ROBERT BARR

TEKLA

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Содержание

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CHAPTER I
THE EMPEROR ENTERS TREVES

The Romans had long since departed, but their handiwork remained – a thin line laid like a whiplash across the broad country – a road. It extended northwestward from Frankfort and passed, as straight as might be, through the almost trackless forest that lay to the south of Moselle; for the great highway-builders had little patience with time-consuming curves; thus the road ranged over hill and down dale without shirking whatever came before it. Nearing the western terminus, it passed along high lands, through a level unbroken forest. A wayfarer, after travelling many monotonous leagues, came suddenly to an opening in the timber, and found himself on the brow of a hill, confronted with a scene amazing in extent, well calculated to arrest his progress and cause him to regard with admiration, the wide spread landscape beneath and beyond. The scene was the more startling that it burst unexpectedly on the view, after

miles of trees that seemed innumerable, hemming in, with their unvarying cloak of green, the outlook of the traveller.

At the brow of the hill there had paused two men, excellently mounted, who now, with slackened rein, allowed their evidently exhausted horses to stand, while they gazed upon this prospect. The younger man was slightly in advance of his comrade, and sat easily on his horse, with hand on hip; while the other, an arm extended, was pointing to the city lying far below. The age of the former might have been anything between twenty-five and thirty-five: he was, in truth, twenty-eight years old at the time he first came within sight of this western city. He wore the dress of a young gallant of that period, with a light rapier by his side, but was otherwise unarmed. His costume indicated no special distinction, and would not have prepared a listener for the manner in which his fellow-traveller addressed him.

"That, your Majesty," he said, "is the ancient town of Treves."

The young Emperor turned his eyes from the city to his companion.

"It may be well to remember, Siegfried," he said, speaking slowly, "that his Majesty is now far from here on his way to the Holy Land, and that he who has, for the first time, looked upon Treves, is plain Rodolph the traveller, abroad to see something of the land the Emperor is supposed to rule, and which his loyal subjects, the Archbishops of Treves and Cologne, intend to rule for him."

Siegfried bowed low and said, "I will remember," checking

himself barely in time from repeating again the title of his listener.

"A trifle less deference, I beg of you, Siegfried. An erect head and a tongue not too civil may make my way easier in the fair city of Treves. Where flows the Moselle?"

"Between that cliff and the city. You may see it yonder to the right, below the town, and again along the plain in the distance above it."

"Is that the Archbishop's palace in the wall?"

"No, it is the Black Gate of the Romans. The palace of the Archbishop lies to the south by the Roman Basilica yonder. The cathedral whose spire you see, stands midway between the Porta Nigra and the palace."

"Think you we may be questioned narrowly when we enter?"

"Oh, no. Many come because of the Archbishop's Court, which is said to outshine the Emperor's at Frankfort."

"Ah, that is better, Siegfried. Now is the Emperor indeed well on his way to meet the infidel Saracen when we talk freely of him in his absence. Shall we then pass unchallenged through the gate?"

"Without doubt. There is also much traffic of trade between Frankfort and Treves, and interchange of visitors."

"We met but few on the road, Siegfried."

"True. The traffic is mainly by the river. Merchants frequent the boats going down, but many traverse the road from Frankfort. Had we been journeying eastward we should have met more

travellers."

"That sounds like a riddle, Siegfried. There must be a glut of Frankfort horses in Treves, if all their riders return by boat."

"The horses go by boat as well to Coblentz, then are ridden along the Rhine to Frankfort."

"Ah, that is the solution, is it? Well, let us get on to Treves, and try our fortune at cozening the guards if we are questioned."

Downward rode the two, toward the ancient city, the horses refreshed by the halt at the top of the hill. The great cliff by the side of the unseen Moselle seemed to rise higher and higher into the sky as they descended, until it stood like a huge rampart over the walled town. Reaching level ground again, the riders took a westerly direction, bending their course so that they might enter the city by the northern gate. As they approached, it became evident that a throng was gathered on each side of the port, the way in the centre being kept clear by mounted soldiery.

"You are versed in the manners of Treves," said the Emperor, "knowing all of note within its walls – what think you then is going forward at the gate? Is it well for us to attempt entrance now, or are we more likely to pass unnoticed in the press?"

"It is probable that the Archbishop and his train are about to pass outward to his villa or water palace, as some call it. He travels in state, and there are always many onlookers."

"Where is his water palace?"

"On the Moselle, near Zurlauben, a short half-hour's ride from the gate."

"This then gives us excellent opportunity of seeing Arnold von Isenberg, Archbishop of Treves, ourselves unseen in the throng. Shall we wait his coming outside or inside the gate?"

"We were better outside, I think, for then we may enter unquestioned with the press of people when the show is over."

Thus the two horsemen ranged themselves by the side of the road with others also on horseback, merchants, travellers, messengers and the like, while the crowd on foot shifted here and there to find standing room that commanded a view. Mounted men-at-arms rode hither and thither, roughly keeping the way clear and the mob in check, buffeting with their pike-handles those who were either reluctant or slow to move. The clattering of horses' shod hoofs on the stone-paved narrow street within the gate announced the coming of the cortège.

"Off with your hat, fellow," cried one of the men-at-arms, raising his pike. "His Lordship, the Archbishop, comes."

Rodolph's quick hand sought his sword-hilt, but a touch on his arm from his comrade recalled him to a sense of his position. He changed the downward motion of his hand to an upward one, and speedily doffed his cap, seeing now that every one else was uncovered, for the haughty Archbishop allowed no disrespect abroad when he took an airing.

First came a troop of landsknecht, numbering perhaps a score, then, with an interval between, the Archbishop and his train, followed at a slight distance by another score of horsemen.

Arnold von Isenberg sat upright on his black charger, looking

much more the soldier than the churchman. On the further side of him rode a middle-aged nobleman, with whom the Archbishop now and then exchanged a word. Count Bertrich never could have been handsome, and the red scar from a sabre cut over his nose had in no way added to his personal attractions, but his fame throughout the land as a fighter of both skill and courage, caused him to be reckoned a favourite with the electoral prelate, who had usually more need of warriors round him than of the numerous court gallants who followed in his train, and were now conversing in low tones with the ladies who accompanied them. But whether the softness of their words was caused by the tender import of them, or whether they feared to intrude their voices on the conversation or the meditations of the Archbishop, the onlooking but unnoticed Emperor could not have guessed, had his curiosity been aroused to inquire. Rumour had it that the Archbishop intended to bestow on Count Bertrich the hand, and incidentally, the broad lands of his ward, who rode at his right hand, and if this were true the girl showed little pleasure over it, to judge by the small heed she gave either to the crowd that lined the road on each side or to those who accompanied her in the august procession. She seemed neither to see nor to hear aught that went on around her, but with eyes looking straight forward, and a slight frown on her fair brow, rode onward in silence, a marked contrast to the prattling train which followed her. Meanwhile, von Isenberg spoke with the Count, who bent his head deferentially to listen, and perhaps while doing so, to

glance across the charger's mane at the proud and beautiful girl, who rode on the other side of the Archbishop, heedless of glance or conversation.

When the procession had passed, the young Emperor sat looking after it, bonnet still in hand, with an absorbed expression on his face. And well might he gaze long at the iron Archbishop, for he had come on a weary journey to see that potentate, and judge for himself what manner of man he might be who was reported to have remarked to his brother Archbishop of Cologne, when he cast the vote which helped to make Rodolph an emperor, that the young man was said to be a romantic fool, who would be the more easily led by their Lordships of Treves and Cologne, than any older and more seasoned noble. Therefore had it been given out that the new Emperor was gone to smite the Saracen, whereas he had merely journeyed from Frankfort to Treves in disguise, to look upon a man who might prove more formidable to his peace than the fiercest Saracen roaming the plains of the East. Siegfried, who, though so much older, was Rodolph's confidential friend, seemed anxious to know the estimate the Emperor had formed of his probable adversary.

"A hard, stern face," said Siegfried. "A cold friend and an implacable enemy, to judge by the glance I got of him. What think you?"

"An adorable face," murmured the young man, absently, still gazing after the rapidly disappearing cortège. "A face to dream over; to die for. Who is she, Siegfried?"

"The Countess Tekla," answered Siegfried, somewhat briefly and grimly, for here their expedition, not without peril, undertaken against his strongly urged advice, was turned from its purpose, at this critical moment, by a passing glimpse of a pretty face. Perhaps, after all, the Archbishop had made the remark attributed to him, and Rodolph seemed determined on the most inopportune occasion, to give colour to it.

"But who is she?" demanded the Emperor, covering again.

"The Countess Tekla is the ward of the Archbishop. Her father died in his service and is said to have been the only man Arnold von Isenberg ever had any affection for. The sole living relative she has, so far as known to me, is Count Heinrich, surnamed the Black, of Castle Thuron, near Coblentz. Her mother was sister to the Black Count."

"That marauder! No wonder she was not left his ward."

"There was little love lost between her father and her uncle. 'Tis said Heinrich tried to get possession of Tekla and has even had the temerity to threaten an attack upon the Archbishop because of her, but he is hardly likely to do more than bluster, for, however much the Count may lack common honesty, he is not devoid of common sense, and well knows that Arnold could crush him in his castle as a snail is crushed in its shell under an iron heel."

"The Countess Tekla," murmured the Emperor, more to himself than to his companion. "She is the most beautiful vision that ever floated before the eyes of man."

"She is betrothed to Count Bertrich, who rode at the Archbishop's left hand," said Siegfried, coldly.

"What! To that florid image carved with a broadsword? I cannot believe it. 'Twould be sacrilege."

"Rodolph, since you allow me to call you so," replied Siegfried, solemnly, "I have also heard that you yourself are hardly free."

"It is false," cried the young man, hotly. "I am pledged to none. Such thought is utterly baseless. The Princess herself would be the first to disclaim it."

"I mentioned no one."

"Perhaps not. 'Tis false nevertheless."

Two pikes, crossed, barred their entrance under the archway of the gate.

"Where from?"

"Frankfort."

"Your purpose in Treves?"

"We are two silk merchants."

"Your papers."

Siegfried handed down the documents to the officer who demanded them. He scrutinised them closely, and, apparently satisfied, returned them.

"What news from Frankfort? How fares our new Emperor?" he asked.

"He has betaken himself to the Holy Wars," answered Siegfried.

"By the Coat then, and are there not blows enough for him in Germany without going abroad for them? I heard he was more gallant than soldier."

"It is not true," said Siegfried, with some sternness.

"Soldier and gallant too, my friend," interjected Rodolph, fearing that Siegfried's loyalty might lead him to indulge in censure which might prove impolitic on the part of those seeking entrance, to those who were the guardians of a gate. "Surely the two trades have gone hand in hand before now?"

"Aye, and will again," laughed the officer, twirling his moustache.

Baron Siegfried von Brunfels now led the way through a narrow street, riding confidently, like a man well acquainted with his direction. Avoiding the main thoroughfare which led to the north gate, he turned into what seemed little more than a lane, and now the horsemen were compelled to travel in file, as the way was not broad enough for two horses conveniently to walk abreast. Neither were there houses on each side, as was the case with the street they had just left, but instead, blank walls, such as might surround convents or monasteries, as indeed they did. So high were these enclosing barriers, that Rodolph on his horse could not see over them, and he had the feeling of a man making his way along the deep bottom of a huge ditch, which impression was intensified by the gathering gloom of approaching night. The lane, continually bending toward the right of the riders, came at last to what was quite evidently the city wall, and on this abutted

the lesser wall of the monastery grounds on the right, while that on the left ran for some distance parallel to the more lofty ring of stout masonry which encircled the city, leaving a narrow space between. The ringing sound of the iron-shod hoofs on the stone causeway echoed from the ramparts in the deep stillness. In the distance a large mansion built against the city wall, stood across the way and ended the lane. The windows were shuttered and heavily barred with iron, giving the building a forbidding, prison-like appearance. The lane terminated at a strong arched gate, with heavy double doors of oak, iron-bolted, in one leaf of which was a shuttered grating that, being lifted, enabled those within to see all who approached. The bastion to the left ended against the side of this sinister house.

"By the gods, Baron," cried the Emperor, "it is well I have confidence in you, for never was man guided along a more death-trap road to such a sepulchre-looking ending. What fortress have we here, Siegfried? This is no inn, surely."

The Baron half turned in his saddle, and spoke in a voice so low that its tone alone was a hint against unnecessary conversation.

"It is my house," he said. "You will be better served and less spied upon than at an inn."

A moment later the Baron, stopping at the archway, but without dismounting, reached out his hand and pulled an iron rod which had a loop lower down for the convenience of one on foot. The faint clanging of a bell, jangling far within, could be heard.

After the echoes died away there was a perceptible interval, then the shutter behind the grating was noiselessly lifted with some caution, and a pair of eyes appeared and disappeared at the iron network. Instantly the gates were flung open and were as speedily closed when the horsemen had ridden into a courtyard.

Having parted with their tired steeds, host and guest, hardly less weary with their ride, mounted one broad stairway and two narrower ones, then walked along a passage that led them to a door, on opening which, Siegfried conducted the Emperor into a large square apartment lighted by two windows heavily barred outside. The inside shutters were open, and Rodolph looked over an extensive landscape bounded by red cliffs and green hills, at the foot of which flowed the rapid Moselle. Although the sun had gone down and the view was growing indistinct in the twilight, Rodolph went to one of the windows and gazed admiringly upon the prospect. The moon, nearly at the full, had risen, and was already flooding the scene with her silvery light.

"You have a pleasant outlook here, Siegfried," said the Emperor.

"Yes, and a safe one."

"A safe one?" echoed Rodolph, inquiringly.

"You see this house is a story higher than the city wall. A rope flung from that window gives a hurried man safe conduct to the open country without the necessity of passing through a gate."

"True," said the Emperor, with a smile; "but your hurried man would lose some valuable time in filing through these stout bars.

He would be a ghost indeed to pass between them."

"Not if he knew their secret."

Saying this, Siegfried laid hold of an iron stanchion, one of two that stood perpendicular on either side of the window-aperture from top to ledge, pressed against the thick stone wall. The stanchion left the stone under Siegfried's efforts, and proved to be shaped like an elongated letter E, with three bolts of equal length that fitted into three holes drilled in the side of the window-opening, one at top and bottom, and the third in the middle. The Baron pushed outward the heavy iron grating, which swung on hinges, pulling from the wall three bars with round loops at the end of each, into which the three bolts had interlocked when the grating was closed, and the E-like stanchion placed in position.

"A most ingenious arrangement," cried the Emperor, "lacking only the rope."

"A rope lies there," said Siegfried, kicking the coil with his foot, where it rested on the floor and had escaped notice in the gathering darkness. "It is fastened to a ring in the wall."

"What a device for a lover!" exclaimed Rodolph.

"It is intended for a man's safety rather than his danger," said Siegfried, with the slightest possible touch of austerity in his voice.

The Emperor laughed.

"Nevertheless," he said, "had I my lady-love in this house, I would prefer that she knew not the secret of this window. But

why all these precautions, Baron? They have not been put here because I am your visitor, for I think the grate moved rustily upon its hinges."

"No, the window has been as you see it these many years. I do not know its history. I suspect that my father found it convenient sometimes to slip out of Treves without much ado, for I know he felt safer on occasion in our strong Rhine castle than in this sometimes turbulent city. I have not interfered with the device, although I have seldom had need of it. I even keep up an old custom of our house, disliking change as all my forefathers have done, although I have never profited by it."

"What old custom?"

"The stationing of a sentinel night and day in a small room above where we stand. When he sees a light in yonder house by the river, or hears by night or day the cry of a waterfowl that frequents the upper Rhine, but which is unknown on the Moselle, he instantly comes down to this room, throws open the casement and flings out the rope. Although as I said, I have never had actual need of this method of exit or entrance, I have, nevertheless, tested the vigilance of my servants, and have climbed in hand over hand."

"Another question, Baron, and forgive my curiosity. How is it that you, a noble and a householder in Treves, enter the gates as a silk merchant unchallenged? Surely the Archbishop keeps slack guard."

"Although I know many of those about the Archbishop's

Court, I am myself practically unknown. I attend once a year, perhaps, a formal function in Treves, but it is generally supposed I am in my castle on the Rhine, or at Frankfort, which is indeed the case. My house attracts no attention, for it has belonged to my family for centuries. And now, your Majesty, the room adjoining this, and connected with it, I design for your sleeping apartment, and I trust you will rest well there."

"One more question, Siegfried, in punishment for the title you have bestowed upon me; that house by the river – is it also yours?"

"Yes. A small place, but in some respects the complement of this. I keep there a fast horse, and a swift skiff, so that the man in a hurry, of whom I spoke, may betake himself either to the road or the river as best falls in with his humour or necessity."

"By the gods, Baron, and should we find it necessary to enter into a conspiracy against the great Arnold von Isenberg, we are reasonably well provided for any emergency."

"It is said there is nothing entirely useless in this world, Rodolph," answered the other, drily.

The Baron drew in the grating, replaced the three-bolted stanchion, and finally closed the inside shutters. A servant announced dinner, and Rodolph betook himself to his room to prepare for it.

CHAPTER II
THE ARCHER INTRODUCES HIMSELF

The Emperor, having removed the stains of travel, followed his host downstairs to the banquet that had been prepared for him, and both fell to with an appetite sharpened by a long journey. The white wines of the Moselle, supplemented by the vintage of the Saar, speedily drove away all remembrance of the day's fatigue.

After the meal, the Baron, with a re-filled flagon at his elbow, stretched out his legs and enjoyed to the full the consciousness that he had been well fed and was comfortably housed, with nothing more arduous in prospect than an honestly earned night's repose. The young Emperor looked across at this picture of contentment with a twinkle in his eye.

"Siegfried," he said, "I have a fancy for a moonlight stroll."

The Baron drew in his feet and sat bolt upright, an expression of dismay coming into his face. The sigh that followed, truly indicated what he perhaps hesitated to express, that he wished people knew when they were well off. The Emperor laughed heartily and added, "You may not have noticed that the moon was nearly full."

"If I had," said the Baron, "I should merely have thanked

heaven for it, resolved to stay indoors and follow her most excellent example. The wine flagon has more attraction for me than the fullest of moons, and I have some rare Rhenish in my cellars regarding which I was about to invite your criticism – a more potent vintage than this of the Saar."

"The Rhenish will be still older when we return, Siegfried."

"Indeed, and that is true, Rodolph. It may have aged so much that our heirs shall have the enjoyment of drinking it. The man who leaves a secure door in Treves to stroll by moonlight has no surety of ever reaching it again. A slit throat is an ill conduit for sound Rhenish."

"Is Treves, then, so turbulent? I thought the Archbishop kept strict rule."

"Much goes on in Treves that the Archbishop knows nothing of, as our own presence here is witness. The town is full of soldiers and bravos. There are many outbreaks in the streets, and a brawl might be fatal to your plans. We should assuredly be stopped and questioned, and we might have to trust to our swords."

"You think then, a jaunt in the country would be safer than a moonlight stroll in the city?"

"I do indeed."

"That tallies exactly with my purpose. Never say again that I disregard your advice, for it is not your secure door I would leave, but your insecure window, trusting to find the rope dangling there when we return. I am anxious to test your ingenious device

of exit and entrance. We shall walk to the river, and you will make me free of your boat and your fleet horse. It is well that your servants at that small house on the Moselle should know me, for if I enact the part of your man in a hurry, it would avail me little to scramble down the city wall, while you bravely kept the outer door with your sword against the minions of Arnold, if your own minions by the river refused further means of escape."

"That is true, but we are safe here for the night and may we not without prejudice put off further action until to-morrow?"

"There speaks the comforting flagon, Baron. You are too well versed in siege and surprise not to know that every precaution should be taken, and that no moment is too soon for doing what reconnoitering there is to be accomplished. I would not ask you to accompany me, were it not that I need your introduction in the house by the river."

This brought Siegfried instantly to his feet.

"Where you go, I go, introduction or none. Let us then to the window before the night grows older."

They mounted the stairs again, and unbolted the swinging window-grate. The Baron going first, slid swiftly down the rope, and a moment after he reached the ground, the Emperor followed. Directly under the wall, they were in the shadow, but the broad plain before them, and the cliffs beyond, lay distinct in the moonlight. The small riverside hamlet, towards which they bent their steps, showed here and there a few twinkling lights, to guide them. The plain was uncultivated, covered with thick rank

grass, which seemed to betoken a marshy nature of the soil, but the ground was nevertheless firm underfoot. The Baron, as best knowing the way, took the lead, wading knee-deep in the thick grass, and was silent, thinking rather of the luxury of bench and wine-laden table than of the expedition in hand.

The night was very quiet, the stillness being broken, now and then, by the far-away cry of some sentinel on the wall proclaiming that all was well, and that peace reigned over Treves, invoking piously a blessing on the sleeping city – which Christian benediction was a duty resting on all who kept watch and guard for that Prince of the Church, the Archbishop.

The pair walked in silence as had been arranged, and the first to violate the compact was the Baron, who stumbling over something, pitched head-foremost, uttering a good round Rhenish oath as he did so. The laugh on the Emperor's lips was checked by the sudden springing up, as if from out the earth, of a man apparently fully armed, who instantly put himself in a posture of defence. Simultaneously the swords of Rodolph and Siegfried flashed from their scabbards, and the Baron, finding the stranger had leaped up between him and his friend, rapidly executed a semi-circular retreat, and stood at the side of the Emperor, while the unexpected third, moving as on a pivot, faced Siegfried, with a stout sword in his hand, making, however, no motion of attack.

"If you propose to fight me together," said the stranger, quietly, "permit me to stoop unscathed for my pike, but if you are

content to fall upon me one at a time, I shall be happy to meet you as I am, although you have the advantage of the longer blade."

"What need to fight at all?" asked the Emperor. "We are no enemies of thine."

"If, as I take it, you are marauders seeking gain from belated wayfarers, it is but honest to tell you that, in case of victory, which is doubtful, seeing you are but two and Germans at that, there is little to be picked from me but hard knocks, or, given a proper distance, a well-placed shaft which you would find harder to digest than anything you have taken inwardly this some time past. I say this but in the way of fair dealing as between man and man, to prevent after disappointment, and not as prejudicing a fair encounter should your inclination tend in that direction."

"Fellow, we are no marauders, but peaceable merchants from Treves."

"Then the merchandise you deal in must pertain to combat, for you came more deftly by your blades than any yard-stick-handler I have met with in all my wanderings. I know a well-hung weapon when I see it, ready for thrust or parry, yet carried with seeming carelessness, as if nothing were further from your minds than either assault or defence."

"You are a shrewd fellow," said the Emperor. "Why lie you here in ambush?"

"It is no ambush other than one to capture sleep, which I had in thrall when your comrade trod on my stomach and straightway rescued and put to flight my drowsy prisoner."

"And can a man of your ability provide yourself with no better bed than one in the high grass by the side of the Moselle?"

"There is little to complain of in the bed, my Lord, for I take you to be no merchant, but a person of quality. A bed is but a place in which to sleep, and where slumber comes, the bed has served its purpose. I have before now laid down my head within walls and under roof in circumstances of such uncertainty that a man slept at the risk of a slit throat, while here the bed is wide with no danger of falling out, having good fighting ground, if one is molested, and ample space for flight should opposition overmatch me. There is small fault to find with such a resting-place."

"You are easily contented, but surely you should have a cloak to ward off, partly at least, the dews of night."

"A cloak, my Lord, although I admit its comfort, hampers a man suddenly awakened; still I should doubtless succumb to its temptations did I not need it for the protection of a weapon that I love even more than the pampering of my own body."

Saying this, the man stooped and lifted from the ground a cloak which he unfolded drawing from cover an unstrung bow somewhat longer than himself. Resting one end on the ground against his foot, and bending the upper part over his shoulder, he deftly slipped the loop of the cord into its notch, and twanged the string, making it give forth a musical note that vibrated melodiously in the still air.

"There, my Lord, is a one-stringed harp, which sings of sudden death and nothing else. Were it as good at arm's length

as it is at stone's throw, I should cumber myself with no other weapon; but it is as delicate and capricious as a woman, and must be taken care of. So in the dampness of the river valley I wrap it in my cloak to keep the moisture from it."

"I should think so tender a weapon would be of little use in the rough and tumble of actual war."

"There speaks the unenlightened German! A slender shaft like this, two hundred years ago, killed a king and lost my country to the Normans. The German swine are as gross in their killing as in their eating. They appreciate not delicacy in death, but must needs mutilate the image of their Creator, slicing him with huge two-handed swords, or battering his head with battle-axe, but a gentle arrow, truly sped, passing daintily through an enemy, dipping its fleecy wing in the red core of his heart, leaving little mark to attest its passage, and furnishing thereby a corpse that is a delight to look upon, gives no pleasure to this uncivilised people."

"You forget, fellow, that you are speaking to Germans, and also that we have had the cross-bow for centuries, as well as instruments not dissimilar to thine," cried the Baron, with natural indignation at the bowman's strictures.

"Hush, Siegfried," whispered the Emperor, "let him babble on. Surely the conceit of the rascal shows he comes from England."

"I am a free man," continued the archer, calmly, "and am used to speak my mind, but I seek not to shirk responsibility for

my words. If any, hearing me, take just offence at the tenour of my expressions, I shall not deny him opportunity for satisfaction, under the equitable rule that the victor enter into possession, not thereafter to be disputed, of the belongings of the conquered. On these terms therefore I shall be pleased to uphold against you, sir, the truth of my remarks about the German people, your friend seeing fair combat betwixt us."

"I cannot demean myself by fighting with a fellow of your quality."

"Those are high words to be spoken by an honest merchant, the progeny of a yard-stick, a class over which we men-at-arms hold ourselves the superior. In a fair field all men, bearing arms, willing to submit to the arbitration thereof, are considered equal. King William, perhaps with some justice surnamed the Conqueror, questioned not the quality of a yeoman who hotly beset him at the battle of Hastings, but honoured the man by cleaving him to the midriff with his battle-axe, the which is held in high esteem by the yeoman's descendants to this day. But touching the use of the long bow, I grant that you may well make some demur regarding unproven statements, if you have seen no better examples of its merits than is shown by your German archers, who lazily prefer the cumbrous cross-bow with a stake upright in the ground to steady it, necessitating thus a clumsy equipment hardly more portable than a catapult itself, whereas this fibrous length of toughened yew can be held lightly in the outstretched left hand, and given but the skill behind it, will nip

you off a dozen men while the cross-bow villain is planting his marvellous engine. But let the arrow sing its own praises. You see yonder sentinel pacing back and forth in the moonlight on the wall near the gate. I will wing you a shaft through him, and he will never know whence comes the summons to a less contentious world."

Saying this, the bowman placed an arrow on the string with much deliberation and was about to raise his weapon when Rodolph and Siegfried, with simultaneous movement, sprang between the unconscious victim and the foreigner.

"Good Heavens! What are you setting out to do?" cried the Emperor. "Would you slay an innocent man, and bring a hornet's nest unnecessarily about our ears?"

"The hornets would not know whither to fly. The man would drop inside the wall most likely, or outside perchance, but no one could tell from which direction the shaft had sped, or whether it was let loose from city or country. I hold no malice against the sentinel, but merely offered this example in proof of what I spoke. Indeed I myself would be the only one put to inconvenience by the shot, for you carry no bow and it is likely they would see by the shaft when they got it, that it differs from those in use hereabouts, for the Germans have small skill in arrow-making; besides I did myself twice these last two days endeavour to gain entrance to that stupid city, hoping to win appointment to the Archbishop's train, and may have mentioned something to the guardsmen at the gate of my own merit with

the bow-string, but they, on both occasions, refused admission unless I were provided with passports, the which, of course, I could not show."

"Why do you travel, or expect admittance to a walled town without papers of identification?"

"You have asked me many questions and answered none, excepting that about your occupation, which I take to be devoid of truth, – nay, no offence is meant, for I hold it each man's privilege to lie to any chance wayfarer as may suit his purpose, and I myself never cling to truth longer than my necessity serves. Are you then adherents of the Archbishop and have you any influence with his Lordship such as might bend him to look with favour on my desire for employment?"

"We are not known to the Archbishop, therefore have no influence with him. I come from Frankfort and my friend from the Rhine. We are but visitors here, and so in some measure similar to yourself."

"I take that to be well and truly answered. I shall deal with you in equal honesty. My papers would be small recommendation to Arnold von Isenberg, for they truly show that in his last campaign I fought manfully against him. But peace being unfortunately declared, I am now in want of occupation. Know you of any noble in need of an unerring bow and a courageous heart at threepence a day, with victualling, and such lodgment as a man, who cares not where he sleeps, may require?"

"I have no need of such a warrior," replied the Baron, "but a

man, expert at ridding the world of his fellow-creatures, would find more to do in the turbulent valley of the Rhine than in the more peaceful vale of the Moselle. Here the nobles are awed by the Archbishop, and when he is not in arms, the country rests, but on the Rhine the Barons are at continual feud and there is no strong hand to restrain them."

"You forget the Emperor," said Rodolph, in a tone of mild reproach.

"He, alas! has gone to fight the Saracens," answered the Baron, with calm mendacity.

"Ah, would he had taken me with him," sighed the archer. "I have heard that Eastern bowmen have much skill in the art, and I would like to have tried conclusions with some of them. In truth, I had thought of going to Frankfort when I heard some rumour of the Emperor's departure. As there is little use in knocking at the door of Treves I will on the morrow set my face down the Moselle toward the Rhine, in hope of falling among a less peaceably inclined people. And now, my Lords, as it seems we can be of little use to each other, I will, if it please you, go once more to my interrupted sleep and allow you to proceed on your interrupted journey."

The archer, as he said this, unstrung his bow, and carefully wrapped it once more in his cloak. With little ceremony he prepared to lie down on the grassy couch from which he had risen.

"If I cannot give you employment," began the Baron, "I can at

least offer you a more comfortable sleeping-place than the one in which I have been the means of disturbing you. We are going to my house on the river, and I think my servant can provide you with a heap of straw where you will have a roof over your head. Then you can proceed on your way down the river unmolested in the morning."

"Indeed," answered the bowman, indifferently, "in so far as the roof and the straw are concerned I would not travel a shaft's flight to secure them. I can sleep refreshingly wherever my head touches pillow, be it earth, stone, or straw, but if your generosity advances itself so far as to include a yard of beef and a stoup of wine I will not say I shall altogether and in spite of proper persuasions, refuse."

"I am unacquainted with the present condition of my servant's larder, but as he looks to his own provender at my expense, I doubt not he will be well provided, and the chance may strike you as worth the risk of a brief walk."

For answer the archer thrust his short hanger into the leathern sheath prepared for it, which hung at his belt, lifted his cloak-enveloped bow, and also a long pike, and thus accoutred signified his readiness to follow them.

They marched in file, the Baron leading and the archer bringing up the rear, reaching without further adventure the margin of the swift flowing Moselle, then proceeded along its bank until they came to the first house in the small hamlet of Zurlauben, where the procession paused, and its leader rapped

lightly at the door of the dark dwelling. The only response was the baying of a hound within, and the low neigh of a horse in the adjoining outhouse. A louder knock merely resulted in a deeper bay from the hound.

"He is perhaps asleep," said the Baron. "The rascal keeps early hours."

"More likely he is absent," suggested the Emperor.

The two went partly round the house, which was built with half of it resting on the river bank, while the other half was supported by piles rising from the water. This lower portion was enclosed, and had a door that allowed the skiff to be taken in or out. The Baron, noticing that the water door was ajar, pushed it further open with his sword, and bending over, endeavoured to peer inside, as well as the darkness would allow him.

"The boat is gone," he said; "the fellow evidently fancies a moonlight row. I shall hold some account with him when he returns."

"I think he owes you an explanation," replied Rodolph. "It would be somewhat inconvenient were the Archbishop's troops after us, and we desired to escape by the water."

The Baron said nothing, but his black looks boded ill for the absent menial.

"Some apology is due to the archer for a postponed supper," continued Rodolph. "Let us quit this muddy spot and discharge that duty, in the hope that his conversation may strengthen our patience while we wait."

They climbed up the bank and came again to the front of the house, where they found the bowman fully accoutred, sitting with his back against the wall, his head inclined on one shoulder, sound asleep. The moonlight shone upon him, and he snored gently.

"His peaceful slumber is certainly a mark of confidence in his host. Blessed is he who can sleep when he wills," said the Emperor, looking down upon him. "If the fellow's skill at all equals his boasting, I might do worse than send him to Frankfort, to instruct a band of archers that would give good account of themselves in time of trouble."

"To whom in Frankfort could you send him, and whom should the bowman name as his sponsor when he arrived there? If he said he was sent by a worthy merchant in Treves, I doubt if he would receive much attention when his journey was completed."

"That is true," returned Rodolph. "I fear I must part company with him when we have fed him. Still I should like to see some sample of his skill before we dismiss him."

"That is easily tested if he does not shrink from the trial. On the other side of the river I see rising and flying further up first one heron, and then another, from which I surmise that my rascal is working his way homeward in the skiff along the further shore, where the current is slackest. He seems to be disturbing the birds and so this some time back I have noted his slow progress. If our archer can wing you one of these long-legged fowls, we may well believe he could have surprised the sentinel."

"Hey, bowman," continued the Baron, stirring up the sleeper with his foot, "I hear my servant coming and we will be in presently. But first we would like to hear the hum of your bow-string, if your skill has not deserted you since you had sinister designs on the sentinel above the gate."

The archer had sprung to his feet, wide-awake, the moment he felt a touch upon his body.

"You can hardly expect me to bring down a man on Treves' wall from here," he said, casting his eye toward the city. "My shaft does not live in the air longer than one may slowly count a score. Nevertheless I am willing to try, although I cannot guarantee a pleasurable result."

"We set no such impossibility before the strength of your weapon; what we desire – "

"Nay, I spoke not of impossibility, but of surety," interrupted the archer. "I can throw you an arrow high in the air and can guarantee that it will fall within Treves or not far short of it, but to say definitely that it will hit such and such a button in a man's doublet at that distance, would be wild prophecy, for you cannot predict the home-coming of a descending shaft, from which, as it were, the life and vigour of it has departed, as you can the unerringness of an arrow sped horizontally, retaining the message given to it by thumb and fingers until it reaches the person to whom admonition is thus forwarded through its agency."

While he spoke the archer had unwound the cloak from the

bow and now he strung the weapon with anxious care, after which he plucked a shaft from the quiver that hung at his back.

"There are herons rising ever and anon from yonder bank. The darkness of the cliff somewhat obscures them, and they hang not out against the sky like your soldier on the wall. Nevertheless the moon shines fairly on them and the distance is less, so I beg of you to show us your skill upon the body of the next that comes between us and the rocks."

"Now the Fiend fry me on his gridiron," cried the archer, glancing at the opposite cliffs, "I would rather shoot you ten soldiers than one bird flapping through the air, for that asks of a bowman the measuring of the distance the heron will advance from the time the arrow leaves the string until it coincides with its quarry, the which renders necessary also the nice adjustment by the eye of the space between myself and the bird, a difficult enough task in broad day, causing such a venture in the night to mix more blind chance with marksmanship than any one not versed in necromancy should be called upon to endure."

"So this is the outcome of your bragging!" cried the Baron, already angered by the absence of his servant. "You well knew we would allow no shots at a soldier and so you boasted safely. When a fair mark is offered you, then come excuses and the making of conditions. I have a mind, braggart, to lay my sword across your back, or rather a stout cudgel which would better accord with your condition."

The archer stepped rapidly away from them at this threat and

said, with arrow still notched on the string:

"If you meditate any such breach of a hospitality which I accepted at your proffer, and not of my own seeking, I would tell you first that I am a free man, formal engagement having been refused by you, so keep your cudgels for your laggard who deserves them, as standing thus by his delay between a hungry man and his meat; while secondly I would inform you that on the attempt at my chastisement, seeing the same is unmerited, I would first put this shaft through you and then its mate into the middle of your comrade, before he could lift foot to help you, and neither of you would complain of any inaccuracy of aim, swift as the shafts would follow each other. So advance one or both at your peril."

"Tush, tush," cried the Emperor, "no one will molest you. While you chatter the heron escapes. There is one rising even now and will vanish like his companions unscathed."

The archer turned quickly to the north, his bow hanging almost horizontally in his left hand. He seemed in no hurry to shoot, but watched the bird beating the air heavily with its huge wings, its long legs trailing behind, making seemingly slow and laborious motion across the moonlit face of the opposite cliff. Suddenly the archer, having to his satisfaction measured the distance with his eye, straightened himself, lifted his bow to the perpendicular, drew back the string to his right ear, and apparently taking no aim, let fly the shaft into the night. He leaned forward, trying to watch its flight, but none saw the arrow

after it left the bow. The heron, however, with a cry of affright, plunged downward, and whirled over and over until it struck the water with a splash.

"Nevertheless," said the archer, in a dissatisfied tone, "'tis no fair test, and is, like enough, pure accident."

"It is a marvellous shot," cried the Emperor, with enthusiasm, "and such art is wondrous cheap at threepence a day."

"With lodgment and provender," added the archer, once more unstringing his bow.

"Here, if your pouch has no hole in the bottom of it, is three months' pay, which will not come amiss in your journey down the Moselle."

"I thank your Lordship," said the man, taking the money with great readiness, "this is more to my liking than offers of cudgelling."

"And when you hear that the Emperor has returned to Frankfort I would strongly advise you to go thither, for he is a lover of good qualities wherever found. As for the offer of cudgelling, 'twas but a jest, or at most the outcome of the delay of our custodian."

"Here he is," said the Baron. "I think he will speedily regret his absence."

Across the moonlit river, in a small boat that drifted sideways rapidly in the swift current, a man rowed with sturdy strokes. The two who awaited him stood silently on the bank and watched his approach. The archer had already seated himself with his back

to the wall, and was snatching a moment's repose.

As the boatman ceased rowing and allowed his craft to float down to its harbour, the Baron said sternly:

"Get inside as speedily as you may and undo the door. Then I will have a word with you."

A few moments later there was a rattle of chains and bolts, the door was thrown open, and gave the visitors a glimpse of a young man with white face and trembling limbs.

CHAPTER III
LISTENERS HEAR LITTLE GOOD OF THEMSELVES

"Come, archer," said the Baron, "arouse yourself. I have work for you to do."

"Not before the meal, I hope," objected the man, rising to his feet.

"Yes; but it will not detain you long, and the supper shall be spread before your sight, to quicken your hand."

They entered a lower room, long and narrow, meagrely furnished, containing a rough table thrust against the wall next the river, with two benches, on one of which the Emperor seated himself. The trap-door by which the man had ascended was still open and the gurgling sound of flowing water came up. The hound crouched in a corner, and eyed the visitors with lips drawn back from his teeth, uttering a low growl, as if he did not like the situation so suddenly presented to him. The man who was the cause of it all, liked it even less, and stood dumb, as one paralysed with fright.

"Close the trap-door," said the Baron, shortly. The man obeyed the order.

"Set a light in the upper window toward Treves."

The servant disappeared up a ladder, set the light, and

returned.

"Place on the table supper for one, and a large flagon of wine."

When this was accomplished, the servant, who had throughout spoken no word, moving mechanically to and fro like one walking in a dream, stood once more before his angry master.

"Take your place with your back against that wall."

The man, breathing hard, but still silent, stood up at the end of the room, his wide eyes fastened in a hypnotism of fear on his master.

"Now, archer, I am ready. Notch a shaft on your string and pin me this deserter though the heart to the wall."

The archer, whose eyes had been riveted on the viands set on the table, impatiently waiting the word to set to, withdrew them with reluctance and turned them towards the victim who stood dumb and motionless at the other end of the room.

"I am as loath to keep good victuals waiting as any man in the Archbishopric, but, my Lord, I have failed to make plain to you the nature of my calling. I am no executioner, but a soldier. If you give yonder fellow a blade in his hand to protect himself, I will be glad to carve him into as many pieces as may please your Lordship, but to draw bow on an unarmed man at ten paces is a misuse of a noble weapon, and the request to do so, were it not that this good flagon yearns for lips to meet it, I would construe it into an insult to myself, warranting a hostile encounter."

"You were not so choice when you proposed to slaughter an innocent man on the walls. Here stands a traitor, who has

deserted his post and richly earned his death, yet you – "

"The man on the wall, my Lord, was a soldier, at that moment bearing arms and enjoying pay for the risks he ran. When I myself mount guard I make no objection to your German cross-bowmen practising at my body with their bolts, taking whatever chance cares to offer, and holding it commendable that they should thus industriously attempt to perfect their marksmanship, but to send a shaft through a poor devil standing weaponless at arm's length, as one might say, is no work for an English archer, the which I will maintain, though you order this most tempting food back into the larder again."

The Baron scowled at the bowman, who returned his whole regard to the table. The Emperor looked at his friend with a half quizzical smile on his lips, while the speechless victim gazed helplessly at his master.

"Siegfried, a word with you," said the Emperor, pointing to the bench beside him. The Baron crossed over and sat down.

"It is not your intention to have this young man executed, is it?"

"Most assuredly; nothing but an order from the Emperor will save his deservedly forfeited life."

"Then God help him," said Rodolph, "for the Emperor is far away. If, however, my own poor word can avail him, I would gladly see him spared, and this without in any way underrating the heinousness of his crime."

"His desertion might have cost either of us our lives, as you

yourself admitted but a short while since. I can forgive anything rather than absence from the post of duty."

"I grant you that if he were not alone here his offence would be unpardonable, if but for the effect on others, but there is none other to make a precedent of leniency. Then there is this to be said, he has had a stern lesson, for if ever man read death in the eye of another he saw it in yours a moment ago, although at first I thought you were jesting. If you spare him, he will therefore be the truer in future and will not soon forget this night, while another who takes his place will still have the lesson to learn. May I question him?"

"Certainly. He is yours, as I am."

"Hark ye, fellow, were you ever out with that boat before?"

"Yes, my Lord."

"You see it is not the first offence. I beg you to let me execute justice upon him," said the Baron.

"A worse man would have denied it," responded Rodolph, eagerly. "He speaks the truth when he knows it prejudices his case. I like the fellow, although he is so badly frightened. Where do you voyage, sirrah?"

"To the Archbishop's palace, my Lord."

"To the Archbishop's palace?" echoed both Rodolph and Siegfried, in a breath. "In the Fiend's name what have you to do with the Archbishop or his Palace?"

The young fellow cleared his throat, and some colour mounted to his pale face.

"My Lord," he stammered, "a maid, who is named Hilda – "

"I could have sworn it," cried the Emperor. "Now we have the woman, the riddle unravels itself. What of Hilda, my young gallant?"

"She is tirewoman of the Countess Tekla – "

"Ha!" ejaculated the Emperor, a sudden interest coming into his face, while the Baron's frown grew blacker. "You met with Hilda then to-night?"

"Not so, my Lord. I was on my way to meet her when, in the still night, I heard a knock, and fearing it might be at this door I hurried back; alas! that I kept your Lordship waiting."

"Then if I understand you aright, Hilda has now accepted our late *rôle*."

The man looked at the ground, evidently not comprehending the last remark.

"Hilda is at this moment waiting for you, then," explained Rodolph.

"Yes, my Lord."

The Emperor turned his frank smiling face upon the Baron, who sat with his chin in his hand, grimly regarding the servant, who, now that there seemed hope of rescue, kept his eyes fixed on the floor.

"You see," said Rodolph, "'tis but a simple lover's meeting, and I have known great affairs of State put aside for such. What wonder that the boy forgot his duty and stole away in your skiff to have a few sweet words with the doubtless charming Hilda."

"I distrust him," said the Baron, in a low voice. "I like not this traffic with the Archbishop's Palace. Arnold von Isenberg is a suspicious man, and has little scruple regarding the means he uses to satisfy either his curiosity or his resentment. This young fool may be innocent, but I doubt it. He made no protest against my judgment just now, but stood silent, like one who knew his doom was merited. The Archbishop may have heard something from his spies about this shuttered house, and its mysterious horse, never taken out save for exercise. This young fellow is practically a stranger to me. He is not one of my hereditary servants, for I wished to have a man here who knew no one in my house at Treves, and my servants there know nothing of this place at the river, except the man on guard, who unbars the window and throws down the rope when a light is displayed here, and he knows no more than that. As for this fellow here and his glib love story I mistrust him thoroughly."

"I think you do him wrong. If ever I saw an honest face, it is his. Besides, what harm can he do, since he knows nothing?"

"The mystery of the house, and even his lack of knowledge might lead to an investigation. Ordinarily I should care little for that, but now you are here, I wish to move with all caution."

"Then his truth is easily put to the test. I would vouch for the fellow from his looks alone, but, as you say, much depends on his fidelity. He cannot complain that his absence has aroused suspicion, so we will insist that a second absence shall allay it. We will go with him in the boat to meet this waiting girl and

hear what comes of their conversation. He will have no chance of warning her, and if there is fair love-talk between them you will then be satisfied."

"We cannot go with him unseen."

"Why not? We shall be in the shadow of the Palace and in the bottom of the skiff with our cloaks around us. It will not be a dignified position, but anything is better than a slumbering distrust of one's underlings, and then our situation will be heavenly compared with his in any case. If he is a traitor he will assuredly betray himself by trying to warn his confederate: if he is merely a lover it will be somewhat embarrassing to uphold this character when he knows he has an audience. But a man will do much to save his neck, and he will doubtless come passably off with his rehearsal. If it is a woman who waits for him, and if she proves ardent in her affections, we may have some ado to keep from laughter, but even then our position will be enviable compared with his."

The conversation at this point was broken in upon by a doleful voice which came from the patient archer.

"I have met much hospitality of varying kinds, in different parts of the world," he said, mournfully; "but never anything bearing resemblance to this. I have heard that in savage lands they place food before a hungry prisoner, the which he is unable to reach, although the sight of it feasts his eyes and the aroma therefrom tickles his nostrils. But to think that in a Christian land, where – "

"In God's name, good fellow, are you still hungering?" cried the Baron. "I thought when everything was prepared you would not need a formal invitation. Fall to, fall to, without further delay, and prove yourself as good a trencherman as you are excellent in archery."

The bowman, losing no further time in talk, at once began his long postponed repast, and continued the same with such absorption that the Emperor and the Baron went on with their conversation in no fear of interruption from him. Siegfried, with some reluctance, agreed to the plan proposed by Rodolph. The latter beckoned to the man standing by the wall, awaiting knowledge of his fate with that extreme anxiety which the uncertain tenure whereby he held his life was sure to occasion.

"You know, doubtless," began the Emperor, "that the late desertion of the post entrusted to you has forfeited your life to your justly incensed master?"

The young man made a motion of assent to this proposition.

"Having found you false in one thing, it is but natural that your master should distrust you in all, and therefore he disbelieves the tale you have told of meeting with a maid, attributing other motives to your visit to the Palace."

"What other motive could I have?"

"That remains to be seen. Are you willing, then, that we should put your fidelity to the test?"

"I am willing."

"Remember that you gain your life thereby. Where is it that

you meet this maid?"

"On the river balcony of the Palace, at the corner nearest here."

"How high is this balcony from the water?"

"Less than a man's height. Standing in the boat the floor is level with my shoulders."

"Is it your custom to ascend upon the balcony?"

"No, my Lord. I stand there holding the rope in my hand, which coming from the prow of the skiff passes round one of the balustrades. Thus, in case of interruption, I can instantly release my hold, sit down, and float away unseen."

The Emperor glanced at Siegfried with a look that plainly said, "This man speaks the truth." But the Baron, with perplexed brows, showed that he thought all the worse of him. Thus do the same words produce differing effects on different minds.

"Now, hark ye, fellow," said the Emperor, with more severity in his tone than he had yet used, "and give good heed to what I say, for much depends on it, especially to you. We will accompany you in the boat to this tryst upon the water, but will so bestow ourselves that we shall be unseen by whoever there awaits you. Now, mark this: you are to proceed thither silently; you are to give neither sign nor signal. If you so much as cough, your neck shall suffer for it. If you attempt to whisper, or say aught that is inaudible to us, as we lie in your boat, we will adjudge you a traitor. If it is but innocent love traffic that calls you to the balcony, you will carry on your flirtation as if we were not within

hearing distance, and I will hold you unscathed for anything you may say. Are you honest with this girl?"

"As honest as I am with you, my Lord."

"Ah! that is somewhat in doubt at the moment, but if you are honest then will I give your Hilda a handsome dowry when she weds with the boatman of the Moselle. Are you content with the trial?"

"I am content, my Lord."

"Then get ready the boat, so that we may not keep the maiden waiting."

The young man raised the trap-door and disappeared down the steps.

"I hope he will prove himself a true man," said the Baron, evidently somewhat shaken in his suspicions by the straightforward answers and actions of the person accused.

"By the Holy Coat," cried the Emperor, with a laugh, "it is well for us if he does so."

"Well for *us*?" echoed the Baron; "well for him you mean surely."

"Not so. Look you in what plight he has us should he be a traitor. We are wrapped in our cloaks, lying in the bottom of the skiff. The young man steers us to this balcony, springs nimbly upon it, the rope in his hand, deftly with his foot upsetting the boat, as, like my countryman, William Tell, he leaps from it. He cries aloud, 'Treason! treason against my Lord, the Archbishop!' The guards rush out, we are fished dripping from the water, and

dragged before Archbishop Arnold to explain to him who we are and what we did cruising round his Moselle palace. If he is false, being a quick-witted man he sees his doom is fixed should he refuse the test, while by accepting our proposal we at once deliver ourselves shackled into his hands. I should ask nothing better than to have two fools, who were my enemies, placed thus at my disposal."

The Baron sprang to his feet with an oath. "We shall go on no such hare-brained excursion," he cried.

"Pardon," said the Emperor, calmly, "but I shall go, most assuredly. I am not the man to propose a test and then shrink from it. But it would be wiser for you to remain here, ready to stand sponsor for me with the Archbishop, should I be captured. I assure you, good Siegfried, your testimony will have much greater weight if you come to the Palace dry, than if you are a dripping accomplice, rescued by his men-at-arms."

"Where you go, I go," answered the Baron, nonplussed.

The boatman put his head up through the trap-door and announced that the skiff was ready. The Emperor laughed as he flung his cloak over his shoulders; the Baron did likewise, but there was disquietude on his brow.

"There is like to be enough of meat," said the archer, seeing they were about to depart, "but if you are to be long absent I would fain be put into communication with the hogshead from which this most excellent flagon is accustomed to be replenished. Wine, when a man is eating, makes fair escort for

good food down the throat, but one is scarcely able thus to judge satisfactorily of its quality, missing the aroma which the more leisurely drinking allows the palate to become acquainted with. I hold that the proper time for doing justice to a good wine is when hunger has been so thoroughly appeased that – "

"The barrel is in the adjoining room," replied Siegfried, as he disappeared down the trap-door.

The boatman, sitting in the stern and using a paddle, propelled the skiff through the water-doorway and out upon the broad bosom of the river. His two passengers reclined near the prow and thus they floated down with the current, passing the numerous small buildings, all dark, which composed the little hamlet of Zurlauben. The huge square bulk of the Archbishop's Palace rose in the moonlight at the further end of the village, showing some lights in the upper rooms. The man in the stern of the boat sat silent as a statue of Death, and almost as motionless. He allowed the boat to drift with the current, making no effort to accelerate its progress by use of the paddle that trailed in the water behind, contenting himself by giving it a slight deflection to right or left and thus direct the impetus of the craft this way or that. The tall pointed windows of the large hall of the Palace, which, filled with stained glass, gave a semi-ecclesiastical appearance to the river front of the edifice, glowed softly with coloured light, like jewelled pictures against the dark wall, showing that the room within was still illuminated. The two passengers now reclined with heads towards the prow, their

cloaks entirely concealing their persons, and in the silence and the darkness, with the mute figure upright in the stern, the weird craft looked as if Charon were its master, ferrying two lost souls over the Styx.

As the boat floated noiselessly as a leaf on the surface of the water into the great shadow which the Palace threw upon the river, the stillness was broken by a woman's voice. She hissed out the one word —

"Laggard!"

"I am not to blame," answered the boatman, rising, taking the rope in his hand and flinging the loop of it upon the balcony, where it caught upon some projection, and swung the skiff gently round till the prow pointed up stream.

"I assure you, Hilda, I am not to blame. My master had commands for me which I could not dispose of sooner."

"I wish I could see thy face," answered the girl, "then I would know whether you speak the truth or not. It is like that you have been to Treves to meet some wench more complaisant than I. Oh, I know of old how well you can arrange meetings in the city, and if with me why not with another?"

"It is hard to be accused twice in one night of lying. I was on my way to meet you when my master came, and he would not believe what I said. I know not how to convince you of my truth unless you ask him whether or no he stopped me from coming earlier."

"Bring thy master to me instead, Conrad, and I will vouch thou

art truth teller except where women are concerned, and of that I have my doubts. What hast thou in thy boat, Conrad? I saw the bulk of a burden when I peered my eyes out watching for thy slow coming."

"'Tis but dressed calves that I must deliver safe and sound at a house in the village further up the river. I came direct to thee before doing so."

"Who is thy master then, that asks such strange service from his man?"

"He is a butcher who delights in the killing."

The prone Emperor nudged his companion and whispered, "The adage is true, Siegfried; you are like to hear little that will flatter you."

"Conrad, tell me you have not been to Treves."

"I swear to you I have not."

"And that you love none other than me?"

"I love you only, and would stand against wall to be pierced through the heart for thy sake."

"Oh, Conrad!" cried the girl, kneeling and taking his head in her arms. "No such test of thy love shall ever be required of thee, but I dearly yearn to hear thee tell me so. Wilt thou come earlier to-morrow night; for when the light dims in the great hall windows I must away, and I feared to-night they would be dark ere I saw the boat. Say thou wilt come earlier, then no time will be lost in chiding thee."

"Hilda, it must be as my master wills. He is a strict man, and

hard. If he knows of my coming I cannot tell what may happen."

"But why serve the butcher? If you quit him I will speak to my Lady, who will surely get you a place in the household of his Lordship."

"Advancement may be more certain with a hard master where there are few servants than with one like the Archbishop, who has hundreds at his command. I will answer you to-morrow. If my master is just and regards truthful service he may look with favour on me."

"But you said you knew little of him."

"I know more of him now that he has returned. Hilda, I pray you cast your memory back and tell me what I proposed to do when next I saw him."

"You mean the telling him about our love and betrothal?"

"Yes."

"Then you have told him? What did he say!"

"I have told him. I shall know to-morrow what he says."

As he spoke the lights in the great windows dimmed and went out.

"Alas! alas!" cried the girl, "our time is spent. Come earlier to-morrow night. And now get thee back to thy butcher."

"In truth, Hilda, he came nearer than you wot of, to the justifying of your term to-night. Farewell."

There was the smacking sound of several kisses hurriedly bestowed, then the young man pulled the prow end of the rope toward him, and sat down again in the stern. The boat

floated along under the shadow of the Palace, but the steersman with vigorous but silent strokes of the paddle prevented it from drifting into the moonlight, shooting the craft rapidly across the river until it reached the comparatively still water near the opposite bank. The two in the prow now sat up but remained silent, making no comment on the events of the evening in the hearing of the person most interested, who applied himself strenuously to the work in hand, and proved not only his strength, but his mastery of the waterman's art. The moonlight falling on the Emperor's face, showed a resolute effort on the part of his Majesty to keep from laughter, while the Baron's countenance exhibited a settled gloom. When well above the village, the boatman, with a few quick, well-placed strokes, sped the skiff across the river, and timed his efforts so accurately that it floated into the open doorway under the house.

Rodolph and Siegfried mounted the steps and found the archer with his head resting on his arms spread out over the table, sound asleep, and audibly enjoying his rest.

"Speaking for myself, I like Hilda," said the Emperor, with a laugh. "How does your more experienced judgment approve of the girl, Siegfried?"

But the Baron did not answer the question. He said instead, with some indignation, "A butcher, indeed! I shall give the fellow his life, because I passed my word, but he is no longer servant of mine. I shall take instead this honest archer, who has passed the time of life when balcony work is attractive."

"My lord Baron, you will do nothing so foolish. The young man is a jewel. He is a proven man, while you know little of this stranger, who is a foreigner, and, by his own account, a mere hireling. If I am ever to make my escape from this place on horse, or in boat, I want this young fellow here to help me. I feel I can depend on him in an emergency."

"In that case he remains."

At this point Conrad himself appeared, and closing down the trap-door, stood waiting orders.

"You have proven yourself a true man," said the Emperor, "and I will make my promise good to provide your Hilda with a suitable dowry. For the time being your duty lies here, and I beg you to remember that a shut mouth will lead to an open purse. Your master will tell you that you are, for the present, to obey me as you would him, and should I reach here without him, you are to be at my orders. Meanwhile, no word to any of what happened to-night, least of all to Hilda herself, who will not thank you, believe me, for providing witnesses able to give testimony regarding her undoubted affection for you. I shall add to your pay an amount equal to what my friend allows you. Are you satisfied?"

"Yes, my Lord."

"You will give this archer breakfast in the morning," added the Baron, "and then bid him God-speed. Satisfy his hunger and thirst, but not his curiosity. And finally remember well that you are to hold yourself at all times under the special commands of this gentleman, to whom to-night you owe your life, for had I

been alone I would undoubtedly have made good my title of your butcher."

Conrad bowed and remained silent.

The Emperor and the Baron departed, and made their way across the plain to Treves, where they found the dangling rope awaiting them, by the aid of which they reached their rooms, unimpeded by further adventure.

CHAPTER IV
THE EMPEROR DISAPPEARS

For three days the Emperor and Siegfried wandered about Treves and saw much to interest and instruct them. Among other things they noted that the city was more efficiently garrisoned than was Frankfort, the capital. Soldiers swarmed everywhere, insolent and overbearing. One would imagine that no such person as the Emperor existed, for all authority seemed vested in the Archbishop. The talk was of what the Archbishop would do or would not do. Whatever nominal authority the Emperor might possess in Treves, the Archbishop was the holder of actual power, and his wishes were law without appeal.

"I think," said Rodolph, "that when I return from the Holy Land I shall get together an army and pay a visit of State to this Arnold. It would be some gratification for me to know that a few good people in this city were at least aware of my existence."

Once or twice the two were stopped and questioned with an arrogance that was particularly galling to both Emperor and Baron. On these occasions Siegfried's suave diplomacy succeeded in avoiding disaster, but he was in continual fear that the anger of the Emperor himself might be aroused and that something would be said resulting in peril. On the third day the crisis came, and then not through any indiscretion on the part of

the Emperor, but rather from the action of Siegfried himself. As they approached the market-square on the evening of the third day, homeward bent, a truculent officer, with feet spread wide apart, opposed their passage.

"Hold, my fine fellow," he cried, placing his hand rudely on Rodolph's shoulder. "Are you military or civil?"

"Let me pass," said the Emperor, quietly. "I am a peaceable merchant."

"Then by what right do you wear a sword at your hip?"

"By what right do you question me?"

"I question you in the name of his high and mighty Lordship, the Archbishop of Treves."

"Then I answer that I wear this sword by permission of the Emperor Rodolph, being a citizen of Frankfort."

"The Emperor Rodolph is a Swiss, and no true German."

"You lie!" cried Siegfried, whipping out his blade. "The Emperor is a better German than you or any other Treves cut-throat, and he is overlord of Arnold von Isenberg, whose menial you are. Doff your cap to the name of the Emperor, or I will smite your head to the pavement, cap and all."

"Treason, treason!" shouted the officer, springing back and unsheathing his sword. "Treason to the Archbishop! Treason!"

The cry brought instantly all the military, both officers and men, within hearing distance, to the spot, and caused, at the same time, the few civilians of the neighbourhood to escape as quickly as possible. The civil population well knew that in a military

disturbance they were safer in their own houses.

Rodolph had also drawn his sword, ready to stand by the Baron should an onslaught be made, yet he saw in a moment that resistance would be vain, surrounded as they now were by an angry well-armed-mob.

"Arrest those dogs," cried the infuriated officer, "who have dared to question the authority of the Archbishop in his own town of Treves, and have insulted him by drawing blade on one of his officers."

Several soldiers moved forward to execute this command, when Siegfried, holding his sword aloft in the air, shouted:

"Have a care what you do! I am Baron Siegfried von Brunfels, a resident and a householder in Treves, as noble as the Archbishop himself, which his Lordship would be the first to allow. If there is to be an arrest, let the proper authority take into custody this brawling officer, who disgraces the uniform he wears by attempted mishandling of his superiors. By the gods, his Lordship will be surprised to learn of the manners that prevail in his good city of Treves during his absence, and he barely outside the walls."

Those around the Baron instantly fell back upon the proclamation of his quality. Another officer pressed forward with outstretched hand.

"Welcome to Treves, my Lord," he said. "I thought you were in Frankfort."

"I am but newly arrived," replied Siegfried, taking the

proffered hand of his acquaintance, "and come only to meet insult for myself and my guest."

"I knew not his condition," pleaded the originator of the disturbance, in the most abject manner. "I crave your pardon, my Lord, and that of your comrade."

The Baron made no reply, but turned his back upon the suppliant. With his anger rapidly cooling he began to realise the possible consequences of his revelation of identity. He would now be compelled to pay formal court to the Archbishop, and give some plausible reason for his unexpected visit to Treves. If any word reached the suspicious ear of the Archbishop that he had been in the city secretly for several days, his already embarrassing situation would be rendered all the more difficult, and he might speedily find himself an inhabitant of the prison, where it was notorious that entrance was more easy than exit.

He bade good-bye to the officer who had recognised him, pleaded fatigue from his journey in excuse for his refusal of hospitality that night at the officer's quarters, and departed with his guest, looked after somewhat curiously by all who remained.

He knew that they would now hear his opponent's version of the beginning of the mêlée and that all would wonder why a noble of the Baron's rank should be wandering through Treves with a man who announced himself a merchant. The mystery would deepen the more it was discussed, and the Baron felt increased uneasiness regarding his forthcoming interview with Arnold von Isenberg. Yet what troubled him most was the future action of the

Emperor himself. He was resolved that Rodolph should forthwith quit Treves and hie him back to Frankfort, leaving his friend to stand the brunt of whatever explanation might be forthcoming. In this lay difficulty. The Emperor was so loyal to his friendships that he might refuse to leave Treves. Siegfried well knew that when Rodolph made up his mind to a certain course of action, neither persuasion nor threats could swerve him from it. Their coming had been but a foolhardy expedition at the best, and a most dangerous one as well. The Emperor himself had given out that he had departed for the Holy Land. None but Siegfried knew that such departure had not taken place. Let but the crafty Arnold get an inkling of the fact that the Emperor was in Treves secretly, and disguised as a merchant, and he would instantly surround the house with troops, convey both Emperor and Baron to the secret prison he possessed, and there hold them until it suited his purpose to let them go. No friend of either Emperor or Baron would have the slightest suspicion of their fate, for each had elaborately perfected the fiction that they had gone to the East, which fiction now seemed like to be their own undoing, more to be feared than the wrath of the Archbishop himself. How the crafty Arnold would chuckle at the trap they had laid for themselves!

"Baron," said the Emperor, as they walked silently homeward, "I am sorry to disturb your most uncompanionable meditations, but I think we are followed."

"Followed!" echoed Siegfried in alarm, casting a look over

his shoulder. He saw in the distance behind them an officer and two soldiers, who seemed anxious to escape observation and who slunk under an archway when they saw the Baron turn his head.

"Their suspicion is aroused then," said Siegfried. "What can they expect to discover but that I go to my own house accompanied by my guest."

"I thought, my valiant Baron, you would propose to double on them and lead them a dance through the narrow streets of Treves. There would be at least a little excitement in such a course."

"It would merely confirm them in their evident belief that I have something to conceal. No. Our wisest plan is to go directly to my house and let them report that we have done so. But I am convinced that you must leave Treves, and that as soon as possible. I propose, therefore, that we ride through the gates to-morrow, and, if questioned, say we are about to pay a formal visit to the Archbishop. We will then ride to Zurlauben, where Conrad shall mount my fleet horse and accompany you to Frankfort."

"And you?"

"I shall wait upon the Archbishop, and answer any question he is pleased to ask."

"My good Siegfried, no. I can scarcely desert you after having led you into what you were pleased to term a piece of folly. We go together, or we stay together."

"But I must now wait upon the Archbishop. This night's work makes that imperative. Believe me, were I sure you were well on the road to Frankfort, I would meet his Lordship with an easy

conscience."

"Well, we will discuss the project further to-morrow, and, as I am alone to blame, you will not find me obdurate. I shall fall in with any plan you think is to our advantage, for I see you are anxious regarding my welfare."

The Baron von Brunfels was pleased to think that he had gained so easy and complete a victory.

They had now reached the arched doorway, and were speedily admitted. After dinner the Emperor retired early, as had been his custom ever since he reached Treves, excepting on the first night of their visit. Before von Brunfels followed his guest's example he looked out upon the moonlit narrow street, and was somewhat alarmed to notice two soldiers on watch, although they were at such a distance that they probably hoped to escape observation. On the other side of the house he also saw two armed men. It was evident the dwelling was surrounded, and that all exit was now impossible, save by passing the guards or by slipping out of the barred window over the city wall.

The distance at which the sentinels were posted seemed to indicate that this was not done by the Archbishop's authority, but was a measure adopted by some of his officers, who might if necessary disclaim any intention of restricting the liberty of a noble so highly placed as Baron von Brunfels, yet who were determined that no one should leave or enter the house without their cognisance. The Baron's first thought was to put the question to the test by himself passing through the cordon

and seeing whether any dare question him, but remembering that the Emperor was in his charge, he hesitated about further jeopardising his safety. He thought it better to consult the Emperor himself, and if possible persuade him to escape by rope over the wall, make speed to the house by the river, and take horse from there instantly for Frankfort.

With this intent the Baron ascended the stair and tried the door of the large apartment which communicated with the smaller room in which the Emperor slept. The door was bolted fast on the inside. He rapped at first lightly, then more loudly, but there was no response. Hesitating to break the Emperor's slumber for what he might regard as a trivial cause, von Brunfels returned to a lower floor and again reconnoitered, but now saw nothing of the guards on either side of the house. Perplexed, thinking that he had perhaps jumped too hastily to a conclusion; that after all the house might not be invested by the Archbishop's troops; that his own disquiet was the probable cause of his aroused suspicions; he determined not to awaken Rodolph until there was more pressing reason for doing so, but to remain himself on guard until daylight. He asked a servant to put out all lights except that in the dining-room, where he sat with a re-filled flagon at his elbow, ears alert for any unaccustomed sound. Toward midnight he again thought he saw soldiers move silently in the narrow street, as if guard were being changed, but although the moon shone with midsummer brightness, the depth of the shadows cast by the walls made it impossible for any definite judgment to be formed

regarding what was taking place on the street below.

When day began to break grayly, the Baron watched the departing shadows, eager to learn whether or not their lifting would reveal anything of the guard he was convinced had been set on his house, but the clear light of morning showed the streets deserted and silent. Breathing more freely, he threw himself on a bench with his cloak around him and was soon in a deep sleep.

It was late when he awoke. Calling a servant, he asked why he had not been informed when his guest had breakfasted, and learned with renewed alarm that the Emperor had not yet made his appearance. Springing to his feet he strode hastily up the stair to find the door still bolted. With ever-increasing uneasiness he mounted another stair to the small room in which his sentinel sat, whose duty it was to watch for the light in the river house, and to unbar the window below and throw down the rope. This room communicated with the Emperor's apartments below by means of a secret circular stair. The guard seemed surprised to see the Baron, and what was said did not serve to reassure his Lordship.

"The light by the river has been burning all night. When morning broke I pulled up the rope and closed the window. Nobody came in."

"Why did you not inform me before daybreak?"

"I thought it was your Lordship who was out. You came in betimes these three nights past."

"Three nights?" cried the Baron. "Has the rope been in use for three nights?"

"Yes, my Lord. But, until last night, entry was made long before cock-crow."

The Baron, stopping to make no further inquiry, went down the circular stair, and after rapping at the bedroom door, opened it. The room was empty, and the bed had not been slept in. Cursing his own thoughtlessness in allowing the night to pass before finding this out, the Baron unbolted the door, went downstairs, and ordered his horse to be saddled. It was evident that for three nights the Emperor had been engaged in nocturnal rambles of some sort, and it was also plain that he had intended to return on the third night as usual, otherwise the light would not have burned till day-dawn in the window. What, then, had prevented his return? Into what trap had he fallen while the Baron was uselessly guarding an empty house? Had the suspected traitor at the river house informed the Palace authorities of the advent of a mysterious visitor, and had they learned who that visitor was? These reflections tortured Baron von Brunfels as he paced the stone-paved court impatiently waiting for his horse. He resolved to ride at once to the house by the river and extort full confession from Conrad at the point of his sword, slaying him with his own hand if there was the slightest suspicion of treachery.

He sprang into the saddle, when the horse was led out, and roused the echoes of the silent narrow street as he galloped toward the North Gate. He was permitted to pass through without question, and now proceeded more slowly toward the river, not

desiring to show unusual haste. The light still burned in the upper window, and a few moments' investigation served to show that the house was untenanted and the boat gone. Thoroughly convinced now that Conrad was a traitor, he realised the futility of expecting to find him, as he would doubtless be well protected from vengeance by the Archbishop. The Baron bitterly regretted that he had not placed one of his own true and tried servants in charge of the river house. In his heart he had no fault to find with the young Emperor for engaging, unknown to his host, in these hazardous midnight expeditions. Rather he blamed himself for his reluctance in accompanying Rodolph on the first stroll that they took to the river, and thought this reluctance the probable cause of the Emperor's subsequent secrecy.

Having at last succeeded in forcing an entrance, Siegfried unbolted the stable door and placed the horse he had ridden beside the one standing there. In the large room he found an iron lamp dimly burning, and the trap-door raised. Everything tended to show that the Emperor fully expected to return, as he had returned before. Von Brunfels sat down on a bench and buried his face in his hands. He had not the slightest idea what to do, hampered as he was on every side. He could not go into the streets of Treves and cry that the Emperor was missing. He could not go to the Archbishop and seek assistance, as he might have done were the lost man any one else on earth than the Emperor Rodolph. He could not return to Frankfort and raise an army to come to the assistance of a man all supposed to be in the Holy

Land. He might go to Frankfort and await developments, but Rodolph at that moment probably needed the aid of his good sword, a few hundred yards from where he sat. Every avenue seemed closed to him. Rodolph, in whatever prison he lay, was not more helpless than his friend outside.

As the Baron sat there, in a state bordering on despair, his ear caught the sound of a bugle, giving out an imperative note from the direction of the Archbishop's Palace. This was answered faintly from the town. The Archbishop was likely going to Treves. Siegfried sprang to his feet, and determined to present himself to Arnold von Isenberg, as he had need to do that day in any case, and by noting every look and expression of his Lordship, endeavour to form some conclusion regarding Rodolph's fate. Once more outside, he found that, during his brief withdrawal, many things had happened. A troop of horse was drawn up in front of the Palace. Mounted men were hurrying to and fro between Treves and Zurlauben. From the North Gate of the city another body of cavalry was issuing. Bugle notes came over the plains from Treves, and it was only too evident to the Baron that something unusual was afoot. As may be imagined, these hasty military preparations did not tend to soothe his apprehensions. His first thought that the Archbishop intended to proceed from Zurlauben to Treves seemed erroneous, because of the magnitude of the movement going forward. Arnold marched in state when he went abroad, but he did not throw the whole military force at his disposal into commotion by doing so. The

Baron's practised eye, and his knowledge of life in Treves at once told him that some unexpected event had led to the sudden rally of troops round the summer palace. He walked his horse slowly towards the body of cavalry, and as he approached was saluted by the officer in charge, whom he recognised as the friend who had come to his rescue the evening before.

"You have chosen an inopportune time, my lord Baron, for your visit to the Archbishop, if such is your purpose," said the officer, in a low voice, when the Baron came up with him. "I doubt if you will have audience with his Lordship to-day."

"I came with that design," answered Siegfried, with a scarcely perceptible falter in his voice. "What has happened since I last saw you, for there appears to be some commotion of more than usual significance?"

"Ah, that I do not know," replied the officer. "There is something important in the wind that was not thought of last night. War, I hope. My instructions – there is nothing secret about them – is to take the road to Frankfort with all speed. I merely wait the coming of one who is now with his Lordship receiving final directions. Count Bertrich was in Treves this morning when, it seems, the Archbishop thought he should have been at hand. I spoke with the Count two hours ago, and I'll swear he had no idea that there was anything extraordinary afoot. A company has already gone westward with all haste, and five messengers have been despatched, one after another, to Treves for the Count. So impatient is the Archbishop that no sooner does one mounted

man disappear through the North Gate than another is sent off. Here comes the Count now on the gallop at the head of his troop."

As he spoke the party which Siegfried had seen leaving the city came racing up in a cloud of dust. Count Bertrich flung himself from his horse and strode into the Palace, unheeding the salutations he received on all sides. At the same moment a man, booted and spurred, but not in armour, equipped rather for swift riding than for combat, came hurriedly down the steps, sprang on his horse and shouted "Forward."

The officer at once gave the word to his men, and the troop started off at a trot for the Frankfort Road.

Baron von Brunfels sat on his horse, doubtful what next to do. As he hesitated, Count Bertrich came out of the Palace, with pale face and set lips, mounted the horse he had left but a few moments before, gave a curt word of command, and galloped at the head of his company down the river road. Whatever communication he had had with the Archbishop must have been of the shortest, and the cloud on the Count's brow showed it had been at least unpleasant. The Baron determined to see the Archbishop at all hazards, hoping that some chance word would give him a key to these swift and mysterious movements. He dismounted, left his horse in charge of one of the numerous retainers standing about, went up the steps and entered the large hall, which he found filled with officers and nobles, all speaking low to each other; all, quite palpably, in a state of anxiety and unsatisfied curiosity. The Baron walked through this throng to a

smaller ante-chamber into which he was admitted by the officer on guard, on mentioning his rank, and once there he sent his name to the Archbishop. After a time the Archbishop's monkish secretary came out, and bowing low said:

"My Lord, the Archbishop sends greeting to Baron Siegfried von Brunfels, and deeply regrets that it is impossible for his Lordship to receive even the Emperor to-day, were he to honour Treves with his presence."

"Even the Emperor!" repeated Siegfried, slowly, looking with keen apprehension at the secretary-monk, who had delivered so singular a message.

"Those were his Lordship's words," replied the monk, again bowing deferentially, which assurance did little to diminish the Baron's anxiety.

"I trust," said Siegfried, "that nothing untoward has happened to cause his Lordship apprehension."

"I devoutly trust not," answered the monk, with non-committal obsequiousness, and after this remark he gravely took his leave.

Baron von Brunfels again passed through the crowded hall, pausing to converse briefly with one or two acquaintances, but he learned nothing; on the contrary, he found those who knew him, expecting enlightenment themselves because he had just come from the ante-chamber.

The Baron mounted his horse and rode slowly back to Treves, pondering on the exciting events of the day. These events had

convinced him that if Rodolph had been captured in the night, he had evidently escaped in the morning, and that this was the meaning of the hurried scouring of the country. There seemed nothing left but to return to his house in Treves, for he thought that if Rodolph could remain in hiding until nightfall he would probably attempt to re-enter the house by the way he had departed from it, knowing as he must, the anxiety his continued absence would cause his friend. Besides it must undoubtedly occur to him that, while the search lasted, the safest place in which to hide was Treves itself, for the Archbishop would most likely imagine that the fugitive Emperor had made for Frankfort with all the speed he could command.

Reasoning thus, the Baron passed again unchallenged through the gate to his house, which he found just as he had left it. He sent one of his servants to the cottage by the river with strict instructions not to quit the place until he was relieved, and to show two lights in the window if, for any reason, help was needed.

Then the Baron threw himself down on a couch to get some rest, and await the coming of night.

CHAPTER V
LOVE LEADS THE WAY

On the night after his adventure in the boat with the Baron, the Emperor retired early, bolted his door, threw open the window, flung down the rope, and so descended to the plain outside the wall. He made his way across the plateau, pausing for some moments to look at the lighted windows of the Palace, but hesitating to approach near, fearing to be challenged by the sentinels who marched up and down in front of the huge building. Finally he proceeded to the upper part of the village, knocked at the door of his friend's châlet, and was admitted by the young man in charge.

"Well, Conrad," he said, "has our eloquent and skilful archer left you yet?"

"Yes, my Lord. He went away this morning after he had breakfasted."

"Most heartily, I warrant?"

"Yes, my Lord!"

"And whither went he?"

"He said he thought of marching to the Rhine, my master having advised him that he would there find employment."

"I doubt not he will obtain it. They were ever a turbulent crew on the lordly Rhine. We are quit of the archer then. Have you

seen Hilda since last night?"

"No, my Lord," said the young man, casting his eyes on the floor.

"Ah, there I stand your friend. I am come to hold guard until you return from the balcony. But hark ye, Conrad, we are all selfish in this world, and I demand due recompense for my watch and ward. Will you make bargain then to requite good deed with good deed?"

"So far as deed of mine may repay you, my Lord, not only for what you offer, but because of that you have already done on my behalf, you are welcome to any service of mine you are pleased to accept. I hold my life at your hands."

"Then we begin fair, and I see I may make for myself a most favourable compact with you. We are both of an age, and although it may seem heresy to say so under the feudal law, there might be some difficulty, if each were stripped of his trappings, to proclaim which of us was noble and which plebeian. The valiant archer, who was your guest, said quite truly, that under arms the best wielder of his weapon was ever the best man, be he titled or nameless, and I think the same holds true where such archery as that of Cupid comes in question. To be plain with you, Conrad, as lover to lover, there exists a maid in yonder palace with whom I would fain hold balcony discourse – but, alas! she waits not for me, listening to the ripple of the river or for the splash of my paddle. In truth, my friend, she, like many in this district, knows not of my existence, and of the fact that I live and

adore her I should dearly love to make her aware."

"You mean the Countess Tekla, my Lord?"

"Conrad, 'tis easy to see that you have learned the craft of the arrow, not from our stupid archer, but under the tutelage of the god of love himself. Your first shaft shot straight home. Has Hilda ever spoken of her?"

"Sometimes, my Lord. The Countess is most unhappy, she says, because she is to wed the mighty war-lord Bertrich, whom she loves not."

"Then are we laggards indeed, did we stand idly by and offer no aid to the lady. Now, Conrad, what I wish you to do is this: discover for me whether the Countess walks in the garden attended only by Hilda, and at what hour. Get such particulars as you can regarding means of access to the spot, and beseech Hilda, as she hopes her own love shall prosper, to be my friend should I seek speech with the Countess."

"My Lord, there is a better way than that. Hilda told me when last the Court was at the river palace, that I was to hold myself in readiness with my boat, so that her ladyship might come secretly and be rowed by me upon the water. Nothing has since been said of this excursion, but I will ask Hilda to-night if it has been abandoned. I will ask her also to urge her ladyship to come, for Hilda has a persuasive tongue, and the Countess Tekla thinks much of her. Then I shall tell them that I must have a comrade to help me to manage the boat because of the strength of the current."

"Now the gods stand our friends, but that is a most happy conceit of yours, Conrad! Cupid should be the god of liars as of lovers. Therefore get thee with haste to thy balcony. I see we will manage this most skilfully together. See that Hilda be ready to say a soothing word should the Countess take alarm at my addressing her. Urge thou the water trip; dilate on the beauty of the full moon, the quickness with which it waneth, and the softness of the summer night. Plead eloquently, Conrad, and let Hilda think your anxiety rises from your desire to sit near her in the skiff, which will indeed be the truth."

"I shall do my best, my Lord," said Conrad, as he departed.

The Emperor strode up and down, humming to himself a song of the Swiss mountains that told of dangers dared for the sake of a lady. He kept his watch, half-expecting that at any moment his friend Siegfried might knock at the door; but no one came until he heard again the bump of the boat's prow underneath the house. A few moments later Conrad appeared through the trap-door.

"Well, what news?" cried the impatient guard.

"None, as yet. The Countess has not of late spoken of the boating project, but Hilda will suggest it and let me know the result to-morrow night."

"Then with that we must be content. To-morrow – at the same hour – I shall be here, and will again keep watch for you. Meanwhile take this and present it to Hilda to wear for my sake. I should have given it to you before you went to see her to-night,

but became so interested in your plans that I forgot. Set the light in the upper window, and so good night."

He handed to the young man a jewelled necklace, and was gone.

At the same hour on the second night the Emperor was admitted by Conrad.

"Now away to your tryst," cried Rodolph, as soon as the door was barred. "I am impatient to hear the result of your oratory regarding the pleasures of boating in the moonlight."

The young man hesitated, then took from his bosom the necklace that had been given him the night before.

"I fear, my Lord, that this gift is too costly for me to present or Hilda to wear. I beg of you – "

"Tush, tush! Do not stand there chattering about trifles. I promised Hilda a dowry: it is in those jewels if I never give her more. This is an uncertain world, Conrad, and few of us know how long we may remain in it. When you and Hilda are married who knows where I may be? I may become Emperor, or may be a beggar; so in one case I should forget, while in the other there would be little gear in my remembering. Always take the good the gods send, when they send it. 'Tis unsafe to wait a second offer. And now begone, begone. Tell Hilda to conceal the necklace until such time as she can wear it safely or transmute the stones into gold. Away, away!"

Conrad descended to his boat without further ado, and again Rodolph paced up and down the room with even more

impatience than he had shown the previous night. It seemed hours before he heard the lover returning, and when the young man appeared —

"Well, well, well?" cried the waiting Emperor, "when do they come, when do they come?"

"That I cannot yet tell, my Lord."

"Good heavens! May not a conclusion be more speedily reached on a subject so trivial? What did Hilda say?"

"She asked the Countess whether it was her will or no to go out in the boat, as had been formerly proposed. Her ladyship seemed strangely moved by so simple a question. She wrung her hands, Hilda said, and wept a little, crying that she knew not what to do. Hilda assured her I held myself in readiness, upon which the Countess walked up and down the room in agitation, and asked Hilda to beg me not to fail her, if she called upon me."

"There is more in this than appears on the surface. Go on, go on."

"She asked Hilda to inquire particularly where I lived, and where the boat was kept; whether any one else was in the house with me, and the like. Then she said she might go to-morrow night, but would let me know. She said she must see the Archbishop first."

"The Archbishop!" cried Rodolph. "In God's name, did she say why? Is she a prisoner?"

"Hilda thinks she wishes to get his permission."

"A thousand terrors! This is most awkward. It will mean

guards, a retinue, and what not. Why did you not urge Hilda to beg her to come without such ceremony?"

"I did, my Lord, right earnestly. Hilda has promised to do so, and let me know the result to-morrow night."

"Another postponement! I like not the thought of the Archbishop mixing in this matter; but, come what will, we are ready to face it. To-morrow, then, and may it arrive speedily. I give you good-night, Conrad. I will be here at the same hour to-morrow night, or earlier."

When the Emperor arrived on the third night the events happening in Treves, that evening, increased his fear that something would prevent his meeting with the Countess. He felt that he was entangling his feet in a skein that might at any time tighten and overthrow him. He well knew that these three nights' work would meet the strong disapproval of Siegfried, who had reluctantly enough given his consent to the project when its objects were strictly political – the measuring of the Archbishop's military strength and personal power – but now that Mars had given way to Cupid, Rodolph dreaded the opinion of his friend, should he get inkling of the change of purpose. Siegfried's hope was to see Rodolph not only become a real Emperor, but a great one, reducing his powerful and haughty subjects, the Archbishops, for instance, to their proper relation to the Imperial Throne. The Emperor had been inspired with enthusiasm when he left Frankfort, resolving to fulfil his destiny, but now he could not conceal from himself that all political

visions had dissolved for the moment because of one fleeting glance at a handsome woman. He knew he was jeopardising his brilliant future, and perhaps life itself, for the mere chance of speaking to her, and sitting near her. But he was twenty-eight, and he never even thought of turning back.

Conrad had nothing new to tell him when Rodolph entered the house by the river, and the Emperor hurried him away, begging him to make his visit at the balcony as brief as possible. The visit was indeed brief, for the Emperor, impatient as he was, had hardly imagined Conrad at the Palace when the bumping of the boat underneath the house announced his return. Conrad came up through the trap-door.

"Hilda is not there, my Lord," he said.

"Not there? Why did you not wait? My anxiety has brought me here early, yet I could have sworn I arrived later than on either of the other nights."

"It is later; therefore I wonder what has detained her. I did not wait, my Lord, but thought it best to return and let you know. I can go instantly back."

"Do so, Conrad, do so. She may be waiting for you now."

As Conrad was about to depart there came a distinct knock at the door. The two men looked at each other, Conrad in alarm, Rodolph with an expression of annoyance in his face. Much as he loved his friend, the Baron was the last person on earth whose presence he desired at that moment. Not even the Archbishop would be more unwelcome.

The knock was repeated with some emphasis.

"Is there any place from which you can see who knocks? The moon shines full on the front of the house," whispered Rodolph.

"Yes; through the shutters of that bow-shot window."

"Then move cautiously to reconnoitre. We will decide how to act when we know who is there."

Conrad tip-toed to the window, peered through, and drew back with a suppressed exclamation.

"It is the Countess Tekla herself," he cried.

CHAPTER VI
AN UNWISHED-FOR MARRIAGE DAY

The Countess Tekla having dismissed her waiting-maid, sat long in her boudoir over-looking the Moselle, and thought deeply upon the question that the girl had brought uppermost, by asking if the Countess had abandoned all purpose of making an excursion on the river. Such indeed had once been her intention if the iron Archbishop, her unrelenting guardian, persisted in forcing his will upon her. His last word had been given her the day the Court left Treves, and it was to the effect that she should hold herself in readiness to wed Count Bertrich at the Cathedral when the Court returned. The time for preparation was short, and once inside the walls of that grim city, all chance of escape would be cut off. Could she but reach Castle Thuron, the lofty stronghold of her uncle Count Heinrich the Black, on the Lower Moselle, she felt that, for the sake of kinship, if not for her broad lands, he would refuse to give her up again to the Archbishop and to this abhorred union with a middle-aged ruffian, who, rumour said, had murdered his first wife.

The stern Black Count, her uncle, she had never seen, and what she had heard of him was disquieting enough. His mailed hand was heavy, and it came down with crushing force on all who

opposed his will; but he could not make for her a more detested match than that which the Archbishop insisted upon; and then he was her mother's brother; if any trace of softness was concealed in his adamantine nature his niece might perhaps touch it, for he had no children of his own.

Yet the Countess felt that in setting up her own will against that of her guardian she was doing an unheard of, unmaidenly act. All women were thus disposed of. How came it that rebellion against just authority arose in her heart? She could not herself account for this strange anomaly, and she feared that evil lurked somewhere in her nature. She had confessed this feeling to her spiritual adviser, and he had mildly, reproachfully censured her for it, placing her under penance that she willingly endured, hoping it would bring about a change; but it had not, and she shuddered every time the battle-scarred face of Count Bertrich leered upon her. The Countess knelt before the image of her patron saint and implored help; help to decide; help to oppose; help to submit; but the placid saint had sent, as yet, no solution of the problem.

When last the Archbishop spoke, he spoke as one giving final decision and he permitted neither reply nor comment. The days by the river were slipping away and none knew how soon the Archbishop might suddenly make up his mind to return to Treves. Then the Cathedral, and the wedding procession! Why had Hilda spoken of the river and the skiff; that wild project which she had prayed for help to put out of her mind? Was this

then an indication that her saint had come to a decision and that too in her favour? It certainly seemed so.

She resolved to seek her guardian, throw herself at his feet and implore him by the love he had once held for her father, who had lost his life in the Archbishop's service, to release her from this loathed union. She would give up her lands willingly, if that were required, and would retire to a convent in Treves, or to any other place of refuge that might be appointed.

Arnold von Isenberg sat in a chair that was with difficulty to be distinguished from a throne. The back rose high above his head, and at the top was carved in gilded relief the arms of the Electorate. The tall pointed coloured windows by the river, cast a subdued radiance of many hues on the smooth surface of the polished oaken floor. The lofty timbered roof of the large room gave the apartment the appearance of a chapel, which effect was heightened by an altar at one end, where several high wax candles burned unceasingly.

Near the Archbishop, by a table, sat the monkish secretary, who wrote at his Lordship's slow dictation, orders pertaining to business both ecclesiastical and military. At the door of the room, which was concealed by a heavy crimson curtain, stood two fully-mailed men-at-arms, with tall pikes upright, whose ends rested on the polished floor. Near them, out of hearing of the Archbishop's low voice, stood, cap in hand, a courier equipped for riding, evidently awaiting the despatches which the monk was writing. Deep silence pervaded the great room and each person

within it was motionless, save only the monk, who now was tying the despatches into bundles and sealing them at the small candle which burned on the table beside him.

The heavy drapery over the door parted, and a retainer entered softly, standing with his back to the curtain until a scarcely perceptible motion of the Archbishop's head permitted him to advance. Dropping on one knee before the seated monarch, he said:

"My Lord Archbishop, the Countess Tekla begs to be admitted."

The Archbishop made no reply, and the messenger remained on his knee. The despatches were given to the waiting courier, who departed. Then his Lordship said curtly, "Admit her."

The messenger, rising, went to the door, held back the curtains, and a moment later there glided into the room the Countess Tekla, who stood pale against the crimson background. The Archbishop regarded her with a dark and menacing look, but gave no other greeting. Seeing no motion which invited her to approach, the girl, after standing a moment or two in hesitation, moved swiftly forward and sank down before the throne.

"My Lord," she murmured; then agitation seemed to choke her utterance.

"If you come here to kneel," said the Archbishop, in low, deep tones, "kneel at the altar yonder and not to me. While you are there, pray that the saints bestow upon you a contrite spirit."

"My Lord," she cried, "I beg of you to take my lands, and

graciously permit me to retire to a convent that you may be pleased to appoint for me."

"Your lands are mine, as your person is mine, to dispose of at my will, unquestioned."

"My Lord, when my father gave my guardianship to you – "

"I hold my guardianship, not by your father's will, but through the reading of the feudal law. Your father, in dutifully testifying that his wish ran parallel with the law, set an example which his daughter may profitably follow."

"I wish to follow his example. I wish to render up to you all lands that were his. I wish to devote my poor services to Mother Church."

"Your poor services shall be given where I bestow them. Betake yourself to your apartments, and come not here again until you bring with you a bending will and an unrebellious spirit."

"My lord guardian, I do beseech you to hear me."

"I have heard enough and too much," said the Archbishop sternly. "Write," he added to the secretary: "'To Count Bertrich. Hold yourself in readiness to wed the Countess Tekla in the chapel of our summer palace two days hence – on Friday at mid-day.'"

The Countess rose to her feet, the colour mounting to her cheek and brow.

"My Lord," she cried, a ring of indignation in her voice, "add to that a request that the Count disclose to you the cause of his

first wife's death, so that you may judge whether he is a fit person to entrust with a second."

"You may question him regarding that after marriage. I have ever understood that a man will grant information to his bride which he risks peril of his soul by concealing from his confessor. To your apartments, obstinate woman; there is but brief space to prepare for the festivities."

"My Lord, my Lord, I bid you beware. It is feudal law that you may dispose of my hand as you will; but by feudal law I also have the right to make choice instead of a convent and forfeiture of my lands."

"Despatch that message to Count Bertrich," said the Elector to his secretary.

"My Lord Archbishop, I will appeal to our Holy Father, the Pope, and to the Emperor."

"Do so. We will marry you first, and should we have made a mistake our Holy Father hath ample power to remedy it. And now, madame, your audience is ended."

The Countess retired to her apartments, knelt before the image of her saint and prayed for guidance. She was in some doubt that the harsh old man would insist on the carrying out of his threat, and she had hope that he would send for her to tell her so, but no message came from him. Tekla slept little that night, and going down to early mass she saw the chapel already decorated for the dreaded ceremony, the workmen having evidently spent the night in preparing it.

The floral wreaths, the loops of white flowers breathing sweetness and perfume, typical of love, joy and happiness, seemed in such ghastly contrast to the reality, that their simple presence did more to decide the girl than all the other influences which, on that eventful day, helped to shape her conduct.

She resolved to escape from the thraldom of the Archbishop; seek refuge in the castle of her uncle, and from that haven send an appeal to the Pope and also to the Emperor. The only question was now that of means. Castle Thuron was on the Moselle; the river was swift; she knew little of the geography of the country, but she was aware that the roads by the stream were bad, and she doubted if they extended all or even the greater part of the way to the Rhine. Could she once get several hours start, on that rapid current, the chances of being overtaken were slight.

While the Countess had full confidence in her maid Hilda, she thought it better not to confide her plans to any one. Hilda would be sure to tell her lover, and that young man might at the very outset refuse to undertake so perilous a voyage.

Then if Hilda were cross-questioned and became frightened, she could not confess what she did not know. In the case of failure Tekla wished to face all the results of her rebellion alone, and leave herself the right to say that none other knew of her purpose. Questioning Hilda, and finding she had learned where Conrad lived, the Countess, with the natural craft of her sex, made preparations calculated to baffle her pursuers, temporarily at least. When darkness set in, she requested Hilda to lay out for

her the costume she usually wore. This costume she astonished Hilda by asking her to put on. When the tire-woman had thus arrayed herself the two looked like sisters, and Hilda laughed merrily at the transformation, which caused even the Countess, anxious as she was, to smile.

"Now listen attentively, Hilda, and act with circumspection. I have reason for wishing you to be mistaken for me to-night. You will put on this heavy veil so that none may see your face. Go quietly through the Palace and pass the guards without speaking to any or looking at any. Avoid meeting three persons at all hazards; return at once if you see one or other of them, and hie forth again as soon as danger is past. These three are the Archbishop, Count Bertrich, and the monk who is his Lordship's secretary. The guards will not stop you nor speak to you, thinking it is I who pass. Once outside, see that you are not followed, then get you to Conrad's house and bid him instantly to take you in his boat to the watersteps of the Palace, where I will await you."

"Conrad spoke of another to help him with the boat; should he be absent shall Conrad search for him, my Lady?"

"No. If he is there, bring him; if he is not, come instantly without. But first you must come with me to the water-door and bolt the door when I am out upon the steps."

"But how shall we return, my Lady?"

"I will tell thee more regarding our return when we are in the boat."

Hilda barred her lady out, which seemed a strange proceeding,

then, safely reached without question or following, the door of Baron Siegfried, where she knocked twice.

CHAPTER VII
THE FLIGHT OF THE COUNTESS

"It is the Countess Tekla herself," cried Conrad, at the window.

"Then unbar at once and do not keep her waiting," commanded the Emperor, eagerly.

The bolts were instantly drawn back and the door thrown open.

"Oh, Conrad," whispered Hilda, flinging the veil over her shoulder, thus disclosing her face. She paused in the midst of her speech when she saw a stranger standing there.

"It is Hilda," said Conrad, to the Emperor. "Why do you masquerade as the Countess, Hilda?"

"It was her ladyship's wish. You are to take me in the boat with you immediately. The Countess awaits us at the watersteps."

The trap-door was open, and the Emperor descended, saying, hastily, "Come, Conrad."

"He is no boatman," whispered Hilda, holding back in alarm. "Who is – "

"Hush!" breathed Conrad, "trust to me and come."

An instant later the boat was pushed out with its three passengers, moving swiftly and silently down the stream, propelled by the lusty but noiseless strokes of Conrad's paddle.

As they approached the watersteps it seemed at first that no one was there, but as Conrad with outstretched arm placed hand on the stone stairway and brought the boat to a stand, the shadowy form of the Countess came away from the closed door and a whisper breathed the name of Hilda. Hilda responded reassuringly, and the Countess came down the steps, Rodolph standing and handing her into the boat with a deference that the lady was too much agitated to notice. Her small hand, lightly touching his as she stepped into the boat, sent a thrill through him such as he had never experienced before. The Countess sat down with her back toward him, facing Hilda and Conrad.

"Now, good rowers," she said, breathing quickly, "keep within the shadow of the bank until we are sure to have escaped espionage, then I shall have further instructions, and remember that if you work well and silently I shall reward you beyond your hopes."

"May that prove true in my case," said Rodolph to himself.

The huge Palace seemed to float to the west; the moon shone brightly, but there was shadow enough thrown by the low bank to conceal the voyagers not only from chance wayfarers, should there be any, which was unlikely, but also from each other. The summer night was warm, and not a breath of wind rippled the surface of the river. Now and then some waterfowl, disturbed by their approach, plashed two or three times, beating wing against water, until it rose with a cry and soared away into the night.

They had made down the river for nearly an hour when Conrad

began murmuring to Hilda, who sat next him.

"The Countess does not know how swift this river is," he said. "We will not get back in a week if we go much further. If it had been up the stream time would matter little, but down – "

"What does he say?" asked the Countess.

"He fears we cannot return betimes if we go further. The current is fleet to row against."

"Conrad," said the Countess, bending towards him, "we go not back, but forward. Seek the speediest part of the river, and guide the boat into it. I am on my way to Castle Thuron near the Rhine."

Both Hilda and Conrad gave utterance to exclamations of astonishment and alarm.

"But the Archbishop?" cried Hilda.

"But my master!" groaned Conrad.

"The Archbishop will follow us in hot haste when he finds us gone, Hilda, which will be some time before noontide to-morrow, therefore must Conrad persuade the swift stream to aid his stout arms."

"The boat is not mine," said Conrad, "and I have left my master without his sanction."

"I will amply reward your master for the losing of his boat, and you for the guiding of it. Both you and your comrade will I take into my employ, and neither shall lose by the transfer."

"Will you stand for me against my master as you did before, my Lord," cried Conrad, in great alarm at the possible

consequences of his desertion from a master who brooked no excuse.

"My Lord!" cried the Countess, half-rising and looking round for the first time at the second boatman, on whom the moonlight now fell, showing that he had removed his cap, and was bowing to her.

"I pray you, madame, do not stand, for this boat is but unsteady at best. I beg you not to be alarmed, for I shall be as faithful to your behests as Conrad here, and no man can give himself higher warrant."

"What lord are you, or are you one?"

"Conrad, in his excitement, gives me title to which I make no claim, exaggerating my importance because of some influence I have exerted on his behalf with his master."

"What is your name and quality, for I see you are no waterman?"

"I am sorely disappointed to hear you say so, madame, for I hoped to make good my reputation as waterman by my work to-night. My name is Rodolph, and none who know me will deny I am a gentleman."

"Are you German?"

"As German as the Emperor and a fellow-countryman of his."

"You are a Swiss adventurer, then?"

"All men have a touch of the adventurer about them: I not more than others, I hope."

"Why are you here disguised as a boatman?"

"I am not disguised, but in my ordinary dress – the costume in which I have appeared these few days past in Treves. The house by the river, of which Conrad is caretaker, belongs to my friend, who is Conrad's master. It happened that I was there when your tire-woman came in real disguise, and when I heard that you awaited the boat on the watersteps of the Palace I felt sure something more serious than an excursion by moonlight was intended, although Conrad suspected nothing. I came, therefore, thinking you might perhaps need the help of a good sword, and that sword I now lay at your feet."

"I need a swift paddle rather than the best of swords. My safety lies in flight, and not in fighting."

"My services as oarsman are also at your disposal, madame. I trust that in your presence there will be no need for swordsmanship; but should such necessity arise a stout blade is not to be despised."

The Countess mused for some moments in silence, evidently disquieted by the intrusion of a stranger, yet well aware that if he proved true and staunch his help might be invaluable. It was impossible for her to question Conrad about him in his presence, for she saw he was a gentleman, as he had asserted, but a fear arose that he might be some adherent of the Archbishop, intent on furthering his own interests by delivering her into the hands of his Lordship's minions. She knew that at various posts along the river, companies of the Archbishop's troops were stationed – at Bruttig, at Cochem, and elsewhere; he could, at the moment

of passing any one of these places, give the alarm which would result in her immediate capture. He was armed and Conrad was not, therefore there might be some difficulty in disposing of him even if no help were at hand. Still anything was better than uncertainty, and she resolved to act at once. The river now ran between high hills, densely wooded from top to water's edge. If he could be put off it were better to disembark him in a wilderness like this, than at some settlement where he had opportunity of raising the hue and cry of pursuit. Yet she did not wish to leave him to starve or be torn in pieces by wild boars roaming an almost unlimited forest. The perplexing part of the problem lay in the fact that if he were a spy and a traitor he might refuse to land, while if he were a true man he would rid them of his company when he saw that it was not wanted.

The Countess leaned forward and spoke to Conrad.

"Do you know this river?"

"I know it as far as Cochem, my lady."

"Where are we now, think you?"

"We are some two leagues above the ancient Roman town of Boveris."

Turning to Rodolph, she said:

"Is the Archbishop your over-lord?"

"No, madame. I am a free man, owing allegiance to none."

"Not to the Emperor?"

"To the Emperor, of course, but to none other."

"Where did you come from, and how long have you been in

Treves?"

"I came from Frankfort some three or four days since, and never saw Treves before."

"You came to seek service with the Archbishop perhaps?"

"No, madame. I am a student as well as soldier. I came merely to inform myself regarding the manners and customs of so celebrated and ancient a city as Treves."

"Know you who I am?"

"You are the Countess Tekla, ward of the Archbishop of Treves and niece of Count Heinrich, to whose Castle of Thuron you are now betaking yourself."

"You are well informed. For what object did you gather this knowledge?"

"I sat on horseback outside the North Gate, having just arrived from Frankfort, when the Archbishop and his train passed through on their way to the summer palace. I saw you riding by his side, and discovered who you were."

"Were you similarly inquisitive regarding the other ladies of the Court?"

"I saw no others, madame."

The Countess seemed taken aback by this reply and remained silent for a few moments. At last she said, with deep displeasure in her voice:

"I distrust you, sir. If you are a gentleman, as you say, you are aware that none such thrusts himself uninvited into a lady's presence. I ask you, therefore, to leave us."

"I am truly grieved, madame, to refuse your slightest request, but I will not leave you until I see you safely at the gate of Castle Thuron."

This refusal at once confirmed all the fears the Countess had entertained. With rising anger she cried:

"Not to the gates of Thuron will you deliver me, but to the Archbishop's troops at Bruttig, and then return to Treves for your reward."

Having said this she did what any girl of nineteen might have been expected to do – she buried her face in her hands and wept.

"Madame," said Rodolph, "forgive me. I may have overrated my ability to serve you in the future, but I see there is no doubt I cause you present distress. I will at once do as you desire. Conrad, draw the boat toward the northern shore."

When the craft touched the bank Rodolph sprang on a rock that jutted into the stream. Before leaving the skiff he slipped his cloak from his shoulders and allowed it to remain where he had been seated. On landing he drew his sword from its scabbard and flung it to Conrad, saying, "Use that only when you are compelled to do so, but trust, unless something unforeseen occurs, to the paddle. Keep the boat in the swiftest part of the current and stop question for none. And now, away with all speed, getting as far down the river as possible before daybreak."

Conrad looked stupidly from the sword lying at the bottom of the boat, up to its owner standing on the rock, not comprehending at first what had happened or was about to happen. When the

situation broke upon him he cried:

"You are surely not going to desert us, my Lord?"

Rodolph gave no answer, but the Countess, drying her tears, made reply to him.

"It is my wish that he leave us, Conrad."

"If that be the case," said Conrad, stoutly, "I return to Treves. I have put my neck in a halter only on the assurance of his Lordship that the rope be not pulled. If my surety is gone, then will the halter tighten. Not an inch further down the Moselle do I go; in truth, we are much too far already, and God knows what time we shall see Treves again, against this current."

"Tell your fellow," said the Countess, imperiously, to Hilda, "that he must complete the task he has begun. He will obey you, even though he refuse orders from me, and I will protect him at the journey's end."

"Indeed, indeed, my Lady," cried Hilda, in despair, torn between love for her lover and loyalty to her mistress, "why cannot we go on as we began? What needs this lord to be sent thus adrift in the forest, weaponless?"

"We want not his weapon; our safety, as he himself says, is in flight. Give back the sword, Conrad. I will protect you."

"Pardon me, my Lady," replied Conrad, with sullen stubbornness, "but how you can protect me when you are flying for your own safety I cannot comprehend. The one who can protect me and who has done so, stands on the bank, and either he comes again into the boat, or I go back to Treves. The fewer

words that are spoken the less time there is lost."

The Countess Tekla was quick in her decisions. She turned to the young man standing silent in the moonlight upon the rock. She could not but see what a handsome manly fellow he was, and at the sight of him her fears regarding his loyalty diminished, in spite of herself, although she strove in her own mind to justify her action.

"My Lord, as they persist in calling you, in derision of your disclaimer, you see my crew has mutinied on your account. I beg of you, therefore, to return to your place."

"Countess," answered Rodolph, "more great enterprises have been wrecked through mutiny within the ranks, than because of the enemy without. It is unpleasant to be looked upon as a traitor by one we are proud to serve freely, therefore, as a condition of returning I must ask you to withdraw the imputation you cast upon me."

"I do withdraw it. Have you further terms to make now that you see me helpless?"

"I shall take advantage of your helplessness to impose one more condition. I am to be captain of this expedition, my power being absolute and unquestioned. You, not less than they, are to be under my orders, which must be obeyed promptly and implicitly. Do you agree?"

"Having no choice, I agree."

"Countess, as you will, when your expedition succeeds, make generous amends for the present ungraciousness of your

acceptance, I am content to wait for commendation until then. Conrad, give me the sword. Hilda, sit in the bottom of the boat, and Conrad will fling his cloak about your shoulders. Countess, my cloak will form but an inefficient carpet, still 'tis better than naught. Lay your head in Hilda's lap, and your own cloak shall be your coverlet. So. Now to sleep. Conrad, strike out for mid-stream."

Propelled by the sturdy strokes of both, the boat shot out from under cover of the land and re-commenced its rapid voyage down the river. Now and then a sleeping village was passed, and once disaster was narrowly averted when Conrad's quick eye recognised the floating logs which upheld the linked loops of chain that stretched across the river below a robber castle.

This obstruction was intended to stop boats of deeper draught than the light skiff, and compel their owners to pay reluctant tribute to the lord of the castle. The skiff passed midway between two of the logs and floated over the submerged chain in safety.

The banks on either hand were high, almost mountainous, and those on the northern side were clothed with vines nearly to the summit.

The moon sank behind the hills and for a time the darkness was intense, rendering navigation a matter of some skill and alertness, not without a spice of danger. Both the Countess and Hilda slept peacefully and neither man spoke. Only an infrequent plash of paddle, or the lonely cry of a disturbed waterfowl, or night-bird, broke the stillness.

At last the short summer night gave token of ending. The lightening surface of the water first heralded the approach of dawn, then the stars began to dim over the eastern hills, and a faint, ever-spreading suggestion of grey crept up the sky beyond.

Rodolph ventured on a sigh of relief and weariness as the light increased and the difficulties of the task lessened, but he soon saw they were merely exchanging danger of one kind for danger of another, as an early man-at-arms on the right bank espying him, loudly commanded them to draw in and explain themselves, which command, being unheeded, he forthwith planted stake in ground, strung his cross-bow and launched a bolt at them in such hurry that it fell uselessly short and was a good bolt lost. By the time the second was ready, the skiff and its occupants were hopelessly out of range.

But the cry of the challenger had awakened the Countess, who sat up to see the red rim of the sun breaking out above the hills and flooding the valley with golden light.

"Are we nearly there?" she asked.

"I think not," answered Rodolph. "In truth, I know not where we are. Is it still far to Thuron, Conrad?"

"We are not yet half-way. It is, I judge, but seven hours since we left Treves, and if, with this current and our own work, we have sped two leagues an hour we have done well. That gives us fourteen leagues accomplished. From Treves to Thuron is somewhere about thirty-four leagues, so there must be twenty at least before us."

The Countess gave a cry of despair. "Is it then so far? I thought we would reach the castle by daybreak. Have we passed the Archbishop's palace at Cochem?"

"No, my lady. Cochem is but six short leagues from Thuron."

"Is it your wish, madame, to stop at Cochem?" asked Rodolph.

"Oh no, no. Anywhere but there. I am well known to all about the palace."

"But none would have the right to detain you."

"Not the right perhaps, but the power. To see me travel thus, without fitting escort, would be sure to arouse suspicion, and the custodian of the palace might well take it upon himself to hold me there until he knew the Archbishop's pleasure."

"We must have food. Conrad, know you of any inn further on?"

"There are no inns along the Moselle except at Bruttig and Cochem; I think there is a house at each place where soldiers drink and boatmen eat and lodge."

"How far is Bruttig from here?"

"About ten leagues, my Lord."

"That is five hours at this going. What soldiers are at Bruttig?"

"The followers of Count Winneburg, those of the Count of Beilstein, and soldiers of the Archbishop."

"If the Archbishop's soldiers are there I beg that you will not stop," said the Countess.

"I am not sure but protection lies in the very fact that they are there. Your flight, in all likelihood, has not yet been discovered

in Treves; we have many hours the start of pursuit, and are not likely to be overtaken. Still we shall not stop there, if food can be procured elsewhere."

When the sun was two hours high, they drew in at a village on the northern bank, nestling at the foot of the vineyard-covered hill. Here they rested for an hour and broke their fast in a fashion. Nothing but the coarsest of black bread could be obtained, with some flagons of inferior white wine. The river was now broader and the current less swift, so that progress was more slow than had been the case during the night. In addition, they had frequently to creep close to the bank on one side or the other to escape observation, and this delayed them. Consequently the sun was well past meridian when Bruttig, with the Castle above it came into sight, and all in the boat were ravenously hungry.

"We will halt here and dine," said Rodolph. "I think there is nothing to fear. I have a passport, and I am a merchant from Frankfort, journeying from Treves to Coblentz. You, madame, are my – my sister, and these two are our servants. It is well to remember this if we are questioned separately. You, Conrad, will wait by the boat, and I will have food and wine sent to you. Countess, I shall escort you to the inn and Hilda will wait upon you. Much depends on acting naturally and showing no anxiety."

The Countess made no objection to this arrangement, and Conrad, with a stroke of his paddle, turned his boat towards the sloping beach that ran along the river in front of the little town.

CHAPTER VIII
THE RAPIER AND THE BROADSWORD

Bruttig consisted of a row of houses facing the river, some few hundred feet back from it. In the centre of the row, near the landing, which was rudely paved with round stones, stood the inn, a sufficiently forbidding-looking square structure, with an arched gateway in front, apparently leading to a courtyard. The gates could be closed at night, and doubtless were, so that, in a way, the inn might be successfully defended from assault should necessity arise, as was often the case in those troublous times.

The bewildering mixed jurisdiction of the place, governed as it was by no less than three over-lords, the Count of Winneburg, the Archbishop of Treves, and the Count of Beilstein, was shown by the different uniforms of the men-at-arms who now, in groups or singly, watched the landing of the party from the skiff.

The three Captains, who represented the three over-lords of Bruttig, were lounging round the doorway of the inn, watching the landing of the mysterious boatload. Such a frail craft coming down the Moselle was an unusual sight, and naturally attracted the attention of the three officers, who were, as a rule, excellent friends, except when a fight was in progress, and some question of jurisdiction came up that had to be argued on the spot with

two-handed swords. They referred to each other by the titles of their chiefs, each man, being spoken to by his comrades as the Archbishop, Beilstein, or Winneburg.

"What have we here, Elector?" asked the Captain who commanded the forces of Count Winneburg.

"That is for our comrade Beilstein to answer; this motley crew belongs to him. You had the last boat-load to exact tribute from, and I the one before. I am glad that it falls upon Beilstein to deal with women, for such traffic befits not the Church," replied the Captain of Treves. The Captain of Beilstein, a tall, powerful, swarthy man in full armour, twirled his black moustache, which spread across his cheeks like a pair of ravens' wings, and gazed down at the landing party.

"There is this to be said, they give us little trouble in bringing them ashore, but are, apparently, about to walk confidently into the lion's mouth," remarked Beilstein, "which seems to argue that they are waterfowl, little worth the plucking."

"Rather that they know not whither they are bound," suggested the Elector. "The young spark hands my lady from the boat with something of an air about him that was not caught in trading booths, and the girl stepped daintily out upon the cobbles in a manner that suggests the Court. If she improves on closer inspection, Beilstein, you are in luck. Would there were three women instead of two."

"They are sufficient as it is," said Winneburg, with a chuckle, "for the Church has just disclaimed all desire for such

merchandise."

"Ho, within there, Host," cried Beilstein, through the gateway. "Here comes gentle custom for thine inn, and you are not by to welcome it."

In response to his call a short burly sullen-looking man, with bullet head, came out and stood under the arch, looking at the group ascending from the river, but as there was little pleasure in his gaze he probably expected small profit from their approach.

Rodolph cast a rapid glance at the four men, bowed slightly to the three officers, who took no notice of his salutation, and addressing the host, said:

"This lady desires a room where she may rest unmolested after her journey. Let such refreshment as you have be instantly prepared. The lady will lunch in her room, and I will eat wherever pleases you. Send as speedily as possible, food and wine to my servant, who remains with my boat by the landing."

The host made no reply, but turned his lowering look upon the officers, as if waiting for word from one or all of them.

"You hear his Lordship's commands, I hope," roared Beilstein, "the best in the house for the lady and that without delay. The gentleman will doubtless wish to remain here and make the acquaintance of three good fellows."

The innkeeper, telling the Countess briefly to follow him, led the way within. Rodolph was about to enter the court-yard, when the stalwart Captain blocked his way, standing with feet set wide apart before him.

"Friend," began the Captain, genially, "we fall on turbulent times, when each man is suspicious of his neighbour. You have little objection, doubtless, to inform us who you are and why you travel."

"None at all," replied Rodolph. "I am a merchant of Frankfort; I journeyed to Treves, transacted there my business and am now returning to Frankfort by way of Coblentz."

"And the lady?"

"The lady is my sister. The two with us are our servants."

"You have little room in your craft for merchandise."

"We came to Treves on horseback by the Roman road, the merchandise carried by mules. It is now sold and thus I return empty-handed."

"Not entirely empty-handed, I trust, for you must have received something by way of honest recompense for honest merchandise. If you sent your gold back to Frankfort by the way the goods came, and now journey down the Moselle with barely enough to pay the innkeeper here for what you have of him, that, I fear, will be looked on by the virtuous barons as a slight upon their probity, and some may hold you to ransom merely to show all future travellers that the noble river is not to be thus lightly dealt with. But, as I before proclaimed to you, we live in a suspicious time, and you, probably do not expect your bare word to be taken regarding your quality. I need hardly ask you if there is in your possession some slight document having reference to your occupation."

"I have a passport, which I shall be pleased to exhibit on being assured of the right of any questioner to demand it."

"I am Captain of the forces here, stationed to serve my Lord, the Count of Beilstein, one of the three over-lords of Bruttig. By consent of my two colleagues of Treves and Winneburg I am Captain of the Day, responsible to my master and to them that no traitors come within our precincts. If further warrant of my right to question is required, then my good two-handed sword stands sponsor to me, dealing forth argument that few care to controvert. Is it your pleasure that I call upon it to set any doubts at rest concerning my authority?"

"Not so. The word of an officer is at all times sufficient for me. I merely desired to know to whom I should have the honour of submitting this document for inspection," saying which Rodolph handed to the officer his passport, although it was evident a moment later that the worthy man, brave soldier as he might be, could not read it. He turned it over and over in his hand, then glanced at the Captain of the Elector, who watched him with a smile.

"This seems in proper form," said Beilstein, shrugging his shoulders, "but you soldiers of the Church are on terms of acquaintance with these characters, which are denied to us who are more practised at arms than with the pen. Construe for us the sheet, Elector." The Captain of the Elector took the parchment and cast his eye over it.

"There is nothing here of a sister, merchant," he said, looking

at Rodolph.

"It is not customary in Frankfort," replied Rodolph, "to take much account of our women. They come and go as they please, providing they are accompanied by a relative or guardian who possesses a proper passport."

"Frankfort customs hold not on the banks of the Moselle," said Beilstein, menacingly.

"Did your sister enter and leave Treves under this passport?" asked the Elector.

"Freely."

"Unquestioned?"

"Absolutely unquestioned."

"Did the Archbishop know of her presence?"

"She had the honour of appearing at the Archbishop's Court."

"Hum!" ejaculated the Captain of the Elector, doubtingly, lowering at the polite stranger suspiciously from under his bushy eyebrows. "The manners of his Lordship's Court must have changed since I knew aught of them, if Arnold von Isenberg invites Frankfort merchants to his circle."

"We have the privilege of being vouched for by Baron Siegfried von Brunfels, now in Treves. I may also add that although I engage in traffic, there is no plebeian blood in my veins."

The Elector's Captain handed the passport back to Beilstein, saying in an undertone, "I should not meddle with these people were I in your stead. 'Tis likely what he says may be true."

"And what is that to me?" cried Beilstein, angrily. "Bruttig is not under the jurisdiction of Arnold von Isenberg alone, nor will Winneburg or Beilstein suffer sole jurisdiction to be claimed by him under any pretence whatever. Speak I not true, Winneburg?"

"Aye," agreed Winneburg's Captain cordially, "and this party falls to you by fair agreement previously made."

"I have put forward no claim to special jurisdiction," said the Elector. "I gave a hint to a friend that it is ill meddling with any pet of the Lion of Treves. You may act on it or not, as pleases you. I shall not interfere unless the merchant here brings me written message from Arnold von Isenberg. Have you any such, sir? If so, give it to me before mistakes are made."

The trend of the discussion showed Rodolph that he was in danger of some kind, which might require all his craft to avoid, for if it came to blows he stood no chance whatever. He also realised that hope lay in winning to his side the good will of the Archbishop's Captain, and, if possible, in gaining some assurance of the neutrality of Winneburg's man. He imagined, however, that he saw a disposition on the part of the two local authorities to stand together against the Archbishop, and a reluctance on the part of the Archbishop's delegate to force matters to an issue. It was, all in all, a most difficult position.

"I have a message from the Archbishop to you, but it will please him better if I am not compelled to deliver it. We are peaceful travellers in his lordship's domains, and have a right to pass on our way without hindrance."

The surly host at this moment came out and announced that the meal was prepared. A lad passed through with a loaf and a measure of wine for Conrad. Rodolph, bowing to the three officers, followed the host.

"What do you propose to do?" asked Winneburg.

"I can tell you better when I have had a glimpse of the maiden. If she suits my fancy I shall have a broadsword bout with the brother, by way of introducing myself amicably to the family."

"Not the best method, perhaps, of commending yourself to the lady, whether victor or vanquished."

"The strong hand, Winneburg, is ever the surest, whether it grasps girl or gold."

The officer of the Archbishop remained silent, while the other two discussed the question. Something in the manner of Rodolph impressed him with the belief that the young man spoke as one having authority, and he knew that if a mistake were made, Arnold von Isenberg was one to punish first and weigh excuses after. He knew that if he opposed Beilstein, or even tendered advice, the obstinate officer would the more surely persist in whatever course he had marked out for himself, so he resolved to maintain silence and keep a watchful eye, governing his actions by whatever might befall. With a scarcely perceptible signal to his lieutenant, he conveyed a message to him that seemed to be instantly understood, for the subordinate at once set himself quietly to the gathering of his men, who grouped themselves round in an apparently casual manner, and remained within call.

While Beilstein and Winneburg were conversing Rodolph reappeared, with the Countess and her maid accompanying him. The sun had already begun to decline far in the west, and the cloudless sky gave promise of a fine summer evening. Beilstein strode forward.

"I have questioned your brother, my girl," he said, "and now, by your leave, I would have a word or two with you. But first draw aside your veil that we may all see whom we have had the pleasure of entertaining in our poor town of Bruttig."

The Countess shrank timidly from him without speaking, and Rodolph at once stepped between her and the officer.

"Sir," he said, gravely, "I have answered all your questions fairly and fully. If you have more to ask, propound them, I beg of you, to me, and I shall again reply until you are satisfied."

"Merchant," cried the officer, working himself into an anger, "your passport makes no mention of this lady. I must therefore look upon her face and judge if there is any sisterly likeness that may give colour of truth to your words. Madame, remove your veil, and put me not to the disagreeable duty of tearing it from your face."

"Is it possible, gentlemen," said Rodolph to the other two, "that a lady is to be thus insulted in your presence, and am I to take it that we can look for no protection from you?"

"It is none of my affair," said Winneburg, impartially.

"I can act only on the written authority of the Archbishop or on the spoken word of a superior officer, whom I personally know,"

replied the Archbishop's man, with a keen glance at Rodolph, which said as plainly as words, "If you have such authority, in God's name, produce it."

Rodolph, turning to the Countess, whispered, "Slip away to the boat while I hold this fellow in check. Get in and tell Conrad to push out into mid-stream. Float down the river and if I do not overtake you along the bank, hurry on alone to your journey's end."

"Sir," he said to the officer, "if you do not wish your own master to curse your interference, you will allow me to go my way without further question."

"Then you shall explain to my master who you are. Come back!" he cried to the Countess, who was hurrying down the slope, and he would have followed after her, but Rodolph, whipping out his slender rapier, stood squarely in the way.

"Ho, there, men of Beilstein!" shouted the officer, "stop those women. Tie me up that fellow at the boat, and cast the boat adrift. Now my fine merchant you have at last found your toy weapon. Is it your purpose to stand against me with that shivering reed?"

"I will do my best, if you insist on an encounter, which I beg of you and your comrades to note I have tried my utmost to avoid. But in fairness allow my sister to go, and wreak your vengeance on me alone. When did you men of the Moselle begin to war on women?"

"The woman shall be the prize of the contest," said the officer, confidently.

The other two looked on in amazement. The rapier was entirely unknown throughout Germany and had only recently come into use in Italy, where Rodolph, dwelling as he did, on the borders of that country, had learned its deadly use. The giant swung his two-handed sword once or twice round his head, and in a loud voice asked his antagonist if he were ready. Rodolph answered nothing, but threw away his cloak, which he would have used as an article of defence had he been opposed to one similarly armed to himself, knowing that in this encounter he must depend on his agility for his safety, and to the cumbrous nature of his opponent's blade, for his chance of attack. The battle was over almost before the spectators knew it had begun. Beilstein brought down an overhead swirl of his heavy blade which would assuredly have annihilated any living thing it encountered, but Rodolph sprang nimbly aside and when the blade struck the earth he darted sharply forward, thrusting the thin rapier through the officer's neck, the only unprotected vital part of his body, springing back again out of arm's length in an instant. The giant strove to raise his blade, but the effort caused a red jet of blood to leap from his throat, and spatter down upon his breast-plate. Rodolph stood apart, braced and alert, the sting of death held tense in his hand, showing not a trace of blood on its shining, needle-like length. No groan escaped the Captain, but a pallour overspread his swarthy face; he swayed to and fro like a tottering oak, apparently upheld by his huge sword, the point of which he had been unable to extricate from the earth. Then he suddenly

collapsed, and came, with a clash of armour, to the ground.

The horrified lieutenant of Beilstein, seeing his master thus unaccountably slain, at once raised the cry of "Beilstein."

"Up! men of Beilstein!" he roared. "Your master is murdered. Surround his assassin and take him, dead or alive, to the castle. Beilstein! Beilstein!"

"I ask your protection, gentlemen," appealed Rodolph, turning to the remaining officers. "I claim adherence to the rule of the combat. I fought reluctantly, and only by compulsion. I demand the right to go without further opposition."

"Beilstein! Beilstein! Beilstein!" The cry reechoed through the town and soldiers came running from all quarters with weapons drawn.

"He speaks truth," said the Elector's man. "He has won his liberty, and may go for all I care."

"Not so," cried Winneburg. "It was no fair contest, but devil's swordsplay. To the castle with him and his brood."

The angry soldiery now pressed round Rodolph, but took good care to keep out of the reach of his flashing weapon.

"Get a pike," said one; "that will outreach him."

"Pikes, lances, pikes!" ran from mouth to mouth. Rodolph saw he must speedily be overpowered, and a scream from the affrighted women in the hands of the soldiery decided him to try a desperate remedy for a desperate case.

He sprang upon the prostrate body of his foe, and towering over the heads of the clamouring throng, raised his sword aloft

and shouted, "The Archbishop! The lady is the Countess Tekla, ward of Arnold von Isenburg, insulted by these Moselle ruffians, while you cravens stand by and see it done. Officer, you have already nearly compassed your own damnation. Redeem yourself by instantly falling to the rescue. Treves! Treves! Is there an Archbishop's man within hearing? Treves! Treves! Treves!"

The Archbishop's officer at once gave the word, and his men, beating down opposition, formed around Rodolph and the Countess. Winneburg stood undecided, and before he made up his mind, the fight was over, the Beilstein men being demoralised for lack of a leader.

"You have entangled us in this affair," said the officer to Rodolph, "and if you have cried the Archbishop's name unwarranted, your head is likely to roll off in consequence. I have seen the Countess Tekla. Will she, therefore unveil so that I may be sure I have not been deluded, or do you prefer to wait until I hear from his Lordship?"

Before Rodolph could reply, the Countess threw back her veil.

"I am indeed, as you see, the Countess Tekla, ward of the Archbishop," she said.

"A fine watch you keep on the Moselle," cried Rodolph, with simulated indignation, "when the Countess Tekla cannot journey to her guardian's Castle of Cochem without having his Lordship insulted in her person by unmannerly marauders at Bruttig, where he supposes he holds through you, control and safe-conduct for all properly authenticated travellers!"

The officer bowed low to the Countess and to Rodolph.

"I crave your Lordship's indulgence and forgiveness. Had you but given me the slightest hint of this I would have protected you."

"I gave you all the hint I could, but you paid little heed to it."

"I am deeply to blame, and I implore your intercession with my Lord the Archbishop. I will myself, with a troop of horse, instantly escort you to Cochem and see you safely bestowed there."

"All I ask of you is to secure our boat and let us depart as we came."

"Alas! the boat is gone, and is now most likely half-way to Cochem. Shall I order you accommodation here until you can communicate with the Archbishop?"

"No, we will at once to Cochem. Have you horses for the Countess and myself and for our servants?"

"Yes, my Lord."

"Then we will set out on our journey as soon as they are ready."

The officer saluted, and departed to give his orders.

"What shall we do? oh, what shall we do?" asked the Countess, wringing her hands.

"Do not be afraid," said Rodolph, with a confidence he did not himself feel. "We will be so much the further from Treves and so much the nearer to Thuron. We will ride side by side to Cochem, and then consult on what is best to be done when we

get there. Meanwhile, keep a firm command of your agitation, and do not show fear. The officer has no suspicion, and will do whatever I ask of him. They, perhaps, do not know yet of your flight at Treves, and even if they did they cannot get here much before this time to-morrow, and not then unless they come by boat. Have no fear; I will, as I promised, see you safe in Thuron gate."

The Countess impulsively held out her hand, and gave a warm pressure to the one extended to her.

"Forgive me," she whispered, "for my distrust of you last night. You are a brave and true soldier."

CHAPTER IX
A PALATIAL PRISON

The Captain presently appeared with a dozen mounted men at his back, and four led horses.

"I hold it well," he said to Rodolph, "to get as speedily away from Bruttig as may be. The lieutenant of Count Beilstein has gone in haste to the castle to tell his Highness what has happened, and it was not within my right to detain him. The Count will be beside himself with rage at the loss of his Captain, so it is safer that you lodge within Castle Cochem as soon as possible. He will think twice before he attacks the Archbishop's stronghold. Is it your will that I send a messenger to Treves to acquaint his Lordship with the welfare of his ward?"

"That is not necessary," replied Rodolph. "The Archbishop will doubtless prefer to hear of our safe arrival at Cochem, and a messenger can be sent from there. Is there a chance that we may be intercepted by the forces of Count Beilstein?"

"No interception is possible. His men here are without a leader, and will attempt nothing, even if they were able to accomplish anything. The Count himself will likely come in haste to Bruttig, but by that time we shall be in Cochem, I hope and although the road by the river is none of the best, it is as bad for him as for us."

"Let us get on, then," said Rodolph. He assisted the Countess to mount, sprang into his own saddle, and felt that exhilaration which comes to a horseman when he finds a spirited steed under him.

Four of the cavalry headed the procession, with eight to bring up the rear, the Countess and her attendants riding between. Rodolph rode by the side of the Countess, with Conrad and Hilda out of earshot behind them, the Captain leading the four horsemen in front. Their rough way led along the right bank of the river.

"Nothing has been heard from the Archbishop, I trust," said the Countess.

"There is little to fear from him until late to-morrow, and not even then unless your escape was discovered early to-day – a most unlikely event."

"But might not the pursuers ride all night?"

"A difficult and hazardous task they would set themselves in passing through the forest in the dark, and slow work even if successfully accomplished."

"Then we need have no apprehension if we can get clear of Cochem before the pursuers from Treves arrive at Bruttig?"

"Once quit of Cochem, pursuit will be futile. My plan is to keep a sharp look-out for the drifting boat. Conrad will secure it if possible, and we will get away from Cochem to-night, if we can leave the castle; but I know nothing of its conformation, nor of how it is guarded."

The Countess shook her head. "I am afraid it will be difficult to leave Cochem at night," she said. "The castle is always well and strictly guarded, and occupies an almost inaccessible position on the top of a hill."

"There is nothing for it then but to go with this escort to Cochem, and trust to Providence and our own ingenuity thereafter. I may have something to suggest when I have seen the place."

The increasing roughness of the road made conversation more and more difficult. An hour's riding and a turn in the river brought them in sight of the grand castle of Cochem, its numerous pinnacles glittering in the last rays of the setting sun. It was another hour before the cavalcade arrived opposite the place. A trumpeter of the troop blew a bugle blast that was echoed back from the rock-ribbed conical hill on which the castle stood. The signal was answered by another from the ramparts of the fortification itself, and presently a boat put out from the foot of the rock. In this boat the Countess and her attendant were placed, while those on horseback set their steeds to the swift current and landed some distance below, at the lower end of the little village that clustered from the foot of the hill, extending down the valley. The Countess mounted her dripping horse, and the troop rode slowly up a winding path that partly encircled the vine-clad hill, and at last arrived at the northern gate, which was the chief entrance to the castle. Here, after a brief parley, the portcullis was raised and the party admitted to a large courtyard that hung

high above the Moselle, overlooking a long stretch of the river as it flowed toward the Rhine.

The custodian of the castle received his distinguished guest with that humble deference which befitted her lofty station, assisting her to dismount and evidently entertaining not the remotest suspicion that the visit was unauthorised. The Countess enacted her part well.

"I commend to your care," she said, imperiously, "my Lord Rodolph, who has conducted me from Treves. Until the Archbishop himself arrives you are to hold yourself entirely at his orders."

The custodian bowed low, first to the Countess and then to Rodolph.

"How soon may we look for his Highness the Archbishop?" he asked.

"You will most likely hear from him to-morrow. Is my suite of apartments ready?"

"They are now being prepared as speedily as possible; but as no messenger brought us word of your coming, I hope your Ladyship will pardon the delay," answered the custodian, with some trepidation.

The Countess made no reply, but with her whip beckoned Rodolph to her side.

"Do the troopers remain in the castle, or return to Bruttig to-night?"

"I have told their officer to keep them here until morning. If

a messenger from the Archbishop arrives at Bruttig sooner than we look for, he will likely remain there until this officer returns. The Archbishop would count on the Captain being at his post, and it is not likely that the messenger's instructions would run further than Bruttig, which will give us further time."

"Will you then give your commands to the custodian regarding the disposal of the men? I think he will obey you; but it is well to discover this by bestowing orders first that are unimportant, before we put our power to a supreme test."

Rodolph gave directions, which, to his relief, were instantly obeyed. The custodian escorted Countess Tekla into the castle, while Rodolph walked round the courtyard to get some idea of the lay of the land and the construction of the fortifications. The view down the river was magnificent, as also was the outlook up the Endertsbach valley, with the huge round tower of Count Winneburg's castle standing out against the evening sky, built on a hill nearly equal in height to the one crowned by Schloss Cochem.

Rodolph's short examination of the castle's position speedily showed him that it was a place difficult to get into or escape from. To steal away at night was hardly practicable, unless one had a ladder of ropes, while to escape by day was equally hopeless, as a fugitive could be seen for miles in any direction until he was lost in the forest.

As the Emperor stood at the corner of the elevated terrace, gazing down the river, he became aware of some one's approach,

and a moment later the deferential voice of the aged custodian broke the silence.

"A goodly sight, my Lord," he said, "and although I have looked at it for many a year, it never becomes less lovely to my eyes. It is rarely the same, varying with every change in the atmosphere, but always beautiful."

"It is indeed a marvelous view, and not to be the less enjoyed because your position up here is well nigh impregnable," answered Rodolph.

"Altogether so, I think," replied the custodian, with the pride of an old retainer in his castle and a belief in its unassailableness, the result of many futile assaults he had seen. "Before Cochem falls the souls of hundreds of its assailants will seek a final abiding place, in bliss or other where, as God wills."

"Does the road we came by from Bruttig, follow the river further down?"

"No, my Lord, it ends opposite the castle. On this side, however, there is a path that follows the river from village to village, but how far it goes, I do not know, for I never explored it to the end."

"Are there many castles between here and the Rhine?"

"Only three or four, some standing back from the river in the valleys that run into the Moselle. The chief castle is that of the Black Count, robber and marauder that he is, and it is called Thuron. Were it less strong, I think the good Archbishop would have smoked him out long ere this. Count Heinrich has a chain

across the river, stopping all honest traffic until tribute is paid, and if there is any cavilling about it, he takes the whole cargo and casts the merchant into a dungeon to teach him respect for the nobility, as he says. But some day there will be a reckoning, for Black Heinrich, while compelling due respect to be paid by all inferiors, is himself most disdainful to those above him."

"Flouts he the Emperor, then?"

"Oh, the Emperor!" said the custodian, with a shrug of his shoulders, that might have been held contemptuous, "the Emperor is but a name, and commands scant respect along the Moselle. He is some young man recently elected, who loves better the dallying of his Court than the risking of good stout blows in the field. They tell me he comes from a noble family in Switzerland, and is not of Germany at all, and I warrant the Archbishop does not wait to ask his leave if he wishes to pull down a castle about the ears of a truculent Baron."

"Then it seems to me our friend, the Archbishop, may be accused of the same want of respect for higher authority that you lay at the door of Count Heinrich the Black."

"The worthy Archbishop, God bless him, recognises no overlord but the Pope himself and I have sometimes doubted whether Arnold von Isenberg paid very much attention even to his Holiness; but then I am letting my tongue run away with me, and am talking of what concerns me not."

"It will do you no harm as long as I am the sole listener. Does Castle Thuron stand on this side of the river or on the other?"

"On the other. It crowns a hill somewhat similar to this and as high, but it is as unlike Cochem as one castle can be unlike another, for this is part palace and part fortress, while Thuron is a fortress pure and simple, and a strong one at that. A stout wall has been built from the castle down to the river, and it is said that there is a passage within, where ten men can walk abreast, although that I doubt. There is certainly a passage by which food or water can be taken up to the castle, while the carriers pass unscathed, protected by strong stone walls."

"It seems, then, that the first duty of besiegers would be to break that wall, and thus cut communication between the castle and the river."

"That is easy to suggest, but there would be difficulty in the doing. The walls are stout and will stand some battering; then the two great round towers of the castle are armed with catapults which, they say, will fling round stones even across the river itself. Besides this, there are engines along the wall for a similar purpose. The attacking party would have to remove solid cemented stone, while the defenders would merely have to sweep down along the hillside unprotected men who had little to cling to. I think it is no secret that the Archbishop had Thuron examined by spies with a view to its capture, but they strongly advised him to leave it alone; safe counsel, which his Lordship followed."

"When the assault takes place I hope we shall be there to see."

"Ah," said the ancient keeper, with a sigh of regret, "I fear

I shall have no such pleasure, for I grow old and Arnold grows cautious. My only hope comes from Heinrich himself, for he is like enough to hurl some insult at the Archbishop that cannot well result in anything but the uprising of pikes; indeed, he once threatened to attack Cochem itself, and for a day or two we had merry preparation, but he thought better of it, and no more came of the threat, much to my regret, for I should have liked to see Heinrich crack his crown against Cochem. And now, my Lord, if you will come within, you will find a meal prepared, for which I doubt not you have sufficient appetite."

The young man and the old entered the castle together.

CHAPTER X
THE INTERCEPTED FUGITIVES

In spite of his anxiety, Rodolph slept that night with a soundness that carried him, unconscious, further into the morning than he had intended when he lay down. It had been his purpose to rise early, and perfect some scheme for quitting the castle without arousing the suspicions of its inmates. The getting off, he knew, must be accomplished that day, and as soon as possible in the day, for undoubtedly the pursuers of the Countess must now be well down the river.

The Emperor, on breakfasting, learned that the Countess had been up long before, and was at that moment praying in the chapel. The Captain and the escort had left for Bruttig, and when Rodolph went out upon the terrace he saw the band far below, climbing up the opposite bank on dripping horses, rising from the clear waters like spirits of the river, into the thin transparent mist that floated over the stream. The morning sun was gently gathering up the airy, white coverlet of the Moselle, promising a clear and brilliant day. The troop below, seen dimly through the intervening haze, had formed in regular order, two and two, the Captain at their head, with the Archbishop's pennant flying above them, and were now trotting slowly up the river road.

"Always beautiful, and never the same, changing with every

hour of the day. In a short time the slight fog will have lifted, and the heightening sun will reveal the full glory of the view."

Rodolph turned quickly and saw standing at his elbow the old custodian of the place, as he had stood on the same spot the evening before.

The young man wondered if any suspicion of the real state of the case had entered the custodian's mind; whether his cat-like steps and unexpected appearances, his haunting of his guest, did not betoken some distrust that all was not as it should be. The custodian had likely learned from the Captain that the Countess came from Treves to Bruttig in a small boat, practically without escort, and that there was trouble before the identity of the party had been disclosed. On the other hand the custodian must know that the Archbishop often adopted a course of action, the object of which was known to none but himself, and his Lordship had small patience with any underling who exhibited inconvenient curiosity regarding the intentions of those above him. Rodolph resolved to set his doubts at rest by a practical test.

"The day," he said, "indeed promises to be fine. To a man of action, however, the precincts of the castle are somewhat circumscribed, and the marvellous view makes him more and more conscious of the limited extent of this most charming terrace. Has the Archbishop some good horses in his stables, or does he keep them all at Treves?"

"His Lordship has a rare fondness for a choice bit of horse-flesh, and there is here an ample variety. Does your Lordship

wish to ride this morning?"

"Is the country round about safe? I have no desire to be captured and thus put the Archbishop to the trouble of knocking down some castle in effecting my rescue."

"The district is reasonably safe. Perhaps it may be well not to venture into the territory of the Count of Winneburg, up the valley of Endertsbach yonder, but down the river there is little chance of molestation; still, I can provide you with an escort that will most likely leave you free from attack wherever you go."

"No," said Rodolph, with unconcern. "It is not worth while to turn out a guard, besides the Archbishop himself may be here at any moment and I think he would like to find the whole garrison ready to receive him, although he said nothing to me about it."

"Yes, Arnold von Isenberg does not overlook scant ceremony when he takes himself abroad. Would you care to see the horses, my Lord?"

Rodolph thanked his host for the invitation, and together they went to the stables, where he selected four horses, and directed that they should be accoutred for riding, two for women and two for men.

"The Countess," he said, to the custodian, "has been accustomed to out-door recreation, and is an excellent horsewoman. I am sure she will desire to take advantage of this exhilarating morning, but I shall now wait upon her and learn her wishes."

To the Emperor's relief, the custodian remained behind to

see that the orders were promptly carried out, while Rodolph went back to the castle. He sought the chapel, which was reached by passing through the castle and crossing another courtyard looking toward the west. The chapel at the south-west angle of the castle seemed to hang over the river, standing as it did on a projecting rock, whose straight sides formed a perpendicular cliff, rising like a castle wall from the deep slope of the hill. The chapel was a small but very perfect bit of ecclesiastical architecture, recently built by Arnold von Isenberg himself. As Rodolph entered the vestibule he was met by the Countess hurrying out.

"Oh, my Lord, my Lord," she cried, with agitation in her voice, "the troops of the Archbishop are now coming down the river. I have seen them from the window within." Rodolph closed the door of the chapel so that they might not be overheard.

"I think," he said, "that the men you saw are those who left us this morning. They are the troops of the Archbishop indeed, but they are going toward Bruttig."

"No, no. Hilda has been watching them for a long time, while I prayed before the altar. Just now she told me she saw a troop meeting those who escorted us hither. Come and see."

The interior of the chapel was in dim-coloured obscurity, all the windows being of glass, sombrely stained. The lower part of one window looking to the south-west opened on hinges, and there Hilda stood gazing up the river. For a long distance the Moselle ran straight toward them, apparently broadening as it

approached. Far away Rodolph saw the two troops meet, but the distance was too great for him to distinguish whose flag flew over the further party.

"It may be that they are retainers of Count Beilstein," said the Emperor. "If it should so chance, there is like to be a hostile meeting. If they belong to the Archbishop, there will be a short conference, then all will probably return to Cochem."

As he spoke the approaching troops came together and it was soon evident that they had no hostile intentions towards each other. A cry from the Countess called his attention to the fact that one horseman was hurrying alone toward Bruttig, and that all the rest were riding at increased speed for Cochem.

"There are four horses now ready in the courtyard. Countess, I beg of you to appear calm and to show no haste in getting away. We will ride slowly to the river and then into the forest: after that we will make what speed we may to Thuron, and I much doubt if those who follow will have sight of us before we reach the castle."

The Countess and Hilda went to their apartments to prepare for the journey, while Rodolph sought Conrad, and told him briefly that he was to make ready for travel.

The four horses with their attendants stood in the courtyard, and presently the Countess appeared coming leisurely down the steps, followed by Hilda. The ancient custodian busied himself in seeing that everything was to the liking of his guests. The gates were thrown open, and the portcullis gradually raised with much creaking of rusty chain. The small cavalcade rode slowly forth,

down the winding way, while the old guardian of the castle stood watching them as they descended.

No word was spoken until they had rounded the hill and once more caught a glimpse of the river. The shoulder of the promontory on the opposite side cut off their view of the Bruttig road, and there was, as yet, no sign of the oncoming troop.

"Even if there was only the river between us," said Rodolph reassuringly, "we should win the race for their horses are tired, and ours are fresh and of the best. We can surely ride as fast as they along a road that is not well adapted for speed; the good custodian told me it is but a path, and he seemed uncertain how far even that extended. Everything is in our favour, and so far as I can learn, nothing but a few leagues of forest and the waters of this river are between us and Thuron gate."

"Is the castle, then, on the other side?" asked the Countess.

"Yes, but the path, such as it is, is on this, and I have no doubt our horses, accustomed to the river, will make little of swimming across, when we catch a glimpse of the two round towers of Thuron."

"I can scarcely believe that we have come so easily forth from yon stronghold, for last night my heart sank within me as I heard the clang of the portcullis descending, and it seemed to me that we were trapped beyond hope of rescue."

"You showed little fear, Countess, if, indeed, you felt any, which from your words and manner at the time, I am inclined to doubt."

The Countess shook her head. "I quaked with fear, nevertheless," she said, simply, glancing sideways at him.

Reaching the foot of the hill they made their way, still without haste, along the front of the village, which straggled for some hundreds of yards facing the river. A short distance below Cochem the cliffs projected to the Moselle, and the path struggled up the hill in zig-zag fashion, finally forming a narrow cornice road running parallel with the stream, but high above it, and when at last it descended to a lower level Cochem Castle was finally shut from their view as they looked backward. Rodolph, who was leading, now put spurs to his horse, and the rest of the company came trotting behind as best they could, Conrad bringing up the rear. The path kept mostly along the margin of the stream, frequently diverging into the forest, and then always mounting upwards, to pass some obstacle where the banks were steep and the waters of the Moselle lapped the face of the rocks. On every height Rodolph paused till the others came up with him, and looked anxiously back where the trees permitted a retrospect, but no sign of pursuit was ever visible. Thuron Castle stood but five leagues from Cochem, and between the two places the river ran nearly in a direct line, forgetting the crooked eccentricities that had marked its progress further up. The roughness of the path and its numerous divergencies from the level made it difficult for the riders to accomplish more than a league an hour. They had been four hours on the journey when Rodolph called Conrad to his side, and said to him:

"Have you any knowledge of the distance still between us and Thuron?"

"No, my Lord. I have no acquaintance with the river below Cochem."

"The sun is at least two hours past meridian, and we must have food. Ride on to yonder village and see if they will prepare something for us."

"My Lord, knowing how badly travellers fare who depend on chance foraging down this valley, I brought with me from Cochem a skin of wine and food enough for half a dozen. We might rest on the hill top after passing through the village and there eat."

"Your foresight was wise in one way and dangerous in another. Asking for food and wine might have aroused suspicion in the castle, although apparently it has not done so."

"I took none into my confidence, my Lord. The buttery is well provided, and they keep not such strict watch on it as they do at the outer gate. I was bidden go there and refresh myself; which I did, and then took with me what was most portable, palatable and sustaining."

"In that case you are to be commended as a more thoughtful campaigner than myself, but, in truth, I was so anxious to get out of the castle I thought little of bringing anything else with me than those in my charge."

Passing through the village, which they learned was called Hattonis Porta, from the hill that overshadowed it to the east,

they began the ascent that was to bring them to their resting-place. The top of the hill commanded the valley up the Moselle for a distance of two or three leagues, and they would thus have ample notice of pursuit, and might therefore lunch in peace. Furthermore, when Rodolph reached the top, he was delighted to see but a short distance further on, and across the river which, rounding the promontory, turned toward the north, the two grey towers of a strong castle, which from the description he had received of it, he instantly knew to be Thuron; thus their journey's end was in plain sight. The empty road far up the river gave him assurance that, should the enemy appear in view, there was ample time for them to cross the river and reach the castle before they were even caught sight of by their pursuers. Rodolph slipped from his horse and stood there awaiting the arrival of the Countess, whose tired steed was coming slowly up the hill. Before he assisted her to dismount he pointed out the castle.

"There, my Lady," he said, "is the residence of the Count, your uncle, and the end of your toilsome march."

"Now may the saints be thanked for their protection," cried the wearied girl. "How I have prayed this some time past for a sight of those towers!"

She slipped from her horse into his arms, and he held her perhaps a moment longer than was necessary to set her safely on the turf. If the lady resented this, she at least made no complaint about it, but the colour came swiftly to her fair face, and she sighed, probably because the haven was so near.

Conrad and Hilda now came up, and assisted each other in setting forth the meal that the former had brought from Cochem. Then the horses cropped the grass near by, securely tethered, as Tekla and Rodolph took their repast together, while Hilda and Conrad did likewise at a little distance.

"What do you propose to do when we reach Thuron?" asked the Countess.

"I shall first offer some good advice to the Count Heinrich, if he will listen to me."

"What advice?"

"To provision his castle instantly for the coming siege."

"The coming siege? I do not understand you. The country is at peace."

"True, but the peace will be speedily broken. The Archbishop will invest Thuron Castle as soon as he can collect his forces."

The Countess looked at him for some moments with dilated eyes, in which apprehension grew more and more pronounced.

"Do you mean that there will be war because – because of me?"

"Most certainly. Did you not know that?"

The girl arose and regarded him with ever-increasing dismay.

"I shall return instantly to Cochem," she said, at last. "I will give myself up to the Archbishop. There shall not be bloodshed on my account, no matter what happens to me."

The Emperor smiled at her agitation, and her innocence at not in the least appreciating the inevitable consequence of her revolt.

"You will do nothing so foolish," he said. "Besides, you are under my command until I deliver you safely to your uncle, and I assure you I permit no rebellion in my camp. Even if you returned to the Archbishop you would merely consign yourself to a prison, and would not prevent a conflict. I understand that your uncle has on more than one occasion demanded the custody of your person, and the crafty Archbishop would never believe that he had no hand in your flight. His Lordship has for some time been meditating an attack on Thuron, and I learned at Cochem that the devout Arnold recently sent spies to discover how best the castle might be taken; so it is more than likely you are doing your uncle the greatest service in giving him warning of a struggle which is hardly preventable, and which might, at any moment, have taken him unaware."

"A siege!" said the Countess, clasping her hands before her, speaking more to herself than to her listener and gazing across the blue river at the two grim grey towers on the hill top. "A siege of Castle Thuron?" Then turning suddenly on Rodolph and flashing upon him a swift bewildering glance of her splendid eyes, speaking rapidly, she asked:

"Will you be in the castle during the conflict?"

"I most sincerely hope and trust I shall," cried the young man, fervently. The girl drew a deep breath that was almost a sigh, but said nothing. Rodolph stretched forth his hand to her and she put her hand in his, looking frankly into his honest face. No speech but that of their eyes passed between them. But there ran

rapidly through her mind the thought that had the Archbishop endeavoured to force her to marry a man like Lord Rodolph, she might never have sought escape from Treves.

Conrad at this point interrupted them.

"My Lord," he said, "there is one coming up the hill, who looks like the archer."

The Emperor rose, and accompanied Conrad to the brow of the descent, with some anxiety, fearing that the newcomer might prove to be one of the pursuers who had somehow escaped his vigilance. There was, however, no cause for alarm; a moment's glance showed that it was indeed the archer, who being stout and cumbered by pike, cloak, and various belongings, with longbow slung over his shoulder, toiled somewhat slowly up the steep ascent, pausing now and then to mop his brow and gaze around him, a habit of caution learned during the years of campaigning. On catching sight of the two men standing above him he stopped, took the bow from his shoulder, strung it, gazing up at them for a moment, then mounted leisurely as before, ready for any greeting he might receive.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.