

GEORG EBERS

MARGERY (GRED): A TALE
OF OLD NUREMBERG.
VOLUME 04

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CHAPTER XV

We reached the forest lodge that evening with red faces and half-frozen hands and feet. The ride through the deep snow and the bitter December wind had been a hard one; but the woods in their glittering winter shroud, the sharp, refreshing breath of the pure air, and a thousand trifling matters—from the white hats that crowned every stock and stone to the tiny crystals of snow that fell on the green velvet of my fur-lined bodice—were a joy to me, albeit my heart was heavy with care. The evening star had risen ere we reached the house; and out here, under God's open heavens, among the giants of the forest and its sturdy, weather-beaten folk, it scarce seemed that it could be true that I should see my bright, young Ann sharing the sorry life of the Magister, an alien from all this world's joys. Those who dwelt out here in these wilds must, methought, feel this as I felt it; and so in truth it proved. After I had taken my place at the hearth by my aunt's side, and she had mingled some spiced wine for us with her own feeble hands, she bid me speak. When she heard

what it was that had brought me forth to the forest so late before Christmas, which we ever spent with our grand-uncle Im Huff she at first did but laugh at our Magister's suit; but as soon as I told her that it was Ann's earnest purpose to wed with him, she swore that she would never suffer such a deed of mad folly.

Master Peter had many times been her guest at the lodge; and she, though so small and feeble herself, loved to see tall and stalwart men, so that she had given him the name of "the little dry Bookworm," hardly accounting him a man at all. When she heard of his newly-gained wealth, she said: "If instead of being the richer by these thousands he could but be the same number of years younger, lift a hundredweight more, and see a hundred miles further out into the world, I would not mind his seeking his happiness with that lovely child!"

As for my uncle, he did but hum a burly bass to the tune of the "Little wee wife." But, being called away, he turned to me before closing the door behind him, and asked me very keenly, as though he had been restraining his impatience for some space: "And how about your brother? How is it that this matter has come about? Was not Herdegen pledged to marry Ann?"

Thereupon I told my aunt all I knew, and gave her Herdegen's letter to read, which I had taken care to bring with me; and even as she read it her countenance grew dark and fearful to look upon; she set her teeth like a raging hound, and hit her little hand on the table that stood by her couch so that the cups and phials standing thereon danced and clattered. Nay, she forgot her weakness, and

made as though she would spring up, but the pain was more than she could bear and she fell back on her pillows with a groan.

She had never loved my grand-uncle Im Hoff, and, as soon as she had recovered herself, she vowed she would bring his craft to nought and likewise would let her nephew, now in Paris, know her opinion of his knavish unfaith to a sacred pledge.

I then went on to tell her how hard and altogether insufferable Ann's life had become, and at length took courage to inform her who the man was whom she now called step-father. To this she at first said not a word, but cast down her eyes as though somewhat confused; but presently she asked wherefore and how it was that she had not heard of this marriage long since, and when I told her that folks for the most part had feared to speak the name of Master Ulman Pernhart in her presence, she again suddenly started up and cried in my face that in truth she forbade any mention of that villain and caitiff who had taken foul advantage of her son's youth and innocence to turn his heart from his parents and bring him to destruction.

And this led me, for the first time in my life, to break through the reverence I owed to the venerable lady, who so well deserved to be in all ways respected and spared; for I made so bold as to point out to her her cruel injustice, and to plead Master Ulman's cause with earnest zeal. For some time she was speechless with wrath and amazement, inasmuch as she was not wont to be thus reproved; but then she paid me back in the like coin; one word struck forth the next, and my rising wrath hastened me on so that

at last I told her plainly, that Master Pernhart had turned her son Gotz out of doors to hinder him from a breach of that obedience he owed to his parents. Furthermore I informed her of all that the coppersmith's mother had told me of the attempt to carry away Gertrude, and what the end of that had been. Indeed, so soon as the foreman had betrayed the lovers' plot, Master Ulman had locked his daughter into her chamber; and when her lover, after waiting for her in vain at the altar with the hireling priest, came at last to seek her, her father told him that unless he—Gotz—ceased his suit, he should exert his authority as her father to compel Gertrude to marry the foreman and go with him to Augsburg, or give her the choice of taking the veil. And this he confirmed by a solemn oath; and when Gotz, like one in a frenzy, strove to make good his claim to see his sweetheart, and hear from her own lips whether she were minded to yield to her father's yoke, they came to blows, even on the stairs leading to Gertrude's chamber, and there was a fierce battle, which might have had a bloody end but that old dame Magdalen herself came between them to part them. And then Master Ulman had sworn to Gotz that he would keep his daughter locked up as a captive unless the youth pledged himself to cease from seeing Gertrude till he had won his parents' consent. Thereupon Gotz went forth into a strange land; but he did not forget his well-beloved, and from time to time a letter would reach her assuring her of his faithfulness.

At the end of three years after his departing he at last wrote

to the coppersmith that he had found a post which would allow of his marrying and setting up house and he straightly besought Master Ulman no longer to keep apart two who could never be sundered. Nor did Pernhart delay to answer him, hard as he found it to use the pen, inasmuch as there was no more to say than that Gertrude was sleeping under the sod with her lover's ring on her finger and the last violets he had ever given her under her head, as she had desired.

Thus ended the tale of poor Gertrude; but before I had half told it my wrath had cooled. For my aunt sat in silence, listening to me with devout attention. Nor were my eyes dry, nor even those of that strong-willed dame, and when, at the end, I said: "Well, Aunt?" she woke, as it were, from a dream, and cried out: "And yet those craftsmen folk robbed me of my son, my only child!"

And she sobbed aloud and hid her face in her hands, while I knelt by her side, and threw my arms about her, and kissed her thin fingers which covered her eyes, and said softly, as if by inspiration: "But the craftsman loved his child; yea, and she was a sweet and lovely maid, the fairest in all the town, and her father's pride. And what was it that snatched her so early away but that she pined for your son? Gotz may soon be recalled to his mother's arms; but the coppersmith may never see his child—fair Gertrude, the folks called her—never see her more. And he might have been rejoiced in her presence to this day if...."

She broke in with words and gestures of warning, and when

I nevertheless would not cease from entreating her no longer to harden her heart, but to bid her son come home to her, who was her most precious treasure, she commanded me to quit her chamber. Such a command I must obey, whether I would or no; nay, while I stood a moment at the door she signed to me to go; but, as I turned away, she cried after me: "Go and leave me, Margery. But you are a good child, I will tell you that!"

At supper, which I alone shared with my uncle and the chaplain, I told my uncle that I had spoken to his wife of Master Pernhart, and when he heard that I had even spoken a good word for him, he looked at me as though I had done a right bold deed; yet I could see that he was highly pleased thereat, and the priest, who had sat silent—as he ever did, gave me a glance of heartfelt thanks and added a few words of praise. It was long after supper, and my uncle had had his night-draught of wine when my aunt sent the house-keeper to fetch me to her. Kindly and sweetly, as though she set down my past wrath to a good intent, she bid me sit down by her and then desired that I would repeat to her once more, in every detail, all I could tell her as touching Gotz and Gertrude. While I did her bidding to the best of my powers she spoke never a word; but when I ended she raised her head and said, as it were in a dream: "But Gotz! Did he not forsake father and mother to follow after a fair face?"

Then again I prayed her right earnestly to yield to the emotions of her mother's heart. But seeing her fixed gaze into the empty air, and the set pout of her nether lip, I could not doubt that she

would never speak the word that would bid him home.

I felt a chill down my back, and was about to rise and leave, but she held me back and once more spoke of Herdegen and that matter. When she had heard all the tale, she looked troubled: "I know my Ann," quoth she. "When she has once given her promise to the Bookworm all the twelve Apostles would not make her break it, and then she will be doomed to misery, and her fate and your brother's are both sealed."

She then went on to ask when the Magister was to return home, and as I told her he was expected on the morrow great trouble came upon her.

It was past midnight or ever I left her, and as it fell I slept but ill and late, insomuch that I was compelled to make good haste, and as it fell that I went to the window I saw the snow whirling in the wind, and behold, in the shed, a great wood-sleigh was being made ready, doubtless for some sick man to be carried to the convent.

I found my aunt in the hall, whither she scarce ever was carried down before noon-day; and instead of her every-day garb—a loose morning-gown—she was apparelled in strange and shapeless raiment, so muffled in kerchiefs and cloaks as to seem no whit like any living woman, much less herself, insomuch that her small thin person was like nothing else than a huge, shapeless, many-coated onion. Her little face peeped out of the veils and kerchiefs that wrapped her head, like a half-moon out of thick clouds; but her bright eyes shone kindly on me as she cried:

"Come, haste to your breakfast, lie-a-bed! I thought to find you fitted and ready, and you are keeping the men waiting as though it were an every-day matter that we should travel together."

"Aye, aye! She is bent on the journey," my uncle said with a groan, as he cast a loving glance at his frail wife and raised his folded hands to Heaven. "Well, chaplain, miracles happen even in our days!" And his Reverence, silent as he was, this time had an answer ready, saying with hearty feeling: "The loving heart of a brave woman has at all times been able to work miracles."

"Amen," said my uncle, pressing his lips on the top of his wife's muffled head.

Howbeit I remembered our talk yesternight, and the sleigh I had seen being harnessed; indeed, the look alone which the unwonted traveller cast on me was enough to tell me what my sickly aunt purposed to do for the sake of Ann. Then something came upon me, I know not what; with a passion all unlike that of yesterdayeve, I fell on my knees and kissed her as a child whose mother has made it a Christmas gift of what it most loves and wishes to have, while my lips were pressed to her eyes, brow, and cheeks, wherever the wrappings covered them not, and she cried out:

"Leave me, leave me, crazy child! You are choking me. What great matter is it after all? One woman will ride through the snow to Nuremberg for the sake of a chat with another, and who turns his head to look at her? Now, foolish wench, let me be. What a to-do for nothing at all!"

How I ate my porridge in the winking of an eye, and then sprang into the sleigh, I scarce could tell, and in truth I marked little of our departing; mine eyes were over full of tears. Packed right close to my aunt, whereas she filled three-fourths of the seat, I flew with her over the snow; nor did we need any great following on horseback to bear us company, inasmuch as my uncle rode on in front, and the Buchenauers and Steinbachers and other highway robbers who made the roads unsafe about Nuremberg, all lived in peace with uncle Waldstromer for the sake of the shooting.

When we got into the town, and I bid the rider take us to the Schopperhof, my aunt said: "No, to Ulman Pernhart's house, the coppersmith."

At this the faithful old serving-man, who had heard many rumors of his banished young master's dealings with the craftsman's fair daughter, and who was devoted to Gotz, muttered the name of his protecting saint and looked about him as though some giant cutthroat were ready to rush out of the brush wood and fall upon the sleigh; nor, indeed, could I altogether refrain my wonder. Howbeit, I recovered myself at once, and pointed out to her that it scarce beseemed her to enter a stranger's house for the first time in such attire. Moreover, Akusch had been sent in front to announce her coming to cousin Maud. I could send for Ann; as, indeed, it beseemed her, the younger, to wait upon my aunt.

But she held to her will to go to Master Ulman's dwelling; yet,

whereas the kerchiefs and wraps were a discomfort to her, she agreed to lay them aside at our house first.

Cousin Maud pressed her almost by force to take rest and meat and drink; but she refused everything; though all was in readiness and steaming hot; till, as fate would have it, as she was being carried down and out again, the Magister came in from his journey to Nordlingen. In his high fur boots and the heavy wrapping he had cast about his head to screen him from the wintry blast, he had not to be sure, the appearance of a suitor for a fair young maiden; and the glance cast at him by my aunt, half in mockery and half in wrath, eyeing him from head to foot, would have said plainly enough to other men than Master Peter—who, for his part made her a right humble and well-turned speech—"Wait awhile, young fellow! I am here now! And if you find a flea in your ear, you have me to thank for it!"

Apparelled now as befitted a lady of her degree, in a furred cloak and hood, she was borne off in Cousin Maud's well-curtained litter. I had sent Akusch to Ann with a note, but he had not found her within, and awaited me in the street; thus it fell that no one at the Pernharts was aware of what was coming upon them.

When presently the bearers set down the litter, Aunt Jacoba looked at the fine house before which we stood, and enquired what this might mean, whereas it was seven years since she had been in the city, and the master's new dwelling was not at that time built. Also she was greatly amazed to find a craftsman in so

great a house. But better things were to come: as I was about to knock at the door it opened, and five gentlemen of the Council, all men of the first rank among the Elders of the city, appeared on the threshold, and Master Pernhart in their midst. They shook hands with him as with one of themselves, and he towered above them all; nay, if he had not stood there as he had come from the forge, in his leathern apron, with his smith's cap in his hand, any one might have conceived him to be the chief of them all.

Now these gentlemen had come to Master Pernhart to announce to him that he had been chosen one of the eight wardens of the guilds who at that time formed part of the worshipful town council of forty-two. Veit Gundling, the old master-brewer, had lately departed this life, and the electors had been of one mind in choosing the coppersmith to fill his place, and he was likewise approved by the guilds. They had come to him forthwith, albeit their choice would not be declared till Saint Walpurgis day, inasmuch as it was deemed well to have the matter settled before the close of the old year.

Thus it came to pass that my aunt was witness while they took leave, and he returned thanks in a few heartfelt words. These, to be sure, were cut short by her coming, by reason that she was well-known to these five noble gentlemen, who all, as in duty bound, assured her of their surprise and pleasure in greeting her once more, here in the town.

That the feeble and suffering lady had come to Pernhart's dwelling not merely to order a copper-lid or a preserving pan was

easy to be understood, but she cut short all inquisition, and the litter was forthwith carried in through the widely-opened door.

The master received her in the hall.

He had till now never seen her but from a distance, yet had he heard enough about her to form a clear image of her. With her it was the same. She saw this man, to whom she owed such bitter grudge, for the first time here, under his own roof, and it was right strange to behold the two eyeing each other so keenly; he with a slight bow, almost timidly, and cap in hand; she unabashed, but with an expression as though she well knew that nothing pleasant lay before her.

The master spoke first, bidding her welcome to his dwelling, in accents of truth but with all due respect, and never speaking of it, as is the wont of his class, as "humble" or "poor," and as he was about to help her out of the litter I could see her face brighten, and this assured me that she would let bygones be bygones, as they say, and declare to Master Pernhart in plain words to what intent and purpose she had knocked at his door. By the time she was in the best chamber, the last sour curl had disappeared from her mouth; and indeed all was snug and seemly therein; Dame Giovanna being well-skilled in giving things a neat appearance, well pleasing to the eye.

Pernhart meanwhile had said but little, and his face was still dark, almost solemn of aspect. The master's mother again, to whom Gertrude had been all-in-all, and who had done what she could to speed her marriage, could read the other woman's heart,

and understood how great had been the sacrifice she had taken upon herself. There was no trace of the old grudge in her speech, and it sounded not ill when, as she put my aunt's cushions straight, she said she could not envy her, forasmuch as she the elder was thus permitted to be of service to the younger. When Pernhart presently quitted the chamber, perchance to don more seemly attire the two old women sat in eager talk; and if the lady were thin and sickly and the craftsman's mother stout and sturdy, yet were there many points of resemblance between them. Both, for certain, loved to rule, and as I watched them, seeing each shoot out her nether lip if the other spoke a word to cross her, I found it right good sport; but at the same time I was amazed to hear how truly old Dame Pernhart understood and spoke of Ann. I had indeed hitherto seen many a thing in my friend with other eyes, and yet I could not accuse the good woman of injustice, or deny that the coppersmith's step-daughter, from knowing me and from keeping company with us, had grown up with manners and desires unlike those of ever another clerk's or even a craftsman's daughter.

Albeit she strove to hide her deep discomfort, the old woman said, she could by no means succeed. A household was a body, and any member of it who could not be content with its ways was ill at ease with the rest, and made it hard for them to do it such service and pleasure as they would fain do. Ann fulfilled her every duty, down to the very least of them, by reason that she had a steadfast spirit and great dominion over herself; but she

got small thanks, and by her own fault, inasmuch as she did it joylessly. To look for bright cheer from her was to seek grapes on a birch-tree; and whereas the grandmother had till lately hoped to find in this gentle maid one who might fill the place of her who was no more, she could now only wish that she might find some other home.

To all this my aunt agreed, and presently, when Pernhart came in, clad in his holiday garb—a goodly man and well fitted for his new dignity, Aunt Jacoba bid me go look out for Ann. I saw that she desired my absence that she might deal alone with the mother and son, so I hastily departed and stayed in the upper chambers with the children till I caught sight of Ann and her mother coming towards the house. I ran down to meet them and behold! as we all three went into the guest chamber, Pernhart was in the act of bending over my aunt's hand to press it to his lips, and tears were sparkling in his eyes as well as in those of the women; nay, they were so greatly moved that no one heard the door open, and the old woman believed herself to be alone with her son as she cried to my aunt: "Oh wherefor did not Heaven vouchsafe to guide you to us some years since!"

My aunt only nodded her head in silence, and Dame Magdalen doubtless took this for assent; but I read more than this in her face, and something as follows: "We have hurt each other deeply, and I am thankful that all is past and forgiven; yet, much as I may now esteem you, in the matter you had so set your heart on I would no more have yielded to-day than I did at that time."

CHAPTER XVI

Ann looked right sweetly as she told my aunt that she felt put to shame by the great loving-kindness which had brought the feeble lady out through the forest in the bitter winter weather for her sake, and she kissed the thin, small hand with deep feeling; and even the elder woman unbent and freely gave vent before her favorite to the full warmth of her heart, which she was not wont to display. She had told the Pernharts what were the fears which had brought her into the town, so the chamber was presently cleared, and the master called away Mistress Giovanna after that my aunt had expressed her admiration of her rare charms.

As I too was now preparing to retire, which methought but seemly Aunt Jacoba beckoned me to stay. Ann likewise understood what had brought her sickly friend to her, and she whispered to me that albeit she was deeply thankful for the abundant goodness my aunt had ever shown her, yet could she never swerve from her well-considered purpose. To this I was only able to reply that on one point at least she must change her mind, for that I knew for certain that old grand-dame Pernhart loved her truly. At this she cried out gladly and thankfully: "Oh, Margery! if only that were true!"

So soon as we three were left together, my aunt went to the heart of the matter at once, saying frankly to what end she had come hither, that she knew all that Ann had suffered through

Herdegen, and how well she had taken it, and that she had now set her mind on wedding with the Magister.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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