

**GEORGE
MEREDITH**

FARINA

George Meredith

Farina

«Public Domain»

Meredith G.

Farina / G. Meredith — «Public Domain»,

Содержание

THE WHITE ROSE CLUB	5
THE TAPESTRY WORD	9
THE WAGER	16
THE SILVER ARROW	20
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	21

George Meredith

Farina

THE WHITE ROSE CLUB

In those lusty ages when the Kaisers lifted high the golden goblet of Aachen, and drank, elbow upward, the green-eyed wine of old romance, there lived, a bow-shot from the bones of the Eleven Thousand Virgins and the Three Holy Kings, a prosperous Rhinelander, by name Gottlieb Groschen, or, as it was sometimes ennobled, Gottlieb von Groschen; than whom no wealthier merchant bartered for the glory of his ancient mother-city, nor more honoured burgess swallowed impartially red juice and white under the shadow of his own fig-tree.

Vine-hills, among the hottest sun-bibbers of the Rheingau, glistened in the roll of Gottlieb's possessions; corn-acres below Cologne; basalt-quarries about Linz; mineral-springs in Nassau, a legacy of the Romans to the genius and enterprise of the first of German traders. He could have bought up every hawking crag, owner and all, from Hatto's Tower to Rheineck. Lore-ley, combing her yellow locks against the night-cloud, beheld old Gottlieb's rafts endlessly stealing on the moonlight through the iron pass she peoples above St. Goar. A wailful host were the wives of his raftsmen widowed there by her watery music!

This worthy citizen of Cologne held vasty manuscript letters of the Kaiser addressed to him:

'Dear Well-born son and Subject of mine, Gottlieb!' and he was easy with the proudest princes of the Holy German Realm. For Gottlieb was a money-lender and an honest man in one body. He laid out for the plenteous harvests of usury, not pressing the seasons with too much rigour. 'I sow my seed in winter,' said he, 'and hope to reap good profit in autumn; but if the crop be scanty, better let it lie and fatten the soil.'

'Old earth's the wisest creditor,' he would add; 'she never squeezes the sun, but just takes what he can give her year by year, and so makes sure of good annual interest.'

Therefore when people asked Gottlieb how he had risen to such a pinnacle of fortune, the old merchant screwed his eye into its wisest corner, and answered slyly, 'Because I 've always been a student of the heavenly bodies'; a communication which failed not to make the orbs and systems objects of ardent popular worship in Cologne, where the science was long since considered alchymic, and still may be.

Seldom could the Kaiser go to war on Welschland without first taking earnest counsel of his Well-born son and Subject Gottlieb, and lightening his chests. Indeed the imperial pastime must have ceased, and the Kaiser had languished but for him. Cologne counted its illustrious citizen something more than man. The burghers doffed when he passed; and scampish leather-draggled urchins gazed after him with praeternatural respect on their hanging chins, as if a gold-mine of great girth had walked through the awe-struck game.

But, for the young men of Cologne he had a higher claim to reverence as father of the fair Margarita, the White Rose of Germany; a noble maiden, peerless, and a jewel for princes.

The devotion of these youths should give them a name in chivalry. In her honour, daily and nightly, they earned among themselves black bruises and paraded discoloured countenances, with the humble hope to find it pleasing in her sight. The tender fanatics went in bands up and down Rhineland, challenging wayfarers and the peasantry with staff and beaker to acknowledge the supremacy of their mistress. Whoso of them journeyed into foreign parts, wrote home boasting how many times his head had been broken on behalf of the fair Margarita; and if this happened very often, a spirit of envy was created, which compelled him, when he returned, to verify his prowess on no less than a

score of his rivals. Not to possess a beauty-scar, as the wounds received in these endless combats were called, became the sign of inferiority, so that much voluntary maiming was conjectured to be going on; and to obviate this piece of treachery, minutes of fights were taken and attested, setting forth that a certain glorious cut or crack was honourably won in fair field; on what occasion; and from whom; every member of the White Rose Club keeping his particular scroll, and, on days of festival and holiday, wearing it haughtily in his helm. Strangers entering Cologne were astonished at the hideous appearance of the striplings, and thought they never had observed so ugly a race; but they were forced to admit the fine influence of beauty on commerce, seeing that the consumption of beer increased almost hourly. All Bavaria could not equal Cologne for quantity made away with.

The chief members of the White Rose Club were Berthold Schmidt, the rich goldsmith's son; Dietrich Schill, son of the imperial saddler; Heinrich Abt, Franz Endermann, and Ernst Geller, sons of chief burghers, each of whom carried a yard-long scroll in his cap, and was too disfigured in person for men to require an inspection of the document. They were dangerous youths to meet, for the oaths, ceremonies, and recantations they demanded from every wayfarer, under the rank of baron, were what few might satisfactorily perform, if lovers of woman other than the fair Margarita, or loyal husbands; and what none save trained heads and stomachs could withstand, however naturally manful. The captain of the Club was he who could drink most beer without intermediate sighing, and whose face reckoned the proudest number of slices and mixture of colours. The captaincy was most in dispute between Dietrich Schill and Berthold Schmidt, who, in the heat and constancy of contention, were gradually losing likeness to man. 'Good coin,' they gloried to reflect, 'needs no stamp.'

One youth in Cologne held out against the standing tyranny, and chose to do beauty homage in his own fashion, and at his leisure. It was Farina, and oaths were registered against him over empty beer-barrels. An axiom of the White Rose Club laid it down that everybody must be enamoured of Margarita, and the conscience of the Club made them trebly suspicious of those who were not members. They had the consolation of knowing that Farina was poor, but then he was affirmed a student of Black Arts, and from such a one the worst might reasonably be feared. He might bewitch Margarita!

Dietrich Schill was deputed by the Club to sound the White Rose herself on the subject of Farina, and one afternoon in the vintage season, when she sat under the hot vine-poles among maiden friends, eating ripe grapes, up sauntered Dietrich, smirking, cap in hand, with his scroll trailed behind him.

'Wilt thou?' said Margarita, offering him a bunch.

'Unhappy villain that I am!' replied Dietrich, gesticulating fox-like refusal; 'if I but accept a favour, I break faith with the Club.'

'Break it to pleasure me,' said Margarita, smiling wickedly.

Dietrich gasped. He stood on tiptoe to see if any of the Club were by, and half-stretched out his hand. A mocking laugh caused him to draw it back as if stung. The grapes fell. Farina was at Margarita's feet offering them in return.

'Wilt thou?' said Margarita, with softer stress, and slight excess of bloom in her cheeks.

Farina put the purple cluster to his breast, and clutched them hard on his heart, still kneeling.

Margarita's brow and bosom seemed to be reflections of the streaming crimson there. She shook her face to the sky, and affected laughter at the symbol. Her companions clapped hands. Farina's eyes yearned to her once, and then he rose and joined in the pleasantry.

Fury helped Dietrich to forget his awkwardness. He touched Farina on the shoulder with two fingers, and muttered huskily: 'The Club never allow that.'

Farina bowed, as to thank him deeply for the rules of the Club. 'I am not a member, you know,' said he, and strolled to a seat close by Margarita.

Dietrich glared after him. As head of a Club he understood the use of symbols. He had lost a splendid opportunity, and Farina had seized it. Farina had robbed him.

'May I speak with Mistress Margarita?' inquired the White Rose chief, in a ragged voice.

'Surely, Dietrich! do speak,' said Margarita.

'Alone?' he continued.

'Is that allowed by the Club?' said one of the young girls, with a saucy glance.

Dietrich deigned no reply, but awaited Margarita's decision. She hesitated a second; then stood up her full height before him; faced him steadily, and beckoned him some steps up the vine-path. Dietrich bowed, and passing Farina, informed him that the Club would wring satisfaction out of him for the insult.

Farina laughed, but answered, 'Look, you of the Club! beer-swilling has improved your manners as much as fighting has beautified your faces. Go on; drink and fight! but remember that the Kaiser's coming, and fellows with him who will not be bullied.'

'What mean you?' cried Dietrich, lurching round on his enemy.

'Not so loud, friend,' returned Farina. 'Or do you wish to frighten the maidens? I mean this, that the Club had better give as little offence as possible, and keep their eyes as wide as they can, if they want to be of service to Mistress Margarita.'

Dietrich turned off with a grunt.

'Now!' said Margarita.

She was tapping her foot. Dietrich grew unfaithful to the Club, and looked at her longer than his mission warranted. She was bright as the sunset gardens of the Golden Apples. The braids of her yellow hair were bound in wreaths, and on one side of her head a saffron crocus was stuck with the bell downward. Sweetness, song, and wit hung like dews of morning on her grape-stained lips. She wore a scarlet corset with bands of black velvet across her shoulders. The girlish gown was thin blue stuff, and fell short over her firm-set feet, neatly cased in white leather with buckles. There was witness in her limbs and the way she carried her neck of an amiable, but capable, dragon, ready, when aroused, to bristle up and guard the Golden Apples against all save the rightful claimant. Yet her nether lip and little white chin-ball had a dreamy droop; her frank blue eyes went straight into the speaker: the dragon slept. It was a dangerous charm. 'For,' says the minnesinger, 'what ornament more enchants us on a young beauty than the soft slumber of a strength never yet called forth, and that herself knows not of! It sings double things to the heart of knighthood; lures, and warns us; woos, and threatens. 'Tis as nature, shining peace, yet the mother of storm.'

'There is no man,' rapturously exclaims Heinrich von der Jungferweide, 'can resist the desire to win a sweet treasure before which lies a dragon sleeping. The very danger prattles promise.'

But the dragon must really sleep, as with Margarita.

'A sham dragon, shamming sleep, has destroyed more virgins than all the heathen emperors,' says old Hans Aepfelmann of Duesseldorf.

Margarita's foot was tapping quicker.

'Speak, Dietrich!' she said.

Dietrich declared to the Club that at this point he muttered, 'We love you.' Margarita was glad to believe he had not spoken of himself. He then informed her of the fears entertained by the Club, sworn to watch over and protect her, regarding Farina's arts.

'And what fear you?' said Margarita.

'We fear, sweet mistress, he may be in league with Sathanas,' replied Dietrich.

'Truly, then,' said Margarita, 'of all the youths in Cologne he is the least like his confederate.'

Dietrich gulped and winked, like a patient recovering wry-faced from an abhorred potion.

'We have warned you, Fraulein Groschen!' he exclaimed. 'It now becomes our duty to see that you are not snared.'

Margarita reddened, and returned: 'You are kind. But I am a Christian maiden and not a Pagan soldan, and I do not require a body of tawny guards at my heels.'

Thereat she flung back to her companions, and began staining her pretty mouth with grapes anew.

THE TAPESTRY WORD

Fair maids will have their hero in history. Siegfried was Margarita's chosen. She sang of Siegfried all over the house. 'O the old days of Germany, when such a hero walked!' she sang.

'And who wins Margarita,' mused Farina, 'happier than Siegfried, has in his arms Brunhild and Chrimhild together!'

Crowning the young girl's breast was a cameo, and the skill of some cunning artist out of Welschland had wrought on it the story of the Drachenfels. Her bosom heaved the battle up and down.

This cameo was a north star to German manhood, but caused many chaste expressions of abhorrence from Aunt Lisbeth, Gottlieb's unmarried sister, who seemed instinctively to take part with the Dragon. She was a frail- fashioned little lady, with a face betokening the perpetual smack of lemon, and who reigned in her brother's household when the good wife was gone. Margarita's robustness was beginning to alarm and shock Aunt Lisbeth's sealed stock of virtue.

'She must be watched, such a madl as that,' said Aunt Lisbeth. 'Ursula! what limbs she has!'

Margarita was watched; but the spy being neither foe nor friend, nothing was discovered against her. This did not satisfy Aunt Lisbeth, whose own suspicion was her best witness. She allowed that Margarita dissembled well.

'But,' said she to her niece, 'though it is good in a girl not to flaunt these naughtinesses in effrontery, I care for you too much not to say—Be what you seem, my little one!'

'And that am I!' exclaimed Margarita, starting up and towering.

'Right good, my niece,' Lisbeth squealed; 'but now Frau Groschen lies in God's acre, you owe your duty to me, mind! Did you confess last week?'

'From beginning to end,' replied Margarita.

Aunt Lisbeth fixed pious reproach on Margarita's cameo.

'And still you wear that thing?'

'Why not?' said Margarita.

'Girl! who would bid you set it in such a place save Satan? Oh, thou poor lost child! that the eyes of the idle youths may be drawn there! and thou become his snare to others, Margarita! What was that Welsh wandering juggler but the foul fiend himself, mayhap, thou maiden of sin! They say he has been seen in Cologne lately. He was swarthy as Satan and limped of one leg. Good Master in heaven, protect us! it was Satan himself I could swear!'

Aunt Lisbeth crossed brow and breast.

Margarita had commenced fingering the cameo, as if to tear it away; but

Aunt Lisbeth's finish made her laugh outright.

'Where I see no harm, aunty, I shall think the good God is,' she answered; 'and where I see there's harm, I shall think Satan lurks.'

A simper of sour despair passed over Aunt Lisbeth. She sighed, and was silent, being one of those very weak reeds who are easily vanquished and never overcome.

'Let us go on with the Tapestry, child,' said she.

Now, Margarita was ambitious of completing a certain Tapestry for presentation to Kaiser Heinrich on his entry into Cologne after his last campaign on the turbanned Danube. The subject was again her beloved Siegfried slaying the Dragon on Drachenfels. Whenever Aunt Lisbeth indulged in any bitter virginity, and was overmatched by Margarita's frank maidenhood, she hung out this tapestry as a flag of truce. They were working it in bits, not having contrivances to do it in a piece. Margarita took Siegfried and Aunt Lisbeth the Dragon. They shared the crag between them. A roguish gleam of the Rhine toward Nonnenwerth could be already made out, Roland's Corner hanging like a sentinel across the chanting island, as one top-heavy with long watch.

Aunt Lisbeth was a great proficient in the art, and had taught Margarita. The little lady learnt it, with many other gruesome matters, in the Palatine of Bohemia's family. She usually talked of the spectres of Hollenbogenblitz Castle in the passing of the threads. Those were dismal spectres in Bohemia, smelling of murder and the charnel-breath of midnight. They uttered noises that wintered the blood, and revealed sights that stiffened hair three feet long; ay, and kept it stiff!

Margarita placed herself on a settle by the low-arched window, and Aunt Lisbeth sat facing her. An evening sun blazoned the buttresses of the Cathedral, and shadowed the workframes of the peaceful couple to a temperate light. Margarita unrolled a sampler sheathed with twists of divers coloured threads, and was soon busy silver-threading Siegfried's helm and horns.

'I told you of the steward, poor Kraut, did I not, child?' inquired Aunt Lisbeth, quietly clearing her throat.

'Many times!' said Margarita, and went on humming over her knee

'Her love was a Baron,
A Baron so bold;
She loved him for love,
He loved her for gold.'

'He must see for himself, and be satisfied,' continued Aunt Lisbeth; 'and Holy Thomas to warn him for an example! Poor Kraut!'

'Poor Kraut!' echoed Margarita.

'The King loved wine, and the Knight loved wine,
And they loved the summer weather:
They might have loved each other well,
But for one they loved together.'

'You may say, poor Kraut, child!' said Aunt Lisbeth. 'Well! his face was before that as red as this dragon's jaw, and ever after he went about as white as a pullet's egg. That was something wonderful!' 'That was it!' chimed Margarita.

'O the King he loved his lawful wife,
The Knight a lawless lady:
And ten on one-made ringing strife,
Beneath the forest shady.'

'Fifty to one, child!' said Aunt Lisbeth: 'You forget the story. They made Kraut sit with them at the jabbering feast, the only mortal there. The walls were full of eye-sockets without eyes, but phosphorus instead, burning blue and damp.'

'Not to-night, aunty dear! It frightens me so,' pleaded Margarita, for she saw the dolor coming.

'Night! when it's broad mid-day, thou timid one! Good heaven take pity on such as thou! The dish was seven feet in length by four broad. Kraut measured it with his eye, and never forgot it. Not he! When the dish- cover was lifted, there he saw himself lying, boiled!

"I did not feel uncomfortable then," Kraut told us. "It seemed natural."

'His face, as it lay there, he says, was quite calm, only a little wrinkled, and piggish-looking-like. There was the mole on his chin, and the pucker under his left eyelid. Well! the Baron carved. All the guests were greedy for a piece of him. Some cried out for breast; some for toes. It was shuddering cold to sit and hear that! The Baroness said, "Cheek!"'

'Ah!' shrieked Margarita, 'that can I not bear! I will not hear it, aunt; I will not!'

'Cheek!' Aunt Lisbeth reiterated, nodding to the floor.

Margarita put her fingers to her ears.

'Still, Kraut says, even then he felt nothing odd. Of course he was horrified to be sitting with spectres as you and I should be; but the first tremble of it was over. He had plunged into the bath of horrors, and there he was. I 've heard that you must pronounce the names of the Virgin and Trinity, sprinkling water round you all the while for three minutes; and if you do this without interruption, everything shall disappear. So they say. "Oh! dear heaven of mercy!" says Kraut, "what I felt when the Baron laid his long hunting-knife across my left cheek!"'

Here Aunt Lisbeth lifted her eyes to dote upon Margarita's fright. She was very displeased to find her niece, with elbows on the window-sill and hands round her head, quietly gazing into the street.

She said severely, 'Where did you learn that song you were last singing,

Margarita? Speak, thou girl!'

Margarita laughed.

'The thrush, and the lark, and the blackbird,
They taught me how to sing:
And O that the hawk would lend his eye,
And the eagle lend his wing.'

'I will not hear these shameless songs,' exclaimed Aunt Lisbeth.

'For I would view the lands they view,
And be where they have been:
It is not enough to be singing
For ever in dells unseen !'

A voice was heard applauding her. 'Good! right good! Carol again,
Gretelchen! my birdie!'

Margarita turned, and beheld her father in the doorway. She tripped toward him, and heartily gave him their kiss of meeting. Gottlieb glanced at the helm of Siegfried.

'Guessed the work was going well; you sing so lightsomely to-day, Grete! Very pretty! And that's Drachenfels? Bones of the Virgins! what a bold fellow was Siegfried, and a lucky, to have the neatest lass in Deutschland in love with him. Well, we must marry her to Siegfried after all, I believe! Aha? or somebody as good as Siegfried. So chirrup on, my darling!'

'Aunt Lisbeth does not approve of my songs,' replied Margarita, untwisting some silver threads.

'Do thy father's command, girl!' said Aunt Lisbeth.

'And doing his command,
Should I do a thing of ill,
I'd rather die to his lovely face,
Than wanton at his will.'

'There—there,' said Aunt Lisbeth, straining out her fingers; 'you see, Gottlieb, what over-indulgence brings her to. Not another girl in blessed Rhineland, and Bohemia to boot, dared say such words!—than— I can't repeat them!—don't ask me!—She's becoming a Frankish girl!'

'What ballad's that?' said Gottlieb, smiling.

'The Ballad of Holy Otilia; and her lover was sold to darkness. And she loved him—loved him—'

'As you love Siegfried, you little one?'

'More, my father; for she saw Winkried, and I never saw Siegfried. Ah! if I had seen Siegfried! Never mind. She loved him; but she loved Virtue more. And Virtue is the child of God, and the good God forgave her for loving Winkried, the Devil's son, because she loved Virtue more, and He rescued her as she was being dragged down—down—down, and was half fainting with the smell of brimstone—rescued her and had her carried into His Glory, head and feet, on the wings of angels, before all men, as a hope to little maidens.

'And when I thought that I was lost
I found that I was saved,
And I was borne through blessed clouds,
Where the banners of bliss were waved.'

'And so you think you, too, may fall in, love with Devils' sons, girl?' was Aunt Lisbeth's comment.

'Do look at Lisbeth's Dragon, little Heart! it's so like!' said Margarita to her father.
Old Gottlieb twitted his hose, and chuckled.

'She's my girl! that may be seen,' said he, patting her, and wheezed up from his chair to waddle across to the Dragon. But Aunt Lisbeth tartly turned the Dragon to the wall.

'It is not yet finished, Gottlieb, and must not be looked at,' she interposed. 'I will call for wood, and see to a fire: these evenings of Spring wax cold': and away whimpered Aunt Lisbeth.

Margarita sang:

'I with my playmates,
In riot and disorder,
Were gathering herb and blossom
Along the forest border.'

'Thy mother's song, child of my heart!' said Gottlieb; 'but vex not good
Lisbeth: she loves thee!'

'And do you think she loves me?
And will you say 'tis true?
O, and will she have me,
When I come up to woo?'

'Thou leaping doe! thou chattering pie!' said Gottlieb.

'She shall have ribbons and trinkets,
And shine like a morn of May,
When we are off to the little hill-church,
Our flowery bridal way.'

'That she shall; and something more !' cried Gottlieb. 'But, hark thee, Gretelchen; the Kaiser will be here in three days. Thou dear one! had I not stored and hoarded all for thee, I should now have my feet on a hearthstone where even he might warm his boot. So get thy best dresses and jewels in order, and look thyself; proud as any in the land. A simple burgher's daughter now, Grete; but so shalt thou not end, my butterfly, or there's neither worth nor wit in Gottlieb Groschen!'

'Three days!' Margarita exclaimed; 'and the helm not finished, and the tapestry-pieces not sewed and joined, and the water not shaded off.—Oh! I must work night and day.'

'Child! I'll have no working at night! Your rosy cheeks will soon be sucked out by oil-light, and you look no better than poor tallow Court beauties—to say nothing of the danger. This old house saw Charles the Great embracing the chief magistrate of his liege city yonder. Some swear he slept in it. He did not sneeze at smaller chambers than our Kaisers abide. No gold ceilings with cornice carvings, but plain wooden beams.'

'Know that the men of great renown,
Were men of simple needs:
Bare to the Lord they laid them down,
And slept on mighty deeds.'

'God wot, there's no emptying thy store of ballads, Grete: so much shall be said of thee. Yes; times are changing: We're growing degenerate. Look at the men of Linz now to what they were! Would they have let the lads of Andernach float down cabbage-stalks to them without a shy back? And why? All because they funk that brigand-beast Werner, who gets redemption from Laach, hard by his hold, whenever he commits a crime worth paying for. As for me, my timber and stuffs must come down stream, and are too good for the nixen under Rhine, or think you I would acknowledge him with a toll, the hell-dog? Thunder and lightning! if old scores could be rubbed out on his hide!'

Gottlieb whirled a thong-lashing arm in air, and groaned of law and justice. What were they coming to!

Margarita softened the theme with a verse:

'And tho' to sting his enemy,
Is sweetness to the angry bee,
The angry bee must busy be,
Ere sweet of sweetness hiveth he.

The arch thrill of his daughter's voice tickled Gottlieb. 'That's it, birdie! You and the proverb are right. I don't know which is best

'Better hive
And keep alive
Than vengeance wake
With that you take.'

A clatter in the cathedral square brought Gottlieb on his legs to the window. It was a company of horsemen sparkling in harness. One trumpeter rode at the side of the troop, and in front a standard-bearer, matted down the chest with ochre beard, displayed aloft to the good citizens of Cologne, three brown hawks, with birds in their beaks, on an azure stardotted field.

'Holy Cross!' exclaimed Gottlieb, low in his throat; 'the arms of Werner! Where got he money to mount his men? Why, this is daring all Cologne in our very teeth! 'Fend that he visit me now! Ruin smokes in that ruffian's track. I 've felt hot and cold by turns all day.'

The horsemen came jingling carelessly along the street in scattered twos and threes, laughing together, and singling out the maidens at the gable-shadowed windows with hawking eyes. The good citizens of Cologne did not look on them favourably. Some showed their backs and gruffly banged their doors: others scowled and pocketed their fists: not a few slunk into the side alleys like well-licked curs, and scurried off with forebent knees. They were in truth ferocious-looking fellows these trusty servants of the robber Baron Werner, of Werner's Eck, behind Andernach. Leather, steel, and dust, clad them from head to foot; big and black as bears; wolf-eyed, fox-nosed. They glistened bravely in

the falling beams of the sun, and Margarita thrust her fair braided yellow head a little forward over her father's shoulder to catch the whole length of the grim cavalcade. One of the troop was not long in discerning the young beauty. He pointed her boldly out to a comrade, who approved his appetite, and referred her to a third. The rest followed lead, and Margarita was as one spell-struck when she became aware that all those hungry eyes were preying on hers. Old Gottlieb was too full of his own fears to think for her, and when he drew in his head rather suddenly, it was with a dismal foreboding that Werner's destination in Cologne was direct to the house of Gottlieb Groschen, for purposes only too well to be divined.

'Devil's breeches!' muttered Gottlieb; 'look again, Grete, and see if that hell-troop stop the way outside.'

Margarita's cheeks were overflowing with the offended rose.

'I will not look at them again, father.'

Gottlieb stared, and then patted her.

'I would I were a man, father!'

Gottlieb smiled, and stroked his beard.

'Oh! how I burn!'

And the girl shivered visibly.

'Grete! mind to be as much of a woman as you can, and soon such raff as this you may sweep away, like cobwebs, and no harm done.'

He was startled by a violent thumping at the streetdoor, and as brazen a blast as if the dead were being summoned. Aunt Lisbeth entered, and flitted duskily round the room, crying:

'We are lost: they are upon us! better death with a bodkin! Never shall it be said of me; never! the monsters!'

Then admonishing them to lock, bar, bolt, and block up every room in the house, Aunt Lisbeth perched herself on the edge of a chair, and reversed the habits of the screech-owl, by being silent when stationary.

'There's nothing to fear for you, Lisbeth,' said Gottlieb, with discourteous emphasis.

'Gottlieb! do you remember what happened at the siege of Mainz? and poor Marthe Herbstblum, who had hoped to die as she was; and Dame Altknopfchen, and Frau Kaltblut, and the old baker, Hans Topf's sister, all of them as holy as abbesses, and that did not save them! and nothing will from such godless devourers.'

Gottlieb was gone, having often before heard mention of the calamity experienced by these fated women.

'Comfort thee, good heart, on my breast,' said Margarita, taking Lisbeth to that sweet nest of peace and fortitude.

'Margarita! 'tis your doing! have I not said—lure them not, for they swarm too early upon us! And here they are! and, perhaps, in five minutes all will be over!

Herr Je!—What, you are laughing! Heavens of goodness, the girl is delighted!'

Here a mocking ha-ha! accompanied by a thundering snack at the door, shook the whole house, and again the trumpet burst the ears with fury.

This summons, which seemed to Aunt Lisbeth final, wrought a strange composure in her countenance. She was very pale, but spread her dress decently, as if fear had departed, and clasped her hands on her knees.

'The will of the Lord above must be done,' said she; 'it is impious to complain when we are given into the hand of the Philistines. Others have been martyred, and were yet acceptable.'

To this heroic speech she added, with cold energy: 'Let them come!'

'Aunt,' cried Margarita, 'I hear my father's voice with those men. Aunt! I will not let him be alone. I must go down to him. You will be safe here. I shall come to you if there's cause for alarm.'

And in spite of Aunt Lisbeth's astonished shriek of remonstrance, she hurried off to rejoin Gottlieb.

THE WAGER

Ere Margarita had reached the landing of the stairs, she repented her haste and shrank back. Wrapt in a thunder of oaths, she distinguished: "Tis the little maiden we want; let's salute her and begone! or cap your skull with something thicker than you've on it now, if you want a whole one, happy father!"

'Gottlieb von Groschen I am,' answered her father, 'and the Kaiser—'

"S as fond of a pretty girl as we are! Down with her, and no more drivelling! It's only for a moment, old Measure and Scales!"

'I tell you, rascals, I know your master, and if you're not punished for this, may I die a beggar!' exclaimed Gottlieb, jumping with rage.

'May you die as rich as an abbot! And so you will, if you don't bring her down, for I've sworn to see her; there 's the end of it, man!'

'I'll see, too, if the laws allow this villany !' cried Gottlieb. 'Insulting a peaceful citizen! in his own house! a friend of your emperor! Gottlieb von Groschen!'

'Groschen? We're cousins, then! You wouldn't shut out your nearest kin? Devil's lightning! Don't you know me? Pfennig? Von Pfennig! This here's Heller: that's Zwanziger: all of us Vons, every soul! You're not decided? This'll sharpen you, my jolly King Paunch!'

And Margarita heard the ruffian step as if to get swing for a blow. She hurried into the passage, and slipping in front of her father, said to his assailant:

'You have asked for me! I am here!'

Her face was colourless, and her voice seemed to issue from between a tightened cord. She stood with her left foot a little in advance, and her whole body heaving and quivering: her arms folded and pressed hard below her bosom: her eyes dilated to a strong blue: her mouth ashy white. A strange lustre, as of suppressed internal fire, flickered over her.

'My name 's Schwartz Thier, and so 's my nature!' said the fellow with a grin; 'but may I never smack lips with a pretty girl again, if I harm such a young beauty as this! Friendly dealing's my plan o' life.'

'Clear out of my house, then, fellow, and here's money for you,' said

Gottlieb, displaying a wrathfully-trembling handful of coin.

'Pish! money! forty times that wouldn't cover my bet! And if it did? Shouldn't I be disgraced? jeered at for a sheep-heart? No, I'm no ninny, and not to be diddled. I'll talk to the young lady! Silence, out there! all's going proper': this to his comrades through the door. 'So, my beautiful maiden! thus it stands: We saw you at the window, looking like a fresh rose with a gold crown on. Here are we poor fellows come to welcome the Kaiser. I began to glorify you. "Schwartz Thier!" says Henker Rothhals to me, "I'll wager you odds you don't have a kiss of that fine girl within twenty minutes, counting from the hand-smack!" Done! was my word, and we clapped our fists together. Now, you see, that's straightforward! All I want is, not to lose my money and be made a fool of—leaving alone that sugary mouth which makes mine water'; and he drew the back of his hand along his stubbled jaws: 'So, come! don't hesitate! no harm to you, my beauty, but a compliment, and Schwartz Thier's your friend and anything else you like for ever after. Come, time's up, pretty well.'

Margarita leaned to her father a moment as if mortal sickness had seized her. Then cramping her hands and feet, she said in his ear, 'Leave me to my own care; go, get the men to protect thee'; and ordered Schwartz Thier to open the door wide.

Seeing Gottlieb would not leave her, she joined her hands, and begged him. 'The good God will protect me! I will overmatch these men. Look, my father! they dare not strike me in the street: you they would fell without pity. Go! what they dare in a house, they dare not in the street.'

Schwartz Thier had opened the door. At sight of Margarita, the troop gave a shout.

'Now! on the doorstep, full in view, my beauteous one! that they may see what a lucky devil I am—and have no doubts about the handing over.'

Margarita looked behind. Gottlieb was still there, every member of him quaking like a bog under a heavy heel. She ran to him. 'My father! I have a device wilt thou spoil it, and give me to this beast? You can do nothing, nothing! protect yourself and save me!'

'Cologne! broad day!' muttered Gottlieb, as if the enormity had prostrated his belief in facts; and moved slowly back.

Margarita strode to the door-step. Schwartz Thier was awaiting her, his arm circled out, and his leering face ducked to a level with his victim's. This rough show of gallantry proved costly to him. As he was gently closing his iron hold about her, enjoying before hand with grim mouthridges the flatteries of triumph, Margarita shot past him through the door, and was already twenty paces beyond the troop before either of them thought of pursuing her. At the first sound of a hoof, Henker Rothhals seized the rider's bridle-rein, and roared: 'Fair play for a fair bet! leave all to the Thier!' The Thier, when he had recovered from his amazement, sought for old Gottlieb to give him a back-hit, as Margarita foresaw that he would. Not finding him at hand, out lumbered the fellow as swiftly as his harness would allow, and caught a glimpse of Margarita rapidly fleeing up the cathedral square.

'Only five minutes, Schwartz Thier!' some of the troop sung out.

'The devil can do his business in one,' was the retort, and Schwartz Thier swung himself on his broad-backed charger, and gored the fine beast till she rattled out a blast of sparkles from the flint.

In a minute he drew up in front of Margarita.

'So! you prefer settling this business in the square.

Good! my choice sweetheart!' and he sprang to her side.

The act of flight had touched the young girl's heart with the spirit of flight. She crouched like a winded hare under the nose of the hound, and covered her face with her two hands. Margarita was no wisp in weight, but Schwartz Thier had her aloft in his arm as easily as if he had tossed up a kerchief.

'Look all, and witness!' he shouted, lifting the other arm.

Henker Rothhals and the rest of the troop looked, as they came trotting to the scene, with the coolness of umpires: but they witnessed something other than what Schwartz Thier proposed. This was the sight of a formidable staff, whirling an unfriendly halo over the head of the Thier, and descending on it with such honest intent to confound and overthrow him, that the Thier succumbed to its force without argument, and the square echoed blow and fall simultaneously. At the same time the wielder of this sound piece of logic seized Margarita, and raised a shout in the square for all true men to stand by him in rescuing a maiden from the clutch of brigands and ravishers. A crowd was collecting, but seemed to consider the circle now formed by the horsemen as in a manner charmed, for only one, a fair slender youth, came forward and ranged himself beside the stranger.

'Take thou the maiden: I'll keep to the staff,' said this latter, stumbling over his speech as if he was in a foreign land among old roots and wolfpits which had already shaken out a few of his teeth, and made him cautious about the remainder.

'Can it be Margarita!' exclaimed the youth, bending to her, and calling to her: 'Margarita! Fraulein Groschen!'

She opened her eyes, shuddered, and said: 'I was not afraid! Am I safe?'

'Safe while I have life, and this good friend.'

'Where is my father?'

'I have not seen him.'

'And you—who are you? Do I owe this to you?'

'Oh! no! no! Me you owe nothing.'

Margarita gazed hurriedly round, and at her feet there lay the Thier with his steel-cap shining in dints, and three rivulets of blood coursing down his mottled forehead. She looked again at the youth, and a blush of recognition gave life to her cheeks.

'I did not know you. Pardon me. Farina! what thanks can reward such courage! Tell me! shall we go?'

'The youth eyed her an instant, but recovering himself, took a rapid survey, and called to the stranger to follow and help give the young maiden safe conduct home.

'Just then Henker Rothhals bellowed, 'Time's up!' He was answered by a chorus of agreement from the troop. They had hitherto patiently acted their parts as spectators, immovable on their horses. The assault on the Thier was all in the play, and a visible interference of fortune in favour of Henker Rothhals. Now general commotion shuttled them, and the stranger's keen hazel eyes read their intentions rightly when he lifted his redoubtable staff in preparation for another mighty swoop, this time defensive. Rothhals, and half a dozen others, with a war-cry of curses, spurred their steeds at once to ride him down. They had not reckoned the length and good-will of their antagonist's weapon. Scarce were they in motion, when round it whizzed, grazing the nostrils of their horses with a precision that argued practice in the feat, and unhorsing two, Rothhals among the number. He dropped heavily on his head, and showed signs of being as incapable of combat as the Thier. A cheer burst from the crowd, but fell short.

The foremost of their number was struck flat to the earth by a fellow of the troop.

Calling on St. George, his patron saint, the stranger began systematically to make a clear ring in his path forward. Several of the horsemen essayed a cut at his arm with their long double-handed swords, but the horses could not be brought a second time to the edge of the magic circle; and the blood of these warriors being thoroughly up, they now came at him on foot. In their rage they would have made short work with the three, in spite of the magistracy of Cologne, had they not been arrested by cries of 'Werner! Werner!'

At the South-west end of the square, looking Rhinewards, rode the marauder Baron, in full armour, helm and hauberk, with a single retainer in his rear. He had apparently caught sight of the brawl, and, either because he distinguished his own men, or was seeking his natural element, hastened up for his share in it, which was usually that of the king of beasts. His first call was for Schwartz Thier. The men made way, and he beheld his man in no condition to make military responses. He shouted for Henker Rothhals, and again the men opened their ranks mutely, exhibiting the two stretched out in diverse directions, with their feet slanting to a common point. The Baron glared; then caught off his mailed glove, and thrust it between his teeth. A rasping gurgle of oaths was all they heard, and presently surged up,

'Who was it?'

Margarita's eyes were shut. She opened them fascinated with horror. There was an unearthly awful and comic mixture of sounds in Werner's querulous fury, that was like the noise of a complaining bear, rolling up from hollow-chested menace to yawning lament. Never in her life had Margarita such a shock of fear. The half gasp of a laugh broke on her trembling lips. She stared at Werner, and was falling; but Farina's arm clung instantly round her waist. The stranger caught up her laugh, loud and hearty.

'As for who did it, Sir Baron,' he cried, in a cheery tone, 'I am the man! As you may like to know why—and that's due to you and me both of us—all I can say is, the Black Muzzle yonder lying got his settler for merry-making with this peaceful maiden here, without her consent—an offence in my green island they reckon a crack o' the scone light basting for, I warrant all company present,' and he nodded sharply about. 'As for the other there, who looks as if a rope had been round his neck once and shirked its duty, he counts his wages for helping the devil in his business, as will any other lad here who likes to come on and try.'

Werner himself, probably, would have given him the work he wanted; but his eye had sidled a moment over Margarita, and the hardly-suppressed applause of the crowd at the stranger's speech failed to bring his ire into action this solitary time.

'Who is the maiden?' he asked aloud.

'Fraulein von Groschen,' replied Farina.

'Von Groschen! Von Groschen! the daughter of Gottlieb Groschen?— Rascals!' roared the Baron, turning on his men, and out poured a mud- spring of filthy oaths and threats, which caused Henker Rothhals, who had opened his eyes, to close them again, as if he had already gone to the place of heat.

'Only lend me thy staff, friend,' cried Werner.

'Not I! thwack 'em with your own wood,' replied the stranger, and fell back a leg.

Werner knotted his stringy brows, and seemed torn to pieces with the different pulling tides of his wrath. He grasped the mane of his horse and flung abroad handfuls, till the splendid animal reared in agony.

'You shall none of you live over this night, villains! I 'll hang you, every hag's son! My last orders were,—Keep quiet in the city, ye devil's brood. Take that! and that!' laying at them with his bare sword. 'Off with you, and carry these two pigs out of sight quickly, or I'll have their heads, and make sure o' them.'

The latter injunction sprang from policy, for at the head of the chief street there was a glitter of the city guard, marching with shouldered spears.

'Maiden,' said Werner, with a bull's bow, 'let me conduct thee to thy father.'

Margarita did not reply; but gave her hand to Farina, and took a step closer to the stranger.

Werner's brows grew black.

'Enough to have saved you, fair maid,' he muttered hoarsely. 'Gratitude never was a woman's gift. Say to your father that I shall make excuses to him for the conduct of my men.'

Whereupon, casting a look of leisurely scorn toward the guard coming up in the last beams of day, the Baron shrugged his huge shoulders to an altitude expressing the various contemptuous shades of feudal coxcombry, stuck one leather-ruffled arm in his side, and jolted off at an easy pace.

'Amen!' ejaculated the stranger, leaning on his staff. 'There are Barons in my old land; but never a brute beast in harness.'

Margarita stood before him, and took his two hands.

'You will come with me to my father! He will thank you. I cannot. You will come?'

Tears and a sob of relief started from her.

The city guard, on seeing Werner's redoubtable back turned, had adopted double time, and now came panting up, while the stranger bent smiling under a fresh overflow of innocent caresses. Margarita was caught to her father's breast.

'You shall have vengeance for this, sweet chuck,' cried old Gottlieb in the intervals of his hugs.

'Fear not, my father; they are punished': and Margarita related the story of the stranger's prowess, elevating him into a second Siegfried. The guard huzzaed him, but did not pursue the Baron.

Old Gottlieb, without hesitation, saluted the astonished champion with a kiss on either cheek.

'My best friend! You have saved my daughter from indignity! Come with us home, if you can believe that a home where the wolves come daring us, dragging our dear ones from our very doorsteps. Come, that we may thank you under a roof at least. My little daughter! Is she not a brave lass?'

'She's nothing less than the white rose of Germany,' said the stranger, with a good bend of the shoulders to Margarita.

'So she's called,' exclaimed Gottlieb; 'she 's worthy to be a man!'

'Men would be the losers, then, more than they could afford,' replied the stranger, with a ringing laugh.

'Come, good friend,' said Gottlieb; 'you must need refreshment. Prove you are a true hero by your appetite. As Charles the Great said to Archbishop Turpin, "I conquered the world because Nature gave me a gizzard; for everywhere the badge of subjection is a poor stomach." Come, all! A day well ended, notwithstanding!'

THE SILVER ARROW

At the threshold of Gottlieb's house a number of the chief burgesses of Cologne had corporated spontaneously to condole with him. As he came near, they raised a hubbub of gratulation. Strong were the expressions of abhorrence and disgust of Werner's troop in which these excellent citizens clothed their outraged feelings; for the insult to Gottlieb was the insult of all. The Rhinestream taxes were provoking enough to endure; but that the licence of these free-booting bands should extend to the homes of free and peaceful men, loyal subjects of the Emperor, was a sign that the evil had reached from pricks to pokes, as the saying went, and must now be met as became burgesses of ancient Cologne, and by joint action destroyed.

'In! in, all of you!' said Gottlieb, broadening his smile to suit the many. 'We 'll talk about that in-doors. Meantime, I've got a hero to introduce to you: flesh and blood! no old woman's coin and young girl's dream-o'day: the honest thing, and a rarity, my masters. All that over some good Rhine-juice from above Bacharach. In, and welcome, friends!'

Gottlieb drew the stranger along with him under the carved old oak-wood portals, and the rest paired, and reverentially entered in his wake. Margarita, to make up for this want of courtesy, formed herself the last of the procession. She may have had another motive, for she took occasion there to whisper something to Farina, bringing sun and cloud over his countenance in rapid flushes. He seemed to remonstrate in dumb show; but she, with an attitude of silence, signified her wish to seal the conversation, and he drooped again. On the door step she paused a moment, and hung her head pensively, as if moved by a reminiscence. The youth had hurried away some strides. Margarita looked after him. His arms were straightened to his flanks, his hands clenched, and straining out from the wrist. He had the aspect of one tugging against the restraint of a chain that suddenly let out link by link to his whole force.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, [купив полную легальную версию](#) на ЛитРес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.