BARR ROBERT

THE STRONG ARM

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Содержание

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CHAPTER I. – THE BEAUTIFUL JAILER OF GUDENFELS

The aged Emir Soldan sat in his tent and smiled; the crafty Oriental smile of an experienced man, deeply grounded in the wisdom of this world. He knew that there was incipient rebellion in his camp; that the young commanders under him thought their leader was becoming too old for the fray; caution overmastering courage. Here were these dogs of unbelievers setting their unhallowed feet on the sacred soil of Syria, and the Emir, instead of dashing against them, counselled coolness and prudence. Therefore impatience disintegrated the camp and resentment threatened discipline. When at last the murmurs could be no longer ignored the Emir gathered his impetuous young men together in his tent, and thus addressed them.

"It may well be that I am growing too old for the active field; it may be that, having met before this German boar who leads his herd of swine, I am fearful of risking my remnant of life against him, but I have ever been an indulgent general, and am now loath to let my inaction stand against your chance of distinction. Go you therefore forth against him, and the man who brings me this boar's head shall not lack his reward."

The young men loudly cheered this decision and brandished their weapons aloft, while the old man smiled upon them and added:

"When you are bringing confusion to the camp of the unbelievers, I shall remain in my tent and meditate on the sayings of the Prophet, praying him to keep you a good spear's length from the German's broad sword, which he is the habit of wielding with his two hands."

The young Saracens went forth with much shouting, a gay prancing of the horses underneath them and a marvellous flourishing of spears above them, but they learned more wisdom in their half hour's communion with the German than the Emir, in a long life of counselling, had been able to bestow upon them. The two-handed sword they now met for the first time, and the acquaintance brought little joy to them. Count Herbert, the leader of the invaders, did no shouting, but reserved his breath for other purposes. He spurred his horse among them, and his foes went down around him as a thicket melts away before the well-swung axe of a stalwart woodman. The Saracens had little fear of death, but mutilation was another thing, for they knew that they would spend eternity in Paradise, shaped as they had left this earth, and while a spear's thrust or a wound from an arrow, or even the gash left by a short sword may be concealed by celestial robes, how is a man to comport himself in the Land of the Blest who is compelled to carry his head under his arm, or who is split from crown to midriff by an outlandish weapon that falls irresistible as the wrath of Allah! Again and again they threw themselves with disastrous bravery against the invading horde, and after each encounter they came back with lessened ranks and a more chastened spirit than when they had set forth. When at last, another counsel of war was held, the young men kept silence and waited for the smiling Emir to speak.

"If you are satisfied that there are other things to think of in war than the giving and taking of blows I am prepared to meet this German, not on his own terms but on my own. Perhaps, however, you wish to try conclusions with him again?"

The deep silence which followed this inquiry seemed to indicate that no such desire animated the Emir's listeners, and the old man smiled benignly upon his audience and went on.

"There must be no more disputing of my authority, either expressed or by implication. I am now prepared to go forth against him taking with me forty lancers."

Instantly there was a protest against this; the number was inadequate, they said.

"In his fortieth year our Prophet came to a momentous decision," continued the Emir, unheeding the interruption, "and I take a spear with me for every year of the Prophet's life, trusting that Allah will add to our number, at the prophet's intervention, should such an augmentation prove necessary. Get together then the forty *oldest* men under my command. Let them cumber themselves with nothing in the way of offence except one tall spear each, and see that every man is provided with water and dates for twenty days' sustenance of horse and man in the desert."

The Emir smiled as he placed special emphasis on the word "oldest," and the young men departed abashed to obey his orders.

Next morning Count Herbert von Schonburg saw near his camp by the water-holes a small group of horsemen standing motionless in the desert, their lances erect, butt downward, resting on the sand, the little company looking like an oasis of leafless poplars. The Count was instantly astride his Arab charger, at the head of his men, ready to meet whatever came, but on this occasion the enemy made no effort to bring on a battle, but remained silent and stationary, differing greatly from the hordes that had preceded it.

"Well," cried the impatient Count, "if Mahomet will not come to the mountain, the mountain for once will oblige him."

He gave the word to charge, and put spurs to his horse, causing instant animation in the band of Saracens, who fled before him as rapidly as the Germans advanced. It is needless to dwell on the project of the Emir, who simply followed the example of the desert mirages he had so often witnessed in wonder. Never did the Germans come within touch of their foes, always visible, but not to be overtaken. When at last Count Herbert was convinced that his horses were no match for the fleet steeds of his opponents he discovered that he and his band were hopelessly lost in the arid and pathless desert, the spears of the seemingly phantom host ever quivering before him in the tremulous heated air against the cloudless horizon. Now all his energies were bent toward finding the way that led to the camp by the water-holes, but sense of locality seemed to have left him, and the ghostly company which hung so persistently on his flanks gave no indication of direction, but merely followed as before they had fled. One by one the Count's soldiers succumbed, and when at last the forty spears hedged him round the Emir approached a prisoner incapable of action. The useless sword which hung from his saddle was taken, and water was given to the exhausted man and his dying horse.

When the Emir Soldan and his forty followers rode into camp with their prisoner there was a jubilant outcry, and the demand was made that the foreign dog be instantly decapitated, but the Emir smiled and, holding up his hand, said soothingly:

"Softly, softly, true followers of the only Prophet. Those who neglected to remove his head while his good sword guarded it, shall not now possess themselves of it, when that sword is in my hands."

And against this there could be no protest, for the prisoner belonged to the Emir alone, and was to be dealt with as the captor ordained.

When the Count had recovered speech, and was able to hold himself as a man should, the Emir summoned him, and they had a conference together in Soldan's tent.

"Western barbarian," said the Emir, speaking in that common tongue made up of languages Asiatic and European, a strange mixture by means of which invaders and invaded communicated with each other, "who are you and from what benighted land do you come?"

"I am Count Herbert von Schonburg. My castle overlooks the Rhine in Germany."

"What is the Rhine? A province of which you are the ruler?"

"No, your Highness, it is a river; a lordly stream that never diminishes, but flows unceasingly between green vine-clad hills; would that I had some of the vintage therefore to cheer me in my captivity and remove the taste of this brackish water!"

"In the name of the Prophet, then, why did you leave it?"

"Indeed, your Highness, I have often asked myself that question of late and found but insufficient answer."

"If I give you back your sword, which not I, but the demon Thirst captured from you, will you pledge me your word that you will draw it no more against those of my faith, but will return to your own land, safe escort being afforded you to the great sea where you can take ship?"

"As I have fought for ten years, and have come no nearer Jerusalem than where I now stand, I am content to give you my word in exchange for my sword, and the escort you promise."

And thus it came about that Count Herbert von Schonburg, although still a young man, relinquished all thought of conquering the Holy Land, and found himself one evening, after a long march, gazing on the placid bosom of the broad Rhine, which he had not seen since he bade good-bye to it, a boy of twenty-one, then as warlike and ambitious, as now, he was peace loving and tired of strife. The very air of the Rhine valley breathed rest and quiet, and Herbert, with a deep sigh, welcomed the thought of a life passed in comforting uneventfulness.

"Conrad," he said to his one follower, "I will encamp here for the night. Ride on down the Rhine, I beg of you, and cross the river where you may, that you may announce my coming some time before I arrive. My father is an old man, and I am the last of the race, so I do not wish to come unexpectedly on him; therefore break to him with caution the fact that I am in the neighbourhood, for hearing nothing from me all these years it is like to happen he believes me dead."

Conrad rode down the path by the river and disappeared while his master, after seeing to the welfare of his horse, threw himself down in a thicket and slept the untroubled sleep of the seasoned soldier. It was daylight when he was awakened by the tramp of horses. Starting to his feet, he was confronted by a grizzled warrior with half a dozen men at his back, and at first the Count thought himself again a prisoner, but the friendliness of the officer soon set all doubts at rest.

"Are you Count Herbert von Schonburg?" asked the intruder.

"Yes. Who are you?"

"I am Richart, custodian of Castle Gudenfels, and commander of the small forces possessed by her Ladyship, Countess von Falkenstein. I have to acquaint you with the fact that your servant and messenger has been captured. Your castle of Schonburg is besieged, and Conrad, unaware, rode straight into custody. This coming to the ears of my lady the Countess, she directed me to intercept you if possible, so that you might not share the fate of your servant, and offer to you the hospitality of Gudenfels Castle until such time as you had determined what to do in relation to the siege of your own."

"I give my warmest thanks to the Countess for her thoughtfulness. Is her husband the Count then dead?"

"It is the young Countess von Falkenstein whose orders I carry. Her father and mother are both dead, and her Ladyship, their only child, now holds Gudenfels."

"What, that little girl? She was but a child when I left the Rhine."

"Her Ladyship is a woman of nineteen now."

"And how long has my father been besieged?"

"Alas! it grieves me to state that your father, Count von Schonburg, has also passed away. He has been dead these two years."

The young man bowed his head and crossed himself. For a long time he rode in silence, meditating upon this unwelcome intelligence, grieved to think that such a desolate home-coming awaited him.

"Who, then, holds my castle against the besiegers?"

"The custodian Heinrich has stubbornly stood siege since the Count, your father, died, saying he carries out the orders of his lord until the return of the son."

"Ah! if Heinrich is in command then is the castle safe," cried the young man, with enthusiasm. "He is a born warrior and first taught me the use of the broad-sword. Who besieges us? The Archbishop of Mayence? He was ever a turbulent prelate and held spite against our house."

Richart shifted uneasily in his saddle, and for the moment did not answer. Then he said, with hesitation:

"I think the Archbishop regards the siege with favour, but I know little of the matter. My Lady, the Countess, will possess you with full information."

Count Herbert looked with astonishment upon the custodian of Castle Gudenfels. Here was a contest going on at his very doors, even if on the opposite side of the river, and yet a veteran knew nothing of the contest. But they were now at the frowning gates of Castle Gudenfels, with its lofty square pinnacled tower, and the curiosity of the young Count was dimmed by the admiration he felt for this great stronghold as he gazed upward at it. An instant later he with his escort passed through the gateway and stood in the courtyard of the castle. When he had dismounted the Count said to Richart:

"I have travelled far, and am not in fit state to be presented to a lady. Indeed, now that I am here, I dread the meeting. I have seen nothing of women for ten years, and knew little of them before I left the Rhine. Take me, I beg of you, to a room where I may make some preparation other than the camp has heretofore afforded, and bring me, if you can, a few garments with which to replenish this faded, torn and dusty apparel."

"My Lord, you will find everything you wish in the rooms allotted to you. Surmising your needs, I gave orders to that effect before I left the castle."

"That was thoughtful of you, Richart, and I shall not forget it."

The Custodian without replying led his guest up one stair and then another. The two traversed a long passage until they came to an open door. Richart standing aside, bowed low, and entreated his lordship to enter. Count Herbert passed into a large room from which a doorway led into a smaller apartment which the young man saw was fitted as a bedroom. The rooms hung high over the Rhine, but the view of the river was impeded by the numerous heavy iron bars which formed a formidable lattice-work before the windows. The Count was about to thank his conductor for providing so sumptuously for him, but, turning, he was amazed to see Richart outside with breathless eagerness draw shut the strong door that led to the passage from which he had entered, and a moment later, Herbert heard the ominous sound of stout bolts being shot into their sockets. He stood for a moment gazing blankly now at the bolted door, now at the barred window, and then slowly there came to him the knowledge which would have enlightened a more suspicious man long before—that he was a prisoner in the grim fortress of Gudenfels. Casting his mind backward over the events of the morning, he now saw a dozen sinister warnings that had heretofore escaped him. If a friendly invitation had been intended, what need of the numerous guard of armed men sent to escort him? Why had Richart hesitated when certain questions were asked him? Count Herbert paced up and down the long room, reviewing with clouded brow the events of the past few hours, beginning with the glorious freedom of the open hillside in the early dawn and ending with these impregnable stone walls that now environed him. He was a man slow to anger, but resentment once aroused, burned in his heart with a steady fervour that was unquenchable. He stopped at last in his aimless pacing, raised his clinched fist toward the timbered ceiling, and cursed the Countess von Falkenstein. In his striding to and fro the silence had been broken by the clank of his sword on the stone floor, and he now smiled grimly as he realised that they had not dared to deprive him of his formidable weapon; they had caged the lion from the distant desert without having had the courage to clip his claws. The Count drew his broadsword and swung it hissing through the air, measuring its reach with reference to the walls on either hand, then, satisfying himself that he had free play, he took up a position before

the door and stood there motionless as the statue of a war-god. “Now, by the Cross I fought for,” he muttered to himself, “the first man who sets foot across this threshold enters the chamber of death.”

He remained thus, leaning with folded arms on the hilt of his long sword, whose point rested on the flags of the floor, and at last his patience was rewarded. He heard the rattle of the bolts outside, and a tense eagerness thrilled his stalwart frame. The door came cautiously inward for a space of perhaps two feet and was then brought to a stand by the tightening links of a stout chain, fastened one end to the door, the other to the outer wall. Through the space that thus gave a view of the wide outer passage the Count saw Richart stand with pale face, well back at a safe distance in the centre of the hall. Two men-at-arms held a position behind their master.

“My Lord,” began Richart in trembling voice, “her Ladyship, the Countess, desires–”

“Open the door, you cringing Judas!” interrupted the stern command of the count; “open the door and set me as free as your villainy found me. I hold no parley with a traitor.”

“My Lord, I implore you to listen. No harm is intended you, and my Lady, the Countess, asks of you a conference touching–”

The heavy sword swung in the air and came down upon the chain with a force that made the stout oaken door shudder. Scattering sparks cast a momentary glow of red on the whitened cheeks of the startled onlookers. The edge of the sword clove the upper circumference of an iron link, leaving the severed ends gleaming like burnished silver, but the chain still held. Again and again the sword fell, but never twice in the same spot, anger adding strength to the blows, but subtracting skill.

“My Lord! my Lord!” beseeched Richart, “restrain your fury. You cannot escape from this strong castle even though you sever the chain.”

“I’ll trust my sword for that,” muttered the prisoner between his set teeth.

There now rang out on the conflict a new voice; the voice of a woman, clear and commanding, the tones instinct with that inborn quality of imperious authority which expects and usually obtains instant obedience.

“Close the door, Richart,” cried the unseen lady. The servitor made a motion to obey, but the swoop of the sword seemed to paralyse him where he stood. He cast a beseeching look at his mistress, which said as plainly as words: “You are ordering me to my death.” The Count, his weapon high in mid-air, suddenly swerved it from its course, for there appeared across the opening a woman’s hand and arm, white and shapely, fleecy lace falling away in dainty folds from the rounded contour of the arm. The small, firm hand grasped bravely the almost severed chain and the next instant the door was drawn shut, the bolts clanking into their places. Count Herbert, paused, leaning on his sword, gazing bewildered at the closed door.

“Ye gods of war!” he cried; “never have I seen before such cool courage as that!”

For a long time the Count walked up and down the spacious room, stopping now and then at the window to peer through the iron grille at the rapid current of the river far below, the noble stream as typical of freedom as were the bars that crossed his vision, of captivity. It seemed that the authorities of the castle had abandoned all thought of further communication with their truculent prisoner. Finally he entered the inner room and flung himself down, booted and spurred as he was, upon the couch, and, his sword for a bedmate, slept. The day was far spent when he awoke, and his first sensation was that of gnawing hunger, for he was a healthy man. His next, that he had heard in his sleep the cautious drawing of bolts, as if his enemies purposed to project themselves surreptitiously in upon him, taking him at a disadvantage. He sat upright, his sword ready for action, and listened intently. The silence was profound, and as the Count sat breathless, the stillness seemed to be emphasised rather than disturbed by a long-drawn sigh which sent a thrill of superstitious fear through the stalwart frame of the young man, for he well knew that the Rhine was infested with spirits animated by evil intentions toward human beings, and against such spirits his sword was but as a willow wand. He remembered with renewed awe that this castle stood only a few leagues above the Lurlei rocks where a nymph of unearthly beauty lured men to their destruction, and the knight crossed himself as a protection against

all such. Gathering courage from this devout act, and abandoning his useless weapon, he tiptoed to the door that led to the larger apartment, and there found his worst anticipations realised. With her back against the closed outer door stood a Siren of the Rhine, and, as if to show how futile is the support of the Evil One in a crisis, her very lips were pallid with fear and her blue eyes were wide with apprehension, as they met those of the Count von Schonburg. Her hair, the colour of ripe yellow wheat, rose from her smooth white forehead and descended in a thick braid that almost reached to the floor. She was dressed in the humble garb of a serving maiden, the square bit of lace on her crown of fair hair and the apron she wore, as spotless as new fallen snow. In her hand she held a tray which supported a loaf of bread and a huge flagon brimming with wine. On seeing the Count, her quick breathing stopped for the moment and she dropped a low courtesy.

"My Lord," she said, but there came a catch in her throat, and she could speak no further.

Seeing that he had to deal with no spirit, but with an inhabitant of the world he knew and did not fear, there arose a strange exultation in the heart of the Count as he looked upon this fair representative of his own country. For ten years he had seen no woman, and now a sudden sense of what he had lost overwhelmed him, his own breath coming quicker as the realisation of this impressed itself upon him. He strode rapidly toward her, and she seemed to shrink into the wall at his approach, wild fear springing into her eyes, but he merely took the laden tray from her trembling hands and placed it upon a bench. Then raising the flagon to his lips, he drank a full half of its contents before withdrawing it. A deep sigh of satisfaction followed, and he said, somewhat shamefacedly:

"Forgive my hurried greed, maiden, but the thirst of the desert seems to be in my throat, and the good wine reminds me that I am a German."

"It was brought for your use," replied the girl, demurely, "and I am gratified that it meets your commendation, my Lord."

"And so also do you, my girl. What is your name and who are you?"

"I am called Beatrix, my Lord, a serving-maid of this castle, the daughter of the woodman Wilhelm, and, alas! that it should be so, for the present your jailer."

"If I quarrelled as little with my detention, as I see I am like to do with my keeper, I fear captivity would hold me long in thrall. Are the men in the castle such cravens then that they bestow so unwelcome a task upon a woman?"

"The men are no cravens, my Lord, but this castle is at war with yours, and for each man there is a post. A woman would be less missed if so brave a warrior as Count von Schonburg thought fit to war upon us."

"But a woman makes war upon me, Beatrix. What am I to do? Surrender humbly?"

"Brave men have done so before now and will again, my Lord, where women are concerned. At least," added Beatrix, blushing and casting down her eyes, "I have been so informed."

"And small blame to them," cried the count, with enthusiasm. "I swear to you, my girl, that if women warriors were like the woodman's daughter, I would cast away all arms except these with which to enclasp her."

And he stretched out his hands, taking a step nearer, while she shrank in alarm from him.

"My Lord, I am but an humble messenger, and I beg of you to listen to what I am asked to say. My Lady, the Countess, has commissioned me to tell you that—"

A startling malediction of the Countess that accorded ill with the scarlet cross emblazoned on the young man's breast, interrupted the girl.

"I hold no traffic with the Countess," he cried. "She has treacherously laid me by the heels, coming as I did from battling for the Cross that she doubtless professes to regard as sacred."

"It was because she feared you, my Lord. These years back tales of your valour in the Holy Land have come to the Rhine, and now you return to find your house at war with hers. What was she to do? The chances stood even with only your underling in command; judge then what her fate

must be with your strong sword thrown in the balance against her. All's fair in war, said those who counselled her. What would you have done in such an extremity, my Lord?"

"What would I have done? I would have met my enemy sword in hand and talked with him or fought with him as best suited his inclination."

"But a lady cannot meet you, sword in hand, my Lord."

The Count paused in the walk he had begun when the injustice of his usage impressed itself once more upon him. He looked admiringly at the girl.

"That is most true, Beatrix. I had forgotten. Still, I should not have been met with cozenry. Here came I from starvation in the wilderness, thirst in the desert, and from the stress of the battle-field, back to mine own land with my heart full of yearning love for it and for all within its boundaries. I came even from prison, captured in fair fight, by an untaught heathen, whose men lay slain by my hand, yet with the nobility of a true warrior, he asked neither ransom nor hostage, but handed back my sword, saying, 'Go in peace.' That in a heathen land! but no sooner does my foot rest on this Christian soil than I am met by false smiles and lying tongues, and my welcome to a neighbour's house is the clank of the inthrust bolt."

"Oh, it was a shameful act and not to be defended," cried the girl, with moist eyes and quivering lip, the sympathetic reverberation of her voice again arresting the impatient steps of the young man, causing him to pause and view her with a feeling that he could not understand, and which he found some difficulty in controlling. Suddenly all desire for restraint left him, he sprang forward, clasped the girl in his arms and drew her into the middle of the room, where she could not give the signal that might open the door.

"My Lord! my Lord!" she cried in terror, struggling without avail to free herself.

"You said all's fair in war and saying so, gave but half the proverb, which adds, all's fair in love as well, and maiden, nymph of the woodland, so rapidly does a man learn that which he has never been taught, I proclaim with confidence that I love thee."

"A diffident and gentle lover you prove yourself!" she gasped with rising indignation, holding him from her.

"Indeed, my girl, there was little of diffidence or gentleness in my warring, and my wooing is like to have a touch of the same quality. It is useless to struggle for I have thee firm, so take to yourself some of that gentleness you recommend to me."

He strove to kiss her, but Beatrix held her head far from him, her open palm pressed against the red cross that glowed upon his breast, keeping him thus at arm's length.

"Count von Schonburg, what is the treachery of any other compared with yours? You came heedlessly into this castle, suspecting as you say, no danger: I came within this room to do you service, knowing my peril, but trusting to the honour of a true soldier of the Cross, and this is my reward! First tear from your breast this sacred emblem, valorous assaulter of a defenceless woman, for it should be worn by none but stainless gentlemen."

Count Herbert's arms relaxed, and his hands dropped listless to his sides.

"By my sword," he said, "they taught you invective in the forest. You are free. Go."

The girl made no motion to profit by her newly acquired liberty, but stood there, glancing sideways at him who scowled menacingly at her.

When at last she spoke, she said, shyly: "I have not yet fulfilled my mission."

"Fulfil it then in the fiend's name and begone."

"Will you consent to see my Lady the Countess?"

"No."

"Will you promise not to make war upon her if you are released?"

"No."

"If, in spite of your boorishness, she sets you free, what will you do?"

"I will rally my followers to my banner, scatter the forces that surround my castle, then demolish this prison trap."

"Am I in truth to carry such answers to the Countess?"

"You are to do as best pleases you, now and forever."

"I am but a simple serving-maid, and know nothing of high questions of state, yet it seems to me such replies do not oil prison bolts, and believe me, I grieve to see you thus detained."

"I am grateful for your consideration. Is your embassy completed?"

The girl, her eyes on the stone floor, paused long before replying, then said, giving no warning of a change of subject, and still not raising her eyes to his:

"You took me by surprise; I am not used to being handled roughly; you forget the distance between your station and mine, you being a noble of the Empire, and I but a serving-maid; if, in my anger, I spoke in a manner unbecoming one so humble, I do beseech that your Lordship pardon me."

"Now by the Cross to which you appealed, how long will you stand chattering there? Think you I am made of adamant, and not of flesh and blood? My garments are tattered at best, I would in woman's company they were finer, and this cross of Genoa red hangs to my tunic, but by a few frail threads. Beware, therefore, that I tear it not from my breast as you advised, and cast it from me."

Beatrix lifted one frightened glance to the young man's face and saw standing on his brow great drops of sweat. His right hand grasped the upper portion of the velvet cross, partly detached from his doublet, and he looked loweringly upon her. Swiftly she smote the door twice with her hand and instantly the portal opened as far as the chain would allow it. Count Herbert noticed that in the interval, three other chains had been added to the one that formerly had baffled his sword. The girl, like a woodland pigeon, darted underneath the lower chain, and although the prisoner took a rapid step forward, the door, with greater speed, closed and was bolted.

The Count had requested the girl to be gone, and surely should have been contented now that she had withdrawn herself, yet so shifty a thing is human nature, that no sooner were his commands obeyed than he began to bewail their fulfilment. He accused himself of being a double fool, first, for not holding her when he had her; and secondly, having allowed her to depart, he bemoaned the fact that he had acted rudely to her, and thus had probably made her return impossible. His prison seemed inexpressibly dreary lacking her presence. Once or twice he called out her name, but the echoing empty walls alone replied.

For the first time in his life the heavy sleep of the camp deserted him, and in his dreams he pursued a phantom woman, who continually dissolved in his grasp, now laughingly, now in anger.

The morning found him deeply depressed, and he thought the unaccustomed restraints of a prison were having their effect on the spirits of a man heretofore free. He sat silently on the bench watching the door.

At last, to his great joy, he heard the rattle of bolts being withdrawn. The door opened slowly to the small extent allowed by the chains, but no one entered and the Count sat still, concealed from the view of whoever stood without.

"My Lord Count," came the sweet tones of the girl and the listener with joy, fancied he detected in it a suggestion of apprehension, doubtless caused by the fact that the room seemed deserted. "My Lord Count, I have brought your breakfast; will you not come and receive it?"

Herbert rose slowly and came within range of his jailer's vision. The girl stood in the hall, a repast that would have tempted an epicure arrayed on the wooden trencher she held in her hands.

"Beatrix, come in," he said.

"I fear that in stooping, some portion of this burden may fall. Will you not take the trencher?"

The young man stepped to the opening and, taking the tray from her, placed it on the bench as he had previously done; then repeated his invitation.

"You were displeased with my company before, my Lord, and I am loath again to offend."

"Beatrix, I beg you to enter. I have something to say to you."

"Stout chains bar not words, my Lord. Speak and I shall listen."

"What I have to say, is for your ear alone."

"Then are the conditions perfect for such converse, my Lord. No guard stands within this hall."

The Count sighed deeply, turned and sat again on the bench, burying his face in his hands. The maiden having given excellent reasons why she should not enter, thus satisfying her sense of logic, now set logic at defiance, slipped under the lowest chain and stood within the room, and, so that there might be no accusation that she did things by halves, closed the door leaning her back against it. The knight looked up at her and saw that she too had rested but indifferently. Her lovely eyes half veiled, showed traces of weeping, and there was a wistful expression in her face that touched him tenderly, and made him long for her; nevertheless he kept a rigid government upon himself, and sat there regarding her, she flushing, slightly under his scrutiny, not daring to return his ardent gaze.

"Beatrix," he said slowly, "I have acted towards you like a boor and a ruffian, as indeed I am; but let this plead for me, that I have ever been used to the roughness of the camp, bereft of gentler influences. I ask your forgiveness."

"There is nothing to forgive. You are a noble of the Empire, and I but a lowly serving-maid."

"Nay, that cuts me to the heart, and is my bitterest condemnation. A true man were courteous to high and low alike. Now, indeed, you overwhelm me with shame, maiden of the woodlands."

"Such was not my intention, my Lord. I hold you truly noble in nature as well as in rank, otherwise I stood not here."

"Beatrix, does any woodlander come from the forest to the castle walls and there give signal intended for you alone?"

"Oh, no, my Lord."

"Perhaps you have kindly preference for some one within this stronghold?"

"You forget, my Lord, that the castle is ruled by a lady, and that the preference you indicate would accord ill with her womanly government."

"In truth I know little of woman's rule, but given such, I suppose the case would stand as you say. The Countess then frowns upon lovers' meetings."

"How could it be otherwise?"

"Have you told her of—of yesterday?"

"You mean of your refusal to come to terms with her? Yes, my Lord."

"I mean nothing of the kind, Beatrix."

"No one outside this room has been told aught to your disadvantage, my Lord," said the girl blushing rose-red.

"Then she suspects nothing?"

"Suspects nothing of what, my Lord?"

"That I love you, Beatrix."

The girl caught her breath, and seemed about to fly, but gathering courage, remained, and said speaking hurriedly and in some confusion: "As I did not suspect it myself I see not how my Lady should have made any such surmise, but indeed it may be so, for she chided me bitterly for remaining so long with you, and made me weep with her keen censure; yet am I here now against her express wish and command, but that is because of my strong sympathy for you and my belief that the Countess has wrongfully treated you."

"I care nothing for the opinion of that harridan, except that it may bring harsh usage to you; but Beatrix, I have told you bluntly of my love for you, answer me as honestly."

"My Lord, you spoke just now of a woodlander—"

"Ah, there is one then. Indeed, I feared as much, for there can be none on all the Rhine as beautiful or as good as you."

"There are many woodlanders, my Lord, and many women more beautiful than I. What I was about to say was that I would rather be the wife of the poorest forester, and lived in the roughest hut on the hillside, than dwell otherwise in the grandest castle on the Rhine."

"Surely, surely. But you shall dwell in my castle of Schonburg as my most honoured wife, if you but will it so."

"Then, my Lord, I must bid you beware of what you propose. Your wife must be chosen from the highest in the land, and not from the lowliest. It is not fitting that you should endeavour to raise a serving-maid to the position of Countess von Schonburg. You would lose caste among your equals, and bring unhappiness upon us both."

Count Herbert grasped his sword and lifting it, cried angrily: "By the Cross I serve, the man who refuses to greet my wife as he would greet the Empress, shall feel the weight of this blade."

"You cannot kill a whisper with a sword, my Lord."

"I can kill the whisperer."

"That can you not, my Lord, for the whisperer will be a woman."

"Then out upon them, we will have no traffic with them. I have lived too long away from the petty restrictions of civilisation to be bound down by them now, for I come from a region where a man's sword and not his rank preserved his life." As he spoke he again raised his huge weapon aloft, but now held it by the blade so that it stood out against the bright window like a black cross of iron, and his voice rang forth defiantly: "With that blade I won my honour; by the symbol of its hilt I hope to obtain my soul's salvation, on both united I swear to be to you a true lover and a loyal husband."

With swift motion the girl covered her face with her hands and Herbert saw the crystal drops trickle between her fingers. For long she could not speak and then mastering her emotion, she said brokenly:

"I cannot accept, I cannot now accept. I can take no advantage of a helpless prisoner. At midnight I shall come and set you free, thus my act may atone for the great wrong of your imprisonment; atone partially if not wholly. When you are at liberty, if you wish to forget your words, which I can never do, then am I amply repaid that my poor presence called them forth. If you remember them, and demand of the Countess that I stand as hostage for peace, she is scarce likely to deny you, for she loves not war. But know that nothing you have said is to be held against you, for I would have you leave this castle as free as when you entered it. And now, my Lord, farewell."

Before the unready man could make motion to prevent her, she had opened the door and was gone, leaving it open, thus compelling the prisoner to be his own jailer and close it, for he had no wish now to leave the castle alone when he had been promised such guidance.

The night seemed to Count Herbert the longest he had ever spent, as he sat on the bench, listening for the withdrawing of the bolts; if indeed they were in their sockets, which he doubted. At last the door was pushed softly open, and bending under the chain, he stood in the outside hall, peering through the darkness, to catch sight of his conductor. A great window of stained glass occupied the southern end of the hall, and against it fell the rays of the full moon now high in the heavens, filling the dim and lofty apartment with a coloured radiance resembling his visions of the half tones of fairyland. Like a shadow stood the cloaked figure of the girl, who timidly placed her small hand in his great palm, and that touch gave a thrill of reality to the mysticism of the time and the place. He grasped it closely, fearing it might fade away from him as it had done in his dream. She led him silently by another way from that by which he had entered, and together they passed through a small doorway that communicated with a narrow circular stair which wound round and round downwards until they came to another door at the bottom, which let them out in the moonlight at the foot of a turret.

"Beatrix," whispered the young man, "I am not going to demand you of the Countess. I shall not be indebted to her for my wife. You must come with me now."

"No, no," cried the girl shrinking from him, "I cannot go with you thus surreptitiously, and no one but you and me must ever learn that I led you from the castle. You shall come for me as a lord should for his lady, as if he thought her worthy of him."

"Indeed, that do I. Worthy? It is I who am unworthy, but made more worthy I hope in that you care for me."

From where they stood the knight saw the moonlight fall on his own castle of Schonburg, the rays seeming to transform the grey stone into the whitest of marble, the four towers standing outlined against the blue of the cloudless sky. The silver river of romance, flowed silently at its feet reflecting again the snowy purity of the reality in an inverted quivering watery vision. All the young man's affection for the home he had not seen for years seemed to blend with his love for the girl standing there in the moonlight. Gently he drew her to him, and kissed her unresisting lips.

"Woodland maiden," he said tenderly, "here at the edge of the forest is your rightful home and not in this grim castle, and here will I woo thee again, being now a free man."

"Indeed," said the girl with a laugh in which a sob and a sigh intermingled, "it is but scanty freedom I have brought to you; an exchange of silken fetters for iron chains."

His arms still around her, he unloosed the ribbon that held in thrall the thick braid of golden hair, and parting the clustering strands speedily encompassed her in a cloak of misty fragrance that seemed as unsubstantial as the moonlight that glittered through its meshes. He stood back the better to admire the picture he seemed to have created.

"My darling," he cried, "you are no woodland woman, but the very spirit of the forest herself. You are so beautiful, I dare not leave you here to the mercies of this demon, who, finding me gone, may revenge herself on you. If before she dared to censure you, what may she not do now that you have set me free? Curse her that she stands for a moment between my love and me."

He raised his clenched fist and shook it at the tower above him, and seemed about to break forth in new maledictions against the lady, when Beatrix, clasping her hands cried in terror:

"No, no, Herbert, you have said enough. How can you pretend to love me when implacable hatred lies so near to your affection. You must forgive the Countess. Oh, Herbert, Herbert, what more could I do to atone? I have withdrawn my forces from around your castle; I have set you free and your path to Schonburg lies unobstructed. Even now your underling, thinking himself victorious, is preparing an expedition against me, and nothing but your word stands, between me and instant attack. Ponder, I beseech of you, on my position. War, not of my seeking, was bequeathed to me, and a woman who cannot fight must trust to her advisers, and thus may do what her own heart revolts against. They told me that if I made you prisoner I could stop the war, and thus I consented to that act of treachery for which you so justly condemn me."

"Beatrix," cried her amazed lover, "what madness has come over you?"

"No madness touched me, Herbert, until I met you, and I sometimes think that you have brought back with you the eastern sorcery of which I have heard—at least such may perhaps make excuse for my unmaidenly behaviour. Herbert, I am Beatrix of Gudenfels, Countess von Falkenstein, who is and ever will be, if you refuse to pardon her, a most unhappy woman."

"No woodland maiden, but the Countess! The Countess von Falkenstein!" murmured her lover more to himself than to, his eager listener, the lines on his perplexed brow showing that he was endeavouring to adjust the real and the ideal in his slow brain.

"A Countess, Herbert, who will joyfully exchange the privileges of her station for the dear preference shown to the serving-maid."

A smile came to the lips of Von Schonburg as he held out his hands, in which the Countess placed her own.

"My Lady Beatrix," he said, "how can I refuse my pardon for the first encroachment on my liberty, now that you have made me your prisoner for life?"

"Indeed, my captured lord," cried the girl, "you are but now coming to a true sense of your predicament. I marvelled that you felt so resentful about the first offence, when the second was so much more serious. Am I then forgiven for both?"

It seemed that she was, and the Count insisted on returning to his captivity, and coming forth the next day, freed by her commands, whereupon, in the presence of all her vassals, he swore allegiance to her with such deference that her advisers said to her that she must now see they had been right in counselling his imprisonment. Prison, they said, had a wonderfully quieting effect upon even the most truculent, the Count being quickly subdued when he saw his sword-play had but little effect on the chain. The Countess graciously acknowledged that events had indeed proved the wisdom of their course, and said it was not to be wondered at that men should know the disposition of a turbulent man, better than an inexperienced woman could know it.

And thus was the feud between Gudenfels and Schonburg happily ended, and Count Herbert came from the Crusades to find two castles waiting for him instead of one as he had expected, with what he had reason to prize above everything else, a wife as well.

CHAPTER II. – THE REVENGE OF THE OUTLAW

The position of Count Herbert when, at the age of thirty-one he took up his residence in the ancient castle of his line, was a most enviable one. His marriage with Beatrix, Countess von Falkenstein, had added the lustre of a ruling family to the prestige of his own, and the renown of his valour in the East had lost nothing in transit from the shores of the Mediterranean to the banks of the Rhine. The Counts of Schonburg had ever been the most conservative in counsel and the most radical in the fray, and thus Herbert on returning, found himself, without seeking the honor, regarded by common consent as leader of the nobility whose castles bordered the renowned river. The Emperor, as was usually the case when these imperial figure-heads were elected by the three archbishops and their four colleagues, was a nonentity, who made no attempt to govern a turbulent land that so many were willing to govern for him. His majesty left sword and sceptre to those who cared for such baubles, and employed himself in banding together the most notable company of meistersingers that Germany had ever listened to. But although harmony reigned in Frankfort, the capital, there was much lack of it along the Rhine, and the man with the swiftest and heaviest sword, usually accumulated the greatest amount of property, movable and otherwise.

Among the truculent nobles who terrorised the country side, none was held In greater awe than Baron von Wiethoff, whose Schloss occupied a promontory Some distance up the stream from Castle Schonburg, on the same side of the river. Public opinion condemned the Baron, not because he exacted tribute from the merchants who sailed down the Rhine, for such collections were universally regarded as a legitimate source of revenue, but because he was in the habit of killing the goose that laid the golden egg, which action was looked upon with disfavour by those who resided between Schloss Wiethoff and Cologne, as interfering with their right to exist, for a merchant, although well-plucked, is still of advantage to those in whose hands he falls, if life and some of his goods are left to him. Whereas, when cleft from scalp to midriff by the Baron's long sword, he became of no value either to himself or to others. While many nobles were satisfied with levying a scant five or ten per cent on a voyager's belongings, the Baron rarely rested contented until he had acquired the full hundred, and, the merchant objecting, von Wiethoff would usually order him hanged or decapitated, although at times when he was in good humour he was wont to confer honour upon the trading classes by despatching the grumbling seller of goods with his own weapon, which created less joy in the commercial community than the Baron seemed to expect. Thus navigation on the swift current of the Rhine began to languish, for there was little profit in the transit of goods from Mayence to Cologne if the whole consignment stood in jeopardy and the owner's life as well, so the merchants got into the habit of carrying their gear overland on the backs of mules, thus putting the nobility to great inconvenience in scouring the forests, endeavouring to intercept the caravans. The nobility, with that stern sense of justice which has ever characterised the higher classes, placed the blame of this diversion of traffic from its natural channel not upon the merchants but upon the Baron, where undoubtedly it rightly belonged, and although, when they came upon an overland company which was seeking to avoid them, they gathered in an extra percentage of the goods to repay in a measure the greater difficulty they had in their woodland search, they always informed the merchants with much politeness, that, when river traffic was resumed, they would be pleased to revert to the original exaction, which the traders, not without reason pointed out was of little avail to them as long as Baron von Wiethoff was permitted to confiscate the whole.

In their endeavours to resuscitate the navigation interests of the Rhine, several expeditions had been formed against the Baron, but his castle was strong, and there were so many conflicting interests among those who attacked him that he had always come out victorious, and after each onslaught the merchants suffered more severely than before.

Affairs were in this unsatisfactory condition when Count Herbert of Schonburg returned from the Holy Land, the fame of his deeds upon him, and married Beatrix of Gudenfels. Although the nobles of the Upper Rhine held aloof from all contest with the savage Baron of Schloss Wiethoff, his exactions not interfering with their incomes, many of those further down the river offered their services to Count Herbert, if he would consent to lead them against the Baron, but the Count pleaded that he was still a stranger in his own country, having so recently returned from his ten contentious years in Syria, therefore he begged time to study the novel conditions confronting him before giving an answer to their proposal.

The Count learned that the previous attacks made upon Schloss Wiethoff had been conducted with but indifferent generalship, and that failure had been richly earned by desertions from the attacking force, each noble thinking himself justified in withdrawing himself and his men, when offended, or when the conduct of affairs displeased him, so von Schonburg informed the second deputation which waited on him, that he was more accustomed to depend on himself than on the aid of others, and that if any quarrel arose between Castle Schonburg and Schloss Wiethoff, the Count would endeavour to settle the dispute with his own sword, which reply greatly encouraged the Baron when he heard of it, for he wished to try conclusions with the newcomer, and made no secret of his disbelief in the latter's Saracenic exploits, saying the Count had returned when there was none left of the band he took with him, and had, therefore, with much wisdom, left himself free from contradiction.

There was some disappointment up and down the Rhine when time passed and the Count made no warlike move. It was well known that the Countess was much averse to war, notwithstanding the fact that she was indebted to war for her stalwart husband, and her peaceful nature was held to excuse the non-combative life lived by the Count, although there were others who gave it as their opinion that the Count was really afraid of the Baron, who daily became more and more obnoxious as there seemed to be less and less to fear. Such boldness did the Baron achieve that he even organised a slight raid upon the estate of Gudenfels which belonged to the Count's wife, but still Herbert of Schonburg did not venture from the security of his castle, greatly to the disappointment and the disgust of his neighbours, for there are on earth no people who love a fight more dearly than do those who reside along the banks of the placid Rhine.

At last an heir was born to Castle Schonburg, and the rejoicings throughout all the district governed by the Count were general and enthusiastic. Bonfires were lit on the heights and the noble river glowed red under the illumination at night. The boy who had arrived at the castle was said to give promise of having all the beauty of his mother and all the strength of his father, which was admitted by everybody to be a desirable combination, although some shook their heads and said they hoped that with strength there would come greater courage than the Count appeared to possess. Nevertheless, the Count had still some who believed in him, notwithstanding his long period of inaction, and these said that on the night the boy was born, and word was brought to him in the great hall that mother and child were well, the cloud that had its habitual resting-place on the Count's brow lifted and his lordship took down from its place his great broadsword, rubbed from its blade the dust and the rust that had collected, swung the huge weapon hissing through the air, and heaved a deep sigh, as one who had come to the end of a period of restraint.

The boy was just one month old on the night that there was a thunderous knocking at the gate of Schloss Wiethoff. The Baron hastily buckled on his armour and was soon at the head of his men eager to repel the invader. In a marvellously short space of time there was a contest in progress at the gates which would have delighted the heart of the most quarrelsome noble from Mayence to Cologne. The attacking party which appeared in large force before the gate, attempted to batter in the oaken leaves of the portal, but the Baron was always prepared for such visitors, and the heavy timbers that were heaved against the oak made little impression, while von Wiethoff roared defiance from the top of the wall that surrounded the castle and what was more to the purpose, showered down stones and

arrows on the besiegers, grievously thinning their ranks. The Baron, with creditable ingenuity, had constructed above the inside of the gate a scaffolding, on the top of which was piled a mountain of huge stones. This scaffold was arranged in such a way that a man pulling a lever caused it to collapse, thus piling the stones instantly against the inside of the gate, rendering it impregnable against assault by battering rams. The Baron was always jubilant when his neighbours attempted to force the gate, for he was afforded much amusement at small expense to himself, and he cared little for the damage the front door received, as he had built his castle not for ornament but for his own protection. He was a man with an amazing vocabulary, and as he stood on the wall shaking his mailed fist at the intruders he poured forth upon them invective more personal than complimentary.

While thus engaged, rejoicing over the repulse of the besiegers, for the attack was evidently losing its vigour, he was amazed to note a sudden illumination of the forest-covered hill which he was facing. The attacking party rallied with a yell when the light struck them, and the Baron, looking hastily over his shoulder to learn the source of the ruddy glow on the trees, saw with dismay that his castle was on fire and that Count Herbert followed by his men had possession of the battlements to the rear, while the courtyard swarmed with soldiers, who had evidently scaled the low wall along the river front from rafts or boats.

“Surrender!” cried Count Herbert, advancing along the wall. “Your castle is taken, and will be a heap of ruins within the hour.”

“Then may you be buried beneath them,” roared the Baron, springing to the attack.

Although the Baron was a younger man than his antagonist, it was soon proven that his sword play was not equal to that of the Count, and the broadsword fight on the battlements in the light of the flaming stronghold, was of short duration, watched breathlessly as it was by men of both parties above and below. Twice the Baron’s guard was broken, and the third time, such was the terrific impact of iron on iron, that the Baron’s weapon was struck from his benumbed hands and fell glittering through the air to the ground outside the walls. The Count paused in his onslaught, refraining from striking a disarmed man, but again demanding his submission. The Baron cast one glance at his burning house, saw that it was doomed, then, with a movement as reckless as it was unexpected, took the terrific leap from the wall top to the ground, alighting on his feet near his fallen sword which he speedily recovered. For an instant the Count hovered on the brink to follow him, but the swift thought of his wife and child restrained him, and he feared a broken limb in the fall, leaving him thus at the mercy of his enemy. The moment for decision was short enough, but the years of regret for this hesitation were many and long. There were a hundred men before the walls to intercept the Baron, and it seemed useless to jeopardise life or limb in taking the leap, so the Count contented himself by giving the loud command: “Seize that man and bind him.”

It was an order easy to give and easy to obey had there been a dozen men below as brave as their captain, or even one as brave, as stalwart and as skilful; but the Baron struck sturdily around him and mowed his way through the throng as effectually as a reaper with a sickle clears a path for himself in the standing corn. Before Herbert realised what was happening, the Baron was safe in the obscurity of the forest.

The Count of Schonburg was not a man to do things by halves, even though upon the occasion of this attack he allowed the Baron to slip through his fingers. When the ruins of the Schloss cooled, he caused them to be removed and flung stone by stone into the river, leaving not a vestige of the castle that had so long been a terror to the district, holding that if the lair were destroyed the wolf would not return. In this the Count proved but partly right. Baron von Wiethoff renounced his order, and became an outlaw, gathering round him in the forest all the turbulent characters, not in regular service elsewhere, publishing along the Rhine by means of prisoners he took and then released that as the nobility seemed to object to his preying upon the merchants, he would endeavour to amend his ways and would harry instead such castles as fell into his hands. Thus Baron von Wiethoff became known as the Outlaw of the Hundsrück, and being as intrepid as he was merciless, soon made the

Rhenish nobility withdraw attention from other people's quarrels in order to bestow strict surveillance upon their own. It is possible that if the dwellers along the river had realised at first the kind of neighbour that had been produced by burning out the Baron, they might, by combination have hunted him down in the widespread forests of the Hundsrück, but as the years went on, the Outlaw acquired such knowledge of the interminable mazes of this wilderness, that it is doubtful whether all the troops in the Empire could have brought his band to bay. The outlaws always fled before a superior force, and always massacred an inferior one, and like the lightning, no man could predict where the next stroke would fall. On one occasion he even threatened the walled town of Coblentz, and the citizens compounded with him, saying they had no quarrel with any but the surrounding nobles, which expression the thrifty burghers regretted when Count Herbert marched his men through their streets and for every coin they, had paid the Outlaw, exacted ten.

The boy of Castle Schonburg was three years old, when he was allowed to play on the battlements, sporting with a wooden sword and imagining himself as great a warrior as his father had ever been. He was a brave little fellow whom nothing could frighten but the stories his nurse told him of the gnomes and goblins who infested the Rhine, and he longed for the time when he would be a man and wear a real sword. One day just before he had completed his fourth year, a man came slinking out of the forest to the foot of the wall, for the watch was now slack as the Outlaw had not been heard of for months, and then was far away in the direction of Mayence. The nurse was holding a most absorbing conversation with the man-at-arms, who should, instead, have been pacing up and down the terrace while she should have been watching her charge. The man outside gave a low whistle which attracted the attention of the child and then beckoned him to come further along the wall until he had passed the west tower.

"Well, little coward," said the man, "I did not think you would have the courage to come so far away from the women."

"I am not a coward," answered the lad, stoutly, "and I do not care about the women at all."

"Your father was a coward."

"He is not. He is the bravest man in the world."

"He did not dare to jump off the wall after the Baron."

"He will cut the Baron in pieces if he ever comes near our castle."

"Yet he dared not jump as the Baron did."

"The Baron was afraid of my father; that's why he jumped."

"Not so. It was your father who feared to follow him, though he had a sword and the Baron had none. You are all cowards in Castle Schonburg. I don't believe you have the courage to jump even though I held out my arms to catch you, but if you do I will give you the sword I wear."

The little boy had climbed on the parapet, and now stood hovering on the brink of the precipice, his childish heart palpitating through fear of the chasm before him, yet beneath its beatings was an insistent command to prove his impugned courage. For some moments there was deep silence, the man below gazing aloft and holding up his hands. At last he lowered his outstretched arms and said in a sneering tone:

"Good-bye, craven son of a craven race. You dare not jump."

The lad, with a cry of despair, precipitated himself into the empty air and came fluttering down like a wounded bird, to fall insensible into the arms that for the moment saved him from death or mutilation. An instant later there was a shriek from the negligent nurse, and the man-at-arms ran along the battlements, a bolt on his cross-bow which he feared to launch at the flying abductor, for in the speeding of it he might slay the heir of Schonburg. By the time the castle was aroused and the gates thrown open to pour forth searchers, the man had disappeared into the forest, and in its depths all trace of young Wilhelm was lost. Some days after, the Count von Schonburg came upon the deserted camp of the outlaws, and found there evidences, not necessary to be here set down, that his son had been murdered. Imposing secrecy on his followers, so that the Countess might still

retain her unshaken belief that not even an outlaw would harm a little child, the Count returned to his castle to make preparations for a complete and final campaign of extinction against the scourge of the Hundsrück, but the Outlaw had withdrawn his men far from the scene of his latest successful exploit and the Count never came up with him.

Years passed on and the silver came quickly to Count Herbert's hair, he attributing the change to the hardships endured in the East, but all knowing well the cause sprang from his belief in his son's death. The rapid procession of years made little impression on the beauty of the Countess, who, although grieving for the absence of her boy, never regarded him as lost but always looked for his return. "If he were dead," she often said to her husband, "I should know it in my heart; I should know the day, the hour and the moment."

This belief the Count strove to encourage, although none knew better than he how baseless it was. Beatrix, with a mother's fondness, kept little Wilhelm's room as it had been when he left it, his toys in their places, and his bed prepared for him, allowing no one else to share the task she had allotted to herself. She seemed to keep no count of the years, nor to realise that if her son returned he would return as a young man and not as a child. To the mind of Beatrix he seemed always her boy of four.

When seventeen years had elapsed after the abduction of the heir of Schonburg, there came a rumour that the Outlaw of Hundsrück was again at his depredations in the neighbourhood of Coblentz. He was at this time a man of forty-two, and if he imagined that the long interval had led to any forgetting on the part of the Count von Schonburg, a most unpleasant surprise awaited him. The Count divided his forces equally between his two castles of Schonburg and Gudenfels situated on the west bank and the east bank respectively. If either castle were attacked, arrangements were made for getting word to the other, when the men in that other would cross the Rhine and fall upon the rear of the invaders, hemming them thus between two fires. The Count therefore awaited with complacency whatever assault the Outlaw cared to deliver.

It was expected that the attack would be made in the night, which was the usual time selected for these surprise parties that kept life from stagnating along the Rhine, but to the amazement of the Count the onslaught came in broad daylight, which seemed to indicate that the Outlaw had gathered boldness with years. The Count from the battlements scanned his opponents and saw that they were led, not by the Outlaw in person, but by a young man who evidently held his life lightly, so recklessly did he risk it. He was ever in the thick of the fray, dealing sword strokes with a lavish generosity which soon kindled a deep respect for him in the breasts of his adversaries. The Count had not waited for the battering in of his gates but had sent out his men to meet the enemy in the open, which was rash generalship, had he not known that the men of Gudenfels were hurrying round to the rear of the outlaws. Crossbowmen lined the battlements ready to cover the retreat of the defenders of the castle, should they meet a reverse, but now they stood in silence, holding their shafts, for in the mêslée there was a danger of destroying friend as well as foe. But in spite of the superb leadership of the young captain, the outlaws, seemingly panic-stricken, when there was no particular reason, deserted their commander in a body and fled in spite of his frantic efforts to rally them. The young man found himself surrounded, and, after a brave defence, overpowered. When the Gudenfels men came up, there was none to oppose them, the leader of the enemy being within the gates of Schonburg, bound, bleeding and a prisoner. The attacking outlaws were nowhere to be seen.

The youthful captive, unkempt as he was, appeared in the great hall of the castle before its grey-headed commander, seated in his chair of state.

"You are the leader of this unwarranted incursion?" said the Count, sternly, as he looked upon the pinioned lad.

"Warranted or unwarranted, I was the leader."

"Who are you?"

"I am Wilhelm, only son of the Outlaw of Hundsrück."

"The only son," murmured the Count, more to himself than to his auditors, the lines hardening round his firm mouth. For some moments there was a deep silence in the large room, then the Count spoke in a voice that had no touch of mercy in it:

"You will be taken to a dungeon and your wounds cared for. Seven days from now, at this hour, you will appear again before me, at which time just sentence will be passed upon you, after I hear what you have to say in your own defence."

"You may hear that now, my Lord. I besieged your castle and would perhaps have taken it, had I not a pack of cowardly dogs at my heels. I am now in your power, and although you talk glibly of justice, I know well what I may expect at your hands. Your delay of a week is the mere pretence of a hypocrite, who wishes to give colour of legality to an act already decided upon. I do not fear you now, and shall not fear you then, so spare your physicians unnecessary trouble, and give the word to your executioner."

"Take him away, attend to his wounds, and guard him strictly. Seven days from now when I call for him; see to it that you can produce him."

Elsa, niece of the Outlaw, watched anxiously for the return of her cousin from the long prepared for expedition. She had the utmost confidence in his bravery and the most earnest belief in his success, yet she watched for the home-coming of the warriors with an anxious heart. Perhaps a messenger would arrive telling of the capture of the castle; perhaps all would return with news of defeat, but for what actually happened the girl was entirely unprepared. That the whole company, practically unscathed, should march into camp with the astounding news that their leader had been captured and that they had retreated without striking a blow on his behalf, seemed to her so monstrous, that her first thought was fear of the retribution which would fall on the deserters when her uncle realised the full import of the tidings. She looked with apprehension at his forbidding face and was amazed to see something almost approaching a smile part his thin lips.

"The attack has failed, then. I fear I sent out a leader incompetent and too young. We must make haste to remove our camp or the victorious Count, emboldened by success, may carry the war into the forest." With this amazing proclamation the Outlaw turned and walked to his hut followed by his niece, bewildered as one entangled in the mazes of a dream. When they were alone together, the girl spoke.

"Uncle, has madness overcome you?"

"I was never saner than now, nor happier, for years of waiting are approaching their culmination."

"Has, then, all valour left your heart?"

"Your question will be answered when next I lead my band."

"When next you lead it? Where will you lead it?"

"Probably in the vicinity of Mayence, toward which place we are about to journey."

"Is it possible that you retreat from here without attempting the rescue of your son, now in the hands of your lifelong enemy?"

"All things are possible in an existence like ours. The boy would assault the castle; he has failed and has allowed himself to be taken. It is the fortune of war and I shall not waste a man in attempting his rescue."

Elsa stood for a moment gazing in dismay at her uncle, whose shifty eyes evaded all encounter with hers, then she strode to the wall, took down a sword and turned without a word to the door. The Outlaw sprang between her and the exit.

"What are you about to do?" he cried.

"I am about to rally all who are not cowards round me, then at their head, I shall attack Castle Schonburg and set Wilhelm free or share his fate."

The Outlaw stood for a few moments, his back against the door of the hut, gazing in sullen anger at the girl, seemingly at a loss to know how she should be dealt with. At last his brow cleared and he spoke: “Is your interest in Wilhelm due entirely to the fact that you are cousins?”

A quick flush overspread the girl’s fair cheeks with colour and her eyes sought the floor of the hut. The point of the sword she held lowered until it rested on the stone flags, and she swayed slightly, leaning against its hilt, while the keen eyes of her uncle regarded her critically. She said in a voice little above a whisper, contrasting strongly with her determined tone of a moment before:

“My interest is due to our relationship alone.”

“Has no word of love passed between you?”

“Oh, no, no. Why do you ask me such a question?”

“Because on the answer given depends whether or not I shall entrust you with knowledge regarding him. Swear to me by the Three Kings of Cologne that you will tell to none what I will now impart to you.”

“I swear,” said Elsa, raising her right hand, and holding aloft the sword with it.

“Wilhelm is not my son, nor is he kin to either of us, but is the heir of the greatest enemy of our house, Count Herbert of Schonburg. I lured him from his father’s home as a child and now send him back as a man. Some time later I shall acquaint the Count with the fact that the young man he captured is his only son.”

The girl looked at her uncle, her eyes wide with horror.

“It is your purpose then that the father shall execute his own son?”

The Outlaw shrugged his shoulders.

“The result lies not with me, but with the Count. He was once a crusader and the teaching of his master is to the effect that the measure he metes to others, the same shall be meted to him, if I remember aright the tenets of his faith. Count Herbert wreaking vengeance upon my supposed son, is really bringing destruction upon his own, which seems but justice. If he show mercy to me and mine, he is bestowing the blessed balm thereof on himself and his house. In this imperfect world, few events are ordered with such admirable equity as the capture of young Lord Wilhelm, by that haughty and bloodthirsty warrior, his father. Let us then await with patience the outcome, taking care not to interfere with the designs of Providence.”

“The design comes not from God but from the evil one himself.”

“It is within the power of the Deity to overturn even the best plans of the fiend, if it be His will. Let us see to it that we do not intervene between two such ghostly potentates, remembering that we are but puny creatures, liable to err.”

“The plot is of your making, secretly held, all these years, with unrelenting malignity. The devil himself is not wicked enough to send an innocent, loyal lad to his doom in his own mother’s house, with his father as his executioner. Oh, uncle, uncle, repent and make reparation before it is too late.”

“Let the Count repent and make reparation. I have now nothing to do with the matter. As I have said, if the Count is merciful, he is like to be glad of it later in his life; if he is revengeful, visiting the sin of the father on the son, innocent, I think you called him, then he deserves what his own hand deals out to himself. But we have talked too much already. I ask you to remember your oath, for I have told you this so that you will not bring ridicule upon me by a womanish appeal to my own men, who would but laugh at you in any case and think me a dotard in allowing women overmuch to say in the camp. Get you back to your women, for we move camp instantly. Even if I were to relent, as you term it, the time is past, for Wilhelm is either dangling from the walls of Castle Schonburg or he is pardoned, and all that we could do would be of little avail. Prepare you then instantly for our journey.”

Elsa, with a sigh, went slowly to the women’s quarters, her oath, the most terrible that may be taken on the Rhine, weighing heavily upon her. Resolving not to break it, yet determined in some way to save Wilhelm, the girl spent the first part of the journey in revolving plans of escape, for she found as the cavalcade progressed that her uncle did not trust entirely to the binding qualities of the

oath she had taken, but had her closely watched as well. As the expedition progressed farther and farther south in the direction of Mayence, vigilance was relaxed, and on the evening of the second day, when a camp had been selected for the night, Elsa escaped and hurried eastward through the forest until she came to the Rhine, which was to be her guide to the castle of Schonburg. The windings of the river made the return longer than the direct journey through the wilderness had been, and in addition to this, Elsa was compelled to circumambulate the numerous castles, climbing the hills to avoid them, fearing capture and delay, so it was not until the sun was declining on the sixth day after the assault on the castle that she stood, weary and tattered and unkempt, before the closed gates of Schonburg, and beat feebly with her small hand against the oak, crying for admittance. The guard of the gate, seeing through the small lattice but a single dishevelled woman standing there, anticipating treachery, refused to open the little door in the large leaf until his captain was summoned, who, after some parley, allowed the girl to enter the courtyard.

"What do you want?" asked the captain, curtly.

She asked instead of answered:

"Is your prisoner still alive?"

"The son of the Outlaw? Yes, but he would be a confident prophet who would predict as much for him at this hour to-morrow."

"Take me, I beg of you, to the Countess."

"That is as it may be. Who are you and what is your business with her?"

"I shall reveal myself to her Ladyship, and to her will state the object of my coming."

"Your object is plain enough. You are some tatterdemalion of the forest come to beg the life of your lover, who hangs to-morrow, or I am a heathen Saracen."

"I do beseech you, tell the Countess that a miserable woman craves permission to speak with her."

What success might have attended her petition is uncertain, but the problem was solved by the appearance of the Countess herself on the terrace above them, which ran the length of the castle on its western side. The lady leaned over the parapet and watched with evident curiosity the strange scene in the courtyard below, the captain and his men in a ring around the maiden of the forest, who occupying the centre of the circle, peered now in one face, now in another, as if searching for some trace of sympathy in the stolid countenances of the warriors all about her. Before the captain could reply, his lady addressed him.

"Whom have you there, Conrad?"

It seemed as if the unready captain would get no word said, for again before he had made answer the girl spoke to the Countess.

"I do implore your Ladyship to grant me speech with you."

The Countess looked down doubtfully upon the supplicant, evidently prejudiced by her rags and wildly straying hair. The captain cleared his throat and opened his mouth, but the girl eagerly forestalled him.

"Turn me not away, my Lady, because I come in unhandsome guise, for I have travelled far through forest and over rock, climbing hills and skirting the river's brink to be where I am. The reluctant wilderness, impeding me, has enviously torn my garments, leaving me thus ashamed before you, but, dear Lady, let not that work to my despite. Grant my petition and my prayer shall ever be that the dearest wish of your own heart go not unsatisfied."

"Alas!" said the Countess, with a deep sigh, "my dearest wish gives little promise of fulfilment."

Conrad, seeing that the lady thought of her lost son, frowned angrily, and in low growling tones bade the girl have a care what she said, but Elsa was not to be silenced and spoke impetuously.

"Oh, Countess, the good we do often returns to us tenfold; mercy calls forth mercy. An acorn planted produces an oak; cruelty sown leaves us cruelty to reap. It is not beyond imagination that the soothing of my bruised heart may bring balm to your own."

"Take the girl to the east room, Conrad, and let her await me there," said the Countess.

"With a guard, your Ladyship?"

"Without a guard, Conrad."

"Pardon me, my Lady, but I distrust her. She may have designs against you."

The Countess had little acquaintance with fear. She smiled at the anxious captain and said:

"Her only desire is to reach my heart, Conrad."

"God grant it may not be with a dagger," grumbled the captain, as he made haste to obey the commands of the lady.

When the Countess entered the room in which Elsa stood, her first question was an inquiry regarding her visitor's name and station, the telling of which seemed but an indifferent introduction for the girl, who could not help noting that the Countess shrank, involuntarily from her when she heard the Outlaw mentioned.

"Our house has little cause to confer favour on any kin of the Outlaw of Hundsrück," the lady said at last.

"I do not ask for favour, my Lady. I have come to give your revenge completeness, if it is revenge you seek. The young man now imprisoned in Schonburg is so little esteemed by my uncle that not a single blow has been struck on his behalf. If the Count thinks to hurt the Outlaw by executing Wilhelm, he will be gravely in error, for my uncle and his men regard the captive so lightly that they have gone beyond Mayence without even making an effort toward his rescue. As for me, my uncle bestows upon me such affection as he is capable of, and would be more grieved should I die, than if any other of his kin were taken from him. Release Wilhelm and I will gladly take his place, content to receive such punishment as his Lordship, the Count, considers should be imposed on a relative of the Outlaw."

"What you ask is impossible. The innocent should not suffer for the guilty."

"My Lady, the innocent have suffered for others since the world began, and will continue to do so till it ends. Our only hope of entering Heaven comes through Him who was free from sin being condemned in our stead. I do beseech your Ladyship to let me take the place of Wilhelm."

"You love this young man," said the Countess, seating herself, and regarding the girl with the intent interest which women, whose own love affair has prospered, feel when they are confronted with an incident that reminds them of their youth.

"Not otherwise than as a friend and dear companion, my Lady," replied Elsa, blushing. "When he was a little boy and I a baby, he carried me about in his arms, and since that time we have been comrades together."

"Comradeship stands for much, my girl," said the Countess, in kindly manner, "but it rarely leads one friend willingly to accept death for another. I have not seen this young man whom you would so gladly liberate; the dealing with prisoners is a matter concerning my husband alone; I never interfere, but if I should now break this rule because you have travelled so far, and are so anxious touching the prisoner's welfare, would you be willing to accept my conditions?"

"Yes, my Lady, so that his life were saved."

"He is a comely young man doubtless, and there are some beautiful women within this castle; would it content you if he were married to one of my women, and so escaped with life?"

A sudden pallor overspread the girl's face, and she clasped her hands nervously together. Tears welled into her eyes, and she stood thus for a few moments unable to speak. At last she murmured, with some difficulty:

"Wilhelm can care nothing for any here, not having beheld them, and it would be wrong to coerce a man in such extremity. I would rather die for him, that he might owe his life to me."

"But he would live to marry some one else."

"If I were happy in heaven, why should I begrudge Wilhelm's happiness on earth?"

"Ah, why, indeed, Elsa? And yet you disclaim with a sigh. Be assured that I shall do everything in my power to save your lover, and that not at the expense of your own life or happiness. Now come with me, for I would have you arrayed in garments more suited to your youth and your beauty, that you may not be ashamed when you meet this most fascinating prisoner, for such he must be, when you willingly risk so much for his sake."

The Countess, after conducting the girl to the women's apartments, sought her husband, but found to her dismay that he showed little sign of concurrence with her sympathetic views regarding the fate of the prisoner. It was soon evident to her that Count Herbert had determined upon the young man's destruction, and that there was some concealed reason for this obdurate conclusion which the Count did not care to disclose. Herbert von Schonburg was thoroughly convinced that his son was dead, mutilated beyond recognition by the Outlaw of Hundsrück, yet this he would not tell to Beatrix, his wife, who cherished the unshaken belief that the boy still lived and would be restored to her before she died. The Count for years had waited for his revenge, and even though his wife now pleaded that he forego it, the Master of Schonburg was in no mind to comply, though he said little in answer to her persuading. The incoming of Elsa to the castle merely convinced him that some trick was meditated on the part of the Outlaw, and the sentimental consideration urged by the Countess had small weight with him. He gave a curt order to his captain to double his guards around the stronghold, and relax no vigilance until the case of the prisoner had been finally dealt with. He refused permission for Elsa to see her cousin, even in the presence of witnesses, as he was certain that her coming was for the purpose of communicating to him some message from the Outlaw, the news of whose alleged withdrawal he did not believe.

"With the country at peace, the Outlaw has instigated, and his son has executed, an attack upon this castle. The penalty is death. To-morrow I shall hear what he has to say in his defence, and shall deliver judgment, I hope, justly. If his kinswoman wishes to see him, she may come to his trial, and then will be in a position to testify to her uncle that sentence has been pronounced in accordance with the law that rules the Rhine provinces. If she has communication to make to her cousin, let it be made in the Judgment Hall in the presence of all therein."

The Countess, with sinking heart, left her husband, having the tact not to press upon him too strongly the claims of mercy as well as of justice. She knew that his kind nature would come to the assistance of her own suing, and deeply regretted that the time for milder influences to prevail was so short. In a brief conference with Elsa, she endeavoured to prepare the girl's mind for a disastrous ending of her hopes.

Some minutes before the hour set for Wilhelm's trial, the Countess Beatrix, followed by Elsa, entered the Judgment Hall to find the Count seated moodily in the great chair at one end of the long room, in whose ample inclosure many an important state conference had been held, each of the forefathers of the present owner being seated in turn as president of the assemblage. Some thought of this seemed to oppress the Count's mind, for seated here with set purpose to extinguish his enemy's line, the remembrance that his own race died with him was not likely to be banished. The Countess brought Elsa forward and in a whisper urged her to plead for her kinsman before his judge. The girl's eloquence brought tears to the eyes of Beatrix, but the Count's impassive face was sphinx-like in its settled gloom. Only once during the appeal did he speak, and that was when Elsa offered herself as a sacrifice to his revenge, then he said, curtly:

"We do not war against women. You are as free to go as you were to come, but you must not return."

A dull fear began to chill the girl's heart and to check her earnest pleading: She felt that her words were making no impression on the silent man seated before her, and this knowledge brought weak hesitation to her tongue and faltering to her speech. In despair she wrung her hands and cried: "Oh, my Lord, my Lord, think of your own son held at the mercy of an enemy. Think of him as

a young man just the age of your prisoner, at a time when life is sweetest to him! Think, think, I beg of you–"

The Count roused himself like a lion who had been disturbed, and cried in a voice that resounded hoarsely from the rafters of the arched roof, startling the Countess with the unaccustomed fierceness of its tone:

"Yes, I will think of him—of my only son in the clutch of his bitter foe, and I thank you for reminding me of him, little as I have for these long years needed spur to my remembrance. Bring in the prisoner."

When Wilhelm was brought in, heavy manacles on his wrists, walking between the men who guarded him, Elsa looked from judge to culprit, and her heart leaped with joy. Surely such blindness could not strike this whole concourse that some one within that hall would not see that, here confronted, stood father and son, on the face of one a frown of anger, on the face of the other a frown of defiance, expressions almost identical, the only difference being the thirty years that divided their ages. For a few moments the young man did not distinguish Elsa in the throng, then a glad cry of recognition escaped him, and the cloud cleared from his face as if a burst of sunshine had penetrated the sombre-coloured windows and had thrown its illuminating halo around his head. He spoke impetuously, leaning forward:

"Elsa, Elsa, how came you here?" then, a shadow of concern crossing his countenance, "you are not a prisoner, I trust?"

"No, no, Wilhelm, I am here to beseech the clemency of the Count—"

"Not for me!" exclaimed the prisoner, defiantly, drawing himself up proudly: "not for me, Elsa. You must never ask favour from a robber and a coward like, Count von Schonburg, brave only in his own Judgment Hall."

"Oh, Wilhelm, Wilhelm, have a care what you say, or you will break my heart. And your proclamation is far from true. The Count is a brave man who has time and again proved himself so, and my only hope is that he will prove as merciful as he is undoubtedly courageous. Join your prayers with mine, Wilhelm, and beg for mercy rather than justice."

"I beg from no man, either mercy or justice. I am here, my Lord Count, ready to receive whatever you care to bestow, and I ask you to make the waiting brief for the sake of the women present, for I am I sure the beautiful, white-haired lady there dislikes this traffic in men's lives as much as does my fair-haired cousin."

"Oh, my lord Count, do not heed what he says; his words but show the recklessness of youth; hold them not against him."

"Indeed I mean each word I say, and had I iron in my hand instead of round my wrists, his Lordship would not sit so calmly facing me."

Elsa, seeing how little she had accomplished with either man began to weep helplessly, and the Count, who had not interrupted the colloquy, listening unmoved to the contumely heaped upon him by the prisoner, now said to the girl:

"Have you finished your questioning?"

Receiving no answer, he said to the prisoner after a pause:

"Why did you move against this castle?"

"Because I hoped to take it, burn it, and hang or behead its owner."

"Oh, Wilhelm, Wilhelm!" wailed the girl.

"And, having failed, what do you expect?"

"To be hanged, or beheaded, depending on whether your Lordship is the more expert with a cord or with an axe."

"You called me a coward, and I might have retorted that in doing so you took advantage of your position as prisoner, but setting that aside, and speaking as man to man, what ground have you for such an accusation?"

"We cannot speak as man to man, for I am bound and you are free, but touching the question of your cowardice, I have heard it said by those who took part in the defence of my father's castle, when you attacked it and destroyed it, commanding a vastly superior force, my father leaped from the wall and dared you to follow him. For a moment, they told me, it seemed that you would accept the challenge, but you contented yourself with calling on others to do what you feared to do yourself, and thus my father, meeting no opposition from a man of his own rank, was compelled to destroy the unfortunate serfs who stood in his way and, so cut out a path to safety. In refusing to accept the plunge he took, you branded yourself a coward, and once a toward always a coward."

"Oh, Wilhelm," cried Elsa, in deep distress at the young man's lack of diplomacy, while she could not but admire his ill-timed boldness, "speak not so to the Count, for I am sure what you say is not true."

"Indeed," growled Captain Conrad, "the young villain is more crafty than we gave him credit for. Instead of a rope he will have a challenge from the Count, and so die honourably like a man, in place of being strangled like the dog he is."

"Dear Wilhelm, for my sake, do not persist in this course, but throw yourself on the mercy of the Count. Why retail here the irresponsible gossip of a camp, which I am sure contains not a word of truth, so far as the Count is concerned."

Herbert of Schonburg held up his hand for silence, and made confession with evident difficulty.

"What the young man says with harshness is true in semblance, if not strictly so in action. For the moment, thinking of my wife and child, I hesitated, and when the hesitation was gone the opportunity was gone with it. My punishment has been severe; by that moment's cowardice, I am now a childless man, and therefore perhaps value my life less highly than I held it at the time we speak of. Hear then, your sentence: You will be taken to the top of the wall, the iron removed from your wrists, and your sword placed in your hand. You will then leap from that wall, and if you are unhurt, I will leap after you. Should your sword serve you as well as your father's served him, you will be free of the forest, and this girl is at liberty to accompany you. I ask her now to betake herself to the field outside the gate, there to await the result of our contest."

At this there was an outcry on the part of Countess Beatrix, who protested against her husband placing himself in this unnecessary jeopardy, but the Count was firm and would permit no interference with his sentence. Elsa was in despair at the unaccountable blindness of all concerned, not knowing that the Count was convinced his son was dead, and that the Countess thought continually of her boy as a child of four, taking no account of the years that had passed, although her reason, had she applied reason to that which touched her affections only, would have told her, he must now be a stalwart young man and not the little lad she had last held in her arms. For a moment Elsa wavered in her allegiance to the oath she had taken, but she saw against the wall the great crucifix which had been placed there by the first crusader who had returned to the castle from the holy wars and she breathed a prayer as she passed it, that the heir of this stubborn house might not be cut off in his youth through the sightless rancour that seemed to pervade it.

The Count tried to persuade his weeping wife not to accompany him to the walls, but she would not be left behind, and so, telling Conrad to keep close watch upon her, in case that in her despair she might attempt to harm herself, his lordship led the way to the battlements.

Wilhelm, at first jubilant that he was allowed to take part in a sword contest rather than an execution, paused for a moment as he came to the courtyard, and looked about him in a dazed manner, once or twice drawing his hand across his eyes, as if to perfect his vision. Some seeing him thus stricken silent and thoughtful, surmised that the young man was like to prove more courageous in word than in action; others imagined that the sudden coming from the semi-gloom of the castle interior into the bright light dazzled him. The party climbed the flight of stone steps which led far upward to the platform edged by the parapet from which the spring was to be made. The young man walked up and down the promenade, unheeding those around him, seeming like one in a dream, groping

for something he failed to find. The onlookers watched him curiously, wondering at his change of demeanour.

Suddenly he dropped his sword on the stones at his feet, held up his hands and cried aloud:

"I have jumped from here before—when I was a lad—a baby almost—I remember it all now—where am I—when was I here before—where is my wooden sword—and where is Conrad, who made it—Conrad, where are you?"

The captain was the first to realise what had happened. He stepped hurriedly forward, scrutinising his late prisoner, the light of recognition, in his eyes.

"It is the young master," he shouted. "My Lord Count, this is no kinsman of the Outlaw, but your own son, a man grown."

The Count stood amazed, as incapable of motion as a statue of stone; the countess, gazing with dreamy eyes, seemed trying to adjust her inward vision of the lad of four with the outward reality of the man of twenty-one. In the silence rose the clear sweet voice of Elsa without the walls, her face upturned like a painting of the Madonna, her hands clasped in front of her.

"Dear Virgin Mother in Heaven, I thank thee that my prayer was not unheard, and bear me witness that I have kept my oath—I have kept my oath, and may Thy intervention show a proud and sinful people the blackness of revenge."

Count Herbert, rousing himself from his stupor, appealed loudly to the girl.

"Woman, is this indeed my son, and, if so, why did you not speak before we came to such extremity?"

"I cannot answer. I have sworn an oath. If you would learn who stands beside you, send a messenger to the Outlaw, saying you have killed him, as indeed you purposed doing," then stretching out her arms, she said, with faltering voice: "Wilhelm, farewell," and turning, fled toward the forest.

"Elsa, Elsa, come back!" the young man cried, foot on the parapet, but the girl paid no heed to his commanding summons, merely waving her hand without looking over her shoulder.

"Elsa!"

The name rang out so thrillingly strange that its reverberation instantly arrested the flying footsteps of the girl. Instinctively she knew it was the voice of a man falling rapidly through the air. She turned in time to see Wilhelm strike the ground, the impetus precipitating him prone on his face, where he lay motionless. The cry of horror from the battlements was echoed by her own as she sped swiftly toward him. The young man sprang to his feet as she approached and caught her breathless in his arms.

"Ah, Elsa," he said, tenderly, "forgive me the fright I gave you, but I knew of old your fleetness of foot, and if the forest once encircled you, how was I ever to find you?"

The girl made no effort to escape from her imprisonment, and showed little desire to exchange the embrace she endured for that of the forest.

"Though I should blush to say it, Wilhelm, I fear I am easily found, when you are the searcher."

"Then let old Schloss Schonburg claim you, Elsa, that the walls which beheld a son go forth, may see a son and daughter return."

CHAPTER III. – A CITY OF FEAR

The Countess Beatrix von Schonburg warmly welcomed her lost son and her newly-found daughter. The belief of Beatrix in Wilhelm's ultimate return had never wavered during all the long years of his absence, and although she had to translate her dream of the child of four into a reality that included a stalwart young man of twenty-one, the readjustment was speedily accomplished. Before a week had passed it seemed to her delighted heart that the boy had never left the castle. The Countess had liked Elsa from the first moment when she saw her, ragged, unkempt and forlorn, among the lowering, suspicious men-at-arms in the courtyard, and now that she knew the dangers and the privations the girl had braved for the sake of Wilhelm, the affectionate heart of Beatrix found ample room for the motherless Elsa.

With the Count, the process of mental reconstruction was slower, not only on account of his former conviction that his son was dead, but also because of the deep distrust in which he held the Outlaw. He said little, as was his custom, but often sat with brooding brows, intently regarding his son, gloomy doubt casting a shadow over his stern countenance. Might not this be a well-laid plot on the part of the Outlaw to make revenge complete by placing a von Weithoff in the halls of Schonburg as master of that ancient stronghold? The circumstances in which identity was disclosed, although sufficient to convince every one else in the castle, appeared at times to the Count but the stronger evidence of the Outlaw's craft and subtlety. If the young man were actually the son of von Weithoff, then undoubtedly the Outlaw had run great risk of having him hanged forthwith, but on the other hand, the prize to be gained, comprising as it did two notable castles and two wide domains, was a stake worth playing high for, and a stake which appealed strongly to a houseless, landless man, with not even a name worth leaving to his son. Thus, while the Countess lavished her affection on young Wilhelm, noticing nothing of her husband's distraction in this excessive happiness, Count Herbert sat alone in the lofty Knight's Hall, his elbows resting on the table before him, his head buried in his hands, ruminating on the strange transformation that had taken place, endeavouring to weigh the evidence *pro* and *con* with the impartial mind of an outsider, becoming the more bewildered the deeper he penetrated into the mystery.

It was in this despondent attitude that Elsa found him a few days after the leap from the wall that had caused her return to Schonburg, a willing captive. The Count did not look up when she entered, and the girl stood for a few moments in silence near him. At last she spoke in a low voice, hesitating slightly, nevertheless going with incisive directness into the very heart of the problem that baffled Count Herbert.

"My Lord, you do not believe that Wilhelm is indeed your son."

The master of Schonburg raised his head slowly and looked searchingly into the frank face of the girl, gloomy distrust reflected from his own countenance.

"Were you sent by your uncle to allay my suspicion?

"No, my Lord. I thought that a hint of the truth being given, Nature would come to the assistance of mutual recognition. Such has been the case between my lady and her son, but I see that you are still unconvinced."

"For my sins, I know something of the wickedness of this world, a knowledge from which her purity has protected the Countess. You believe that Wilhelm is my son?"

"I have never said so, my Lord."

"What you did say was that you had taken an oath. You are too young and doubtless too innocent to be a party to any plot, but you may have been the tool of an unscrupulous man, who knew the oath would be broken when the strain of a strong affection was brought to bear upon it."

"Yet, my Lord, I kept my oath, although I saw my—my—"

The girl hesitated and blushed, but finally spoke up bravely:

"I saw my lover led to his destruction. If Wilhelm is my cousin, then did his father take a desperate chance in trusting first, to my escape from the camp, and second to my perjury. You endow him with more than human foresight, my Lord."

"He builded on your love for Wilhelm, which he had seen growing under his eye before either you or the lad had suspicion of its existence. I know the man, and he is a match for Satan, his master."

"But Satan has been discomfited ere now by the angels of light, and even by holy men, if legend tells truly. I have little knowledge of the world, as you have said, but the case appears to me one of the simplest. If my uncle wished the bitterest revenge on you, what could be more terrible than cause you to be the executioner of your own son? The vengeance, however, to be complete, depends on his being able to place before you incontrovertible proof that you were the father of the victim. Send, therefore, a messenger to him, one from Gudenfels, who knows nothing of what has happened in this castle of Schonburg, and who is therefore unable to disclose, even if forced to confess, that Wilhelm is alive. Let the messenger inform my uncle that his son is no more, which is true enough, and then await the Outlaw's reply. And meanwhile let me venture to warn you, my Lord, that it would be well to conceal your disbelief from Wilhelm, for he is high-spirited, and if he gets but an inkling that you distrust him, he will depart; for not all your possessions will hold your son if he once learns that you doubt him, so you are like to find yourself childless again, if your present mood masters you much longer."

The Count drew a deep sigh, then roused himself and seemed to shake off the influence that enchained him.

"Thank you, my girl," he cried, with something of the old ring in his voice, "I shall do as you advise, and if this embassy results as you say, you will ever find your staunchest friend in me."

He held out his hand to Elsa, and departed to his other castle of Gudenfels on the opposite side of the Rhine. From thence he sent a messenger who had no knowledge of what was happening in Schonburg.

When at last the messenger returned from the Outlaw's camp, he brought with him a wailing woman and grim tidings that he feared to deliver. Thrice his lordship demanded his account, the last time with such sternness that the messenger quailed before him.

"My Lord," he stammered at last, "a frightful thing has taken place—would that I had died before it was told to me. The young man your lordship hanged was no other than–'

"Well, why do you pause? You were going to say he was my own son. What proof does the Outlaw offer that such was indeed the case?"

"Alas! my Lord, the proof seems clear enough. Here with me is young Lord Wilhelm's nurse, whose first neglect led to his abduction, and who fled to the forest after him, and was never found. She followed him to the Outlaw's camp, and was there kept prisoner by him until she was at last given charge of the lad, under oath that she would teach him to forget who he was, the fierce Outlaw threatening death to both woman and child were his orders disobeyed. She has come willingly with me hoping to suffer death now that one she loved more than son has died through her first fault."

Then to the amazement of the pallid messenger the Count laughed aloud and called for Wilhelm, who, when he was brought, clasped the trembling old woman in his arms, overjoyed to see her again and eager to learn news of the camp. How was the stout Gottlieb? Had the messenger seen Captain Heinrich? and so on.

"Indeed, my young Lord," answered the overjoyed woman "there was such turmoil in the camp that I was glad to be quit of it with unbroken bones. When the Outlaw proclaimed that you were hanged, there was instant rebellion among his followers, who thought that your capture was merely a trick to be speedily amended, being intended to form a laughing matter to your discomfiture when you returned. They swore they would have torn down Schonburg with their bare hands rather than have left you in jeopardy, had they known their retreat imperilled your life."

"The brave lads!" cried the young man in a glow of enthusiasm, "and here have I been maligning them for cowards! What was the outcome?"

"That I do not know, my Lord, being glad to escape from the ruffians with unfractured head."

The result of the embassy was speedily apparent at Schonburg. Two days later, in the early morning, the custodians at the gate were startled by the shrill Outlaw yell, which had on so many occasions carried terror with it into the hearts of Rhine strongholds.

"Come out, Hangman of Schonburg!" they shouted, "come out, murderer of a defenceless prisoner. Come out, before we drag you forth, for the rope is waiting for your neck and the gallows tree is waiting for the rope."

Count Herbert was first on the battlements, and curtly he commanded his men not to launch bolt at the invaders, knowing the outlaws mistakenly supposed him to be the executioner of their former comrade. A moment later young Wilhelm himself appeared on the wall above the gate, and, lifting his arms above his head raised a great shout of joy at seeing there collected his old companions, calling this one or that by name as he recognised them among the seething, excited throng. There was an instant's cessation of the clamour, then the outlaws sent forth a cheer that echoed from all the hills around. They brandished their weapons aloft, and cheered again and again, the garrison of the castle, now bristling along the battlements, joining in the tumult with strident voices. Gottlieb advanced some distance toward the gate, and holding up his hand for silence addressed Wilhelm.

"Young master," he cried, "we have deposed von Weithoff, and would have hanged him, but that he escaped during the night, fled to Mayence and besought protection of the Archbishop. If you will be our leader we will sack Mayence and hang the Archbishop from his own cathedral tower."

"That can I hardly do, Gottlieb, as a messenger has been sent to the Archbishop asking him to come to Schonburg and marry Elsa to me. He might take our invasion as an unfriendly act and refuse to perform the ceremony."

Gottlieb scratched his head as one in perplexity, seeing before him a question of etiquette that he found difficult to solve. At last he said:

"What need of Archbishop? You and Elsa have been brought up among us, therefore confer honour on our free company by being married by our own Monk who has tied many a knot tight enough to hold the most wayward of our band. The aisles of the mighty oaks are more grand than the cathedral at Mayence or the great hall of Schonburg."

"Indeed I am agreed, if Elsa is willing. We will be married first in the forest and then by the Archbishop in the great hall of Schonburg."

"In such case there will be delay, for now that I bethink me, his Lordship of Mayence has taken himself to Frankfort, where he is to meet the Archbishops of Treves and Cologne who will presently journey to the capital We were thinking of falling upon his reverence of Cologne as he passed up the river, unless he comes with an escort too numerous for us, which, alas! is most likely, so suspicious has the world grown."

"You will be wise not to meddle with the princes of the Church, be their escorts large or small."

"Then, Master Wilhelm, be our leader, for we are likely to get into trouble unless a man of quality is at our head."

Wilhelm breathed a deep sigh and glanced sideways at his father, who stood some distance off, leaning on his two-handed sword, a silent spectator of the meeting.

"The free life of the forest is no more for me, Gottlieb. My duty is here in the castle of my forefathers, much though I grieve to part with you."

This decision seemed to have a depressing effect on the outlaws within hearing. Gottlieb retired, and the band consulted together for a time, then their spokesman again advanced.

"Some while since," he began in dolorous tone, "we appealed to the Emperor to pardon us, promising in such case to quit our life of outlawry and take honest service with those nobles who needed stout blades, but his Majesty sent reply that if we came unarmed to the capital and tendered submission, he would be graciously pleased to hang a round dozen of us to be selected by him, scourge the rest through the streets of Frankfort and so bestow his clemency on such as survived.

This imperial tender we did not accept, as there was some uncertainty regarding whose neck should feel the rope and whose back the scourge. While all were willing to admit that more than a dozen of us sorely needed hanging, yet each man seemed loath to claim precedence over his neighbour in wickedness, and desired, in some sort, a voice in the selection of the victims. But if you will accept our following, Master Wilhelm, we will repair at once to Frankfort and make submission to his Majesty the Emperor. The remnant being well scourged, will then return to Schonburg to place themselves under your command."

"Are you willing then to hang for me, Gottlieb?"

"I hanker not after the hanging, but if hang we must, there is no man I would rather hang for than Wilhelm, formerly of the forest, but now, alas! of Schonburg. And so say they all without dissent, therefore the unanimity must needs include the eleven other danglers."

"Then draw nigh, all of you, to the walls and hear my decision."

Gottlieb waving his arms, hailed the outlaws trooping to the walls, and, his upraised hand bringing silence, Wilhelm spoke:

"Such sacrifice as you propose, I cannot accept, yet I dearly wish to lead a band of men like you. Elsa and I shall be married by our ancient woodland father in the forest and then by the Abbot of St. Werner in the hall of Schonburg. We will make our wedding journey to Frankfort, and you shall be our escort and our protectors."

There was for some moments such cheering at this that the young man was compelled to pause in his address, and then as the outcry was again and again renewed, he looked about for the cause and saw that Elsa and his mother had taken places on the balcony which overlooked the animated scene. The beautiful girl had been recognised by the rebels and she waved her hand in response to their shouting.

"We will part company," resumed Wilhelm, "as near Frankfort as it is safe for you to go, and my wife and I, accompanied by a score of men from this castle, will enter the capital. I will beg your complete pardon from his Majesty and if at first it is refused, I think Elsa will have better success with the Empress, who may incline her imperial husband toward clemency. All this I promise, providing I receive the consent and support of my father, and I am not likely to be refused, for he already knows the persuasive power of my dear betrothed when she pleads for mercy."

"My consent and support I most willingly bestow," said the Count, with a fervour that left no doubt of his sincerity.

The double marriage was duly solemnised, and Wilhelm, with his newly-made wife, completed their journey to Frankfort, escorted until almost within sight of the capital by five hundred and twenty men, but they entered the gates of the city accompanied by only the score of Schonburg men, the remaining five hundred concealing themselves in the rough country, as they well knew how to do.

Neither Wilhelm nor Elsa had ever seen a large city before, and silence fell upon them as they approached the western gate, for they were coming upon a world strange to them, and Wilhelm felt an unaccustomed elation stir within his breast, as if he were on the edge of some adventure that might have an important bearing on his future. Instead of passing peaceably through the gate as he had expected, the cavalcade was halted after the two had ridden under the gloomy stone archway, and the portcullis was dropped with a sudden clang, shutting out the twenty riders who followed. One of several officers who sat on a stone bench that fronted the guard-house within the walls, rose and came forward.

"What is your name and quality?" he demanded, gruffly.

"I am Wilhelm, son of Count von Schonberg."

"What is your business here in Frankfort?"

"My business relates to the emperor, and is not to be delivered to the first underling who has the impudence to make inquiry," replied Wilhelm in a haughty tone, which could scarcely be regarded, in the circumstances, as diplomatic.

Nevertheless, the answer did not seem to be resented, but rather appeared to have a subduing effect on the questioner, who turned, as if for further instruction, to another officer, evidently his superior in rank. The latter now rose, came forward, doffing his cap, and said:

"I understand your answer better than he to whom it was given, my Lord."

"I am glad there is one man of sense at a gate of the capital," said Wilhelm, with no relaxation of his dignity, but nevertheless bewildered at the turn the talk had taken, seeing there was something underneath all this which he did not comprehend, yet resolved to carry matters with a high hand until greater clearness came to the situation.

"Will you order the portcullis raised and permit my men to follow me?"

"They are but temporarily detained until we decide where to quarter them, my Lord. You know," he added, lowering his voice, "the necessity for caution. Are you for the Archbishop of Treves, of Cologne, or of Mayence?"

"I am from the district of Mayence, of course."

"And are you for the archbishop?"

"For the archbishop certainly. He would have honoured me by performing our marriage ceremony had he not been called by important affairs of state to the capital, as you may easily learn by asking him, now that he is within these walls."

The officer bowed low with great obsequiousness and said:

"Your reply is more than sufficient, my Lord, and I trust you will pardon the delay we have caused you. The men of Mayence are quartered in the Leinwandhaus, where room will doubtless be made for your followers.

"It is not necessary for me to draw upon the hospitality of the good Archbishop, as I lodge in my father's town house near the palace, and there is room within for the small escort I bring."

Again the officer bowed to the ground, and the portcullis being by this time raised, the twenty horsemen came clattering under the archway, and thus, without further molestation, they arrived at the house of the Count von Schonburg.

"Elsa," said Wilhelm, when they were alone in their room, "there is something wrong in this city. Men look with fear one upon another, and pass on hurriedly, as if to avoid question. Others stand in groups at the street corners and speak in whispers, glancing furtively over their shoulders."

"Perhaps that is the custom in cities," replied Elsa.

"I doubt it. I have heard that townsmen are eager for traffic, inviting all comers to buy, but here most of the shops are barred, and no customers are solicited. They seem to me like people under a cloud of fear. What can it be?"

"We are more used to the forest path than to city streets, Wilhelm. They will all become familiar to us in a day or two, yet I feel as if I could not get a full breath in these narrow streets and I long for the trees already, but perhaps content will come with waiting."

"'Tis deeper than that. There is something ominous in the air. Noted you not the questioning at the gate and its purport? They asked me if I favoured Treves, or Cologne, or Mayence, but none inquired if I stood loyal to the Emperor, yet I was entering his capital city of Frankfort."

"Perhaps you will learn all from the Emperor when you see him," ventured Elsa.

"Perhaps," said Wilhelm.

The chamberlain of the von Schonburg household, who had supervised the arrangements for the reception of the young couple, waited upon his master in the evening and informed him that the Emperor would not be visible for some days to come.

"He has gone into retreat, in the cloisters attached to the cathedral, and it is the imperial will that none disturb him on worldly affairs. Each day at the hour when the court assembles at the palace, the Emperor hears exhortation from the pious fathers in the Wahlkapelle of the cathedral; the chapel in which emperors are elected; these exhortations pertaining to the ruling of the land, which his majesty desires to govern justly and well.

"An excellent intention," commented the young man, with suspicion of impatience in his tone, "but meanwhile, how are the temporal affairs of the country conducted?"

"The Empress Brunhilda is for the moment the actual head of the state. Whatever act of the ministers receives her approval, is sent by a monk to the Emperor, who signs any document so submitted to him."

"Were her majesty an ambitious woman, such transference of power might prove dangerous."

"She is an ambitious woman, but devoted to her husband, who, it perhaps may be whispered, is more monk than king," replied the chamberlain under his breath. "Her majesty has heard of your lordship's romantic adventures and has been graciously pleased to command that you and her ladyship, your wife, be presented to her to-morrow in presence of the court."

"This is a command which it will be a delight to obey. But tell me, what is wrong in this great town? There is a sinister feeling in the air; uneasiness is abroad, or I am no judge of my fellow-creatures."

"Indeed, my Lord, you have most accurately described the situation. No man knows what is about to happen. The gathering of the Electors is regarded with the gravest apprehension. The Archbishop of Mayence, who but a short time since crowned the Emperor at the great altar of the cathedral, is herewith a thousand men at his back. The Count Palatine of the Rhine is also within these walls with a lesser entourage. It is rumoured that his haughty lordship, the Archbishop of Treves, will reach Frankfort to-morrow, to be speedily followed by that eminent Prince of the Church, the Archbishop of Cologne. Thus there will be gathered in the capital four Electors, a majority of the college, a conjunction that has not occurred for centuries, except on the death of an emperor, necessitating the nomination and election of his successor."

"But as the Emperor lives and there is no need of choosing another, wherein lies the danger?

"The danger lies in the fact that the college has the power to depose as well as to elect."

"Ah! And do the Electors threaten to depose?"

"No. Treves is much too crafty for any straight-forward statement of policy. He is the brains of the combination, and has put forward Mayence and the Count Palatine as the moving spirits, although it is well known that the former is but his tool and the latter is moved by ambition to have his imbecile son selected emperor."

"Even if the worst befall, it seems but the substitution of a weak-minded man for one who neglects the affairs of state, although I should think the princes of the Church would prefer a monarch who is so much under the influence of the monks."

"The trouble is deeper than my imperfect sketch of the situation would lead you to suppose, my Lord. The Emperor periodically emerges from his retirement, promulgates some startling decree, unheeding the counsel of any adviser, then disappears again, no man knowing what is coming next. Of such a nature was his recent edict prohibiting the harrying of merchants going down the Rhine and the Moselle, which, however just in theory, is impracticable, for how are the nobles to reap revenue if such practices are made unlawful? This edict has offended all the magnates of both rivers, and the archbishops, with the Count Palatine, claim that their prerogatives have been infringed, so they come to Frankfort ostensibly to protest, while the Emperor in his cloister refuses to meet them. The other three Electors hold aloof, as the edict touches them not, but they form a minority which is powerless, even if friendly to the Emperor. Meanwhile his majesty cannot be aroused to an appreciation of the crisis, but says calmly that if it is the Lord's will he remain emperor, emperor he will remain."

"Then at its limit, chamberlain, all we have to expect is a peaceful deposition and election?"

"Not so, my lord. The merchants of Frankfort are fervently loyal, to the Emperor, who, they say, is the first monarch to give forth a just law for their protection. At present the subtlety of Treves has nullified all combined action on their part, for he has given out that he comes merely to petition his over-lord, which privilege is well within his right, and many citizens actually believe him, but others see that a majority of the college will be within these walls before many days are past, and that the

present Emperor may be legally deposed and another legally chosen. Then if the citizens object, they are rebels, while at this moment if they fight for the Emperor they are patriots, so you see the position is not without its perplexities, for the citizens well know that if they were to man the walls and keep out Treves and Cologne, the Emperor himself would most likely disclaim their interference, trusting as he does so entirely in Providence that a short time since he actually disbanded the imperial troops, much to the delight of the archbishops, who warmly commended his action. And now, my Lord, if I may venture to tender advice unasked, I would strongly counsel you to quit Frankfort as soon as your business here is concluded, for I am certain that a change of government is intended. All will be done promptly, and the transaction will be consummated before the people are aware that such a step is about to be taken. The Electors will meet in the Wahlzimmer or election room of the Romer and depose the Emperor, then they will instantly select his successor, adjourn to the Wahlkapelle and elect him. The Palatine's son is here with his father, and will be crowned at the high altar by the Archbishop of Mayence. The new Emperor will dine with the Electors in the Kaisersaal and immediately after show himself on the balcony to the people assembled in the Romerberg below. Proclamation of his election will then be made, and all this need not occupy more than two hours. The Archbishop of Mayence already controls the city gates, which since the disbanding of the imperial troops have been unguarded, and none can get in or out of the city without that potentate's permission. The men of Mayence are quartered in the centre of the town, the Count Palatine's troops are near the gate. Treves and Cologne will doubtless command other positions, and thus between them they will control the city. Numerous as the merchants and their dependents are, they will have no chance against the disciplined force of the Electors, and the streets of Frankfort are like to run with blood, for the nobles are but too eager to see a sharp check given to the rising pretensions of the mercantile classes, who having heretofore led peaceful lives, will come out badly in combat, despite their numbers; therefore I beg of you, my Lord, to withdraw with her Ladyship before this hell's caldron is uncovered."

"Your advice is good, chamberlain, in so far as it concerns my wife, and I will beg of her to retire to Schonburg, although I doubt if she will obey, but, by the bones of Saint Werner which floated against the current of the Rhine in this direction, if there must be a fray, I will be in the thick of it."

"Remember, my Lord, that your house has always stood by the Archbishop of Mayence."

"It has stood by the Emperor as well, chamberlain."

The Lady Elsa was amazed by the magnificence of the Emperor's court, when, accompanied by her husband, she walked the length of the great room to make obeisance before the throne. At first entrance she shrank timidly, closer to the side of Wilhelm, trembling at the ordeal of passing, simply costumed as she now felt herself to be, between two assemblages of haughty knights and high-born dames, resplendent in dress, with the proud bearing that pertained to their position in the Empire. Her breath came and went quickly, and she feared that all courage would desert her before she traversed the seemingly endless lane, flanked by the nobility of Germany, which led to the royal presence. Wilhelm, unabashed, holding himself the equal of any there, was not to be cowed by patronising glance, or scornful gaze. The thought flashed through his mind:

"How can the throne fall, surrounded as it is by so many supporters?"

But when the approaching two saw the Empress, all remembrance of others faded from their minds. Brunhilda was a woman of superb stature. She stood alone upon the dais which supported the vacant throne, one hand resting upon its carven arm. A cloak of imperial ermine fell gracefully from her shapely shoulders and her slightly-elevated position on the platform added height to her goddess-like tallness, giving her the appearance of towering above every other person in the room, man or woman. The excessive pallor of her complexion was emphasised by the raven blackness of her wealth of hair, and the sombre midnight of her eyes; eyes with slumbering fire in them, qualified by a haunted look which veiled their burning intensity. Her brow was too broad and her chin too firm for a painter's ideal of beauty; her commanding presence giving the effect of majesty rather than of loveliness. Deep lines of care marred the marble of her forehead, and Wilhelm said to himself:

"Here is a woman going to her doom; knowing it; yet determined to show no sign of fear and utter no cry for mercy."

Every other woman there had eyes of varying shades of blue and gray, and hair ranging from brown to golden yellow; thus the Empress stood before them like a creature from another world.

Elsa was about to sink in lowly courtesy before the queenly woman when the Empress came forward impetuously and kissed the girl on either cheek, taking her by the hand.

"Oh, wild bird of the forest," she cried, "why have you left the pure air of the woods, to beat your innocent wings in this atmosphere of deceit! And you, my young Lord, what brings you to Frankfort in these troublous times? Have you an insufficiency of lands or of honours that you come to ask augmentation of either?"

"I come to ask nothing for myself, your Majesty."

"But to ask, nevertheless," said Brunhilda, with a frown.

"Yes, your Majesty."

"I hope I may live to see one man, like a knight of old, approach the foot of the throne without a request on his lips. I thought you might prove an exception, but as it is not so, propound your question?"

"I came to ask if my sword, supplemented by the weapons of five hundred followers, can be of service to your Majesty."

The Empress seemed taken aback by the young man's unexpected reply, and for some moments she gazed at him searchingly in silence.

At last she said:

"Your followers are the men of Schonburg and Gudenfels, doubtless?"

"No, your Majesty. Those you mention, acknowledge my father as their leader. My men were known as the Outlaws of the Hundsrück, who have deposed von Weithoff, chosen me as their chief, and now desire to lead honest lives."

The dark eyes of the Empress blazed again.

"I see, my Lord, that you have quickly learned the courtier's language. Under proffer of service you are really demanding pardon for a band of marauders."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.