a sense of imprisonment as he gazed round the narrow limits of this enclosure. He had endeavored to count the number of men who followed the Pfalzgraf, but their impetuosity in seeking the barge prevented an accurate estimate, although he knew there were more than double the force that obeyed him, and therefore it would be suicidal to lead his untrained coterie against the seasoned warriors of Stahleck.

He ordered Greusel to take with him six men, and search the Castle, bringing into the courtyard whomsoever they might find; also to discover whether any window existed that looked out upon the eastern landing-place. The remainder of his men he grouped at the door, under command of Ebearhard.

“I fear, Ebearhard,” he said, “that I boasted prematurely in thinking good luck would attend me now that I lead what appears to be an obedient following. Here we are in a trap, and unless we can escape through rat-holes, I admit that I fail to see for the moment how we are to get safely afloat again.”

“We are in better fettle than the Pfalzgraf and his men outside,” returned Ebearhard, “because this fortress is doubtless well supplied with provisions, and is considered impregnable, while the Pfalzgraf’s impetuous chaps, who did not know enough to stay in comfortable quarters when they had them, are without shelter and without food. You have certainly done the best you could in the circumstances, and for those circumstances you are free of blame, since, not being a wizard, you could scarcely know of the chain.”

“Indeed, Ebearhard, it is just in that respect I blame myself, neglecting your own good example, who discovered the chain at Furstenberg. This trap is a new invention, and, so far as I know, has never before been attempted on the Rhine. I might have remembered that Stahleck here is cousin to the Red Margrave, who likely has told him of the device. Indeed, the chances are that Stahleck himself was the contriver of the chain, for he seems a man of much more craft and intelligence than that huge, laughing animal farther up the river. I should have ordered the captain to tie up against the eastern bank, and then sent some men in a small boat to learn if the way was clear.

No, Ebearhard, I blame myself for this muddle, and, through anxiety to pass the Pfalz, I have landed myself and my men within its walls.

Page 160

I must pace this courtyard for a time, and ponder what next to do. Go you, Ebearhard, with the men to the door. Allow no talking or noise. Listen intently, and report to me if you hear anything. You see, Ebearhard, the devil of it is that Stahleck, like his cousin with Cologne, swears allegiance to the Archbishop of Mayence, and here am I, after destroying the fief of one Archbishop, securely snared in the fief of another. I fear their Lordships' next meeting with me will not pass off so amicably as did the last."

"*Next* meeting?" cried Ebearhard in astonishment; "have you ever met the Archbishops?"

Roland gasped, realizing that his absorption in one subject had nearly caused him to betray his momentous secret.

"Ah, I remember," continued Ebearhard. "It was on account of the Archbishop's presence in Bonn that you returned from that town when first you journeyed up the Rhine."

"Yes," said Roland, with relief.

"It seems to me," went on Ebearhard consolingly, "that even if we may not leave the Castle, at least the Pfalzgraf cannot penetrate into the stronghold, therefore we are safe enough."

"Not so, Ebearhard," replied his chief. "The Pfalzgraf has the barge, remember, and it can carry his whole force to Caub or elsewhere, returning with ample provisions and siege instruments that will batter in the door despite all we can do. Nevertheless, let us keep up our hearts. Get you to the gate, Ebearhard. I must have time to think before Greusel returns."

Alone, with bent head, he paced back and forwards across the courtyard under the wavering light of the torches. Very speedily he concluded that no plan could be formed until Greusel made his report regarding the intricacies of the Castle.

"My luck is against me! My luck is against me!" he said aloud to himself, as if the sound of his own voice might suggest some way out of the difficulty.

"Luck always turns against a thief and a marauder," said a sweet and clear voice behind him; "and how can it be otherwise, when the gallows-tree stands at the end of his journey."

Roland stopped in his walk, and turned abruptly towards the sound. He saw standing there, just descended from the stairway at her back, one quite evidently a lady; not more than eighteen, perhaps, but nevertheless with a flash of defiance in her somber

eyes, which were bent fearlessly upon him. The two tirewomen accompanying her shrank timorously to the background, palpably panic-stricken, and ready to faint with fright.

“Ah, Madam, how came you here?” cried Roland, ignoring her insulting words, too much surprised by her beauty of face and form to think of aught else.

“I came here, because your bully upstairs hammered at my door and bade me open, which I would not do, defying him to break it down if he had the power. It so happened that he possessed the power, and used it.”

Page 161

“I deeply regret that you should have been disturbed, Madam. My lieutenant erred through over-zeal, and I ask your pardon for the offense.”

The girl laughed.

“Why, sir, you are the politest of pirates, but, indeed, your lieutenant seems a harsh man. Without even removing his bonnet, he commanded me to betake myself to the courtyard and report to his chief, which obediently I have done.”

“I did not guess that women inhabited this robber’s nest. My lieutenant is searching for men in hiding, so please accept my assurance that you will suffer no further annoyance. You are surely not alone in this house?”

“Oh no. Her ladyship the Pfalzgraf’s wife, and her entourage, have sought shelter in another part of the Castle, and presently they will all troop down here, prisoners to your most ungallant subordinate; that is, should their doors prove no stouter than mine, or if your furious men have not dislocated their shoulders.”

“How came you to be absent from her ladyship’s party?”

“Because, urbane pirate captain, I am an unwilling prisoner in this stronghold, being an obstreperous person, who refused to obey my superiors; those set in authority over me. Consequently am I immured in this dismal dungeon of the water-rats, and thus, youthful pirate, I welcome even so red-handed an outlaw as yourself.”

“Then are we in like case, my lady of midnight beauty, for I, too, am a prisoner in Pfalzgrafenstein, and, when you came, was cogitating some plan of escape. Therefore, rebellious maiden, the sword of this red-handed freebooter is most completely at your service,” and the speaker once more doffed his bonnet with a gallant sweep that caused the plume to kiss the flagstones at his feet, and he bowed low to the brave girl who had shown no fear of him.

XVI

MY LADY SCATTERS THE FREEBOOTERS AND CAPTURES THEIR CHIEF

Greusel appeared on one of the balconies, and called down to his leader.

“There are,” he said, “a number of women in the western rooms of the Castle. They have bolted their doors, but tell me that the rooms contain the Pfalzgravine von Stahleck and other noble ladies, with their tirewomen. What am I to do?”

“Place a guard in the corridor, Greusel, to make sure that these ladies communicate with no one outside the fortress.”

“I thought it well,” explained Greusel, “not to break in the doors without definite instructions from you to that effect.”

“Quite right. Tell the ladies we will not molest them.”

“You molested me!” cried the handsome girl in the courtyard, her dark eyes flashing in the glow of the torches.

“This person,” said the unemotional Greusel, betraying no eye for beauty, “called us every uncomplimentary name she could think of. We were the scum of the earth, according to her account.”

Page 162

The girl laughed scornfully.

“But I would not have dislodged her,” continued Greusel, unperturbed, “had she not said there was a window in her room, which is on the eastern side of the Castle, overlooking the operations of the Pfalzgraf on the barge, and she proclaimed her determination to warn Stahleck that his Castle was filled with freebooters, as soon as she could make her voice heard above the din at the landing. Therefore I broke in the door, ordering her and the tirewomen to descend to the courtyard. On examining her room I find there is no such window as she described, and she could not communicate with the Count, so I advise that you send her back again.”

Once more the young lady laughed, and exclaimed:

“I could not break down the door for myself, so compelled you and your clods to do it. I am immured here; a reluctant captive. You will not have me sent back to my cell, I hope, Commander?”

“No; if you are really my fellow-prisoner, and not one of the enemy.”

“She may be deluding you also,” warned Greusel.

“I will take the risk of that,” replied Roland, smiling at the girl, who smiled back at him. She had a will of her own, but seemed sensitively responsive to fair treatment.

“Are there any men-servants?” asked Roland.

“Only three, and they are tottering with age,” replied Greusel, “more frightened than the women themselves. Nevertheless, one of the retainers is important, being, as he told me, keeper of the treasure-house. I relieved him of his keys, and find that the strong-room is well supplied with bags of gold. ’Twill be the richest haul yet, excepting our two barrels of coin from—”

“Hush, hush!” cried Roland. “Mention no names. Did you discover any other exit excepting the door by which we entered?”

“No; but at the northern end there is a window through which a man of ordinary size might pass. It is, however, high above the rocks, and I discern floating in the tide a fleet of small boats.”

“Ah,” said Roland, “that is important.”

“Taken in conjunction with the gold, most amiable robber,” suggested the girl.

“Taken in conjunction with the gold,” repeated Roland, smiling again; and adding, “Taken also in conjunction with a lady who, if I understand her, wishes to escape from the Pfalz.”

“You are right,” agreed the young girl archly. “Do I receive a share of the money?”

“Yes; if you join our band.”

“Oh!” she cried, with a pout of feigned disappointment, “I thought you had already accepted me as a member. And what am I to call my new overlord, who acquires wealth so successfully that he does not wish the amount mentioned, or the place from which it was taken specified?”

“My name is Roland. Will you consent to a fair exchange?”

“I am called Hilda by my friends.”

“Then, Hilda,” said the young man, looking at her with admiration, “I welcome you as one of my lieutenants.”

Page 163

“One, indeed!” she exclaimed, with affected indignation. “I shall be first lieutenant or nothing.”

“Up to this moment Herr Joseph Greusel, who so unceremoniously made your acquaintance, has been my chief lieutenant, but I willingly depose him, and give you his place.”

“Do you hear that, Joseph?” Hilda called up to the man leaning over the balcony.

The deposed one made a grimace, but no reply.

“Set your guard, and come down, Greusel.”

Presently Greusel appeared in the courtyard, followed by four men.

“I have left two on guard,” he said.

“Right. What have you done with the servants?”

“Tied them up in a hard knot. I found a loft full of ropes.”

“Right again. Take your four men, and stand guard at the door. Send Ebearhard to me.”

Before Ebearhard arrived, Roland turned to the girl.

“Retire to your room,” he said, “and bid your women gather together whatever you wish to carry with you.”

“I’d rather stay where I am,” protested Hilda, “being anxious to hear what your plans are. I confess I don’t know how you can emerge from this Castle in safety.”

“Fraeulein Hilda, the first duty of a chief lieutenant is obedience.”

“Refusing that, what will you do?”

“I shall call two of my men, cause you to be transported to your room, and order them to see that you do not leave it again.”

“Remaining here when you have departed?”

“That, of course.”

“You will take the gold, however.”

“Certainly; the gold obeys me; doing what I ask of it.”

For a few moments the girl stood there, gazing defiance at him, but although a slight smile hovered about his lips, she realized in some subtle way—woman's intuition, perhaps—that he meant what he said. Her eyes lowered, and an expression of pique came into her pretty face; then she breathed a long sigh.

"I shall go to my room," she said very quietly.

"I will call upon you the moment I have given some instructions to my third lieutenant."

"You need not trouble," she replied haughtily, speaking, however, as mildly as himself. "I remain a prisoner of the Pfalzgraf von Stahleck, who, though a distinguished pillager like yourself, nevertheless possesses some instincts of a gentleman."

With that, the young woman retired slowly up the stairway, and disappeared, followed by her two servants.

"Ebearhard," said Roland, when that official appeared, "Greusel has discovered a window to the north through which yourself and a number of your men can get down to the rocks with the aid of a cord, and he tells me there is a loft full of ropes. A flotilla of boats is tied up at the lower end of the Castle. He has visited the treasury, and finds it well supplied with bags of coin. I intend to effect a junction between those bags and that flotilla. Our position here is quite untenable, for there is probably some secret entrance to this Castle that we know nothing of. There are also a number of women within whom we cannot coerce, and must not starve. Truth to tell, I fear them more than I do the ruffians outside. Have any of the men-at-arms discovered that we pulled up the ladder and closed the door?"

Page 164

“I think not, for in such case they would return from their pillages as quickly as did the Red Margrave when he found his house was ablaze. My opinion is that they are making a clean job of looting the barge.”

“If that is so, our barrels of gold are gone, rendering it the more necessary that we should carry away every kreuzer our friend Stahleck possesses. Call, therefore, every man except one from the door. Greusel has the keys, and will lead you to the treasury. Hoist the bags to the north window. While your men are doing this, rive a stout rope so that you may all speedily descend to the rocks, except as many as are necessary to lower the bags. When this is accomplished, Greusel is to report to me from the balcony, and then descend, taking with him the man on guard at the door. Apportion men and bags in all the boats but one. That one I shall take charge of. Put Greusel in command of the flotilla, and tell him to convey his fleet as quietly as possible to the eastern shore; then paddle up in slack water until he is, say, a third of a league above Pfalz. There he must await my skiff. You will stand by that skiff until I join you. I shall likely be accompanied by three women, so retain the largest and most comfortable of the small boats.”

Ebearhard raised his eyebrows at the mention of the women, but said nothing.

Roland went in person to the room occupied by the young woman, and knocked at her door, whereupon it was opened very promptly.

“Madam,” he said, “there is opportunity for escape if you care to avail yourself of it.”

The girl had been seated when he entered, but now she rose, speaking in a voice that was rather tremulous.

“Sir, I was wrong to disobey you when you had treated me so kindly. I shall therefore punish myself by remaining where I am.”

“In that case, Madam, you will punish me as well; and, indeed, I deserve it, forgetting as I did for the moment that I addressed a lady. If you will give me the pleasure of escorting you, I shall conduct you in safety to whatever place of refuge you wish to reach.”

“Sir, you are most courteous, but I fear my intended destination might take you farther afield than would be convenient for you.”

“My time is my own, and nothing could afford me greater gratification than the assurance of your security. Tell me your destination.”

“It is the Convent of Nonnenwerth, situated on an island larger than this, near Rolandseck.”

“I shall be happy to convoy you thither.”

“Again I thank you. It is my desire to join the Sisterhood there.”

“Not to become a nun?” cried Roland, an intonation of disappointment in his voice.

“Yes; although to this determination my guardian is opposed.”

“Alas,” said Roland, with a sigh, “I confess myself in agreement with him so far as your taking the veil is concerned. Still, imprisonment seems an unduly harsh alternative.”

Page 165

The girl's seriousness fled, and she smiled at him.

"As you have had some experience of my obstinacy, and proposed an even harsher remedy than that—"

"Ah, you forget," interrupted Roland, "that I apologized for my lack of manners. I hope during our journey to Nonnenwerth I may earn complete forgiveness."

"Oh, you are forgiven already, which is magnanimous of me, when you recollect that the fault was wholly my own. I will join you in the courtyard at once if I may."

"Very well. I shall be down there after I have given final instructions to my men."

Roland arrived at the north window, and saw that the flotilla had already departed. He could discern Ebearhard standing with his hand on the prow of the remaining boat, so pulled up the rope, untied it from the ring to which it was fastened, and threw it down to his lieutenant.

"A rope is always useful," he whispered, "and we will puzzle the good Pfalzgraf regarding our exit."

In the courtyard he found the three women awaiting him. Quietly he drew back the heavy bolts, and undid the stout chains. Holding the door slightly ajar, he peered out at the scene on the landing, brightly illuminated by numerous torches which the servants held aloft.

The men-at-arms were enjoying themselves hugely, and the great heap of bales already on the rocks showed that they resolved not to leave even one package on the barge. The fact that they stood in the light prevented their seeing the exit of the quartette from the Castle, even had any been on the outlook.

Roland swung the door wide, placed the ladder in exactly the same position it had formerly occupied, assisted the three women to the ground, and then led them round the western side of the Castle through the darkness to Ebearhard and his skiff. Dipping their paddles with great caution, they kept well out of the torchlight radius.

As they left the shadow of the Castle, and came within sight of the party on the landing, they were somewhat startled by a lusty cheer.

"Ah," said Ebearhard, "they have discovered our barrels of gold."

"'Tis very likely," replied Roland.

"Still," added Ebearhard consolingly, "I think we have made a good exchange. There appears to be more money in Stahleck's bags than in our two barrels."

“By the Three Kings!” cried Roland, staring upstream, “the barge is getting away. They have looted her completely, and are giving her a parting salute. The robbers evidently bear no malice against our popular captain. Hear them inviting him to call again!”

They listened to the rattle of the big chain. It was more amenable than that at Furstenberg, confirming Roland in his belief that Stahleck was the inventor of the device. They saw half a dozen men paying out a rope, while the first section of the chain sank, leaving a passage-way for the barge. Silhouetted against the torchlight, the boatmen were getting ready with their sweeps, prepared to dip them into the water as soon as the vessel got clear of the rocky island.

Page 166

“We will paddle alongside before they begin to row,” said Roland; and Captain Blumenfels was gently hailed from the river, much to his astonishment.

“Make for the eastern bank, captain,” whispered Roland, “and keep a lookout ahead for a number of small boats like this.”

Presently, rowing up the river strenuously, close to the shore, the barge came upon the flotilla. Here Roland bade Hilda remain where she was, and leaving Ebearhard in charge of the skiff, he clambered up on the barge, ordering Greusel to range his boats alongside and fling aboard the treasure.

“Well, captain, did his Excellency of Pfalz leave you anything at all?”

“Not a rag,” replied the captain. “The barge is empty as a drum.”

“In that case there is nothing for it but a speedy return to Frankfort. I do not regret the cloth, which has been paid for over and over again, but I am mercenary enough to grudge Stahleck our two barrels of gold.”

“Oh, as to the gold,” replied the captain gravely, “I took the liberty of reversing your plan at Lorch.”

“What plan?”

“Your honor poured gold into wine barrels, but I poured the red wine of Lorch into the gold barrels, and threw the empty cask overboard. Perhaps you know that the Pfalzgraf grows excellent white wine round his Castle of Stahleck, and despises the red wine of Lorch and Assmannshausen. He tasted the wine, which had not been improved by being poured into the dirty gold barrels, spat it out with an oath, and said we were welcome to keep it. He has also promised to send me a cask of good white wine to Frankfort.”

“Captain, despite your quiet, unassuming manner, you are the most ingenious of men.”

“Indeed, I but copied your honor’s ingenuity.”

“However it happened, you saved the gold, and that action alone will make a rich man of you, for you must accept my third share of the money.”

By this time the bags had been heaved aboard. Greusel followed them, and stood ready to receive further orders.

“You will all make for Frankfort,” said Roland, “keeping close as possible to this side of the river. No man is to be allowed ashore until you reach the capital. Captain, are there provisions enough aboard for the voyage?”

“Yes, your honor.”

“Very well. Put every available person at the oars, and get past Furstenberg before daybreak. My men, who have not had an opportunity to distinguish themselves as warriors, will take their turn at the sweeps. You and Ebearhard,” he continued, turning to Greusel, “will employ the time in counting the money and making a fair division. With regard to the two barrels, the captain will receive my third share, and also be one of us in the apportionment of the gold we secured to-night. It was through his thoughtfulness that the barrels were saved. Whatever portion you find me entitled to, place in the keeping of the merchant, Herr Goebel. And now I shall tie four bags to my belt for emergencies.”

Page 167

“Are you not coming with us, Roland?” asked Greusel anxiously.

“No. Urgent business requires my presence in the neighborhood of Bonn, but I shall meet you in the Kaiser cellar before a month is out.”

Saying this, he shook hands with the captain and Greusel, and descended into the small boat, bidding farewell to Ebearhard.

“Urge them,” were his last words, “to get well out of sight of Pfalz and Furstenberg before the day breaks, and as for the small boats, turn them loose; present them as a peace-offering to the Rhine.”

In the darkness Prince Roland allowed his frail barque to float down the stream, using his paddle merely to keep it toward the east, so to avoid the chain. He found himself accompanied by a silent, spectral fleet; the empty boats that his men had sent adrift. To all appearance the little squadron lay motionless, while the dim Castle of Pfalz, with its score of pointed turrets piercing a less dark sky, seemed like a great ship moving slowly up the Rhine. When it had disappeared to the south, Roland ventured to speak, in a low voice.

“Madam,” he said, “tell your women so to arrange what extra apparel you have brought to form a couch, where you may recline, and sleep for the rest of the night.”

“Captain Roland,” she replied, her gentle little laugh floating with so musical a cadence athwart the waters that he found himself regretting such a sweet voice should be kept from the world by the unappreciative walls of a convent,—“Captain Roland, I was never more awake than I am at this moment. Life has somehow become unexpectedly interesting. I experience the deliciously guilty feeling of belonging to a stealthy society of banditti. Do not, I beg of you, deprive me of that pleasure by asking me to sleep.”

“In the morning, Madam, there will be little opportunity for rest. We must put all the distance we can between ourselves and the Pfalzgraf von Stahleck. I expect you to ride far and fast to-morrow.”

“Do you intend, then, to abandon this boat?”

“I must, Madam. The river has been long so empty that this flotilla, which I cannot shake off, being unaccustomed to oars or paddle, will attract attention from both sides of the Rhine, and when the darkness lifts we are almost certain to be stopped. The boats will be recognized as belonging to the Pfalzgraf, and I wish to sever all connection between this night’s work and my own future.”

“What, then, do you propose?”

“As soon as day breaks we will come to land, and allow our boat to float away with the rest. Can you walk?”

“I love walking,” cried the girl with enthusiasm. “I ask your pity for myself, immured in that windowless dungeon, situated on a tiny point of rock; I, who have roamed the hills and explored the valleys of my own land on foot, breathing the air of freedom with delight. Let me, therefore, I beg of you, remain awake that I may taste the pleasure of anticipation in my thoughts; or is such a wish disobedience on the part of your first lieutenant? I do not mean it so, and will quietly cry myself to sleep if you insist.”

Page 168

“Indeed, Hilda,” said Roland, laughing, and abandoning the more formal title of “madam,” “I am no such tyrant as you suppose. Besides, your office of first lieutenant has lapsed, because our men have all gone south, while we travel north.”

“Then may I talk with you?”

“Nothing would please me better. I was thinking of your own welfare, and not of my desire, when I counseled slumber.”

“Oh, I assure you I slept very well during the first part of the night, for, there being nothing else to do, I went to bed early, and was quite unconscious until the dreadful ringing of that alarm bell, which set the whole Castle astir.”

“Why were you imprisoned?”

“Because—because,” she replied haltingly, “I had chosen the religious life, the which my guardian opposed. He appeared to think that some experience of the rigors of the convent might make me less eager to immure myself in a nunnery, which, like Pfalz Castle, is also on a restricted island.”

“Then his remedy has proved unavailing?”

“Quite. The Sisters will be very good to me, for I shall enrich their convent with my wealth. ’Twill be vastly different from incarceration in Pfalz.”

“Hilda, I doubt that. Captivity is captivity, under whatever name you term it. I cannot understand why one who spoke so enthusiastically just now of hills and valleys and liberty should take the irrevocable step which you propose; a step that will rob you forever of those joys.”

The girl remained silent, and he went on, speaking earnestly:

“I think in one respect you are like myself. You love the murmur of the trees, and the song of the running stream.”

“I do, I do,” she whispered, as if to herself.

“The air that blows around the mountain-top inspires you, and you cannot view the hills on the horizon without wishing to explore them, and learn what is on the other side.”

There was light enough for him to see that the girl’s head sank into her open hand.

“You, I take it, have never been restricted by discipline.”

Her head came up quickly.

“You think that because of what I said in the courtyard?”

“No; my mind was running towards the future rather than to the past. The rigor of strict rules would prove as irksome to you as would a cage to a free bird of the forest.”

“I fear you are in the right,” she said with a sigh; and then, impatiently, “Oh, you do not understand the situation, and I cannot explain! The convent is merely a retreat for me; the lesser of two evils presented.”

“You spoke of your land. Where is that land?”

“Do you know Schloss Sayn?” she asked.

“Sayn? Sayn?” he repeated. “Where have I heard that name before, and recently too? I thought I knew every castle on the Rhine, but I do not remember Sayn.”

The girl laughed.

“You will find no fellow-craftsman there, Pirate Roland, if ever you visit it. The Schloss is not on the Rhine, and, perhaps on that account, rather than because of its owner’s honesty, is free from the taint you suggest. It stands high in the valley of the Saynbach, more than half a league from this river.”

Page 169

“Ah, that accounts for my ignorance. I never saw Sayn Castle, although I seem to have heard of it. Are you its owner?”

“Yes; I told you I was wealthy.”

“Where is the Schloss situated?”

“Below Coblentz, on the eastern side of the river.”

“Then why not let me take you there instead of to the convent?”

“Willingly, if you had brought your barge-load of armed men, but in Sayn Castle I am helpless, commanding a peaceful retinue of servants who, although devoted to me, are useless when it comes to defense.”

“I cannot account for it,” said Roland in meditative tone, “but the thought of that convent becomes more and more distasteful. You will be free of your guardian, no doubt, but you merely exchange one whom you know for another whom you don’t, and that other a member of your own sex.”

“Do you disparage my sex, then?”

“No; but I cannot imagine any man being discourteous to you. Surely every gentleman with a sword by his side should spring at once to your defense.”

The girl laughed.

“Ah, Captain Roland, you are very young, and, I fear, inexperienced, despite your filibustering. However, this lovely, still, summer night, with its warm, velvety darkness, was made for pleasant thoughts. Enough about myself. Let me hear something of you. Did you come up the river or down, with your barge?”

“We came down.”

“How long since you adopted a career of crime? You do not seem to be a hardened villain.”

“Believe me,” protested Roland earnestly, “I am not, and I do not admit that my career is one of crime.”

“Indeed,” said the girl, laughing again, “I am not so gullible as you think. I could almost fancy that you were the incendiary of Furstenberg Castle.”

“What!” exclaimed Roland in consternation. “How came you to learn of its destruction?”

“There!” cried the girl gleefully, “you have all but confessed. You are as startled as if I had said: ’I arrest you in the name of the Emperor!’”

“Who told you that Furstenberg Castle was burned?” demanded the young man sternly.

“Yesterday morning there came swiftly down the river, with no less than twelve oarsmen, a long, thin boat, traveling like the wind. It did not pause at Pfalz, but the man standing in the stern hailed the Castle, and shouted to the Pfalzgraf that Furstenberg had been burned by the outlaws of the Hunsruck. He was on his way to Bonn to inform the Archbishop of Cologne, and he carried also Imperial news for his Lordship: tidings that the Emperor is dead.”

“Dead!” breathed Roland in horror, scarcely above his breath. “The Emperor dead! I wonder if that can be true.”

“Little matter whether it is true or no,” said the girl indifferently. “He doubtless passed away in a drunken sleep, and I am told his drunken son will be elected in his place.”

“Madam!” said Roland harshly, awakened from his stupor by her words, “I must inform your ignorance that the Emperor’s son is not a drunkard, and, indeed, scarcely touches wine at all, being a most strenuous opposer to its misuse. How can one so fair, and, as I believed, so honest, repeat such unfounded slander?”

Page 170

“Are you a partisan of his?”

“I come from Frankfort; have seen the Prince, and know I speak the truth.”

“Ah, well,” replied the girl lightly, “you and I will not quarrel over his Highness. I accept your amendment, and will never more bear false witness against him. After all, it makes slight difference one way or the other. An Emperor goes, and an Emperor is elected in his place as powerless as his predecessor. ’Tis the Archbishops who rule.”

“You seem well versed in politics, Madam.”

The girl leaned forward to him.

“Do not ‘madam’ me, I beg of you, Roland. I dare say rumor has prejudiced me against the young man, but I have promised not to speak slightingly of him again. I wish this veil of darkness was lifted, that I might see your face, to note the effect of anger. Do you know, I am disappointed in you, Roland? You spoke in such level tones in the courtyard that I thought anger was foreign to your nature.”

“I am not angry,” said Roland gruffly, “but I detest malicious gossip.”

“Oh, so do I, so do I! I spoke thoughtlessly. I will kneel to the new Emperor and beg his pardon, if you insist.”

Roland remained silent, and for a time they floated thus down the river, she trailing her fingers in the water, which made a pleasant ripple against them, looking up at him now and then. Perceptibly the darkness was thinning. One seemed to smell morning in the air. A bird piped dreamily in the forest at intervals, as if only half-awakened. The two women reclining in the prow were sound asleep.

Roland picked up the paddle, and with a strong, sweeping stroke turned the head of the boat towards the land. Now she could see his lowering brow, and if the sight pleased her, ’twas not manifested in her next remark.

She took her hand from the water, drew herself up proudly, and said:

“I shall not apologize to you again, and I hate your blameless Prince!”

“Madam, I ask for no apology, and whether you hate or like the Prince matters nothing to me, or, I dare say, to him, either.”

“Cannot you even allow a woman her privilege of the last word?” she cried indignantly.

Roland’s brow cleared, and a smile came to his lips, as he remained silent, thus bestowing upon her the prerogative she seemed to crave. Hilda lay back in the prow of

the boat between her sleeping women, with hands clasped behind her head, and her eyes closed. More and more the light increased, and sturdily with his paddle Roland propelled the boat towards the shore, bringing it alongside the low bank at last. He sprang out on the turf, and with the paddle in one hand held the boat to land with the other.

“We are now,” he said, “a short distance above St. Goarhausen, where I hope to purchase horses. Will you kindly disembark?”

The girl, without moving, or opening her eyes, said quietly:

“Please throw the paddle into the boat again. I shall make for Nonnenwerth in this craft, which is more comfortable than a saddle.”

Page 171

The paddle came rattling down upon the bottom of the skiff. Roland stooped, and before she knew what he was about, took Hilda in his arms, lifted her ashore, and laid her carefully on the grass.

“Come,” he cried to the newly-awakened serving-women, “tumble out of that without further delay,” and they obeyed him in haste.

He stepped into the skiff, flung their belongings on the sward, turned the prow to the west, and, leaping ashore, bestowed a kick upon the boat that impelled it like an arrow far out into the stream.

Hilda was standing on her feet now, speechless with indignation.

“Come along,” urged Roland cheerfully, “breakfast awaits us when we earn it;” but seeing that she made no move, the frown furrowed his brow again.

“Madam,” he said, “I tell you frankly that to be thwarted by petulance annoys me. It happens that time is of the utmost importance until we are much farther from Pfalz. If you think that the ownership of wealth and a castle gives you the right to flout a plain, ordinary man, you take a mistaken view of things. I care nothing for your castle, or for your wealth. You may be a lady of title for aught I know, but even that does not impress me. We must not stand here like two quarrelsome children. I will conduct you to the Adler Inn at St. Goarhausen, where I know from experience you will be taken care of. I shall then purchase four horses, and return to the inn after you have breakfasted. Three of these horses are at your disposal, also the fourth and myself, if you will condescend to make use of us. If not, I shall ask you to accept what money you need for your journey, so that you may travel north unmolested, while I take my way in the other direction.”

“How can I repay the money,” she demanded, “if I do not know who and what you are?”

“I shall send for it, either to your Castle of Sayn, or the Convent of Nonnenwerth. You need be under no obligation to me.”

“But,” cried the girl with a sob, “I am already under obligation to you; an obligation which I cannot repay.”

“Oh yes, you can.”

“How?”

“By coming with me, who will persuade you, as readily as you did with your guardian, who coerced you.”

“I am an ungrateful simpleton,” she murmured. “Of course your way is the right one, and I am quite helpless if you desert me.”

“There,” cried Roland, with enthusiasm, “you have more than repaid whatever you may owe.”

After breakfasting at St. Goarhausen and purchasing the horses, they journeyed down the rough road that extended along the right bank of the Rhine. Roland and Hilda rode side by side, the other two following some distance to the rear. The young man maintained a gloomy silence, and the girl, misapprehending his thoughts, remained silent also, with downcast eyes, seeing nothing of the beautiful scenery they were passing. Every now and then Roland cast a sidelong glance at her, and his melancholy deepened as he remembered how heedlessly he had pledged his word to the three Archbishops regarding his marriage.

Page 172

“I see,” she said at last, “that I have offended you more seriously than I feared.”

“No, no,” he assured her. “There is a burden that I cannot cast from my mind.”

“May I know what it is?”

“I dare not tell you, Hilda. I have been a fool. I am in the position of a man who must break his oath and live dishonored, or keep it, and remain for ever unhappy. Which would you do were you in my place?”

“Once given, I should keep my oath,” she replied promptly, “unless those who accepted it would release me.”

Roland shook his head.

“They will not release me,” he said dolefully.

Again they rode together in silence, content to be near each other, despite the young man’s alternations of elation and despair. ’Twas, all in all, a long summer’s day of sweet unhappiness for each.

One of Roland’s reasons for choosing the right bank of the Rhine was to avoid the important city of Coblentz, with its inevitable questioning, and it was late afternoon when they saw this town on the farther shore, passing it without hindrance.

“You will rest this night,” she said, “in my Castle of Sayn, and then, as time is pressing, to-morrow you must return. We have met no interference even by this dangerous route, and I shall make my way alone without fear to Nonnenwerth, for I know you are anxious to be in Frankfort once more.”

“I swear to you, Hilda, that if, without breaking my oath, I should never see Frankfort again, I would be the most joyous of men.”

“Does your oath relate to Frankfort?”

“My oath relates to a woman,” he said shortly.

“Ah,” she breathed, “then you must keep it,” and so they fell into silence and unhappiness again.

She had talked of security on the road they traversed, but turning a corner north of Vallandar they speedily found that a Rhine road is never safe.

Both reined in their horses as if moved by the same impulse, but to retreat now would simply draw pursuit upon them. Mounted on a splendid white charger, gorgeous with

trappings, glittering with silver and gold, rode a dignified man in the outdoor habit of a general in times of peace.

Following him came an escort of twoscore horsemen; they in the full panoply of war; and behind them, on foot, in procession extending like a gigantic snake down the Rhine road, an army of at least three thousand men, the setting sun flashing fire from the points of their spears. Here and there, down the line, floated above them silken flags, and Roland recognized the device on the foremost one.

“God!” he shouted in dismay. “The Archbishop of Cologne!”

The girl uttered a little frightened cry, and edged her horse nearer to that of her escort.

“My guardian! My guardian!” she breathed. “I shall be rearrested!”

Seeing them standing as if stricken to stone, two horsemen detached themselves from the cavalry and galloped forward.

Page 173

“Make way there, you fools!” cried the leader. “Get ye to the side; into the river; where you like; out of the path of my Lord the Archbishop.”

Nevertheless Roland stood his ground, and dared even to frown at the officers of his Lordship.

“Stand aside *you*,” he commanded in a tone of mastery, “and do not venture to intrude between the Archbishop and me.”

The rider knew that no man who valued his head would dare use such language in the very presence of the Archbishop, unless he were the highest in the land. His dignified Lordship looked up to see the cause of this interruption, and of these angry words.

First came into his face an expression of amazement, then a smile melted the stern lips as he looked on Roland and recognized him. The impetuous horsemen faded away to the background. There was no answering smile on Roland’s face. He reached out and clasped the hand of the girl.

“Now, by the Three Kings!” he whispered, “I shall break my oath.”

Hilda glanced up at him, frightened by his vehemence, wincing under his iron grasp.

An unexpected sound interrupted the tension. The Archbishop had come to a stand, and “Halt! Halt! Halt!” rang out the word along the line of men, whose feet ceased to stir the dust of the road. The unexpected sound was that of hearty laughter from the dignified and mighty Prince of the Church.

“Forgive me, your Highness!” he cried, “but I laugh to think of the countenances of my somber brothers, Treves and Mayence, when they learn how sturdily you have kept your word with them. By the true Cross, Prince Roland, although we wished you to marry her, we had no thought that you would break into the Castle of Pfalz to win her hand. Ah, dear, what a pity ’tis we grow old! The impetuousness of youth outweighs the calculated wisdom of the three greatest prelates outside Rome. Judging by your fair face (and I have always held it to be beautiful, remember), you, Hildegunde Lauretta Priscilla Agnes, Countess of Sayn, are not moving northward to Nonnenwerth. I always insisted that the Saalhof at Frankfort was a more cheerful edifice than any nunnery on the Rhine, yet you never turned upon me such a glance of confidence as I see you bestow on your future Emperor.”

“I hope, my Lord and Guardian,” cried the girl, “that I have met you in time to deflect your course to my Castle of Sayn.”

“Sweet Countess, I thank you for the invitation. My men can go on to their camp in the stronghold of my brother of Mayence, Schloss Martinsburg, and I shall gladly return with

you to the hospitable hearth of Sayn. Indeed," said the Archbishop, lowering his voice, "I shall feel safer there than in enjoying the hospitality I had intended to accept."

"Are you not surprised to meet me?" asked the lady, with a laugh, adjusting words and manner to the new situation, which she more quickly comprehended than did her companion, who glanced with bewilderment from Countess to prelate, and back again.

Page 174

The Archbishop waved his hand.

“Nothing you could do would surprise me, since your interview with the Court of Archbishops. I am on my way to Frankfort.” Then, more seriously, to Prince Roland: “You heard of your father’s death?”

“I learned it only this morning, my Lord. I shall return to Frankfort when I am assured that this gentlewoman is in a place of safety.”

“Ah, Countess, there will be no lack of safety now! But will you not ease an old man’s conscience by admitting he was in the right?”

The Countess looked up at Roland with a smile.

“Yes, dear Guardian,” she said. “You were in the right.”

XVII

“FOR THE EMPRESS, AND NOT FOR THE EMPIRE”

While the long line of troops stood at salute in single file, the Archbishop turned his horse to the north and rode past his regiments, followed by the Countess and Roland. His Lordship was accompanied to the end of the ranks by his general, who received final instructions regarding the march.

“You will encamp for the night not at Schloss Martinsburg, as I had intended, but a league or two up the Lahn. To-morrow morning continue your march along the Lahn as far as Limburg, and there await my arrival. We will enter Frankfort by the north gate instead of from the west.”

The Archbishop sat on his horse for some minutes, watching the departing force, then called Roland to his right hand, and Hildegunde to his left, and thus the three set out on the short journey to Sayn.

“Your Highness,” began the Archbishop, “I find myself in a position of some embarrassment. I think explanations are due to me from you both. Here I ride between two escaped prisoners, and I travel away from, instead of towards, their respective dungeons. My plain duty, on encountering you, was to place you in custody of a sufficient guard, marching you separately the one to Pfalz and the other to Ehrenfels. Having accomplished this I should report the case to my two colleagues, yet here am I actually compounding a misdemeanor, and assisting prisoners to escape.”

“My Lord,” spoke up Roland, “I am quite satisfied that my own imprisonment has been illegal, therefore I make no apology for circumventing it. Before entering upon any

explanation, I ask enlightenment regarding the detention of my lady of Sayn. Am I right in surmising that she, like myself, was placed under arrest by the three Archbishops?"

"Yes, your Highness."

"On what charge?"

"High treason."

"Against whom?"

There was a pause, during which the Archbishop did not reply.

"I need not have asked such a question," resumed the Prince, "for high treason can relate only to the monarch. In what measure has her ladyship encroached upon the prerogative of the Emperor?"

"Your Highness forgets that there is such a thing as treason against the State."

Page 175

“Are not members of the nobility privileged in this matter?”

“They cannot be, for the State is greater than any individual.”

“I shall make a note of that, my Lord of Cologne. I believe you are in the right, and I hope so. During my lonely incarceration,” the Prince laughed a little, “I have studied the condition of the State, arriving at the conclusion that the greatest traitors in our land are the three Archbishops, who, arrogating to themselves power that should belong to the Crown, did not use that power for suppressing those other treason-mongers, the Barons of the Rhine.”

“What would you have us do with them?”

“You should disarm them. You should exact restitution of their illegally-won wealth. You should open the Rhine to honest commerce.”

“That is easy to enunciate, and difficult to perform. If the Castles were disarmed, especially those on the left bank, a great injustice would be done that might lead to the extinction of many noble families. Why, the forests of Germany are filled with desperate outlaws, who respect neither life nor property. I myself have suffered but recently from their depredations. In broad daylight an irresistible band of these ruffians descended upon and captured the supposed impregnable Castle of Rheinstein, shamefully maltreating Baron Hugo von Hohenfels, tying him motionless, and nearly strangling him with stout ropes, after which the scoundrels robbed him of every stiver he possessed. The following midnight but one they descended on Furstenberg, a fief of my own, and not contenting themselves with robbery, brought red ruin on the Margrave by burning his Castle to the ground.”

“My Lord, red ruin and the Red Margrave were made for each other. It was the justice of God that they should meet.” The young man raised aloft his swordarm, shaking his clenched fist at the sky. “That hand held the torch that fired Furstenberg. The Castle was taken and burned by three sword makers from Frankfort, who never saw the Hunsruck or the outlaws thereof.”

The Archbishop reined in his horse, and looked at the excited young man with amazement.

“*You* fired Furstenberg?”

“Yes; and effectively, my Lord. I shall rebuild it for you, but the Red Margrave I shall hang, as my predecessor Rudolph did his ancestor.”

An expression of sternness hardened the Archbishop’s face.

“Sir,” he said, “I regret to hear you speak like this, and your safety lies in the fact that I do not believe a word of it. Even so, such wild words fill me with displeasure. I beg to remind you that the Election of an Emperor has not yet taken place, and I, for one, am likely to reconsider my decision. Still, as I said, I do not believe a word of your absurd tale.”

“I believe every syllable of it!” cried the Countess with enthusiasm, “and glory that there is a mind brave enough, and a hand obedient to it, to smoke out a robber and a murderer.”

Page 176

The tension this astonishing revelation caused was relieved by a laugh from the Archbishop.

“My dear Hildegunde, you are forgetting your own ancestors. I venture that no woman of the House of Sayn talked thus when the Emperor Rudolph marched Count von Sayn to the scaffold. You would probably sing another song if asked to restore the millions amassed by Henry III. of Sayn and his successors; all accumulated by robbery as cruel as any that the Red Margrave has perpetrated.”

“My Lord,” said the Countess proudly, “you had no need to ask that question, for you knew the answer to it before you spoke. Every thaler I control shall be handed over to Prince Roland, to be used for the regeneration of his country.”

Again the Archbishop laughed.

“Surely I knew that, my dear, and I should not have said what I did. I suppose you will not allow me to vote against his Highness at the coming Election.”

“Indeed, you shall vote enthusiastically for him, because you know in your own heart he is the man Germany needs.”

“Was there ever such a change of front?” cried the Archbishop. “Why, my dear, the charges you so hotly made against his Highness are as nothing to what he has himself confessed; yet now he is the savior of Germany, when previously—Ah, well, I must not play the tale-bearer.”

“Prince Roland,” cried the girl, “my kinsman, Father Ambrose, said he met you in Frankfort, although now I believe him to have been mistaken.”

“Oh no; I encountered the good Father on the bridge.”

“There now!” exclaimed the Archbishop, “what do you say to that, my lady?”

She seemed perplexed by the admission, but quickly replied to his Lordship:

“’Twas you said that could not be, as he was a close prisoner in Ehrenfels.” She continued, addressing the Prince: “Father Ambrose asserted that you were a companion of drinkers and brawlers in a low wine cellar of Frankfort.”

“Quite true; a score of them.”

The girl became more and more perplexed.

“Did you imprison Father Ambrose?”

“Yes; in the lowest wine cellar, but only for a day or two. I am very sorry, Madam, but it was a stern necessity of war. He was meddling with affairs he knew nothing of, and there was no time for explanations. He, a man of peace, would not have sanctioned what there was to do even if I had explained.”

“He says,” continued the girl, “that he saw you rob a merchant of a bag of gold.”

“That is untrue!” cried the Prince.

“My dear Hildegunde, what is the robbing of a bag of gold from a merchant when he admits having stolen gold by the castle full?”

“I robbed no merchant,” protested the Prince. “How could Father Ambrose make such a statement?”

“He mounted an outside stairway on the Fahrgasse, and through lighted windows on the opposite side saw you place the point of your sword at the throat of an unarmed merchant, and take from him a bag of gold.”

Page 177

Roland, whose brow had been knitted into an angry frown, now threw back his head and laughed joyously.

“Oh, that was a mere frolic,” he alleged.

It was the girl’s turn to frown.

“When you took stolen treasure from thievish Barons and Margraves protected by scores of armed men, with the object of breaking their power, for the relief of commerce, I admired you, but to say that the despoiling of a helpless merchant is a frolic—”

“No, no, my dear, you do not understand,” eagerly corrected the Prince, unconscious of the affectionate phrase that caused a flush to rise in the cheeks of his listener. “The merchant was, and is, my partner; a blameless man, Herr Goebel, who came near to being hanged on my behalf when these Archbishops took me captive. I sought from him a thousand thalers; he insisted on learning my plans for opening the Rhine, and still would not give the money until, reluctantly, I was obliged to confess myself son of the Emperor. This he could not credit, stipulating that before giving the money I must produce for him a safe-conduct, signed by the Emperor, and verified by the Great Seal of the Empire. This document I obtained at dire personal risk, through the aid of my mother. Here it is.”

He thrust his hand into his doublet, and produced the parchment in question, delivering it to the lady, who, however, did not unfold it, but kept her eyes fixed upon him.

“This distrust annoyed me; it should not have done so, for he was merely acting in the cautious manner natural to a merchant. With a boyishness I now regret, I put my sword to his throat, demanding the money, which I received. I took only half of it, for my mother had given me five hundred thalers. Oh, no; I did not rob my friend Goebel, but merely tried to teach him that lack of faith is a dangerous thing.”

If the old man who listened could have exchanged confidences with the young woman who listened, he would have learned they shared the same thought, which was that the young Prince spoke so straight-forwardly neither doubted him for a moment. The old man, it is true, felt that his talk was rather reckless of consequences, but, on the other hand, this in itself was complimentary, for, as he remembered, the Prince had been cautious enough when catechized by the three Archbishops together.

“I have often read,” said Cologne, with a smile, “pathetic accounts of prisoners, who in extreme loneliness carved their names over and over again on stone as hard as the jailer’s heart, but your Highness seems rather to have enjoyed yourself while so cruelly interned. May I further beg of you to enlighten us concerning a somewhat bibulous youth who at the present moment is enjoying, in every sense of the word, the hospitality of Ehrenfels Castle?”

It was now the Archbishop's turn to astonish the Prince.

"You knew of my device, then?"

"'Knew' is a little too strong. 'Suspect' more nearly fits the case. You won over your jailer, and some one else took your place as prisoner."

Page 178

“Yes; a young man to whom I owe small thanks, and with whom I have an account to settle. He is son of the custodian, and thinks he has us both under his thumb, Heinrich drinks as if he were a fish or a Baron, but I shall cure him of that habit before it becomes firmly established.”

“Am I correct in assuming that you found your liberty only after your interview with the three Electors?”

“Oh, bless you, no! I was free months before that time. Indeed, it is only since then that my substitute is practically useless. Heinrich might have passed for me at a pinch, but only because neither you nor your colleagues had seen me. I have kept him under lock and key ever since, because I dare not allow him abroad until the Election has taken place.”

“I see. A very wise precaution. Well, your Highness, I shall say nothing of what you tell me; furthermore, I still promise you my vote; that is, if you will obey my orders until you are elected Emperor. I foresee we are not going to have the easy time with you that was anticipated, but this concerns Mayence and Treves, rather than myself, for I have no ambition to rule by proxy. And now, my lady of Sayn, when we journeyed southward that day from Gutenfels Castle I gave you some information regarding the mind of Mayence. You remember, perhaps, what I said about his quandary. I rather suspect that he admires you, notwithstanding your defiance of him; but there is nothing remarkable in that, for we all appreciate you, old and young. I, too, carry a document of safe-conduct, like Prince Roland here, although I see that his Highness has placed his safety in your hands.”

The old man smiled, and Hildegunde found herself still carrying the parchment Roland had given her. For a moment she was confused, then smiled also, and offered it back; but the Prince shook his head. The Archbishop went on:

“Mayence sent down to me your written release, signed by himself and Treves. He asked me to attach a signature, and liberate you on my way to Frankfort, which I intended to do had this impetuous young man not forestalled me. By the way, Highness, how did you happen to meet Countess von Sayn in Pfalz?”

“We will tell you about that later, Guardian,” said Hildegunde, before Roland could speak. “What instructions did his Lordship of Mayence give concerning me?”

“He asked me to bring you to my palace in Frankfort, and subtly expressed the hope you had changed your mind.”

“You may assure him I have,” said the Countess, again speaking rapidly; “but let us leave all details of that for the moment. I am then to go with you to the capital?”

“Yes; to-morrow morning.”

“To remain until the coronation?”

“Certainly; if such is your wish. But do you not see something very significant in my brother Mayence’s change of plan, for you know he did not intend to release you until after that event?”

Page 179

“Yes, yes,” replied the Countess breathlessly. “I see it quite clearly, but do not wish to discuss the matter at the present moment.”

“Very well. I intended to enter Frankfort from the west, but meeting you so unexpectedly, I have deflected my troops up the Lahn to Limburg, at which town we will join them to-morrow night, thus following Father Ambrose’s route to the capital.”

“Ah, that will be very interesting. Prince Roland, you accompany us, I hope?”

“Of a surety,” replied the young man confidently.

“No,” quietly said the Archbishop.

“Why not?”

“Because I say no.”

The young man almost an Emperor drew himself up proudly, and his lips pressed together into a firm line of determination.

“Does your Highness so quickly forget your promise?”

“What promise?” asked the Prince, scowling.

“In consideration of my keeping silence touching your recent outrageous career of fire and slaughter, and the enslavement of Heinrich, you promised to obey me until you became Emperor.”

“I intend to obey all reasonable requests, but I very much desire to accompany the Countess from her Castle to the capital, I have never seen Limburg, or taken that route to Frankfort.”

“It is a charming old city,” replied the Archbishop dryly, “which you can visit any time at the expense of a day’s ride. Meanwhile, I shall escort the Countess thither, and endeavor to entertain her with pleasing and instructive conversation during the journey.”

The Prince continued to frown, yet bit his lip and repressed an angry retort.

“But,” protested the girl, “would it not be much safer for his Highness to enter the city of Frankfort protected by your army?”

The Archbishop laughed a little.

“My dear Hildegunde, the presence of Prince Roland causes you to overlook a vast difference in the status of you both, but surely the exercise of a little imagination should

present to you the true aspect of affairs. You are a free woman, and I hold the document by which you regained your liberty. Do not be deluded, therefore, by the apparent fact that his Highness can raise a clenched fist aloft and defy the heavens. It is not so. He wears fetters on his ankles, and manacles round his wrists. Roland is a prisoner, and must straightway immure himself. Your Highness, before us stands the stately Castle of Sayn, where presently you shall refresh yourself, and be furnished with an untired charger, on which to ride all night, that you may reach the gates of Ehrenfels early to-morrow morning. Once there, place the wine-loving Heinrich out of harm in the deepest dungeon, and take his place as prisoner. It is arranged that the three Archbishops personally escort you to Frankfort in the barge of Mayence, which will land you at the water-steps of the Royal Palace. If it were known that I had been even an hour in your company your chances of reaching the throne would be seriously jeopardized."

Page 180

“Surely such haste is unnecessary,” cried the girl. “He can set out to-morrow in one direction while we go in another. He traveled all last night, and for most part of it was paddling a boat containing four people; has ridden almost since daylight, and now to journey on horseback throughout the night is too much for human endurance.”

The grave smile of the Archbishop shone upon her anxiety.

“For lack of a nail the shoe was lost,” he said, “and you know the remainder of the warning. If Prince Roland cares to risk an Empire for a night’s rest, I withdraw my objection.”

The Prince suddenly wheeled his horse, and coming briskly round to the side of the girl, placed a hand on hers.

“A decision, Countess!” he cried. “Give me your decision. I shall always obey you!”

“Oh, the rashness of youth!” murmured the Archbishop.

The girl looked up at the young man, and he caught his breath and clasped her hand more tightly as he gazed into the depths of her glorious eyes.

“You must go,” she sighed.

“Yes, alas!”

He raised her unresisting hand to his lips, and again turned his horse.

“You will obey?” asked the Archbishop.

“I will obey, my Lord.”

He flashed from its scabbard, into the rays of the setting sun, the sword he had made, and elevating the hilt to his forehead, saluted the Archbishop.

“I shall see you at Ehrenfels, my Lord.”

“Ah, do not go thus. Come to the Castle for an hour’s rest at least.”

The young man whirled his sword around, and caught it by the blade, touching the hilt with his lips as if it were a cross.

“I thank God,” said he, “that I can willingly keep my oath.”

Then, looking at the girl—“For the Empress, and not for the Empire!” he cried.

The sword seemed to drop into the scabbard of its own accord, as Roland set spurs to his steed and away.

XVIII

THE SWORD MAKER AT BAY

The heir-presumptive to the throne reached Frankfort very quietly in the Archbishop's barge, and was landed after nightfall at the water-steps of the Imperial Palace. The funeral of the Emperor took place almost as if it were a private ceremonial. Grave trouble had been anticipated, and the route of the procession for the short distance between Palace and Cathedral was thickly lined on either side by the troops of the three Archbishops. This precaution proved unnecessary. The dispirited citizens cared nothing for their late nominal ruler, and they manifested their undisguised hatred of the real rulers, the Archbishops, by keeping indoors while their soldiers marched the streets.

The condition of the capital was unique. It suffered from a famine of money rather than a famine of food. Frankfort starved in the midst of plenty. Never had the earth been more fruitful than during this year, and the coming autumn promised a harvest that would fill the granaries to overflowing, yet no one brought in food to Frankfort, for the common people had not the money to buy. The working population depended entirely upon the merchants and manufacturers, and with the collapse of mercantile business thousands were thrown out of employment, and this penniless mob was augmented by the speedy cessation of all manufacturing.

Page 181

After the futile bread riots earlier in the year, put down so drastically by the Archbishops, the population of the city greatly diminished, and the country round about swarmed with homeless wanderers, who at least were sure of something to eat, but being city-bred, and consequently useless for agricultural employment, they gradually joined into groups and marauding bands, greatly to the menace of the provinces they traversed. Indeed, rumor had it that the robberies from certain castles on the Rhine, and the burning of Furstenberg, were the work of these free companies, consequently a sense of uneasiness permeated the Empire, whose rulers, great and small, began to foresee that a continuance of this state of things meant disaster to the rich as well as misery to the poor. Charity, spasmodic and unorganized, proved wholly unable to cope with the disaster that had befallen the capital city.

When darkness set in on the third night after Roland's return to Frankfort, he made his way out into the unlighted streets, acting with caution until certain he was not followed, then betook himself to the Palace belonging to the Archbishop of Cologne.

The porter at first refused him entrance, and Roland, not wishing to make himself known, declared he had an appointment with his Lordship. Trusting that the underling could not read, he presented his parchment safe-conduct, asking him to give that to his Lordship, with a message that the bearer awaited his pleasure. The suspicious servant, seeing the Grand Seal of the Empire upon the document, at once conducted Roland to a room on the ground floor, then departed with the manuscript to find his master.

The Archbishop returned with him, the Imperial scroll in his hand, and a distinctly perceptible frown on his brow. When the servant withdrew, closing the door, the prelate said:

"Highness, this is a very dangerous procedure on your part."

"Why, my Lord?"

"Because you are certain to have been followed."

"What matter for that?" asked the young man. "I am quite unknown in Frankfort."

"Prince Roland," said the Archbishop gravely, "until your Election is actually accomplished, you would be wise to do nothing that might arouse the suspicion of Mayence. This house is watched night and day, and all who come and go are noted. I dare say that within fifteen minutes Mayence will know you have visited me."

"My dear Archbishop, they cannot note an unknown man. The uneasiness of Frankfort has already taken hold of me, and therefore I saw to it that I was not followed."

"If you were not followed when you came, you will certainly be followed as you return."

“In that case, my Lord, the spies will track me to the innocent home of Herr Goebel, the merchant, in the Fahrgasse.”

“They will shadow you when you leave his house.”

“Then their industry will be rewarded by an enjoyable terminus; in other words, the drinking cellar of the Rheingold.”

Page 182

“Be assured, your Highness, that ultimately you will be traced to the Royal Palace.”

“Again not so, my Lord. They will be led across the bridge into the mechanics’ quarter of Sachsenhausen, and if the watch continues, they must make a night of it, for I shall enter my humble room there and go to bed.”

“I see you have it all planned out,” commented the discomfited Archbishop.

The young man laughed.

“I anticipate an interesting life, my Lord, because it is my habit to think before I act, and I notice that this apparently baffles the Electors. The truth is that you three are so subtle, and so much afraid of one another, so on the alert lest you be taken by surprise, that a straightforward action on my part throws all intrigue out of gear. Now, I’ll warrant you cannot guess why I came here to-night.”

“Oh, I know the reason very well.”

“Do you? That astonishes me. What is the reason?”

“You came to see the Countess von Sayn.”

“Ah, is the lady within? Why, of course, she must be. I remember now, she was to accompany you to Frankfort, and it naturally follows she is your guest.”

“She is my guest, your Highness, and one reason why you cannot see her is because at this moment the lady converses with the Count Palatine, who has just arrived from Gutenfels. As the Countess and myself enjoyed his hospitality not long ago in that stronghold, I have invited him to be my guest until the coronation ceremonies are completed.”

“My Lord, I regret that your hospitality halts when it reaches your future Emperor. Why may I not be introduced to the Count Palatine?”

“Such introduction must not take place except in the presence of the other Electors. I am very anxious, as you may perceive, that nothing shall be done to jeopardize your own prospects. We have arrived, your Highness, at a critical moment. History relates that more than one candidate has come to the very steps of the throne, only to be rejected at the last moment. I am too sincere a friend to risk such an outcome in your own case.”

“Then you think it injudicious of me to see the Countess until after the Election?”

“I not only think it injudicious, your Highness, but I intend to prevent a meeting.”

Again the young man laughed.

“’Tis blessed then that I came for no such purpose; otherwise I might be deeply disappointed.”

“For what purpose did you come, Highness?”

“The Imperial Palace, my Lord, belongs no more to my mother. If she or I continue there to reside, we seem to be taking for granted that I shall be elected Emperor; an assumption unfair to the seven Electors, whose choice should be untrammeled by even a hint of influence. I beg of you, therefore, my Lord, to extend your hospitality to my mother. I have spoken to her on this subject, and she will gladly be your guest, happy, I am sure, to forsake that gloomy abode.”

Page 183

“I am honored, your Highness, by the opportunity you give me. I shall wait upon the Empress to-morrow at whatever hour it is convenient for her Majesty to receive me.”

“You are most kind. I suggested that she should name an hour, and midday was chosen.”

The Archbishop bowed profoundly. The young man rose, and held out his hand, which the Archbishop took with cordiality. The Prince looked very straight-forwardly at his host, and the latter thought he detected a twinkle in his eye, as he said with decision:

“To-morrow I shall formally notify my Lord of Mayence that the Empress has chosen your Palace as her place of residence until after the coronation, and I shall request his Lordship to crave your permission that I may call here every day to see my mother.”

Again Cologne bowed, and made no further protest, although Roland seemingly expected one, but as it did not come, the Prince continued:

“Here is my address in Sachsenhausen, should you wish a communication to reach me in haste; and kindly command your porter not to parley when I again demand speech with your Lordship. Good-night. I thank you, my Lord, for your courtesy,” and the energetic youth disappeared before the slow-thinking Archbishop could call up words with which to reply.

Cologne did not immediately rejoin his guests, but stood a very figure of perplexity, muttering to himself:

“If our friend Mayence thinks that youngster is to be molded like soft clay, he is very much mistaken. I hope Roland will not cause him to feel the iron hand too soon. I wonder why Mayence is delaying the Election? Can it be that already he distrusts his choice, or is it the question of a wife?”

Meanwhile the front door of the Archbishop’s Palace had clanged shut, and Roland strode across the square careless or unconscious of spies, looking neither to the right nor to the left. He made his way speedily to the Fahrgasse, walking down that thoroughfare until he came to Herr Goebel’s door, where he knocked, and was admitted. Ushered into the room where he had parted from the merchant, he found Herr Goebel seated at his table as if he had never left it. The merchant, with a cry of delight, greeted the young man.

“Well, Herr Goebel, you see I have been a successful trafficker. Your bales of goods are all in Castle Pfalz, and I trust the barge returned safely to you with the money.”

“It did indeed, your Highness.”

“Has the coin been counted?”

“Yes; and it totals an enormous, almost unbelievable, sum, which I have set down here to the last stiver.”

“That is brave news. Have any demands been made on you for its partition?”

“No, your Highness.”

“Now, Herr Goebel, I have determined that all that money, which is in effect stolen property, shall go to the feeding of Frankfort’s poor. Buying provender shrewdly, how long would this treasure keep hunger away from the gates of Frankfort?”

Page 184

“That requires some calculation, your Highness.”

“A month?”

“Surely so.”

“Two months, perhaps?”

“’Tis likely; but I deal in cloth, not in food, and therefore cannot speak definitely without computation and the advice of those expert in the matter.”

“Very well, Herr Goebel; get your computations made as soon as possible. Call together your merchants’ guild, and ask its members—By the way,” said Roland, suddenly checking himself, “give to me in writing the amount of gold I have sent you.”

The unsuspecting merchant did so, and Roland’s eyes opened with astonishment when he glanced at the total. He then placed the paper in the wallet he carried.

“You were perhaps about to suggest that a committee be appointed,” ventured the merchant.

“Yes; a small but capable committee, of which you shall be chairman and treasurer. But first you will ask the merchants to subscribe, out of their known wealth, a sum equaling the gold I filched from the Barons.”

The merchant’s face fell, and took on a doleful expression.

“The times, your Highness, have long been very bad, none of us making money—”

The Prince held up his hand, and the merchant ceased his plaint.

“If I can strip a Baron of his wealth,” he said, “I will not waste words over the fleecing of merchants. This contribution is to be given in the name of the three Archbishops, whose heavy hands came down on you after the late insurrection. The Archbishops have now nine thousand troops in Frankfort. If given leave, they will collect the sum three times over within a very few hours; so you, as chairman of the committee, may decide whether the fund shall be a voluntary contribution or an impost gathered by soldiery: it matters nothing to me. Have it proclaimed throughout the city that owing to the graciousness of the three Archbishops starvation is now at an end in Frankfort.”

“Highness, with your permission, and all due deference, it seems rather unjust that we should contribute the cash and lose the credit.”

“Yes, Herr Goebel; this is a very unjust world, as doubtless many of the starving people thought when they recollected that a few hundred of you possessed vast wealth while

they were penniless. Nevertheless, there are good times ahead for all of us. Let me suggest that this money which I sent to you may prove sufficient and so the subscriptions of the merchants can be returned to them; that is, if the relief fund is honestly administered. So set to work early to-morrow with energy. You merchants have had a long vacation. I think the Rhine will be open before many weeks are past, and then you can turn to your money-making, but our first duty is to feed the hungry. Good-night, Herr Goebel."

He left the merchant as dazed as was the Archbishop. Once again outside he made directly for the wine cellar of the Rheingold. On reaching the steps he heard a roar of talk, lightened now and then by the sound of laughter. He paused a moment before descending. It was evident that the company was enjoying itself, and Roland soliloquized somewhat sadly:

Page 185

“I am the disturbing element in that group. They seem to agree famously when by themselves. Ah, well, no matter. They will soon be rid of me!”

When Roland descended the stair, the proprietor greeted him with joy.

“I have missed you, Herr Roland,” he said, “so you may imagine how much the guild has regretted your absence.”

“Yes; I hear them bemoaning their fate.”

The inn-keeper laughed.

“How many are here to-night?”

“There is a full house, Sir Roland.”

“Really? Are Kurzbold and Gensbein within?”

“Oh, yes; and there is no scarcity of money, thanks to you, I understand.”

“Rather, our thanks are for ever due to you, Herr Host, for sustaining us so long when we were penniless. We shall never forget that,” and so with a semi-military salute to the gratified cellar-man, Roland pushed open the door and entered the banqueting room of the iron-workers’ guild. An instant silence fell on the group.

“Good evening to you, gentlemen,” said the Prince, taking off his hat, and with a twist of his shoulders flinging the cloak from them.

Instantly arose a great cheer, and Greusel, who occupied the chair at the head of the table, strode forward, took Roland’s hat and cloak, and hung them up. After that he attempted to lead their Captain to the seat of honor.

“No, no, my dear lieutenant,” said Roland, placing his hand affectionately on the other’s shoulder, “a better man than I occupies the chair, and shall never be displaced by me.”

The others, now on their feet, with the exception of Kurzbold and Gensbein, vociferously demanded that Roland take the chair. Smilingly he shook his head, and holding up his hand for silence, addressed them.

“Take your seats, comrades; and, Greusel, if you force me to give a command, I order you into that chair without further protest.”

Greusel, with evident reluctance, obeyed.

“Truth to tell, brothers, I have but a few moments to stop. I merely dropped in to enjoy a sip of wine with you, and to offer a proposal that, within five minutes, will make me the most unpopular man in this room, therefore you see my wisdom in refusing a chair from which I should be very promptly ejected.”

One of the members poured a tankard full of wine from a flagon, and handed it to Roland, who, saluting the company, drank.

“You did not divide the money, Greusel?”

“No, Roland. We gave each man five hundred thalers, to keep as best he might. We then concealed the rest of the gold between the bottom of the boat and its inner planking. Ebearhard and I construed your orders somewhat liberally, conceiving it was your desire to get our treasure and ourselves safely into Frankfort.”

“Quite right,” corroborated Roland.

Page 186

“When morning came upon us, we soon discovered that the whole country was aroused, because of the destruction of Furstenberg and the looting of Sonneck. No one knew where the next raid would strike, and therefore the whole country-side was in a turmoil. Now, the only fact known to the despoiled was that a long black barge had appeared in front of the Castle while the attack was made from behind. We realized that it would be impossible for us to go up the river except in darkness, so in case of a search we concealed the treasure where it was not likely to be come at, and each day lay quiet at an unfrequented part of the river, rowing all night. Not until we reached the Main did we venture on a daylight voyage. It was agreed among us unanimously that the money should be placed in Herr Goebel’s keeping until you returned.”

“That was all excellently done,” commented Roland. “I have just been to see Herr Goebel, and was surprised to learn how much we had actually taken. And now I ask you to make a great sacrifice. This city is starving. If we give that gold to its relief, the merchants of Frankfort will contribute an equal amount. I do not know how long such a total will keep the wolves from the doors of Frankfort; probably for six months. I shall learn definitely to-morrow.” Here Roland outlined his plan of relief, which was received in silence.

Kurzbold spoke up.

“I should like to know how much the total is?”

“That is a matter with which you have nothing to do,” growled Greusel; then, turning to Roland, who had not yet taken a seat, he said: “So far as my share is concerned, I agree.”

“I agree,” added Ebearhard; and so it went down along each side of the table until eighteen had spoken.

Kurzbold rose with a smile on his face.

“I don’t know how it is, ex-Captain, that the moment you come among us there seems to arise a spirit of disputation.”

“Curiously enough, Herr Kurzbold, that same thought arose in my mind as I listened to your hilarity before I entered. I beg to add, for your satisfaction, that this is my last visit to the guild, and never again shall I disturb its harmony.”

“There is no lack of harmony,” cried Ebearhard, laughing, as he rose. “The agreement has been practically unanimous—quite unanimous in fact, among those entitled to share in the great treasure. I believe Herr Kurzbold has a claim, if it has not been forfeited, to the loot of Rheinstein.”

“Now, even the genial Ebearhard,” continued Kurzbold, “although his words are blameless, speaks with a certain tone of acerbity, while my friend Greusel has become gruff as a bear.”

“You need not labor that point, Herr Kurzbold,” said Roland. “I have resigned.”

“I just wished to remark,” Kurzbold went on, “that I rose for the purpose of stating I had some slight share in something; stolen property; honor among thieves, you know. Are my rights to this share disputed?”

Page 187

“No,” said the chairman shortly.

“Very well,” concluded Kurzbold, “as I am graciously permitted to speak in the august presence of our ex-Captain, I desire to say that whatever my share happens to be, I bestow it gladly, nay, exultantly, upon the poor of Frankfort.”

With that Kurzbold sat down, and there was first a roar of laughter, followed by a clapping of hands. Gensbein rose, and said briefly:

“I do as Kurzbold does.”

“Now,” said Roland, “I want a number of volunteers to start out into the country early to-morrow morning, Greusel, you, as chairman, will designate the routes. Each man is to penetrate as far as he can along the main roads, asking the farmers to bring everything in the shape of food they have to sell. Tell them a vast sum has been collected, and that their cartloads will be bought entire the moment they enter the city. There will be no waiting for their money. Prompt payment, and everything eatable purchased immediately. Greusel, I put on you the hardest task. Penetrate into the forest south of the Main, and tell the charcoal-burners and woodmen to bring in material for kitchen fires. How many will volunteer?”

Every man rose. Roland thanked them. “I shall now divulge a secret, and you will see that when it was told to me I remembered your interests. It has been my privilege to meet, since I saw you, more than one man who is a ruler in this Empire.”

“Did they tell you who is to be the new Emperor?” cried one.

“That is known only to the Electors. But what I was about to say is this. There are to be established by the Government ironworks on a scale hitherto unknown in any land. I believe, and did my best to inculcate that belief in others, that we are on the verge of an age of iron, and, knowing your skill, I am privileged to offer each of you the superintendency of a department, with compensation never before given so lavishly in Germany. I am also induced to believe that the new Emperor will bestow a title on each of you who desire such honor, so that there can be no question of your right to wear a sword. Greusel, you must receive reports from each of our food scouts, and I shall be glad to know the outcome, if you take the trouble to call upon me any hour after nine o’clock at night, at my old room in Sachsenhausen. And now, good-night, and good-luck to you all.”

Roland went over the bridge, and so reached his room on the other side. He glanced around several times to satisfy himself he was not spied upon, and laughed at the apprehension of the Archbishop. Entering his room, he lit a lamp, took off his cloak and flung it on the bed, then unbuckled his sword-belt and hung it and the weapon on a peg,

placing his cloak above them. He was startled by a loud knock at the door, and stood for a moment astonished, until it was repeated with the stern warning:

“Open in the name of the Archbishop!”

Page 188

The young man strode forward, drew back the bolt, and flung open the door. An officer, with two soldiers behind him, came across the threshold, and at the side-motion of the officer's head a soldier closed and bolted the door. Roland experienced a momentary thrill of indignation at this rude intrusion, then he remembered he was a mechanic, and that his line must be the humble and deferential.

"You came to-night from the Imperial Palace. What were you doing there?"

"I was trying to gain admission, sir."

"For what purpose?"

"I wished," said Roland, rapidly outlining his defense in his own mind, "I wished to see some high officer; some one of your own position, sir, but was not so fortunate as to succeed. I could not pass the sentries without a permit, which I did not then possess, but hope to acquire to-morrow."

"Again I ask, for what purpose?"

"For a purpose which causes me delight in meeting your excellency."

"I am no excellency. Come to the point! For what purpose?"

"To show the officer a sword of such superior quality that a man armed with it, and given a certain amount of skill, stands impregnable."

"Do you mean to tell me you went to the Royal Palace for the purpose of selling a second-hand sword?"

"Oh, no, my lord."

"Do not be so free with your titles. Call me Lieutenant."

"Well, Lieutenant, sir; I hope to get orders for a hundred, or perhaps a thousand of these weapons."

"Where did you go after leaving the Palace?"

"I went to the residence of that great Prince of the Church, the Archbishop of Cologne."

"Ah! You did not succeed in seeing his Lordship, I suppose?"

"Pardon me, Lieutenant, but I did. His Lordship is keenly interested in both weapons and armor."

"Did he give you an order for swords?"

“No, Lieutenant; he seems to be a very cautious man. He asked me to visit him in Cologne, or if I could not do that, to see his general, now in Frankfort. You understand, Lieutenant, the presence of the three Archbishops with their armies offers me a great opportunity, by which I hope to profit.”

The officer looked at him with a puzzled expression on his face.

“Where next did you go?”

“I went to the house of a merchant in the Fahrgasse.”

“Ah, that tale doesn’t hold! Merchants are not allowed to wear swords.”

“No, Lieutenant, but a merchant on occasion can supply capital that will enable a skilled workman to accept a large contract. If I should see the general of his Lordship to-morrow, and he gave me an order for, say, two thousand swords, I have not enough money to buy the metal, and I could not ask for payment until I delivered the weapons.”

“Did the merchant agree to capitalize you?”

“He, too, was a cautious man, Lieutenant. He wished first to see the contract, and know who stood responsible for payment.”

Page 189

“Wise man,” commented the officer; “and so, disheartened, I suppose, you returned here?”

“No, Lieutenant; the day has been warm, and I have traveled a good deal. I went from the merchant’s house to the Rheingold tavern, there to drink a tankard of wine with my comrades, a score of men who have formed what they call the ironworkers’ guild. I drank a tankard with them, and then came direct here, where I arrived but a few moments ago.”

The officer was more and more puzzled. Despite this young man’s deferential manner, his language was scarcely that of a mechanic, yet this certainly was his own room, and he had told the absolute truth about his wanderings, as one who has nothing to fear.

The Lieutenant stood for a space of time with eyes to the floor, as silent as the soldiers behind him. Suddenly he looked up.

“Show me the sword. I’ll tell you where it’s made!”

If he expected hesitation he was mistaken. Roland gave a joyful cry, swept aside the cloak, whisked forth the sword, flung it up, and caught it by the blade, then with a low bow handed it to the officer, who flashed it through the air, bent the blade between finger and thumb, then took it near the lamp and scrutinized it with the eye of an expert.

“A good weapon, my friend. Where was it made? I have never seen one like it.”

“It was made by my own hands here in Frankfort. Of course I go first to those who know least about the matter, but if I can get an introduction to his Lordship of Mayence, his officers will know a sword when they see it; and I hope to-night fortune, in leading you to my door, has brought me an officer of Mayence.”

The Lieutenant looked at him, and for the first time smiled. He handed back the weapon, signed to his men to unbolt the door, which they did, stepping out; then he said:

“I bid you good-night. Your answers have been satisfactory, but I set you down not as a mechanic, but a very excellent merchant of swords.”

“Lieutenant,” said Roland, “you do not flatter me.” He raised his weapon in military salute. “I am no merchant, but a sword maker.”

XIX

THE BETROTHAL IN THE GARDEN

Next morning Prince Roland sent a letter to the Archbishop of Mayence informing him that the Empress had taken up her abode in the Palace of her old friend, the Lord of Cologne, giving the reasons for this move and his own desertion of the Imperial Palace, and asking permission to call upon his mother each day. The messenger brought back a prompt reply, which commended the delicacy of his motives in leaving the Royal Palace, but added that, so far as the three Archbishops were concerned, the Saalhof was still at their disposal: of course Prince Roland's movements were quite untrammeled, and again, so far as concerned the three Archbishops, he was at liberty to visit whom he pleased, as often as he liked.

Page 190

While waiting for the return of his messenger, Roland called upon Herr Goebel, and told him that twenty emissaries had gone forth in every direction from Frankfort to inform the farming community that a market had been opened in the city, and in exchange learned what the merchant had already done towards furthering the necessary organization.

“Oh, by the way, Herr Goebel,” he cried, suddenly recollecting, “just write out and sign a document to this effect: ’I promise Herr Roland, sword maker of Sachsenhausen, to supply him with the capital necessary for carrying out his contract with his Lordship the Archbishop of Cologne.’”

Without demur the merchant indited the document, signed it, and gave it to the Prince.

“If any emissary of Mayence pays you a domiciliary visit, Herr Goebel, asking questions about me, carefully conceal my real status, and reply that I am an honest, skillful sword maker, anxious to revive the iron-working industry, and for this reason, being yourself solicitous for the welfare of Frankfort, you are risking some money.”

In the afternoon Roland walked to the Palace of Cologne and boldly entered, with no attempt at secrecy, the doorkeeper on this occasion offering no impediment to his progress. He learned that the Empress, much fatigued, had retired to her room and must not be disturbed; that the Archbishop was consulting with the Count Palatine, while the Countess von Sayn was walking in the garden. Roland passed with some haste through the Palace, and emerged into the grounds behind it: grounds delightfully umbrageous, and of an extent surprisingly large, surrounded by a very high wall of stone, so solidly built that it might successfully stand a siege.

Roland found the girl sauntering very slowly along one of the most secluded alleys, whose gravel-path lay deeply in the shade caused by the thick foliage of over-hanging trees, which made a cool, green tunnel of the walk. Her head was slightly bowed in thought, her beautiful face pathetic in its weariness, and the young man realized, with a pang of sympathy, that she was still to all intents and purposes a prisoner, with no companions but venerable people. She could not, and indeed did not attempt to suppress an exclamation of delight at seeing him, stretching out both hands in greeting, and her countenance cleared as if by magic.

“I was thinking of you!” she cried, without a trace of coquetry.

“I judged your thoughts to be rather gloomy,” he said, with a laugh, in which she joined.

“Gloomy only because I could see or hear nothing of you.”

“Did you know I came yesterday?”

“No. Why did you not ask to see me?”

“I was informed you were entertaining the Count Palatine.”

“Ah, yes. He is a delightful old man. I like him better and better as time goes on. My guardian and I were guests of his at Gutenfels just before I occupied the marine prison of Pfalz.”

Page 191

“So your guardian told me.”

They were now walking side by side in this secluded, thickly-wooded avenue, just wide enough for two, running in a straight line from wall to wall the whole length of the property, in the part most remote from the house.

“Nothing disastrous has happened to you?” she asked. “I have had miserable forebodings.”

“No; I am living a most commonplace life, quite uneventful.”

“But why, why does the Archbishop of Mayence delay the Election?”

“I did not know he was doing so.”

“Oh, my guardian is very anxious about it. Such postponement, I understand, never happened before. The State is without a head.”

“Has your guardian spoken to Mayence about it?”

“Yes; and has been met by the most icy politeness. Mayence wishes this Election to take place with a full conclave of the seven Electors, three of whom have not yet arrived. But my guardian says they never arrive, and take no interest in Imperial matters. He pointed out to Mayence that a quorum of the Court is already in Frankfort, but his Lordship of the Upper Rhine merely protests that they must not force an Election, all of which my guardian thinks is a mere hiding of some design on the part of Mayence.”

Prince Roland meditated on this for a few moments, then, as if shaking off his doubts, he said:

“It never occurs to one Archbishop that either of the others may be speaking the truth. There is so much mistrust among them that they nullify all united action, which accounts for the prostrate state of this city, the capital of one of the most prosperous countries under the sun. So far as I can see, taken individually, they are upright, trustworthy men. Now, to give you an instance. Your guardian last night was simply panic-stricken at my audacity in visiting him. He said I must not come again, refusing me permission to see you; he told you nothing of my conference with him: he felt certain I was being tracked by spies, and could not be made to understand that my presence here was of no consequence one way or another.”

“Then why are you here now?”

“I am just coming to that. I asked your guardian to invite my mother as his guest. Have you met her yet?”

“No; they told me the Empress was too tired to receive any one. I am to be introduced at dinner to-night.”

“Well, this morning I wrote to the Archbishop of Mayence, telling him of my interview with your guardian, the reason for it, and the results. His reply came promptly by return.” Roland produced the document. “Just read that, and see whether you detect anything sinister in it.”

She read the letter thoughtfully.

“That is honest enough on the surface.”

“On the surface, yes; but why not below the surface as well? That is a frank assent to a frank request. I think that if the Archbishops would treat each other with open candor they would save themselves a good deal of anxiety.”

Page 192

“Perhaps,” said the girl, very quietly.

“You are not convinced?”

“I don’t know what to think.” Then she looked up at him quickly. “Were you followed last night?”

“Ah!” ejaculated Roland, laughing a little “apparently not, so far as I could see, but the night was very dark.” Then he related to her the incidents succeeding the return to his room, while she listened with breathless eagerness. “The Lieutenant,” he concluded, “did not deny that he was in the service of Mayence when I hinted as much, but, on the other hand, he did not admit it. Of course, I knew by his uniform to whom he belonged. He conducted my examination with military abruptness, but skillfully and with increasing courtesy, although I proclaimed myself a mechanic.”

“You a mechanic!” she said incredulously. “Do you think he believed it?”

“I see you doubt my histrionic ability, but when next he waits upon me I shall produce documentary evidence of my status, and, what is more, I’ll take to my workshop.”

“Do you possess a workshop?” cried the girl in amazement.

“Do I? Why, I am partner with a man named Greusel, and we own a workshop together. A gruff, clumsy individual, as you would think, but who, nevertheless, with his delicate hammer, would beat you out in metal a brooch finer than that you are wearing.”

“Do you mean Joseph?”

“Yes,” replied Roland, astonished. “What do you know of him?”

“Have you forgotten so soon? It was his stalwart shoulders that burst in my door at Pfalz, and you yourself told me his name was Joseph Greusel. Were all those marauders you commanded honest mechanics?”

“Every man of them.”

“Then you must be the villain of the piece who led those worthy ironworkers astray?”

Roland laughed heartily.

“That is quite true,” he said. “Have I fallen in your estimation?”

“No; to me you appeared as a rescuer. Besides, I come of a race of ruffians, and doubtless on that account take a more lenient view of your villainy than may be the case with others.”

The young man stopped in his walk, and seized her hands again, which she allowed him to possess unresisting.

“Hilda,” he said solemnly, “your guardian thought the Archbishop of Mayence had relented, and would withdraw his opposition to our marriage. Has Mayence said anything to corroborate that estimate?”

“Nothing.”

“Has your guardian broached the subject to him?”

“Yes; but the attitude of my Lord of Mayence was quite inscrutable. Personally I think my guardian wrong in his surmise. The Archbishop of Treves murmured that Mayence never forgives. I am certain I offended him too deeply for pardon. He wishes the future Empress to be a pliable creature who will influence her husband according to his Lordship’s desires, but, as I have boasted several times, I belong to the House of Sayn.”

Page 193

“Hilda, will you marry me in spite of the Archbishops?”

“Roland, will you forego kingship for my sake?”

“Yes; a thousand times yes!”

“You said ‘For the Empress; not for the Empire,’ but if I am no Empress, you will as cheerfully wed me?”

“Yes.”

“Then *I* say yes!”

He caught her in his arms, and they floated into the heaven of their first kiss, an ecstatic melting together. Suddenly she drew away from him.

“There is some one coming,” she whispered.

“Nothing matters now,” said Roland breathlessly. “There is no one in the world to-day but you and me.”

Hildegunde drew her hands down her cheeks, as if to brush away their tell-tale color and their warmth.

“’Tis like,” said Roland, “that you marry a poor man.”

“Nothing matters now,” she repeated, laughing tremulously. “I am said to be the richest woman in Germany. I shall build you a forge and enlist myself your apprentice. We will paint over the door ’Herr Roland and wife; sword makers.’”

Two men appeared at the end of the alley, and stood still; the one with a frown on his brow, the other with a smile on his lips.

“Oh!” whispered the Countess, panic striking from her face the color that her palms had failed to remove, “the Archbishop and the Count Palatine!”

His Lordship strode forward, followed more leisurely by the smiling Count.

“Prince Roland,” said Cologne, “I had not expected this after our conference of last night.”

“I fail to understand why, my Lord, when my parting words were ’Tell your porter to let me in without parley.’ That surely indicated an intention on my part to visit the Palace.”

“Your Highness knows that so far as I am concerned you are very welcome, and always shall be so, but at this juncture there are others to consider.”

Roland interrupted.

“Read this letter, my Lord, and you will learn that I am here with the full concurrence of that generous Prince of the Church, Mayence.”

Cologne, with knitted brow, scrutinized the communication.

“Your Highness is most courageous, but, if I may be permitted, just a trifle too clever.”

“My Highness is not clever at all, but merely meets a situation as it arises.”

“Prince Roland,” said the Countess, her head raised proudly, “may I introduce to you my friend, and almost my neighbor, the Count Palatine of the Rhine?”

“Ah, pardon me,” murmured the Archbishop, covered with confusion, but the jovial Count swept away all embarrassment by his hearty greeting.

“Prince Roland, I am delighted with the honor her ladyship accords me.”

“And I, my Lord, am exceedingly gratified to meet the Count Palatine again.”

“Again?” cried the Count in astonishment, “If ever we had encountered one another, your Highness, I certainly should not have been the one to forget the privilege.”

Page 194

The Prince laughed.

“It is true, nevertheless. My Lord Count, there is a namesake of mine in the precincts of your strong Castle of Gutenfels; a namesake who does more honor to the title than I do myself.”

The Count Palatine threw back his head, and the forest garden echoed with boisterous laughter.

“You mean my black charger, Prince Roland!” he shouted. “A noble horse indeed. How knew you of him? If your Highness cares for horses allow me to present him to you.”

“Never, my Lord Count. You are too fond of him yourself, and I have always had an affectionate feeling towards you for your love of that animal, which, indeed, hardly exceeds my own. I grasped his bridle-rein, and held the stirrup while you mounted.”

“How is that possible?” asked the astonished Count.

“I cared for Prince Roland nearly a month, receiving generous wages, and, what I valued more, your own commendation, for you saw I was as fond of horses as you were.”

“Good heavens! Were you that youth who came so mysteriously, and disappeared without warning?”

“Yes,” laughed the Prince. “I know Gutenfels nearly as well as you do. I was a spy, studying the art of war and methods of fortification. I stopped in various capacities at nearly all the famous Castles of the Rhine, and this knowledge recently came in—”

“Your Highness, your Highness!” pleaded the Archbishop. “I implore you to remember that the Count Palatine is an Elector of the Empire, and, as I told last night, we are facing a crisis. Until that crisis is passed you will add to my already great anxiety by any lack of reticence on your part.”

“By the Three Kings!” cried the Count, “this youth, if I may venture to call him so, has bound me to him with bands stronger than chain armor. I shall vote for him whoever falters.”

“His Highness,” said the Archbishop, with a propitiatory smile, “has been listening to the Eastern tales which our ancestors brought from the Crusades, and I fear has filled his head with fancies.”

“Really, Archbishop, you misjudge me,” said the young man; “I am the most practical person in the Empire. You interrupted my boasting to her ladyship of my handiwork. I

would have you know I am a capable mechanic and a sword maker. What think you of that, my Lord?" he asked, drawing forth his weapon, and handing it to Cologne.

"An excellent blade indeed," said the latter, balancing it in his hand.

"Very well, my Lord, I made it and tempered it unassisted. I beg you to re-enter your palace, and write me out an order for a thousand of these weapons."

"If your Highness really wishes me to do this, and there is no concealed humorism in your request which I am too dull to fathom, you must accompany me to my study and dictate the document I am to indite. I shall wait till you bid farewell to the Countess."

A glance of mutual understanding flashed between the girl and himself, then Roland raised her hand to his lips, and although the onlookers saw the gallant salutation, they knew nothing of the gentle pressure with which the fingers exchanged their confidences.

Page 195

“Madam,” said the Prince, “it will be my pleasure and duty to wait upon my mother to-morrow. May I look forward to the happiness of presenting you to her?”

“I thank you,” said the Countess simply, with a glance of appeal at her guardian. That good man sighed, then led the way into the house.

XX

THE MYSTERY OF THE FOREST

Roland left the palace with a sense of elation he had never before experienced, but this received a check as he saw standing in the middle of the square the Lieutenant of the night before. His first impulse was to avoid the officer, yet almost instinctively he turned and walked directly to him, which apparently nonplussed the brave emissary of Mayence.

“Good afternoon to you, sir,” began Roland, as if overjoyed to see him. “Will you permit me to speak to you, sir?”

“Well?” said the Lieutenant curtly.

“My forge, which has been black and cold for many a long day, will soon be alight and warm again. What think you of this?” He handed to the Lieutenant his order for a thousand swords, and the officer made a mental note of the commission as an interesting point in armament that would be appreciated by his chief.

“You did not inform me last night who was the merchant you hoped would finance your enterprise.”

“Hoped?” echoed Roland, his eyes sparkling. “’Tis more than hope, Herr Lieutenant. His name is Goebel, and he is one of the richest and chiefest traffickers of Frankfort. Why, my fortune is made! Read this, written in his own hand. I got it from him before midday, on my mere word that I was certain of an order from his Lordship.”

“You are indeed much to be envied,” said the Lieutenant coldly, returning the two documents.

“Ah, but I am just at the beginning. If *you* would favor me by smoothing the way to his Lordship, the Archbishop of Mayence, I in return—”

“Out upon you for a base-born, profit-mongering churl! Do you think that I, an officer, would demean myself by partnering a bagman!”

The Lieutenant turned on his heel, strode away and left him. Roland pursued his way with bowed head, as though stricken by the rebuff. Nearing the bridge, he saw a crowd around an empty cart, standing by which a man in rough clothing was cursing most vociferously.

At first he thought there had been an accident, but most of the people were laughing loudly; so, halting in the outskirts, he asked the cause of the commotion.

"'Tis but a fool farmer," said a man, "who came from the country with his load of vegetables. 'Tis safer to enter a lion's den unarmed than to come into Frankfort with food while people are starving. He has been plundered to the last leaf."

Roland shouldered his way through the crowd, and touched the frantic man on the shoulder.

"What was the value of your load?" he said.

Page 196

“A misbegotten liar told me this morning that a market had opened in Frankfort, and that there was money to be had. No sooner am I in the town than everything I brought in is stolen.”

“Yes, yes; I know all about that. My question is, How much is your merchandise worth?”

“Worth? Thirty thalers I expected to get, and now—”

“Thirty thalers,” interrupted the Prince. “Here is your money. Get you gone, and tell your neighbors there is prompt payment for all the provender they can bring in.”

The man calmed down as if a bucket of water had been thrown on him. He counted the payment with miserly care, testing each coin between his teeth, then mounted his cart without a word of thanks, and, to the disappointment of the gathering mob, drove away. Roland, seething with anger, walked directly to the house of Herr Goebel, and found that placid old burgher seated at his table.

“Ten thousand curses on your indolence!” he cried. “Where are your committee, and the emissaries empowered to carry out this scheme of relief I have ordered?”

“Committee? Emissaries?” cried the astonished man. “There has been no time!”

“Time, you thick-headed fool! I’ll time you by hanging you to your own front door. There has been time for me to send my men out into the country; time for a farmer to come in with a cartload of produce, and be robbed here under your very nose! Maledictions on you, you sit here, well fed, and cry there is no time! If I had not paid the yeoman he would have gone back into the country crying we were all thieves here in Frankfort. Now listen to me. I drew my sword once upon you in jest. Should I draw it a second time it will be to penetrate your lazy carcass by running you through. If within two hours there is not a paymaster at every gate in Frankfort to buy and pay for each cartload of produce as it comes, and also a number of guides to tell that farmer where to deliver his goods, I’ll give your town over to the military, and order the sacking of every merchant’s house within its walls.”

“It shall be done; it shall be done; it shall be done!” breathed the merchant, trembling as he rose, and he kept repeating the phrase with the iteration of a parrot.

“You owe me thirty thalers,” said the Prince calming down; “the first payment out of the relief fund. Give me the money.”

With quivering hands Herr Goebel, seeing no humor in the application, handed over the money, which the Prince slipped into his wallet.

Dusk had fallen when at last he reached his room in Sachsenhausen, and there he found awaiting him Joseph Greusel, in semi-darkness and in total gloom.

“Your housekeeper let me in,” said the visitor.

“Good! I did not expect you back so soon. Have the others returned?”

“I do not know. I came direct here. I carry very ominous news, Roland, of impending disaster in Frankfort.”

Page 197

“Greater than at present oppresses it?”

“Civil war, fire, and bloodshed. Close the door, Roland; I am tired out, and I do not wish to be overheard.”

The Prince obeyed the request, locking the door. Going to a cupboard, he produced a generous flagon of wine and a tankard, setting the same on a small table before Greusel, then he threw himself down in the one armchair the room possessed. Greusel filled the tankard, and emptied it without drawing breath. He plunged directly into his narrative.

“I had penetrated less than half a league into the forest when I was stopped by an armed man who stepped out from behind a tree. He wore the uniform of Mayence, and proclaimed me a prisoner. I explained my mission, but this had no effect upon him. He asked if I would go with him quietly, or compel him to call assistance. Being helpless, I said I would go quietly. Notwithstanding this, he bound my wrists behind me, then with a strip of cloth blindfolded me. Taking me by the arm, he led me through the forest for a distance impossible to calculate. I think, however, we walked not more than ten minutes. There was a stop and a whispered parley; a pause of a few minutes, and a further conference, which I partially heard. The commander before whom I must be taken was not ready to receive me. I should be placed in a tent, and a guard set over me.

“This was done. I asked that the cord, which hurt my wrists, might be removed, but instead, my ankles were tied together, and I sat there on the ground, leaning against a pole at the back of the tent. Here my conductor left me, and I heard him give orders to those without to maintain a strict watch, but to hold no communication with me.

“I imagine that the tent I occupied stood back to back with the tent of the commander, for after some time I heard the sound of voices, and it seemed to me voices of two men in authority. They had come to the back part of their tent, as if to speak confidentially, and their voices were low, yet I could hear them quite distinctly, being separated from them merely by two thicknesses of cloth. What I learned was this. There is concealed in the forest, within half an hour’s quick march of the southern gate, a force of seven thousand soldiers. These soldiers belong to the Archbishop of Mayence, who commands an additional three thousand within the walls of Frankfort. Mayence holds the southern gate, as Treves holds the western and Cologne the northern. You see at once what that implies. Mayence can pour his troops into Frankfort, say, at midnight, and in the morning he has ten thousand soldiers as compared with the three thousand each commanded by the Archbishops of Treves and Cologne. That means civil war, and the complete crushing of the two northern Archbishops.”

Page 198

“I think you take too serious a view of the matter,” commented Roland. “Mayence is undoubtedly a subtle man, who takes every precaution that he shall have his own way. The reason that there will be no civil war is this. I happen to know on very excellent authority that so far as the Electoral Court goes, Mayence is paramount. He does not need to conquer Cologne and Treves by force, because he is already supreme by his genius for intrigue. He is a born ruler, and his methods are all those of diplomacy as against those of arms. I dare say if occasion demanded it he would strike quick and strike effectually, but occasion does not demand. I am rather sure of my facts, and I know that the three Archbishops, together with the Count Palatine of the Rhine, are in agreement to elect my namesake, Prince Roland, Emperor of Germany.”

“Yes,” said Greusel, “I heard that rumor, and it is generally believed in Frankfort. Rumor, however, as usual, speaks falsely.”

The Prince smiled at his pessimistic colleague, for that colleague was talking to the man who knew; nevertheless, he listened patiently, for of course he could not yet reveal himself to his somber lieutenant, who continued his narrative:

“The two men spoke of the unfortunate Prince, who is, I understand, still a prisoner in Ehrenfels.”

Here Roland laughed outright.

“My dear Greusel, you are entirely mistaken. The Prince was never really a prisoner, and is at this moment in Frankfort, as free to do what he likes as I am.”

“I am sorry,” said Greusel, “that you do not grasp the seriousness of the situation, but I have not yet come to the vital part of it, although I thought the very fact that seven thousand men threatened Frankfort would impress you.”

“It does, Greusel,” said Roland, remembering the distrust in which both the Countess and her guardian held Mayence, and also the close watch his Lordship was keeping over Frankfort, as evidenced by the domiciliary visit paid to himself by an officer of that potentate. “Go on, Greusel,” he said more soberly, “I shall not interrupt you again.”

“I gathered that Prince Roland actually had been chosen, but complications arose which I do not altogether understand. These complications relate to a woman, or two women; both of them equally objectionable to the Archbishop of Mayence. One of these two women was to marry the new Emperor, but rather than have this happen, Mayence determined that another than Prince Roland should be elected, the reason being that Mayence feared one Empress would be entirely under the influence of Cologne, if chosen, and the other under the influence of Treves. So his subtle Lordship is deluding both of these Electors. Cologne has been asked to bring to Frankfort the woman he controls, therefore he harbors the illusion that Mayence is reconciled to her. Treves also

has been requested to bring the lady who is his relative; thus she, too, is in Frankfort, and Treves blindly believes Mayence is favorable to her cause.

Page 199

“As a matter of fact Mayence will have neither, but has resolved to spring upon the Electoral Court at the last moment the name of the Grand Duke Karl of Hesse, a middle-aged man already married, and entirely under the dominance of his Lordship of Mayence.”

“Pardon me, Greusel, I must interrupt, in spite of my disclaimer. What you say sounds very ingenious, but it cannot be carried out. Treves, Cologne, and the Count Palatine are already pledged to vote for Prince Roland, so is Mayence himself, and to change front at the last moment would be to forswear himself, and act as traitor to his colleagues. Now, he cannot afford to lose even one vote, and I believe that the Archbishop of Cologne will vote for Prince Roland through thick and thin. I think the same of the Count Palatine. Treves, of course, is always doubtful and wavering, but you see that the negative vote of the Archbishop of Cologne would render Mayence powerless and an Election impossible.”

“Doubtless what you say is true, and now you have put your finger on the danger spot. Why has the Election been delayed beyond all precedent?”

“That I do not know,” replied Roland.

“Then I will tell you. The Archbishop of Mayence has sent peremptory orders to the other three Electors, who are reported to be careless so far as Imperial affairs are concerned, and quite indifferent regarding the personality of the future Emperor. No one of these three Electors, however, dares offend so powerful a man as Mayence. If the Archbishop can overawe his colleagues nominally equal to him in position, each commanding an army, how think you can three small nobles, with no soldiers at their beck, withstand his requests, suavely given, no doubt, but with an iron menace behind them?”

“True, true,” muttered Roland.

“Two of these nobles have already arrived, and are housed with the Archbishop of Mayence. The third is expected here within three days; four days at the farthest. Mayence will immediately convene the Electoral Court, when the Count Palatine, with the two Archbishops, may be astonished to find that for the first time in history, the whole seven are present in the Wahlzimmer. Mayence will ask Cologne to make the nomination, and he will put forward the name of Prince Roland. On a vote being taken the Prince will be in a minority of one. Mayence then shows his hand, nominating the Grand Duke Karl, who will be elected by a majority of one. Then may ensue a commotion in the Wahlzimmer, and accusations of bad faith, but remember that Cologne and Treves are taken completely by surprise. They cannot communicate with their commanders, for the three thousand troops which Mayence already has within Frankfort will have quietly surrounded the Town Hall that contains the Election Chamber, and Mayence’s seven thousand men from the forest are pouring through the southern

gate into the city, making straight for the Romer. Meanwhile the Grand Duke Karl, a man well known to the populace of Frankfort, appears on the balcony of the Kaisersaal, and is loudly acclaimed the new Emperor."

Page 200

“Ah, Greusel, forgive my attitude of doubt. It is all as plain now as the Cathedral tower. Still, there will be no civil war. Treves and Cologne will gather up their troops and go home, once more defeated by a man cleverer and more unscrupulous than both of them put together. They are but infants in his hands.”

“Have you any suggestion to make?” asked Greusel.

“No; there is nothing to be done. You see, the young Prince has no following. He is quite unknown in Frankfort. His name can arouse no enthusiasm, and, all in all, that strikes me as a very good thing. The Grand Duke Karl is popular, and I believe he will make a very good Emperor.”

“You mean, Roland, that the Archbishop of Mayence will make a very good ruler, for he will be the real king.”

“Well, after all, Joseph, there is much to be said in favor of Mayence. He is a man who knows what he wants, and, what is more, gets it, and that, after all is the main thing in life. If any one could sway the Archbishop so that he put his great talents to the benefit of his country, instead of thinking only of himself, what a triumph of influence that would be! By the Three Kings, I’d like to do it! I admire him. If I found opportunity and could persuade him to join us in the relief of Frankfort, and in opening the Rhine to commerce, we would give these inane merchants a lesson in organization.”

Greusel rose from his chair, poured out another tankard full from the flagon, and drank it off.

“I must go down now and meet the guild,” he said. “I have eaten nothing all day, and am as hungry as a wolf from the Taunus.”

“Oh, how did you escape, by the way?”

“I didn’t escape. I was led blindfolded into a tent, where my bandage was removed, and here a man in ordinary dress questioned me concerning my object in entering the forest. I told him exactly the truth, and explained what we were trying to do in Frankfort. I dare say I looked honest and rather stupid. He asked when I set out; in what direction I came; questioning me with a great affectation of indifference; wanted to know if I had met many persons, and I told him quite truthfully I met no one but the man I understood was a forester; a keeper, I supposed.”

“‘There are a number of us,’ he said, ’hunting the wild boar, and we do not wish the animal life of these woods to be disturbed. We shall not be here longer than a week, but I advise you to seek another spot for what timber you require.’

“He asked me, finally, if any one in Frankfort knew I had come to the forest, and I answered that the guild of twenty knew, and that we were all to meet to-night at the

Rheingold tavern to report. He pondered for a while on this statement, and I suppose reached the conclusion that if I did not return to Frankfort, this score of men might set out in the morning to search for me, it being well known that the forest is dangerous on account of wild boars. So, as if it were of no consequence, he blindfolded me again, apologizing privately for doing so, saying it was quite unnecessary in the first instance, but as the guard had done so, he did not wish to censure him by implication.

Page 201

“I answered that it did not matter at all, but desired him to order my wrists released, which was done.”

“I must say,” commented Roland, “that the Archbishop of Mayence is well served by his officers. Your examiner was a wise man.”

“Yes,” replied Greusel, “but nevertheless, I am telling my story here in Frankfort.”

“No difference for that, because, as I have said, we can do nothing. Still, it is a blessing your examiner could not guess what you overheard in the other tent. He let you go thinking you had seen and learned nothing, and in doing so warded off a search party to-morrow.”

XXI

A SECRET MARRIAGE

Blessed is he that expects nothing, for he shall not be disappointed. Roland walked with Greusel across the bridge and through the streets to the entrance of the Rheingold, and there stopped.

“I shall not go down with you,” he said. “You have given me much to think of, and I am in no mood for a hilarious meeting. Indeed, I fear I should but damp the enthusiasm of the lads. Continue your good work to-morrow, and report to me at my room.”

With this Roland bade Greusel good-night and turned away. He walked very slowly as far as the bridge, and there, resting his arms on the parapet, looked down at the dark water. He was astonished to realize how little he cared about giving up the Emperorship, and he recalled, with a glow of delight, his recent talk in the garden with Hildegunde, and her assurance that she lacked all ambition to become the first lady in the land so long as they two spent their lives together.

The bells of Frankfort tolling the hour of ten aroused him from his reverie, and brought down his thoughts from delicious dreams of romance to realms of reality. The precious minutes were passing over his head swiftly as the drops of water beneath his feet. There was little use of feeding Frankfort if it must be given over to fire and slaughter.

With a chill of apprehension he reviewed the cold treachery of Mayence, willing to levy the horrors of civil war upon an already stricken city so long as his own selfish purposes were attained.

“And yet,” he said to himself, “there must be good in the man. I wish I knew his history. Perhaps he had to fight for every step he has risen in the world. Perhaps he has been baffled and defeated by deception; overcome by chicanery until his faith died within

him. My faith would die within me were it not that when I meet a Mayence I encounter also the virtue of a Cologne, and the bluff honesty of a Count Palatine. How marvelous is this world, where the trickery of a Kurzbold and a Gensbein is canceled by the faithfulness unto death of a Greusel and an Ebearhard! Thus doth good balance evil, and then—and then, how Heaven beams upon earth in the angel glance of a good woman. God guide me aright! God guide me aright!" he repeated fervently, "and suppress in me all anger and uncharitableness."

Page 202

He walked rapidly across the bridge into Sachsenhausen, past his room at the street corner, and on to the monastery of the Benedictines, whose little chapel stood open night and day for the prayers of those in trouble or in sadness, habited only by one of the elder brothers, who gave, if it were needed, advice, encouragement, or spiritual comfort. Removing his hat, the Prince entered into the silence on tiptoe, and kneeling before the altar, prayed devoutly for direction, asking the Almighty to turn the thoughts of His servant, Mayence, into channels that flowed towards peace and the relief of this unhappy city.

As he rose to his feet a weight lifted from his shoulders, and the buoyancy of youth drove away the depression that temporarily overcame him on hearing of the army threatening Frankfort. His plans were honest, his methods conciliatory, and the path now seemed clear before him. The monk in charge, who had been kneeling in a dark corner near the door, now came forward to intercept him.

“Will your Highness deny me in the chapel as you did upon the bridge?”

Roland stopped. In the gloom he had not recognized the ghostly Father.

“No, Father Ambrose, and I do now what I should have done then. I pray your blessing on the enterprise before me.”

“My son, it is willingly given, the more willingly that I may atone in part my forgetting of the Holy Words: ’Judge not, that ye be not judged.’ I grievously misjudged you, as I learn from both the Archbishop and my kinswoman. I ask your forgiveness.”

“I shall forgive you, Father Ambrose, if you make full, not partial atonement. The consequences of your mistake have proved drastic and far-reaching. The least of these consequences is that it has cost me the Emperorship.”

“Oh,” moaned the good man, “*mea culpa, mea culpa!* No penance put upon me can compensate for that disaster.”

“You blame yourself overmuch, good Father. The penance I have to impose will leave me deeply in your debt. Now, to come from the least to the greatest of these results, so far as I am concerned, my marriage with your kinswoman, whom I love devotedly, is in jeopardy. Through her conviction that I was a thief, she braved the Archbishop of Mayence, who imprisoned her, and now his Lordship has determined that the Grand Duke Karl of Hesse shall be Emperor. Thus we arrive at the most important outcome of your error. Between the overwhelming forces of Mayence and the insufficient troops of Cologne and Treves there may ensue a conflict causing the streets of Frankfort to flow with blood.”

The pious man groaned dismally.

“I have a plan which will prevent this. The day after to-morrow I shall renounce all claim to the throne; but being selfish, like the rest, I refuse to renounce all claim to the woman the Archbishops themselves chose as my wife, neither shall I allow the case to be made further the plaything of circumstance. Your kinswoman, no later ago than this afternoon, confessed her love for me and her complete disregard of any position I may hold in this realm. Now, Father Ambrose, I ask you several questions. Is it in consonance with the rules of the Church that a marriage be solemnized in this chapel?”

Page 203

“Yes.”

“Are you entitled to perform the ceremony?”

“Yes.”

“Is it possible this ceremony can be performed to-morrow?”

“Yes.”

“Will you therefore attend to the necessary preliminaries, of which I am vastly ignorant, and say at what hour the Countess and I may present ourselves in this chapel?”

“The Archbishop of Cologne is guardian to her ladyship. Will you bring me his sanction?”

“Ah, Father Ambrose, there is just the point. So far as concerns himself I doubt not that the Archbishop is the most unambitious of men, but to the marriage of his ward with a sword maker I fear he would refuse consent which he would gladly give to a marriage with an Emperor.”

The monk hung his head, and pondered on the proposition. At last he said:

“Why not ask my Lord the Archbishop?”

“I dare not venture. Too much is at stake. She might be carried away to any castle in Germany. Remember that Cologne has already acquiesced in her imprisonment, and but that the iron chain of the Pfalzgraf brought me to her prison door—The iron chain, do I say? ’Twas the hand of God that directed me to her, and now, with the help of Him who guided me, not all the Archbishops in Christendom shall prevent our marriage. No, Father Ambrose, pile on yourself all the futile penances you can adopt. They are useless, for they do not remedy the wrong you have committed. And now, good-night to your Reverence!”

The young man strode towards the door.

“My son,” said the quiet voice of the priest, “when you were on your knees just now did you pray for remission from anger?”

Roland whirled round.

"Mea culpa, as you said just now. Father Ambrose, I ask your pardon. I made an unfair use of your mistake to coerce you. You were quite right in relating what your own eyes saw here in Frankfort, and although the inference drawn was wrong, you were not to

blame for that. I recognize your scruples, but nevertheless protest that already I possess the sanction of the Archbishop, which has never been withdrawn."

"Prince Roland, if you bring hither the Countess von Sayn to-morrow afternoon, when the bells strike three, I will marry you, and gladly accept whatever penances ensue. I fear the monk's robe has not crushed out all the impulses of the Sayn blood. In my case, perhaps, it has only covered them. And now, good-night, and God's blessing fall upon you and her you are to marry."

Roland went directly from the chapel to his own room, where he slept the sleep of one who has made up his mind. Nevertheless, it was not a dreamless sleep, for throughout the night he seemed to hear the tramp of armed men marching upon unconscious Frankfort, and this sound was so persistent, that at last he woke, yet still it continued. Springing up in alarm, and flinging wide the wooden shutters of his window, he was amazed to see that the sun was already high, while the sound that disturbed him was caused by a procession of heavy-footed horses, dragging over the cobble-stones carts well-laden with farm produce.

Page 204

Having dressed and finished breakfast, he wrote a letter to the Archbishop of Mayence:

“My LORD ARCHBISHOP,—There are some important proposals which I wish to make to the Electors, and as it is an unwritten rule that I should not communicate with them separately, I beg of you to convene a meeting to-morrow, in the Wahlzimmer, at the hour of midday. Perhaps it is permissible to add, for your own information, that while my major proposition has to do with the relief of Frankfort, the minor suggestions I shall make will have the effect of clearing away obstacles that at present obstruct your path, and I venture to think that what I say will meet with your warmest approval.”

It was so necessary that this communication should reach the Archbishop as soon as possible that Roland became his own messenger, and himself delivered the document at the Archbishop’s Palace. As he turned away he was startled by a hand being placed on his shoulder with a weight suggesting an action of arrest rather than a greeting of friendship. He turned quickly, and saw the Lieutenant who had so discourteously used him in the square. There was, however, no menace in the officer’s countenance.

“Still thrusting your sword at people?”

“Yes, Lieutenant, and very harmlessly. ’Tis a bloodless combat I wage with the sword. I praise its construction, and leave to superiors like yourself, sir, the proving of its quality.”

“You are an energetic young man, and we of Mayence admire competence whether shown by mechanic or noble. Was the letter you handed in just now addressed to his Lordship?”

“Yes, Lieutenant.”

“’Twill be quite without effect.”

“It grieves me to hear you say so, sir.”

“Take my advice, and make no effort to see the Archbishop until after the Election. I judge you to be a sane young fellow, for whom I confess a liking. You are the only man in Frankfort who has unhesitatingly told me the exact truth, and I have not yet recovered from my amazement. Now, when you return to your frugal room in Sachsenhausen you do not attempt to reach it by mounting the stairs with one step?”

“Naturally not, Lieutenant.”

“Very well. When the Emperor is proclaimed, come you to me. I’ll introduce you to my superior, and he, if impressed with your weapon, will take you a step higher, and thus you will mount until you come to an officer who may give you an astonishing order.”

“I thank you, Lieutenant, and hope later to avail myself of your kindness.”

The Lieutenant slapped him on the shoulder, and wished him good-luck. As Roland pushed his way through the crowd, he said to himself, with a sigh:

“I regret not being Emperor, if only for the sake of young fellows like that.”

Page 205

Frankfort was transformed as if a magician had waved his wand over it. The streets swarmed with people. Farmers' vehicles of every description added to the confusion, and Roland frowned as he noticed how badly organized had been the preparations for coping with this sudden influx of food, but he also saw that the men of Mayence had taken a hand in the matter, and were rapidly bringing method out of chaos. The uniforms of Cologne or Treves were seldom seen, while the quiet but firm soldiers of Mayence were everywhere ordering to their homes those already served, and clearing the way for the empty-handed.

At last Roland reached the Palace of Cologne, through a square thronged with people. Within he found his mother and the Countess, seated in a room whose windows overlooked the square, watching the stirring scene presented to them. Having saluted his mother, he greeted the girl with a quiet pressure of the hand.

"What is the cause of all this commotion?" asked the Empress.

Roland tapped his breast.

"I am the cause, mother," and he related the history of the relief committee, and if appreciation carries with it gratification, his was the advantage of knowing that the two women agreed he was the most wonderful of men.

"But indeed, mother," continued Roland, "I selfishly rob you of the credit. The beginning of all this was really your gift to me of five hundred thalers, that time I came to crave your assistance in procuring me this document I still carry, and without your thalers and the parchment, this never could have happened. So you see they have increased like the loaves and fishes of Holy Writ, and thus feed the multitude."

Her Majesty arose, smiling.

"Ah, Roland," she said, kissing him, "you always gave your mother more credit than she deserved. It wrung my heart at the time that I was so scant of money." Then, pleading fatigue, the Empress left the room.

"Hilda!" cried the young man, "when you and I discuss things, those things become true. Yesterday we agreed that the Imperial throne was not so enviable a seat as a chair by the domestic hearth. To-day I propose to secure the chair at the hearth, and to-morrow I shall freely give up the Imperial throne."

The girl uttered an exclamation that seemed partly concurrence and partly dismay, but she spoke no word, gazing at him intently as he strode up and down the room, and listening with eagerness. Walking backwards and forwards, looking like an enthusiastic boy, he very graphically detailed the situation as he had learned it from Greusel.

“Now you see, my dear, any opposition to the Archbishop of Mayence means a conflict, and supposing in that conflict our friends were to win, the victory would be scarcely less disastrous than defeat. I at once made up my mind, fortified by my knowledge of your opinion on the subject, that for all the kingships in the world I could not be the cause of civil dissension.”

Page 206

“That is a just and noble decision,” she said, speaking for the first time.

Then, standing before her, the young man in more moderate tone related what had happened and what had been said in the chapel of the Benedictine Fathers. She looked up at him, earnest face aglow, during the first part of his recital, and now and then the sunshine of a smile flickered at the corners of her mouth as she recognized her kinsman in her lover’s repetition of his words, but when it came to the question of a marriage, her eyes sank to the floor, and remained there.

“Well, Hilda,” he said at last, “have you the courage to go with me, all unadvised, all unchaperoned, to the chapel this afternoon at three o’clock?”

She rose slowly, still without looking at him, placed her hands on his shoulders, then slipped them round his neck, laying her cheek beside his.

“It requires no courage, Roland,” she whispered, “to go anywhere if you are with me. I need to call up my courage only when I think with a shudder of our being separated.”

Some minutes elapsed before conversation was resumed.

“Where is the Archbishop?” asked Roland, in belated manner remembering his host.

“He and the Count Palatine went out together about an hour since. I think they were somewhat disturbed at the unusual commotion, and desired to know what it meant. Do you want to consult my guardian after all?”

“Not unless you desire me to do so?”

“I wish only what you wish, Roland.”

“I am glad his Lordship is absent. Let us to the garden, Hilda, and discover a quiet exit if we can.”

A stout door was found in the wall to the rear, almost concealed with shrubbery. The bolts were strong, and rusted in, but the prowess of Roland overcame them, and he drew the door partially open. It looked out upon a narrow alley with another high wall opposite. Roland looked up and down the lane, and saw it was completely deserted.

“This will do excellently,” he said, shoving the door shut again, but without thrusting the bolts into position. He took her two hands in his.

“Dearest, noblest, sweetest of girls! I must now leave you. Await me here at half-past one. I go out by this door, for it is necessary I should know exactly where the alley joins a main street. It would be rather embarrassing if you were standing here, and Father

Ambrose looking for us in the chapel, while I was frantically searching for and not finding the lane."

Some time in advance of the hour set, the impatient young man kept the appointment he had made, and when the Countess appeared exactly on the minute, he held open the door for her, then, drawing it shut behind him, they were both out in the city of Frankfort together. Roland's high spirits were such that he could scarcely refrain from dancing along at her side.

"I'd like to take your hand," he said, "and swing it, and show you the sights of the city, as if we were two young people in from the country."

Page 207

“I am a country girl, please to remember,” said the Countess. “I know nothing of Frankfort, or, indeed, of any other large town.”

“I am glad of that, for there is much to see in Frankfort. We will make for the Cathedral, that beautiful red building, splendid and grand, where we should have been married with great and useless ceremony if I had been crowned Emperor. But I am sure the simple chapel in the working town of Sachsenhausen better suits a sword maker and his bride.”

Now they came out into the busy street, which seemed more thronged than ever. In making their way to the Cathedral, the mob became so dense that progression was difficult. The current seemed setting in one direction, and it carried them along with it. Hildegunde took the young man’s arm, and clung close to him.

“They are driving us, whether we will or no, towards our old enemy, the Archbishop of Mayence. That is his Palace facing the square. There is some sort of demonstration going on,” cried Roland, as cheer after cheer ascended to the heavens. “How grim and silent the Palace appears, all shuttered as if it were a house of the dead! Somehow it reminds me of Mayence himself. I had pictured him occupying a house of gloom like that.”

“Do you think we are in any danger?” asked the girl. “The people seem very boisterous.”

“Oh, no danger at all. This mob is in the greatest good-humor. Listen to their heart-stirring cheers! The people have been fed; that is the reason of it.”

“Is that why they cheer? It sounds to me like an ovation to the Archbishop! Listen to them: ’Long live Mayence! God bless the Archbishop!’ There is no terror in those shouts.”

Nevertheless his Lordship of Mayence had taken every precaution. The shutters of his Palace were tightly closed, and along the whole front of the edifice a double line of soldiers was ranged under the silent command of their officers. They stood still and stiffly as stone-graven statues in front of a Cathedral. The cheers rang unceasingly. Then, suddenly, as if the sinister Palace opened one eye, shutters were turned away from a great window giving upon the portico above the door. The window itself was then thrown wide. Cheering ceased, and in the new silence, from out the darkness there stepped with great dignity an old man, gorgeous in his long robes of office, and surmounting that splendid intellectual head rested the mitered hat of an Archbishop. After the momentary silence the cheers seemed to storm the very door of the sky itself, but the old man moved no muscle, and no color tinged his wan face.

“By the Kings,” whispered Roland, during a temporary lull, “what a man! There stands power embodied, and yet I venture ’tis his first taste of popularity. I am glad we have

seen this sight, both mob and master. How quick are the people to understand who is the real ruler of Germany! I wish he were my friend!”

Page 208

Slowly the Archbishop raised his open hands, holding them for a moment in benediction over the vast assemblage. Once more the cheers died away, and every head was bowed, then the Archbishop was in his place no longer. Unseen hands closed the windows, and a moment later the shutters blinded it. The multitude began to dissolve, and the two wanderers found their way become clearer and clearer.

Together they entered the empty, red Cathedral, and together knelt down in a secluded corner. After some minutes passed thus Roland remembered that the hour of two had struck while they were gazing at the Archbishop. Gently he touched the hand of his companion. They rose, and walked slowly through the great church.

“There,” he whispered, “is where the Emperor is crowned. The Archbishop of Mayence always performs that ceremony, so, after all, there is some justification for his self-assumed leadership.”

Again out into the sunshine they walked to the Fahrgasse, and then to the bridge, where the Countess paused with an expression of delight at the beauty of the waterside city, glorified by the westering sun. Crossing the river, and going down the Bruckenstrasse of Sachsenhausen, Roland said:

“Referring to people who are not Emperors, that is my room at the corner, where I lived when supposed to be in prison.”

“Is that where you made your swords?” she asked.

“No; Greusel’s workshop and mine is farther along that side street. It is a grimy shop of no importance, but here, on the other side, we have an edifice that counts. That low building is the Benedictine monastery, and this is its little chapel.”

The Countess made no comment, but stood looking at it for a few moments until her thoughts were interrupted by the solemn tones of a bell striking three. Roland went up the steps, and held open the door while she passed in, then, removing his hat, he followed her.

XXII

LONG LIVE THEIR MAJESTIES

The most anxious man in all Frankfort was not to be found among the mighty who ruled the Empire, or among the merchants who trafficked therein, or among the people who starved when there was no traffic. The most anxious man was a small, fussy individual of great importance in his own estimation, cringing to those above him, denouncing those beneath; Herr Durnberg, Master of the Romer, in other words, the Keeper of the Town Hall. The great masters whom this little master served were imperious and

unreasonable. They gave him too little information regarding their intentions, yet if he failed in his strict duty towards them, they would crush him as ruthlessly as if he were a wasp.

Page 209

Unhappy Durnberg! Every morning he expected the Electoral Court to be convened that day, and every evening he was disappointed. It was his first duty to lay out upon the table in that great room, the Kaisersaal, a banquet, to be partaken of by the newly-made Emperor, and by the seven potentates who elected him. It was also his duty to provide two huge tanks of wine, one containing the ruby liquor pressed out at Assmannshausen; the other the straw-colored beverage that had made Hochheim famous. These tanks were connected by pipes with the plain, unassuming fountain standing opposite the Town Hall in that square called the Romerberg. The moment an election took place Herr Durnberg turned off the flow of water from the fountain, and turned on the flow of wine, thus for an hour and a half there poured from the northward pointing spout of the fountain the rich red wine of Assmannshausen, and from the southern spout the delicate white wine of Hochheim. Now, wine will keep for a long time, but a dinner will not, so the distracted Durnberg prepared banquet after banquet for which there were no consumers.

At last, thought Herr Durnberg, his vigilance was about to be rewarded. There came up the broad, winding stair, to the landing on which opened the great doors of the Kaisersaal, two joyous-looking young people, evidently lovers, and with the hilt of his sword the youth knocked against the stout panels of the door. It was Herr Durnberg himself who opened, and he said haughtily—

“The Romer is closed, and will not be free to strangers until after the Election.”

“We enter, nevertheless. I am Prince Roland, here to meet the Court of Electors, who convene at midday in the adjoining Wahlzimmer. You, Romer-meister, will announce to their august Lordships that I am here, and, when their will is expressed, summon me to audience with them.”

Herr Durnberg bowed almost to the polished floor, and flinging open both doors, retreated backwards, still bent double as he implored them to enter. Locking the doors, for the Electors would reach the Wahlzimmer through a private way, to be used by none but themselves, the bustling Durnberg produced two chairs, which he set by the windows in the front, and again running the risk of falling on his nose, bowed his distinguished visitors to seats where they might entertain themselves by watching the enormous crowd that filled the Romerberg from end to end, for every man in Frankfort knew an Election was impending, and it was after the banquet, when the wine began to flow in the fountain, that the new Emperor exhibited himself to his people by stepping from the Kaisersaal out upon the balcony in front of it.

“Do you feel any shyness about meeting this formidable conclave? Remember you have at least two good friends among them.”

The girl placed her hand in his, and looked affectionately upon him.

“When you are with me, Roland, I am afraid of nothing.”

Page 210

“I should not ask you to pass through this ordeal were it not for your guardian. His astonishment at the announcement of our marriage will be so honest and unacted that even the suspicious Mayence cannot accuse him of connivance in what we have done. Of course, the strength of my position is that I have but carried out the formal request of their three Lordships; a request which has never been rescinded.”

Before she could reply the hour of twelve rang forth. The deferential Herr Durnberg entered from the Wahlzimmer, and softly approached them.

“Your Highness,” he said, “my Lords, the Electors, request your presence in the Wahlzimmer.”

“How many are there, Romer-meister?”

“There are four, your Highness; the three Archbishops and the Count Palatine.”

“Ah,” breathed Roland, relieved that Mayence had not called up his reserve, and assured now that the seventh Elector had not arrived. With a glance of encouragement at his wife, Roland passed into the presence.

Herr Durnberg, anxious about the outcome, showed an inclination to close the door and remain inside, but a very definite gesture from Mayence wafted the good man to outer regions.

Mayence opened the proceedings.

“Yesterday I received a communication from your Highness, requesting me to convene this Court. I am as ignorant as my colleagues regarding the subjects to be placed before us. I therefore announce to you that we are prepared to listen.”

“I thank you, my Lord of Mayence,” began the Prince very quietly. “When first I had the honor of meeting your three Lordships in the Castle of Ehrenfels, I signed certain documents, and came to an agreement with you upon other verbal requests. I am not yet a man of large experience, but at that time, although comparatively few days have elapsed, I was a mere boy, trusting in the good faith of the whole world, knowing nothing of its chicanery. Since then I have been through a bitter school, learning bitter lessons, but I am nevertheless encouraged, in that for every man of treachery and deceit I meet two who are trustworthy.”

“Pardon me,” said Mayence suavely, “I did not understand that the discourse you proposed was to be a sermon. If your theme is a lecture on morality, I beg to remind you that this Wahlzimmer is a place of business, and what you say is better suited to a chapel or even a church, than to the Election Chamber of the Empire.”

“I am sorry, my Lord,” said Roland humbly, “if my introduction does not meet your approval. I assure you that the very opposite was my intention. My purpose is to show you why a change has come over me, and in order—”

“Once more I regret interrupting, but the reason for whatever change has occurred can be of little interest to any one but yourself. You begin by making vague charges of dishonesty, treachery, and what-not, against some person or persons unknown. May I ask you to be definite?”

Page 211

“Is it your Lordship’s wish that I should mention names?”

Cologne showed signs of uneasiness; Treves looked in bewilderment from one to another of his colleagues; the Count Palatine sat deeply interested, his elbows on the table, massive chin supported by huge hands.

“Your Highness is the best judge whether names should be mentioned or not,” said Mayence, quite calmly, as if his withers were unwrung. “But you must see that if you hint at conspiracy and bafflement, certain inferences are likely to be drawn. Since the time you speak of there has been no opportunity for you to meet your fellow-men, therefore these inferences are apt to take the color that reference is made to one or the other of the three personages you did meet. I therefore counsel you either to abstain from innuendo or explain explicitly what you mean.”

“I the more willingly bow to your Lordship’s decision because it is characterized by that wisdom which accompanies every word your Lordship utters. I shall therefore designate good men and bad.”

Mayence gazed at the young man in amazement, but merely said:

“Proceed, sir, on your perilous road.”

“I am the head of a gang of freebooters. When this company left Frankfort under my command we appeared to be all of one mind. My gang consisted entirely of ironworkers, well-set-up young fellows in splendid physical condition, yet before I was gone a day on our journey I found myself confronted by mutiny. A man named Kurzbold was the leader of this rebellion; a treacherous hound, whom I sentenced to death. The two who stood by me were Greusel and Ebearhard, therefore I told you that when I met one villain I encountered two trustworthy men.”

“When did this happen?” asked Mayence. “And what was the object of your freebooting expedition?”

“High Heaven!” cried the Archbishop of Cologne, unable longer to restrain his impatience when he saw the fatal trend of the Prince’s confession, “what madness has overcome you? Can you not see the effect of these disturbing disclosures?”

The Prince smiled, and answered first the last question.

“’Tis an honest confession, my Lord, of what may be considered a dishonest practice. It is information that should be within your knowledge before you sit down to elect an Emperor.

“When did this happen, my Lord of Mayence?” he continued, turning to the chairman. “It happened when you thought I was your prisoner in Ehrenfels. Never for a day did

you hold me there. I roamed the country at my pleasure. I examined leisurely and effectively the defenses of nearly every castle on the Rhine from the town of Bonn to your own city of Mayence. The object of our expedition, you ask? It was to loot the stolen treasure of the robber castles, and incidentally it resulted in the destruction by fire of Furstenberg. The marauding excursion ended at Pfalz, where I lightened the Pfalzgraf of his wealth, and liberated the Countess von Sayn, unlawfully imprisoned within that fortress."

Page 212

“By the Three Kings!” cried the Count Palatine, bringing his huge fist down on the table like the blow of a sledge hammer, “you are a man, and I glory that it is my privilege to vote for you.”

“I agree with my brother of Cologne,” said Treves, speaking for the first time, “that this young man does not properly weigh the inevitable result of his terrible words. I vote, of course, with my Lord of Mayence, but such a vote will be most reluctantly given for a self-confessed burglar and incendiary.”

“Be not too hasty, gentlemen,” counseled Mayence. “We are not met here to cast votes. Your Highness, I complained a moment ago of lack of interest in your recital; I beg to withdraw that plea. After having heard you I agree that the Countess was unjustly imprisoned. She was accurate in her estimate of your character.”

“I think not, my Lord, I do not regard myself as burglar, incendiary, thief, or robber. I call myself rather a restorer of stolen property. I shed no blood, which in itself is a remarkable feature of action so drastic as mine. The incendiarism was merely incidental, forced upon me by the fact that the Red Margrave tied up eighteen of my men, whom he proposed presently to hang. I diverted his attention from this execution by the first method that occurred to me, namely, the firing of his Castle. In my letter to you yesterday, my Lord, I promised to clear away certain obstacles from your path. I therefore remove one, by saying that an object of this conference is my own renunciation of the Emperorship, thus while I thank my Lord Count for his proffered franchise, I quiet the mind of my Lord of Treves by assuring him his defection has no terror for me. And now, my Lord of Mayence, will you listen carefully to my suggestion?”

“Prince Roland,” replied his Lordship, almost with geniality, “I have never heard so graphic a narrator in my life. Proceed, I beg of you.”

“When our band of cut-purses set out from Frankfort, they supposed the gold was to be shared equally among us. Mutiny taught me to use the arts of diplomacy, which I despise. I hoped to attain such influence over them that they would agree to abjure wealth for the benefit of Frankfort. I am happy to say that I accomplished my object, so that yesterday and to-day you have witnessed the results of my efforts; the relief of a starving city. I merely removed the wealth of robbers to benefit those whom they robbed. Knowing the dangerous feeling actuating this town against your Lordships, I caused proclamation to be made crediting this relief to the Archbishops.

“My Lord of Mayence, when yesterday I saw you appear on your own balcony, the most stern, the most dignified figure I ever beheld; when I heard the ringing cheers that greeted you; when I realized, as never before, the majesty of your genius, I cursed the stupid decree of Fate that denied me your friendship. What could we not have accomplished together for the Fatherland? I, with my youth and energy, under the tutelage of your wisdom and experience. You tasted there, probably for the first time in

your life, the intoxicating cup of popularity, yet it affected you no more than if you had drunk of the fountain in the Romerberg.

Page 213

“Now, my Lords, here is what I ask of you, and it will show how much I would have depended upon you had I been chosen to the position at first proposed to me. I request you, my Lord of Treves, to remove your three thousand troops to the other side of the Rhine.”

“I shall do nothing of the sort,” blurted Treves, amazed at the absurd proposal.

Roland went on, unheeding:

“I ask you, my Lord of Cologne, to march your troops to Assmannshausen.”

“You indeed babble like the boy you said you were!” cried the indignant Cologne. “You show no grasp of statesmanship.”

A faint smile quivered on the thin lips of Mayence at his colleagues’ ill-disguised fear at leaving him the man in possession so far as Frankfort was concerned. The naive proposal which angered his two brethren merely amused Mayence. This young man’s absurdity was an intellectual treat. Roland smiled in sympathy as he turned towards him, but his next words banished all expression of pleasure from the face of Mayence.

“I hope to succeed better with you, my Lord. Of course I recognize I have no standing with this Court since my refusal of the gift you intended to bestow. I ask you to draft into this city seven thousand men;” then after a pause: “*the seven thousand will not have far to march, my Lord.*”

He caught an expression almost of fear in the Archbishop’s eyes, which were quickly veiled, but his Lordship’s tone was as unwavering as ever when he asked:

“What do you mean by that?”

“I mean that the city of Mayence is nearer to Frankfort than either Cologne or Treves.”

“Your geographical point is undeniable. What am I to do with my ten thousand once they are here?”

“My Lord, I admire the rigid discipline of your men, and estimate from that the genius of organization possessed by your officers; a genius imparted, I believe, by you. No one knows better than I the state of confusion which this effort at relief has brought upon the city. I suggest that your capable officers divide this city into cantons, proclaim martial law, and deliver to every inhabitant rations of food as if each man, woman, and child were a member of your army. Meanwhile the merchants should be relieved of a task for which they have proved their incapacity, and turn their attention to commerce. This relief at best must be temporary. The vital task is to open the Rhine. The merchants will load every barge on the river with goods, and this flotilla the armies of Treves and Cologne will escort in safety to the latter city. In passing they will deliver an ultimatum to

every castle, demanding a contribution in gold towards the further relief of Frankfort, until commerce readjusts itself, and assuring each nobleman that if this commerce is molested, his castle shall be forfeited, and himself imprisoned or hanged."

"Quite an effective plan, I think, your Highness, to which I willingly agree, if you can assure me of the support of my two colleagues, which I regret to say has already been refused."

Page 214

His Lordship looked from one to another, but neither withdrew his declaration.

“Prince Roland,” continued Mayence, “we seem to have reached a deadlock, and I fear its cause is that distrust of one human being toward another that you deplored a while ago. I confess myself, however, so pleased with the trend of your mind as exhibited in your conversation with us, that I am desirous to know what further proposals you care to make, now that our mutual good intentions have led us into an impasse.”

“Willingly, my Lord. I propose that you at once proceed to the Election of an Emperor, for the delay in his choosing has already caused an anxiety and a tension dangerous to the peace of this country.”

“Ah, that is easier said than done, your Highness. Having yourself eliminated the one on whom we were agreed, it seems to me you should at least suggest a substitute.”

“Again willingly, my Lord. You should choose some quiet, conservative man, and, if possible, one well known to the citizens of Frankfort, and held in good esteem by the people everywhere. He should be a man of middle age—” Mayence’s eyes began to close again, and his lips to tighten—“and if he had some experience in government, that would be all to the good. One already married is preferable to a bachelor, for then no delicate considerations regarding a woman can arise, as, I need not remind your Lordship, have arisen in my own case. A man of common sense should be selected, who would not make rash experiments with the ideals of the German people, as a younger and less balanced person might be tempted to do. That he should be a good Churchman goes without saying—”

“A truce, a truce!” cried Mayence sternly. “Again we are running into a moral catalogue impossible of embodiment. Is there any such man in your mind, or are you merely treating us to a counsel of perfection?”

“Notwithstanding my pessimism,” said Roland, “I still think so well of my countrymen as to believe there are many such. Not to make any recommendation to those so much better qualified to judge than I, but merely to give a sample, I mention the Grand Duke Karl of Hesse, who fulfills every requirement I have named.”

For what seemed to the onlookers a tense period of suspense, the old man seated and the young man standing gazed intently at one another. Mayence knew at once that in some manner unknown to him the Prince had fathomed his intentions; that his Highness alone knew why the Election had been delayed, yet the Prince conveyed this knowledge directly to the person most concerned, in the very presence of those whom Mayence desired to keep ignorant, without giving them the slightest hint anent the actual state of affairs.

The favorable opinion which the Archbishop had originally formed of Roland in Ehrenfels during this conference became greatly augmented. Even the most austere of men is more or less susceptible to flattery, and yet in flattering him Roland had managed to convey his own sincerity in this laudation.

Page 215

“We will suppose the Grand Duke Karl elected,” Mayence said at last. “What then?”

“Why then, my Lord, the three differing bodies of troops at present occupying Frankfort would be withdrawn, and the danger line crossed over to the right side.”

Mayence now asked a question that in his own mind was crucial. Once more he would tempt the young man to state plainly what he actually knew.

“Can your Highness give us any reason why you fear danger from the presence of troops commanded by three friendly men like my colleagues and myself?”

“My fear is that the hands of one or the other of you may be forced, and I can perhaps explain my apprehension better by citing an incident to which I have already alluded. I had not the slightest intention of burning Castle Furstenberg, but suddenly my hand was forced. I was responsible for the safety of my men. I hesitated not for one instant to fire the Castle. Of the peaceful intentions of my Lords the Archbishops there can be no question, but at any moment a street brawl between the soldiers, say, of Cologne and Treves, may bring on a crisis that can only be quelled by bloodshed. Do you see my point?”

“Yes, your Highness, I do, and your point is well taken. I repose such confidence in our future Emperor that voluntarily I shall withdraw my troops from Frankfort at once. Furthermore, I shall open the Rhine, by sending along its banks the ultimatum you propose, not supported by my army, but supported by the name of the Archbishop of Mayence, and I shall be interested to know what Baron on the Rhine dare flout that title. Will you accept my aid, Prince Roland?”

“I accept it, my Lord, with deep gratitude, knowing that it will prove effective.”

His Lordship rose in his place.

“I said this was not an Electoral Court. I rise to announce my mistake. We Electors here gathered together form a majority. I propose to you the name of Prince Roland, son of our late Emperor.”

“My Lord, my Lord!” cried Roland, raising his hand, “you do not know all.”

“Patient Heaven!” cried the irritated Archbishop, “you make too much of us as father confessors. Do not tell us now you have been guilty of assassination!”

“No, my Lord, but you should know that I have married the Lady Hildegunde, Countess von Sayn, whom you have already rejected as Empress.”

“Well, if you have accepted the dame, the balance is redressed. I am not sure but you made an excellent choice.”

It was now the turn of the amazed Archbishop of Cologne to rise to his feet.

“What his Highness says is impossible. The Lady von Sayn has been in my care ever since she entered Frankfort, and I pledge my word she has never left my Palace!”

“We were married yesterday at three o’clock, in the chapel of the Benedictine Fathers, and in the presence of four of them. We left your Palace, my Lord, by a door which you may discover in the wall of your garden, near the summer-house, and my wife is present in the adjoining room to implore your forgiveness.”

Page 216

Cologne collapsed into his chair, and drew a hand across his bewildered brow. The situation appeared to amuse Mayence.

“I wish your Highness had withheld this information until I was sure that my brother of Treves will vote with me, as he promised. My Lord of Treves, you heard my proposition. May I count on your concurrence?”

Treves’ house of cards fell so suddenly to the ground that under the compelling eyes of Mayence he could do no more than stammer his acquiescence.

“I vote for the Prince,” he said in tones barely audible.

“And you, my Lord of Cologne?”

“Aye,” said Cologne gruffly.

“The Count Palatine?”

“Yes,” thundered the latter. “A choice that meets my full approval, and I speak now for the Empress as well as the Emperor.”

“Durnberg!” cried Mayence, raising his voice.

The doors were instantly opened, and the cringing Romer-meister appeared.

“Is the banquet prepared?”

“Ready to lay on the table, my Lord.”

“The wine for the fountains?”

“Needs but the turning of the tap, my Lord.”

“Order up the banquet, turn the tap; and as the new Emperor is unknown to the people, cause heralds with trumpets to set out and proclaim the Election of Prince Roland of Frankfort.”

“Yes, my Lord.”

The Archbishop of Mayence led the way out into the grand Kaisersaal, and the new Empress rose from her chair, standing there, her face white as the costume she wore. Mayence advanced to her, bending his gray head over the hand he took in his own.

“Your Majesty,” he said gravely, and this was her first hint of the outcome, “I congratulate you upon your marriage, as I have already congratulated your husband.”

“My Lord Archbishop,” she said in uncertain voice, “you cannot blame me for obeying you.”

“I think my poor commands would have been futile were it not for the assistance lent me by his Majesty.”

The salutations of the others were drowned by the cheers of the great assemblage in the Romerberg. The red wine and white had begun to flow, and the people knew what had happened. In the intervals between the clangor of the trumpets, they heard that a Prince of their own town had been elected, so all eyes turned to the Romer, and cries of “The Emperor! The Emperor!” issued from every throat. The multitude felt that a new day was dawning.

“I believe,” said Mayence, “that hitherto only the Emperor has appeared on the balcony, but to-day I suggest a precedent. Let Emperor and Empress appear before the people.”

He motioned to Herr Durnberg, and the latter flung open the tall windows; then Roland taking his wife’s hand, stepped out upon the balcony.

THE END