

GEORG EBERS

MARGERY (GRED): A TALE
OF OLD NUREMBERG.
VOLUME 07

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CHAPTER X

"The old owl! I will give him somewhat to remember me by till some one else can say 'Gone' over him!" This was what my Uncle Christian growled a little later, out near the stables, where Matthew was putting the bridle on my bay nag, while the other serving-men were saddling the horses for the gentlemen. I had stolen hither, knowing full well that the old folks would not have suffered me to ride forth after Ann, and my good godfather even now ceased not from railing, in his fears for his darling. "What else did we talk of yestereve, Master leech and I, all the way we rode with the misguided maid, but of the wicked deeds done in these last few weeks on the high roads, and here in this very wood? With her own ears, she heard us say that the town constable required us to take seven mounted men as outriders, by reason that the day before yesterday the whole train of waggons of the Borchtels and the Schnods was overtaken, and the convoy would of a certainty have been beaten if they had not had the aid, by good-hap, of the fellowship marching with the Maurers and

the Derrers.—And it was pitch dark, owls were flitting, foxes barking; it was enough to make even an old scarred soldier's blood run cold. It is a sin and a shame how the rogues ply their trade, even close under the walls of the city! They cut off a bleacher's man's ears, and when I wished that young Eber of Wichsenstein, and all the rout that follows him might come to the gallows, Ann made bold to plead for them, by reason that he only craved to visit on the Nurembergers the cruel death they brought upon his father the famous thief. As if she did not know full well that, since Epelein of Gailingen was cast into prison, our land has never been such a den of murder and robbery as at this day. If there is less dust to be seen on the high-ways, said the keeper, it is by reason that it is washed away in blood. And notwithstanding all this the crazy maid runs straight into the Devil's arms, with that old dolt."

Then, when I went into the stable to mount, Uncle Conrad turned on Kubbeling in stormy ire for that he had suffered Uhlwurm to lead Ann into such peril; howbeit the Brunswicker knew how to hold his own, and declared at last that he could sooner have looked to see a falcon grow a lion's tail in place of feathers, than that old death-watch make common cause with a young maiden. "He had come forth," quoth he, "to counsel their excellencies to take horse." But my uncle's question, whether he, Kubbeling, believed that they had come forth to the stables to hear mass, put an end to his discourse; the gentlemen called to the serving-men to make speed, and I was already in the saddle.

Then, when I had commanded Endres to open the great gate, I bowed my head low and rode out through the stable door, and bade the company a hearty good-day. To this they made reply, while Uncle Conrad asked whether I had forgotten his counsels, and whither it was my intent to ride; whereupon I hastily replied: "Under safe guidance, that is to say yours, to follow Ann."

My uncle slashed his boot with his whip, and asked in wrath whether I had considered that blood would perchance be shed, and ended by counselling me kindly: "So stay at home, little Margery!"

"I am as obedient as ever," was my ready answer, "but whereas I am now well in the saddle, I will stay in the saddle."

At this the old man knew not whether to take a jest as a jest, or to give me a stern order; and while he and the others were getting into their stirrups he said: "Have done with folly when matters are so serious, madcap child! We have enough to do to think of Ann, and more than enough! So dismount, Margery, with all speed."

"All in good time," said I then, "I will dismount that minute when we have found Ann. Till then the giant Goliath shall not move me from the saddle!"

Hereupon the old man lost patience, he settled himself on his big brown horse and cried out in a wrathful and commanding tone: "Do not rouse me to anger, Margery. Do as I desire and dismount."

But that moment he could more easily have made me to leap into the fire than to leave Ann in the lurch; I raised the bridle and

whip, and as the bay broke into a gallop Uncle Conrad cried out once more, in greater wrath than before: "Do as I bid you!" and I joyfully replied "That I will if you come and fetch me!" And my horse carried me off and away, through the open gate.

The gentlemen tore after me, and if I had so desired they would never have caught me till the day of judgment, inasmuch as that my Hungarian palfrey, which my Hans had brought for me from the stables of Count von Cilly, the father of Queen Barbara, was far swifter than their heavy hook-nosed steeds; yet as I asked no better than to seek Ann in all peace with them, and as my uncle was a mild and wise man, who would not take the jest he could not now spoil over seriously, I suffered them to gain upon me and we concluded a bargain to the effect that all was to be forgotten and forgiven, but that I was pledged to turn the bay and make the best of my way home at the first sign of danger. And if the gentlemen had come to the stables in a gloomy mood and much fear, the wild chase after me had recovered their high spirits; and, albeit my own heart beat sadly enough, I did my best to keep of good cheer, and verily the sight of Kubbeling helped to that end. He was to show us the way to the spot where he had found Eppelem, and was now squatted on a very big black horse, from which his little legs, with their strange gear of catskins, stuck out after a fashion wondrous to behold. After we had thus gone at a steady pace for some little space, my confidence began to fail once more; even if Ann and her companion had been somewhat delayed by their search, still ought we to have met them by this

time, if they had gone to the place without tarrying, and set forth to return unhindered. And when, presently, we came to an open plot whence we might see a long piece of the forest path, and yet saw nought but a little charcoal burner's cart, meseemed as though a cold hand had been laid on my heart. Again and again I spied the distance, while a whole army of thoughts and terrors tossed my soul. I pictured them in the power of the vengeful Eber von Wichsenstein and his fierce robber fellows; methought the covetous Bremberger had dragged them into his castle postern to exact a great ransom—nor was this the worst that might befall. If Abersfeld the wildest freebooter of all the plundering nobles far or near were to seize her? My blood ran cold as I conceived of this chance. Ann was so fair; what lord who might carry her off could she fail to inflame? And then I minded me of what I had read of the Roman Lucretia, and if I had been possessed of any magic art, I would have given the first raven by the way a sharp bodkin that he should carry it to her.

In my soul's anguish, while I held my bridle and whip together in my left hand, with the right I lifted the gold cross on my breast to my lips and in a silent heartfelt prayer I besought the Blessed Virgin, and my own dear mother in Heaven to have her in keeping.

And so we rode on and on till we came to the pools by Pillenreuth. Hard by the larger of these, known as the King's pool, was a sign-post, and not far away was the spot where they had found Eppelein, stripped and plundered; and in truth it was

the very place for highwaymen and freebooters, lying within the wood and aside from the highway; albeit, if it came to their taking flight, they might find it again by Reichelstorf. Nor was there any castle nor stronghold anywhere nigh; the great building with walls and moats which stood on the south side of the King's pool was but the peaceful cloister of the Augustine Sisters of Pillenreuth. All about the water lay marsh-ground overgrown with leafless bushes, rushes, tall grasses, and reeds. It was verily a right dismal and ill-boding spot.

The boggy tract across which our path lay was white with fresh hoar-frost, and the thicket away to the south was a haunt for crows such as I never have seen again since; the black birds flew round and about it in dark clouds with loud shrieks, as though in its midst stood a charnel and gallows, and from the brushwood likewise, by the pool's edge, came other cries of birds, all as full of complaining as though they were bewailing the griefs of the whole world.

Here we stayed our horses, and called and shouted; but none made answer, save only toads and crows. "This is the place, for certain," said Young Kubbeling, and Grubner the head forester, sprang to his feet to help him down from his tall mare. The gentlemen likewise dismounted, and were about to follow the Trunswicker across the mead to the place where Epplein had been found; but he bid them not, inasmuch as they would mar the track he would fain discover.

They, then, stood still and gazed after him, as I did likewise;

and my fears waxed greater till I verily believed that the crows were indeed birds of ill-omen, as I saw a large black swarm of them wheel croaking round Kubbeling. He, meanwhile, stooped low, seeking any traces on the frosted grass, and his short, thick-set body seemed for all the world one of the imps, or pixies, which dwell among the roots of trees and in the holes in the rocks. He crept about with heedful care and never a word, prying as he went, and presently I could see that he shook his big head as though in doubt, nay, or in sorrow. I shuddered again, and meseemed the grey clouds in the sky waxed blacker, while deathly pale airy forms floated through the mist over the pools, in long, waving winding-sheets. The thick black heads of the bulrushes stood up motionless like grave-stones, and the grey silken tufts of the bog-grass, fluttering in the cold breath of a November morning, were as ghostly hands, threatening or warning me.

Ere long I was to forget the crows, and the fogs, and the reed-grass, and all the foolish fears that possessed me, by reason of a real and well-founded terror; again did Kubbeling shake his head, and then I heard him call to my Uncle Conrad and Grubner the headforester, to come close to him, but to tread carefully. Then they stood at his side, and they likewise stooped low and then my uncle clasped his hands, and he cried in horror, "Merciful Heaven!"

In two minutes I had run on tip-toe across the damp, frosted grass to join them, and there, sure enough, I could see full plainly

the mark of a woman's dainty shoe. The sole and the heel were plainly to be seen, and, hard by, the print of a man's large, broad shoes, with iron-shod heels, which told Kubbeling that they were those of Uhlwurm's great boots. Yet though we had not met those we sought, the forest was full of by-ways, by which they might have crossed us on the road; but nigh to the foot-prints of the maid and the old man were there three others. The old woodsman could discern them only too well; they had each and all been made in the hoar-frost by men's boots. Two, it was certain, had been left by finely-cut soles, such as are made by skilled city cordwainers; and one left a track which could only be that of a spur; whereas the third was so flat and broad that it was for sure that of the shoe of a peasant, or charcoal burner.

There was a green patch in the frost which could only be explained as having been made by one who had lain long on the earth, and the back of his head, where he had fallen, had left a print in the grass as big as a man's fist. Here was clear proof that Ann and her companion had, on this very spot, been beset by three robbers, two of them knights and one of low degree, that Uhlwurm had fought hard and had overpowered one of them or had got the worst of it, and had been flung on the grass.

Alas! there could be no doubt, whereas Kubbeling found a foot-print of Ann's over which the spurred mark lay, plainly showing that she had come thither before those men. And on the highway we found fresh tracks of horses and men; thus it was beyond all doubt that knavish rogues had fallen upon Ann and

Uhlwurm, and had carried them off without bloodshed, for no such trace was to be seen anywhere on the mead.

Meanwhile the forester had followed the scent with the bloodhounds, starting from the place where the man had lain on the grass, and scarce were they lost to sight among the brushwood when they loudly gave tongue, and Grubner cried to us to come to him. Behind a tall alder bush, which had not yet lost its leaves, was a wooden lean-to on piles, built there by the Convent fisherman wherein to dry his nets; and beneath this shelter lay an old man in the garb of a serving-man, who doubtless had lost his life in the struggle with Uhlwurm. But Kubbeling was soon kneeling by his side, and whereas he found that his heart still beat, he presently discovered what ailed the fellow. He was sleeping off a drunken bout, and more by token the empty jar lay by his side. Likewise hard by there stood a hand-barrow, full of such wine-jars, and we breathed more freely, for if the drunken rogue were not himself one of the highway gang, they must have found him there and seized the good liquor.

Now, while Kubbeling fetched water from the pool, Uncle Christian tried the quality of the jars in the barrow, and the first he opened was fine Malvoisie. Whether this were going to the Convent or no the drunken churl should tell, and a stream of cold November-water ere long brought him to his wits. Then was there much mirth, as the rogue thus waked on a sudden from his sleep let the water drip off him in dull astonishment, and stared at us open-mouthed; and it needed some patience till he was able

to tell us of many matters which we afterwards heard at greater length and in fuller detail.

He was a serving-man to Master Rummel of Nuremberg, who had been sent forth from Lichtenau to carry this good liquor to the nuns at Pillenreuth; the market-town of Lichtenau lieth beyond Schwabach and had of yore belonged to the Knight of Heideck, who had sold it to that city, of which the Rummels, who were an old and honored family, had bought it, with the castle.

Now, whereas yestereve the Knight of Heideck, the former owner of the castle, a noble of staunch honor, was sitting at supper with Master Rummel in the fortress of Lichtenau, a rider from Pillenreuth had come in with a petition from the Abbess for aid against certain robber folk who had carried away some cattle pertaining to the convent. Hereupon the gentlemen made ready to go and succor the sisters, and with wise foresight they sent a barrow-load of good wine to Pillenreuth, to await them there, inasmuch as that no good liquor was to be found with the pious sisters. When the gentlemen had, this very morning, come to the place where the highwaymen had fallen on Epplein, they had met Ann who was known to them at the Forest lodge, where she was in the act of making search for Herdegen's letter, and they, in their spurred boots, had helped her. At last they had besought her to go with them to the Convent, by reason that the men-at-arms of Lichtenau had yesternight gone forth to meet the thieves, and by this time peradventure had caught them and found the letter on them. Ann had consented to follow this gracious bidding, if only

she might give tidings of where she would be to those her friends who would for certain come in search of her. Thereupon Master Rummel had commanded the servingman, who had come up with the barrow, to tarry here and bid us likewise to the Convent; the fellow, however, who had already made free on his way with the contents of the jars, had tried the liquor again. And first he had tumbled down on the frosted grass and then had laid him down to rest under the fisherman's hut.

Rarely indeed hath a maiden gone to the cloister with a lighter heart than I, after I had heard these tidings, and albeit there was yet cause for fear and doubting, I could be as truly mirthful as the rest, and or ever I jumped into my saddle again I had many a kiss from bearded lips as a safe conduct to the Sisters. My good godfather in the overflowing joy of his heart rushed upon me to kiss me on both cheeks and on my brow, and I had gladly suffered it and smiled afterwards to perceive that he would allow the barrow-man to tarry no longer.

In the Convent there was fresh rejoicing. The mist had hidden us from their sight, and we found them all at breakfast: the gentlemen and Ann, the lady Abbess and a novice who was the youngest daughter of Uncle Endres Tucher of Nuremberg, and my dear cousin, well-known likewise to Ann. Albeit the Convent was closed to all other men, it was ever open to its lord protector. Hereupon was a right happy meeting and glad greeting, and at the sight of Ann for the second time this day, though it was yet young, the bright tears rolled over Uncle Christian's round twice-

double chin.

Now wheresoever a well-to-do Nuremberg citizen is taking his ease with victuals and drink, if others join him they likewise must sit down and eat with him, yea, if it were in hell itself. But the Convent of Pillenreuth was a right comfortable shelter, and my lady the Abbess a woman of high degree and fine, hospitable manners; and the table was made longer in a winking, and laid with white napery and plates and all befitting. None failed of appetite and thirst after the ride in the sharp morning air, and how glad was my soul to have my Ann again safe and unharmed.

We were seated at table by the time our horses were tied up in the stables, and from the first minute there was a mirthful and lively exchange of talk. For my part I forthwith fell out with the Knight von Heideck, inasmuch as he was fain to sit betwixt Ann and me, and would have it that a gallant knight must ever be a more welcome neighbor to a damsel than her dearest woman-friend. And the loud cheer and merrymaking were ere long overmuch for me; and I would gladly have withdrawn with Ann to some lonely spot, there to think of our dear one.

At last we were released; Jorg Starch, the captain of the Lichtenau horsemen, a tall, lean soldier, with shrewd eyes, a little turned-up cock-nose, and thick full beard, now came in and, lifting his hand to his helmet, said as sharply as though he were cutting each word short off with his white teeth: "Caught; trapped; all the rabble!"

In a few minutes we were all standing on the rampart between

the pools and the Convent, and there were the miserable knaves whom Jorg Starch and his men-at-arms had surrounded and carried off while they were making good cheer over their morning broth and sodden flesh. They had declared that they had been of Wichsenstein's fellowship, but had deserted Eber by reason of his over-hard rule, and betaken themselves to robbery on their own account. Howbeit Starch was of opinion that matters were otherwise. When he had been sent forth to seek them he had as yet no knowledge of the attack on Epelein; now, so soon as he heard that they had stripped him of his clothes, he bid them stand in a row and examined each one; in truth they were a pitiable crew, and had they not so truly deserved our compassion their rags must have moved us to laughter. One had made his cloak of a woman's red petticoat, pulling it over his head and cutting slits in it for arm-holes, and another great fellow wore a friar's brown frock and on his head a good-wife's fur turban tied on with an infant's swaddling band. Jorg Starch's enquiries as to where were Epelein's garments made one of them presently point to his decent and whole jerkin, another to his under coat, and the biggest man of them all to his hat with the cock's feather, which was all unmatched with his ragged weed. Starch searched each piece for the letter, and meanwhile Uhlwurm stooped his long body, groping on the ground in such wise that it might have seemed that he was seeking the four-leaved clover; and on a sudden he laid hands on the shoes of a lean, low fellow, with hollow cheeks and a thrifty beard on his sharp chin, who till now

had looked about him, the boldest of them all; he felt round the top of the shoes, and looking him in the face, asked him in a threatening voice: "Where are the tops?"

"The tops?" said the man in affrighted tones. "I wear shoes, Master, and shoes are but boots which have no tops; and mine. . . ."

"And yours!" quoth Uhlwurm in scorn. "The rats have made shoes of your boots and have eaten the tops, unless it was the mice? Look here, Captain, if it please you. . . ."

Starch did his bidding, and when he had made the lean knave put off his left shoe he looked at it on all sides, stroked his beard the wrong way, and said solemnly: "Well said, Master, this is matter for thought! All this gives the case a fresh face." And he likewise cried to the rogue: "Where are the tops?" The fellow had had time to collect himself, and answered boldly: "I am but a poor weak worm, my lord Captain; they were full heavy for me, so I cut them away and cast them into the pool, where by now the carps are feeding on them." And he glanced round at his fellows, as it were to read in their faces their praise of his quick wit. Howbeit they were in overmuch dread to pay him that he looked for; nay, and his bold spirit was quelled when Starch took him by the throat and asked him: "Do you see that bough there, my lad? If another lie passes your lips, I will load it with a longer and heavier pear than ever it bore yet? Sebald, bring forth the ropes.—Now my beauty; answer me three things: Did the messenger wear boots? How come you, who are one of the

least of the gang, to be wearing sound shoes? And again, Where are the tops?"

Whereupon the little man craved, sadly whimpering, that he might be asked one question at a time, inasmuch as he felt as it were a swarm of humble- bees in his brain, and when Starch did his will he looked at the others as though to say: "You did no justice to my ready wit," and then he told that he had in truth drawn off the boots from the messenger's feet and had been granted them to keep, by reason that they were too small for the others, while he was graced with a small and dainty foot. And he cast a glance at us ladies on whom he had long had an eye, a sort of fearful leer, and went on: "The tops—they. . . ." and again he stuck fast. Howbeit, as Starch once more pointed to the pear-tree, he confessed in desperate terror that another man had claimed the tops, one who had not been caught, inasmuch as they were so high and good. Hereupon Starch laughed so loud and clapped his hand with such a smack as made us maidens start, and he cried: "That's it, that is the way of it! Zounds, ye knaves! Then the Sow—[Eber, his name, means a boar. This is a sort of punning insult]—of Wichsenstein was himself your leader yesterday, and it was only by devilish ill-hap that the knave was not with you when I took you! You ragged ruffians would never have given over the tops in this marsh and moorland, to any but a rightful master, and I know where the Sow is lurking—for the murderer of a messenger is no more to be called a Boar. Now then, Sebald! In what hamlet hereabout dwells there a cobbler?"

"There is crooked Peter at Neufess, and Hackspann at Reichelstorf," was the answer.

"Good; that much we needed to know," said Starch. "And now, little one," and he gave the man another shaking, "Out with it. Did the Sow—or, that there may be no mistake—did Eber of Wichsenstein ride away to Neufess or to Reichelstorf? Who was to sew the tops to his shoes, Peter or Hackspann?"

The terrified creature clasped his slender hands in sheer amazement, and cried: "Was there ever such abounding wisdom born in the land since the time of chaste Joseph, who interpreted Pharaoh's dreams? The man who shall catch you asleep, my lord Captain, must rise earlier than such miserable hunted wretches as we are. He rode to Neufess, albeit Hackspann is the better cobbler. Reichelstorf lies hard by the highway by which you came, my lord; and if Eber does but hear the echo of your right glorious name, my lord Baron and potent Captain. . . ."

"And what is my name—your lord Baron and potent Captain?" Starch thundered out.

"Yours?" said the little man unabashed. "Yours? Merciful Heaven! Till this minute I swear I could have told you; but in such straits a poor little tailor such as I might forget his own father's honored name!" At this Starch laughed out and clapped the little rogue in all kindness behind the ears, and when his men-at-arms, whom he had commanded to make ready, had mounted their horses, he cried to Uhlwurm: "I may leave the rest to you, Master; you know where Barthel bestows the liquor!—Now, Sebald, bind

this rabble and keep them safe.—And make a pig-sty ready. If I fail to bring the boar home this very night, may I be called Dick Dule to the end of my days instead of Jorg Starch!"

And herewith he made his bow, sprang into his saddle, and rode away with his men.

"A nimble fellow, after God's heart!" quoth Master Rummel to my Uncle Conrad as they looked after him. And that he was in truth; albeit we could scarce have looked for it, we learned on the morrow that he might bear his good name to the grave, inasmuch as he had taken Eber of Wichsenstein captive in the cobbler's work-place, and carried him to Pillenreuth, whence he came to Nuremberg, and there to the gallows.

Starch had left a worthy man to fill his place; hardly had he departed when old Uhlwurm pulled off the tailor's right shoe, and now it was made plain wherefor Epplein had so anxiously pointed to his feet; the letter entrusted to him had indeed been hid in his boot. Under the lining leather of the sole it lay, but only one from Akusch addressed to me. Howbeit, when we had threatened the now barefoot knave with cruel torture, he confessed that, having been an honest tailor till of late, he had soft feet by reason that he had ever sat over his needle. And when he pulled on the stolen shoes somewhat therein hard hurt his sole, and when he made search under the leather, behold a large letter closely folded and sealed. This had been the cause and reason of his being ill at ease, and he had opened it, being of an enquiring mind, and, inasmuch as he was a schoolmaster's son he could

read with the best. Howbeit, at that time the gang were about to light a fire to make their supper, and whereas it would not burn by reason of the wet, they had taken the dry paper and used it to make the feeble flame blaze up.

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