

Hope Anthony

The Heart of Princess Osra



Anthony Hope

The Heart of Princess Osra

«Public Domain»

Hope A.

The Heart of Princess Osra / A. Hope — «Public Domain»,

Содержание

CHAPTER I.	5
CHAPTER II.	20
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	27

Anthony Hope

The Heart of Princess Osra

CHAPTER I.

The Happiness of Stephen the Smith

"Stephen! Stephen! Stephen!"

The impatient cry was heard through all the narrow gloomy street, where the old richly-carved house-fronts bowed to meet one another and left for the eye's comfort only a bare glimpse of blue. It was, men said, the oldest street in Strelsau, even as the sign of the "Silver Ship" was the oldest sign known to exist in the city. For when Aaron Lazarus the Jew came there, seventy years before, he had been the tenth man in unbroken line that took up the business; and now Stephen Nados, his apprentice and successor, was the eleventh. Old Lazarus had made a great business of it, and had spent his savings in buying up the better part of the street; but since Jews then might hold no property in Strelsau, he had taken all the deeds in the name of Stephen Nados; and when he came to die, being unable to carry his houses or his money with him, having no kindred, and caring not a straw for any man or woman alive save Stephen, he bade Stephen let the deeds be, and, with a last curse against the Christians (of whom Stephen was one, and a devout one), he kissed the young man, and turned his face to the wall and died. Therefore Stephen was a rich man, and had no need to carry on the business, though it never entered his mind to do anything else; for half the people who raised their heads at the sound of the cry were Stephen's tenants, and paid him rent when he asked for it; a thing he did when he chanced to remember, and could tear himself away from chasing a goblet or fashioning a little silver saint; for Stephen loved his craft more than his rents; therefore, again, he was well liked in the quarter.

"Stephen! Stephen!" cried Prince Henry, impatiently hammering on the closed door with his whip. "Plague take the man! Is he dead?"

The men in the quarter went on with their work; the women moved idly to the doors; the girls came out into the street and clustered here and there, looking at the Prince. For although he was not so handsome as that scamp Rudolf, his brother, who had just come back from his travels with half a dozen wild stories spurring after him, yet Henry was a comely youth, as he sat on his chestnut mare, with his blue eyes full of impatience, and his chestnut curls fringing his shoulders. So the girls clustered and looked. Moreover Stephen the smith must come soon, and the sight of him was worth a moment's waiting; for he buried himself all day in his workshop, and no laughing challenge could lure him out.

"Though, in truth," said one of the girls, tossing her head, "it's thankless work to spend a glance on either, for they do not return it. Now when Rudolf comes – "

She broke off with a laugh, and her comrades joined in it. Rudolf left no debts of that sort unpaid, however deep he might be in the books of Stephen Nados and of the others who furnished his daily needs.

Presently Stephen came, unbolting his door with much deliberation, and greeting Prince Henry with a restrained courtesy. He was not very well pleased to see his guest, for it was a ticklish moment with the nose of Saint Peter, and Stephen would have liked to finish the job uninterrupted. Still, the Prince was a prince, a gentleman, and a friend, and Stephen would not be uncivil to him.

"You ride early to-day, sir," he observed, patting the chestnut mare.

"I have a good reason," answered Henry. "The Lion rages to-day."

Stephen put up his hand to shelter his eyes from a ray of sunshine that had evaded the nodding walls and crept in; it lit up his flaxen hair, which he wore long and in thick waves, and played in his yellow beard; and he looked very grave. For when the Lion raged, strange and alarming things might happen in the city of Strelsau. The stories of his last fit of passion were yet hardly old.

"What has vexed the King?" he asked; for he knew that Prince Henry spoke of his father, Henry surnamed the Lion, now an old man, yet as fierce as when he had been young. "Is it your brother again?"

"For a marvel, no. It is myself, Stephen. And he is more furious with me than he has ever been with Rudolf; aye, even more than he was at all the stories that followed my brother home."

"And what is the cause of it all, sir, and how is it in my power to help?"

"That you will find out very soon," said the Prince with a bitter laugh. "You will be sent for to the palace in an hour, Stephen."

"If it is about the King's ring, the ring is not finished," said Stephen.

"It is not about the ring. Yet indeed it is, in a way, about a ring. For you are to be married, Stephen. This very day you are to be married."

"I think not, sir," said Stephen mildly. "For it is a thing that a man himself hears about if it be true."

"But the King thinks so; Stephen, have you remarked, among my sister Osra's ladies, a certain dark lady, with black hair and eyes? I cannot describe her eyes."

"But you can tell me her name, sir," suggested Stephen, who was a practical man.

"Her name? Oh, her name is Hilda – Hilda von Lauengram."

"Aye, I know the Countess Hilda. I have made a bracelet for her."

"She is the most beautiful creature alive!" cried Prince Henry, in a sudden rapture and so loudly (being carried away by his passion) that the girls heard him and wondered of whom he spoke with so great an enthusiasm.

"To those to whom she seems such," observed Stephen. "But, pray, how am I concerned in all this, sir?"

The Prince's smile grew more bitter as he answered:

"Why, you are to marry her. It was an idle suggestion of Osra's, made in jest; my father is pleased to approve of it in earnest."

Then he bent in his saddle and went on in a hurried urgent whisper: "I love her better than my life, Stephen – better than heaven; and my faith and word are pledged to her; and last night I was to have fled with her – for I knew better than to face the old Lion – but Osra found her making preparations and we were discovered. Then Osra was scornful, and the King mad, and Rudolf laughed; and when they talked of what was to be done to her, Osra came in with her laughing suggestion. It caught the King's angry fancy, and he swore that it should be so. And, since the Archbishop is away, he has bidden the Bishop of Modenstein be at the palace at twelve to-day, and you will be brought there also, and you will be married to her. But, by heavens, I'll have your blood if you are!" With this sudden outbreak of fury the Prince ended. Yet a moment later, he put out his hand to the smith, saying: "It's not your fault, man."

"That's true enough," said the smith; "for I have no desire to marry her; and it is not fitting that a lady of her birth should mate with a smith; she is of a great house, and she would hate and despise me."

Prince Henry was about to assent when his eye chanced to fall on Stephen the smith. Now the smith was a very handsome man – handsomer, many said, than Prince Rudolf himself, whom no lady could look on without admiration; he stood six feet and two inches in his flat working shoes; he was very broad, and could leap higher and hurl a stone farther than any man in Strelsau. Moreover he looked kind and gentle, yet was reputed to grow angry at times, and then to be very dangerous. Therefore Prince Henry, knowing (or thinking that he knew) the caprices of women, and how they are caught by this and that, was suddenly seized with a terrible fear that the Countess Hilda might not

despise Stephen the smith. Yet he did not express his fear, but said that it was an impossible thing that a lady of the Countess's birth (for the House of Lauengram was very noble) should wed a silversmith, even though he were as fine a fellow as his good friend Stephen; to which gracious speech Stephen made no reply, but stood very thoughtful, with his hand on the neck of the chestnut mare. But at last he said: "In any case it cannot be, for I am bound already."

"A wife? Have you a wife?" cried the Prince eagerly.

"No; but my heart is bound," said Stephen the smith.

"The King will make little of that. Yet who is she? Is she any of these girls who stand looking at us?"

"No, she is none of these," answered Stephen, smiling as though such an idea were very ludicrous.

"And are you pledged to her?"

"I to her, but not she to me."

"But does she love you?"

"I think it most unlikely," said Stephen the smith.

"The Lion will care nothing for this," groaned the Prince despondently. "They will send for you in half an hour. For heaven's sake spare her, Stephen!"

"Spare her, sir?"

"Do not consent to marry her, however urgently the King may command you."

The smith shook his head, smiling still. Prince Henry rode sorrowfully away, spending not a glance on the bevy of girls who watched him go; and Stephen, turning into his house, shut the door, and with one great sigh set to work again on the nose of Saint Peter.

"For anyhow," said he, "a man can work." And after a long pause he added, "I never thought to tell any one; but if I must, I must."

Now, sure enough, when the clock on the Cathedral wanted a quarter of an hour of noon, two of the King's Guard came and bade Stephen follow them with all haste to the palace; and since they were very urgent and no time was to be lost, he followed them as he was, in his apron, without washing his hands or getting rid of the dust that hung about him from his work. However he had finished Saint Peter's nose and all had gone well with it, so that he went in a contented frame of mind, determined to tell the whole truth to King Henry the Lion sooner than be forced into a marriage with the Countess Hilda von Lauengram.

The Lion sat in his great chair; he was a very thin old man, with a face haggard and deeply lined; his eyes, set far back in his head, glowed and glowered, and his fingers pulled his sparse white beard. On his right Prince Rudolf lolled on a low seat, smiling at the play; on his left sat that wonderfully fair lady, the Princess Osra, then in the first bloom of her young beauty; and she was smiling scornfully. Prince Henry stood before his father, and some yards from him was the Countess Hilda, trembling and tearful, supported by one of her companions; and finally, since the Archbishop was gone to Rome to get himself a Scarlet Hat, the Bishop of Modenstein, a young man of noble family, was there, most richly arrayed in choicest lace and handsomest vestments, ready to perform the ceremony. Prince Rudolf had beckoned the Bishop near him, and was jesting with him in an undertone. The Bishop laughed as a man laughs who knows he should not laugh but cannot well help himself; for Rudolf owned a pretty wit, although it was sadly unrestrained.

The King's fury, having had a night and a morning to grow cool in, had now settled into a cold ironical mood, which argued no less resolution than his first fierce wrath. There was a grim smile on his face as he addressed the smith, who, having bowed to the company, was standing between the Countess and Prince Henry.

"The House of Elphberg," said the King, with mocking graciousness, "well recognises your worth, Stephen, my friend. We are indebted to you –"

"It's a thousand crowns or more from Prince Rudolf alone, sire," interrupted Stephen, with a bow to the Prince he named.

"For much faithful service," pursued the King, while Rudolf laughed again. "I have therefore determined to reward you with the hand of a lady who is, it may be, above your station, but in no way above your worth. Behold her! Is she not handsome? On my word, I envy you, smith. She is beautiful, young, high-born. You are lucky, smith. Nay, no thanks. It is but what you deserve – and no more than she deserves. Take her and be happy," and he ended with a snarling laugh, as he waved his lean veined hand towards the unhappy Countess, and fixed his sneering eyes on the face of his son Henry, who had turned pale as death, but neither spoke nor moved.

The Bishop of Modenstein – he was of the House of Hentzau, many of which have been famous in history – lifted up his hands in horror at Rudolf's last whispered jest, and then, advancing with a bow to the King, asked if he were now to perform his sacred duties.

"Aye, get on with it," growled the Lion, not heeding the Countess's sobs or the entreaty in his son's face. And the Princess Osra sat unmoved, the scornful smile still on her lips; it seemed as though she had no pity for a brother who could stoop, or for a girl who had dared to soar too high.

"Wait, wait!" said Stephen the smith. "Does this lady love me, sire?"

"Aye, she loves you enough for the purpose, smith," grinned the King. "Do not be uneasy."

"May I ask her if she loves me, sire?"

"Why, no, smith. Your King's word must be enough for you."

"And your Majesty says that she loves me?"

"I do say so, smith."

"Then," said Stephen, "I am very sorry for her; for as there's a heaven above us, sire, I do not love her."

Prince Rudolf laughed; Osra's smile broadened in greater scorn; the Countess hid her face in her companion's bosom. The old King roared out a gruff burst. "Good, good!" he chuckled. "But it will come with marriage, smith; for with marriage love either comes or goes – eh, son Rudolf? – and since in this case it cannot go, you must not doubt, friend Stephen, that it will come." And he threw himself back in his chair, greatly amused that a smith, when offered the hand of a Countess, should hesitate to take it. He had not thought of so fine a humiliation as this for the presumptuous girl.

"That might well be, sire," admitted Stephen, "were it not that I most passionately love another."

"Our affections," said the King, "are unruly things, smith, and must be kept in subjection; is it not so, son Rudolf?"

"It should be so, sire," answered the merry Prince.

But the Princess Osra, whose eyes had been scanning Stephen's figure, here broke suddenly into the conversation.

"Are you pledged to her whom you love so passionately?" she asked.

"I have not ventured to tell her of my love, madame," answered he, bowing low.

"Then there is no harm done," observed Prince Rudolf. "The harm lies in the telling, not in the loving."

"Tell us something about her," commanded the Princess; and the King, who loved sport most when it hurt others, chimed in: "Aye, let's hear about her whom you prefer to this lady. In what shop does she work, smith? Or does she sell flowers? Or is she a serving-girl? Come, listen, Countess, and hear about your rival."

Prince Henry took one step forward in uncontrolled anger; but he could not meet the savage mirth in the old man's eyes, and, sinking into a chair, spread his hand across his face. But Stephen, regarding the King with placid good-humour, began to speak of her whom he loved so passionately. And his voice was soft as he spoke.

"She works in no shop, sire," said he, "nor does she sell flowers, nor is she a serving-girl; though I would not care if she were. But one day, when the clouds hung dark over our street, she came riding down it, and another girl with her. The two stopped before my door, and, seeing them, I came out – "

"It is more than you do for me," remarked Prince Rudolf.

Stephen smiled, but continued his story. "I came out; and she whom I love gave me a bracelet to mend. And I, looking at her rather than at the bracelet, said, 'But already it is perfect.' But she did not hear, for, when she had given me the bracelet, she rode on again at once and took no more notice of me than of the flies that were crawling up my wall. That was the first and is the last time that I have spoken to her until this day. But she was so beautiful that there and then I swore that, until I had found means and courage to tell her my love, and until she had thrice refused it, I would marry no other maiden nor speak a word of love."

"It seems to me," said Prince Rudolf, "that the oath has some prudence in it; for if she prove obdurate, friend Stephen, you will then be able to go elsewhere; many lovers swear more intemperately."

"But they do not keep their oaths," said Stephen, with a shrewd look at the Prince.

"You had best let him alone, my son," said the old King. "He knows what all the country knows of its future King."

"Then he may go and hang with all the country," said the Prince peevishly.

But the Princess Osra leant a little forward towards Stephen, and the Countess Hilda also looked covertly out from the folds of her friend's dress at Stephen. And the Princess said:

"Was she then so beautiful, this girl?"

"As the sun in heaven, madame," said the smith.

"As beautiful as my pretty sister?" asked Rudolf in careless jest.

"Yes, as beautiful, sir," answered Stephen.

"Then," said the cruel old King, "very much more beautiful than this Countess?"

"Of that you must ask your son Henry, sire," said Stephen discreetly.

"Nevertheless," said the King, "you must put up with the Countess. We cannot all have what we want in this world, can we, son Henry?" and he chuckled again most maliciously.

"Not, sire, till my lady has thrice refused me," the smith reminded the King.

"Then she must be quick about it. For we all, and my lord Bishop here, are waiting. Send for her, Stephen – by heaven, I have a curiosity to see her!"

"And, by heaven! so have I," added Prince Rudolf with a merry smile. "And poor Henry here may be cured by the sight."

The Princess Osra leant a little further forward, and said gently:

"Tell us her name, and we will send for her. Indeed I also would like to see her."

"But if she refuses, I shall be worse off than I am now; and if she says yes, still I must marry the Countess," objected the smith.

"Nay," said the King, "if she does not refuse you three times, you shall not marry the Countess, but shall be free to try your fortune with the girl;" for the smith had put the old Lion in a better temper, and he thought he was to witness more sport.

"Since your Majesty is so good, I must tell her name," said Stephen, "though I had rather have declared my love to herself alone."

"It is the pleasantest way," said Prince Rudolf, "but the thing can be done in the presence of others also."

"You must tell us her name that we may send for her," said the Princess, her eyes wandering now from the Countess to the smith, and back to the Countess again.

"Well, then," said Stephen sturdily, "the lady who came riding down the street and took away my heart with her is called Osra, and her father is named Henry."

A moment or two passed before they understood what the smith had said. Then the old King fell into a fit of laughter, half choked by coughing; Prince Rudolf clapped his hands in merry mockery, and a deep flush spread over the face of the Princess; while the Countess, her companion, and the younger Prince seemed too astonished to do anything but stare. As for Stephen, having said what he had to say, he held his peace – a thing in him which many men, and women also, would do well to imitate; and, if they cannot, let them pray for the grace that is needful. Heaven is omnipotent.

The old King, having recovered from his fit of laughing, looked round on the smith with infinite amusement, and, turning to his daughter, he said: "Come, Osra, you have heard the declaration. It remains only for you to satisfy our good friend's conscience by refusing him three times. For then he will be free to do our pleasure and make the Countess Hilda happy."

The heart of women is, as it would seem, a strange thing; for the Princess Osra, hearing what the smith had said and learning that he had fallen passionately in love with her on the mere sight of her beauty, suddenly felt a tenderness for him and a greater admiration than she had entertained before; and although she harboured no absurd idea of listening to his madness, or of doing anything in the world but laugh at it as it deserved, yet there came on her a strange dislike of the project that she had herself, in sport, suggested: namely, that the smith should be married immediately to the Countess Hilda by the Lord Bishop of Modenstein. The fellow, this smith, had an eye for true beauty, it seemed. It would be hard to tie him down to this dusky, black-maned girl; for so the Princess described the lady whom her brother loved, she herself being, like most of the Elphbergs, rather red than black in color. Accordingly, when the King spoke to her, she said fretfully:

"Am I to be put to refuse the hand of such a fellow as this? Why, to refuse him is a stain on my dignity!" And she looked most haughty.

"Yet you must grant him so much because of his oath," said the King.

"Well, then, I refuse him," said she tartly, and she turned her eyes away from him.

"That is once," said Stephen the smith calmly, and he fixed his eyes on the Princess's face. She felt his gaze, her eyes were drawn back to his, and she exclaimed angrily:

"Yes, I refuse him," and again she looked away. But he looked still more intently at her, waiting for the third refusal.

"It is as easy to say no three times as twice," said the King.

"For a man, sire," murmured Prince Rudolf; for he was very learned in the perilous knowledge of a woman's whims, and, maybe, read something of what was passing in his sister's heart. Certainly he looked at her and laughed, and said to the King:

"Sire, I think this smith is a clever man, for what he really desires is to wed the Countess, and to do it without disobliging my brother. Therefore he professes this ridiculous passion, knowing well that Osra will refuse him, and that he will enjoy the great good fortune of marrying the Countess against his will. Thus he will obey you and be free from my brother's anger. In truth, you're a crafty fellow, Master Stephen!"

"There is no craft, sir," said Stephen. "I have told nothing but the truth."

But the King swore a loud oath, crying: "Aye, that there is! Rudolf has hit the mark. Yet I do not grudge him his good luck. Refuse him, Osra, and make him happy."

But the dark flush came anew on the Princess's face, for now she did not know whether the smith really loved her or whether he had been making a jest of her in order to save himself in the eyes of her brother Henry, and it became very intolerable to her to suppose that the smith desired the Countess, and had lied in what he said about herself, making a tool of her. Again, it was hardly more tolerable to give him to the Countess, in case he truly loved herself; so that her mind was very greatly disturbed, and she was devoured with eagerness to know the reality of the smith's feelings towards her; for, although he was only a smith, yet he was a wonderfully handsome man – in truth, it was curious that she had not paid attention to his looks before. Thus she was reluctant to refuse him a third time, when the Bishop of Modenstein stood there, waiting only for her word to marry him to the

Countess; and she rose suddenly from her seat and walked towards the door of the room, and, when she had almost reached the door, she turned her head over her shoulder and cast one smile at Stephen the smith. As she glanced, the blush again mounted to her face, making her so lovely that her father wondered, and she said in arch softness: "I'll refuse him the third time some other day; two denials are enough for one day," and with that she passed through the door and vanished from their sight.

The King and Rudolf, who had seen the glance that she cast at Stephen, fell to laughing again, swearing to one another that a woman was a woman all the world over, whereat the lips of the Bishop twitched.

"But the marriage can't go on," cried Rudolf at last.

"Let it rest for to-day," said the King, whose anger was past. "Let it rest. The Countess shall be guarded; and, since this young fool" (and he pointed to his son Henry) "will not wander while she is caged, let him go where he will. Then as soon as Osra has refused the smith a third time, we will send for the Bishop."

"And what am I to do, sire?" asked Stephen the smith.

"Why, my son-in-law that would be," chuckled the King, "you may go back to where you came from till I send for you again."

So Stephen, having thanked the King, went back home, and, sitting down to the chasing of a cup, became very thoughtful; for it seemed to him that the Countess had been hardly treated, and that the Prince deserved happiness, and that the Princess was yet more lovely than his eyes had found her before.

Thus, in his work and his meditations, the afternoon wore away fast. So goes time when hand and head are busy.

The Princess Osra walked restlessly up and down the length of her bed-chamber. Dinner was done and it was eight o'clock, and, the season being late October, it had grown dark. She had come thither to be alone; yet, now that she was alone, she could not rest. He was an absurd fellow – that smith! Yes, she thought him fully as handsome as her brother Rudolf. But what did Henry find to love in the black-brown Hilda? She could not understand a man caring for such a colour; a blackamoor would serve as well! Ah, what had that silly smith meant? It must have been a trick, as Rudolf said. Yet when he spoke first of her riding down the street, there was a look in his eyes that a man can hardly put there of his own will. Did the silly fellow then really – ? Nay, that was absurd; she prayed that it might not be true, for she would not have the poor fool unhappy. Nay, he was no fool. It was a trick, then! How dared the insolent knave use her for his tricks? Was there no other maiden in Strelsau whose name would have served? Must he lay his tongue to the name of a daughter of the Elphbergs? The fellow deserved flogging, if it were a trick. Ah, was it a trick? Or was it the truth? Oh, in heaven's name, which was it? And the Princess tore the delicate silk of her ivory fan to shreds, and flung the naked sticks with a clatter on the floor.

"I can't rest till I know," she cried, as she came to a stand before a long mirror let into the panel of the wall, and saw herself at full length in it. As she looked a smile came, parting her lips, and she threw her head back as she said: "I will go and ask the smith what he meant." And she smiled again at her own face in triumphant daring; for when she looked, she thought, "I know what he meant! Yet I will hear from himself what he meant."

Stephen the smith sat alone in his house; his apprentices were gone, and he himself neither worked nor supped, but sat still and idle by his hearth. The street was silent also, for it rained and nobody was about. Then suddenly came a light timid rap at the door; so light was it that the smith doubted if he had really heard, but it came again and he rose leisurely and opened the door. Even as he did so a slight tall figure slipped by him, an arm pulled him back, the door was pushed close again, and he was alone inside the house with a lady wrapped in a long riding-cloak, and so veiled that nothing of her face could be seen.

"Welcome, madame," said Stephen the smith; and he drew a chair forward and bowed to his visitor. He was not wearing his apron now, but was dressed in a well-cut suit of brown cloth and had put on a pair of silk stockings. He might have been expecting visitors, so carefully had he arrayed himself.

"Do you know who I am?" asked the veiled lady.

"Since I was a baby, madame," answered the smith, "I have known the sun when I saw it, even though clouds dimmed its face."

A corner of the veil was drawn down, and one eye gleamed in frightened mirth.

"Nobody knows I have come," said Osra. "And you do not know why I have come."

"Is it to answer me for the third time?" asked he, drawing a step nearer, yet observing great deference in his manner.

"It is not to answer at all, but to ask. But I am very silly to have come. What is it to me what you meant?"

"I cannot conceive that it could be anything, madame," said Stephen, smiling.

"Yet some think her beautiful – my brother Henry, for example."

"We must respect the opinions of Princes," observed the smith.

"Must we share them?" she asked, drawing the veil yet a little aside.

"We can share nothing – we humble folk – with Princes or Princesses, madame."

"Yet we can make free with their names, though humbler ones would serve as well."

"No other would have served at all, madame."

"Then you meant it?" she cried in sudden half-serious eagerness.

"Nay, but what, madame?"

"I don't care whether you meant it or not."

"Alas! I know it so well, that I marvel you have come to tell me."

The Princess rose and began to walk up and down as she had in her own chamber. Stephen stood regarding her as though God had made his eyes for that one purpose.

"The thing is nothing," she declared petulantly, "but I have a fancy to ask it. Stephen, was it a trick, or – or was it really so? Come, answer me! I can't spend much time on it."

"It is not worth a thought to you. If you say no a third time, all will be well."

"You will marry the Countess?"

"Can I disobey the King, madame?"

"I am very sorry for her," said the Princess. "A lady of her rank should not be forced to marry a silversmith."

"Indeed I thought so all along. Therefore – "

"You played the trick?" she cried in unmistakable anger.

Stephen made no answer for a time, then he said softly: "If she loves the Prince and he her, why should they not marry?"

"Because his birth is above hers."

"I am glad, then, that I am of no birth, for I can marry whom I will."

"Are you so happy and so free, Stephen?" sighed the Princess; and there was no more of the veil left than served to frame the picture of her face.

"So soon as you have refused me the third time, madame," bowed the smith.

"Will you not answer me?" cried the Princess; and she smiled no more, but was as eager as though she were asking some important question.

"Bring the Countess here to-morrow at this time," said Stephen, "and I will answer."

"You wish, perhaps, to make a comparison between us?" she asked haughtily.

"I cannot be compelled to answer except on my own terms," said the smith. "Yet if you will refuse me once again, the thing will be finished."

"I will refuse you," she cried, "when I please."

"But you will bring the Countess, madame?"

"I am very sorry for her. I have behaved ill to her, Stephen, though I meant only to jest."

"There is room for amends, madame," said he.

The Princess looked long and curiously in his face, but he met her glance with a quiet smile.

"It grows late," said he, "and you should not be here longer, madame. Shall I escort you to the palace?"

"And have every one asking with whom Stephen the smith walks? No, I will go as I came. You have not answered me, Stephen."

"And you have not refused me, madame."

"Will you answer me to-morrow when I come with the Countess?"

"Yes, I will answer then."

The Princess had drawn near to the door; now Stephen opened it for her to pass out; and as she crossed the threshold, she said:

"And I will refuse you then – perhaps;" with which she darted swiftly down the dark, silent, shining street, and was gone; and Stephen, having closed the door, passed his hand twice over his brow, sighed thrice, smiled once, and set about the preparation of his supper.

On the next night, as the Cathedral clock struck nine, there arose a sudden tumult and excitement in the palace. King Henry the Lion was in such a rage as no man had ever seen him in before; even Rudolf, his son, did not dare to laugh at him; courtiers, guards, attendants, lackeys, ran wildly to and fro in immense fear and trepidation. A little later, and a large company of the King's Guard filed out, and, under the command of various officers, scattered themselves through the whole of Strelsau, while five mounted men rode at a gallop to each of the five gates of the city, bearing commands that the gates should be closed, and no man, woman, or child be allowed to pass out without an order under the hand of the King's Marshal. And the King swore by heaven, and by much else, that he would lay them – that is to say, the persons whose disappearance caused all this hubbub – by the heels, and that they should know that there was life in the Lion yet; whereat Prince Rudolf looked as serious as he could contrive to look – for he was wonderfully amused – and called for more wine. And the reason of the whole thing was no other than this, that the room of the Princess Osra was empty, and the room of the Countess Hilda was empty, and nobody had set eyes on Henry, the King's son, for the last two hours or more. Now these facts were, under the circumstances of the case, enough to upset a man of a temper far more equable than was old King Henry the Lion.

Through all the city went the Guards, knocking at every door, disturbing some at their suppers, some from their beds, some in the midst of revelry, some who toiled late for a scanty livelihood. When the doors were not opened briskly, the Guard without ceremony broke them in; they ransacked every crevice and cranny of every house, and displayed the utmost zeal imaginable; nay, one old lady they so terrified that she had a fit there where she lay in bed, and did not recover for the best part of a month. And thus, having traversed all the city and set the whole place in stir and commotion, they came at last to the street where Stephen lived, and to the sign of the "Silver Ship," where he carried on the business bequeathed to him by Aaron Lazarus the Jew.

"Rat, tat, tat!" came thundering on the door from the sword-hilt of the Sergeant in command of the party.

There was no answer; no light shone from the house, for the window was closely shuttered. Again the Sergeant hammered on the door.

"This pestilent smith is gone to bed," he cried in vexation. "But we must leave no house unsearched. Come, we must break in the door!" and he began to examine the door, and found that it was a fine solid door, of good oak and clamped with iron.

"Phew, we shall have a job with this door!" he sighed. "Why, in the devil's name, doesn't the fellow answer? Stephen, Stephen! Ho, there! Stephen!"

Yet no answer came from the inside of the house.

But at this moment another sound struck sharp on the ears of the Sergeant and his men. It was the noise of flames crackling; from the house next to Stephen's (which belonged to him, but was inhabited by a fruit-seller) there welled out smoke in volumes from every window; and the fruit-seller and his family appeared at the windows calling for aid. Seeing this, the Sergeant blew very loudly the whistle that he carried and cried "Fire!" and bade his men run and procure a ladder; for plainly the fruit-seller's house was on fire, and it was a more urgent matter to rescue men and women from burning than to find the Countess and the Prince. Presently the ladder came, and a great crowd of people, roused by the whistle and the cries of fire, came also; and then the door of Stephen's house was opened, and Stephen himself, looking out, asked what was the matter. Being told that the next house was on fire, he turned very grave – for the house was his – and waited for a moment to watch the fruit-seller and his family being brought down the ladder, which task was safely and prosperously accomplished. But the Sergeant said to him: "The fire may well spread, and if there is anyone in your house, it would be prudent to get them out."

"That is well thought of," said Stephen approvingly. "I was working late with three apprentices, and they are still in the house." And he put his head in at his door and called: "You had better come out, lads, the fire may spread." But the Sergeant turned away again and busied himself in putting the fire out.

Then three lads, one being very tall, came out of Stephen's house, clad in their leather breeches, their aprons, and the close-fitting caps that apprentices wore; and for a moment they stood watching the fire at the fruit-seller's. Then, seeing that the fire was burning low – which it did very quickly – they did not stay till the attention of the Sergeant was released from it, but, accompanied by Stephen, turned down the street, and, going along at a brisk rate, rounded the corner and came into the open space in front of the Cathedral.

"The gates will be shut, I fear," said the tallest apprentice. "How came the fire, Stephen?"

"It was three or four trusses of hay, sir, and a few crowns to repair his scorched paint. Shall we go to the gate?"

"Yes, we must try the gate," said Prince Henry, gathering the hand of the Countess into his; and the third apprentice walked silently by Stephen's side. Yet once as she went, she said softly:

"So it was no trick, Stephen?"

"No trick, but the truth, madame," said Stephen.

"I do not know," said Osra, "how I am to return to the palace in these clothes."

"Let us get your brother and the Countess away first," counselled the smith.

Now when they came to the nearest gate it was shut; but at the moment a troop of mounted men rode up, having been sent by the King to scour the country round, in case the fugitives should have escaped already from the city. And the Commandant of the company bore an order from the King's Marshal for the opening of the gate. Seeing this, Stephen the smith went up to him and began to talk to him, the three apprentices standing close by. The Commandant knew Stephen well, and was pleased to talk with him while the gates were opened and the troopers filed through. Stephen kept close by him till the troopers were all through. Then he turned and spoke to the apprentices, and they nodded assent. The Commandant checked his horse for an instant when he was half-way through the gate, and bent down and took Stephen's hand to shake it in farewell. Stephen took his hand with marvellous friendliness, and held it, and would not let him go. But the apprentices edged cautiously nearer and nearer the gate.

"Enough, man, enough!" laughed the Commandant. "We are not parting for ever."

"I trust not, sir, I trust not," said Stephen earnestly, still holding his hand.

"Come, let me go. See, the gate-warden wants to shut the gate!"

"True!" said Stephen. "Good-bye then, sir. Hallo, hallo! stop, stop! Oh, the young rascals!"

For even as Stephen spoke, two of the apprentices had darted through the half-closed gate, and run swiftly forward into the gloom of the night. Stephen swore an oath.

"The rogues!" he cried. "They were to have worked all night to finish an image of Our Lady! And now I shall see no more of them till to-morrow! They shall pay for their prank then, by heaven they shall!" But the Commandant laughed.

"I am sorry I can't catch them for you, friend Stephen," said he, "but I have other fish to fry. Well, boys will be boys. Don't be too hard on them when they return."

"They must answer for what they do," said Stephen; and the Commandant rode on and the gates were shut.

Then the Princess Osra said:

"Will they escape, Stephen?"

"They have money in their purses, love in their hearts, and an angry King behind them. I should travel quickly, madame, if I were so placed."

The Princess looked through the grating of the gate.

"Yes," she said, "they have all those. How happy they must be, Stephen! But what am I to do?"

Stephen made no answer and they walked back in silence to his house. It may be that they were wondering whether Prince Henry and the Countess would escape. Yet it may be that they thought of something else. When they reached the house, Stephen bade the Princess go into the inner room and resume her own dress that she might return to the palace, and that it might not be known where she had been nor how she had aided her brother to evade the King's prohibition; and when she, still strangely silent, went in as he bade her, he took his great staff in his hand, and stood on the threshold of the house, his head nearly touching the lintel and his shoulders filling almost all the space between door-post and door-post.

When he had stood there a little while, the same Sergeant of the Guard, recollecting (now that the fire at the fruit-seller's was out) that he had never searched the house of the smith, came again with his four men, and told Stephen to stand aside and allow him to enter the house.

"For I must search it," he said, "or my orders will not be performed."

"Those whom you seek are not here," said Stephen.

"That I must see for myself," answered the Sergeant. "Come, smith, stand aside."

When the Princess heard the voices outside, she put her head round the door of the inner room, and cried in great alarm to Stephen:

"They must not come in, Stephen. At any cost they must not come in!"

"Do not be afraid, madame, they shall not come in," said he.

"I heard a voice in the house," exclaimed the Sergeant.

"It is nothing uncommon to hear in a house," said Stephen, and he grasped more firmly his great staff.

"Will you make way for us?" demanded the Sergeant. "For the last time, will you make way?"

Stephen's eyes kindled; for though he was a man of peace, yet his strength was great and he loved sometimes to use it; and above all, he loved to use it now at the bidding and in protection of his dear Princess. So he answered the Sergeant from between set teeth:

"Over my dead body you can come in."

Then the Sergeant drew his sword and his men set their halberds in rest, and the Sergeant, crying, "In the King's name!" came at Stephen with drawn sword and struck fiercely at him. But Stephen let the great staff drop on the Sergeant's shoulder, and the Sergeant's arm fell powerless by his side. Thereupon the Guards cried aloud, and people began to come out of their houses, seeing that there was a fight at Stephen's door. And Stephen's eyes gleamed, and when the Guards thrust at him, he struck at them, and two of them he stretched senseless on the ground; for his height and reach were such that he struck them before they could come near enough to touch him, and having no firearms they could not bring him down.

The Princess, now fully dressed in her own garments, came out into the outer room, and stood there looking at Stephen. Her bosom rose and fell, and her eyes grew dim as she looked; and growing

very eager, and being very much moved, she kept murmuring to herself, "I have not said no thrice!" And she spent no thought on the Countess or her brother, nor on how she was to return undetected to the palace, but saw only the figure of Stephen on the threshold, and heard only the cries of the Guards who assaulted him. It seemed to her a brave thing to have such a man to fight for her, and to offer his life to save her shame.

Old King Henry was not a patient man, and when he had waited two hours without news of son, daughter, or Countess, he flew into a mighty passion and sent one for his horse, and another for Rudolf's horse, and a third for Rudolf himself; and he drank a draught of wine, and called to Rudolf to accompany him, that they might see for themselves what the lazy hounds of Guards were doing, that they had not yet come up with the quarry. Prince Rudolf laughed and yawned and wished his brother at the devil, but mounted his horse and rode with the King. Thus they traversed the city, riding swiftly, the old King furiously upbraiding every officer and soldier whom he met; then they rode to the gate; and all the gate-wardens said that nobody had gone out, save that one gate-warden admitted that two apprentices of Stephen the silversmith had contrived to slip out when the gates were open to let the troopers pass. But the King made nothing of it, and, turning with his son, rode up the street where Stephen lived. Here they came suddenly into the midst of a crowd, that filled all the roadway, and would hardly let the horses move even at a foot's pace. The King cried out angrily, "What is this tumult?"

Then the people knew him, and, since common folk are always anxious to serve and commend themselves to the great, a score began all at once to tell him what had happened, some starting with the fire, some going straight to the fight; and the King could not make head or tail of the babel of voices and different stories. And Prince Rudolf dropped his reins and sat on his horse laughing. But the King, his patience being clean gone, drew his sword and cried fiercely, "Make way!" and set his spurs to his horse, not recking whether he hurt any man in life or limb. Thus he gained a passage through the crowd, and came near to Stephen's house, Prince Rudolf following in his wake, still greatly amused at all that was happening.

But the sight they saw there arrested even Prince Rudolf's smiles, and he raised himself in his stirrups with a sudden cry of wonder. For four more of the Guard had come, and there were now six standing round the doorway, and three lay stretched on the ground; but Stephen the smith still stood on the threshold, with his staff in his hand. Blood flowed from a wound in his head, but he twirled the staff to and fro, and was not weary, and none of the Guard dared to rush in and close with him. Thus he had held the threshold for an hour; yet the Princess Osra could not escape unless he could drive off the Guard for a few moments, and this he hoped to do, thinking that they might draw off and wait for reinforcements; but in any case he had sworn that they should not pass. And Osra did not pray him to let them pass, but stood motionless in the middle of the room behind him, her hands clasped, her face rigid, and her eyes all aflame with admiration of his strength and his courage.

Thus matters were when the old King and Prince Rudolf broke through the crowd that ringed the house round, and the King cried out, asking what was the meaning of all that he saw.

But when the King heard that Stephen the smith resisted the officers, would not suffer his house to be searched, had stretched three of the Guards senseless on the ground, and still more than held his own, he fell into a great rage; he roared out on them all, calling them cowards, and, before his son or any one else could stop him, he drew his sword, and dug his spurs into his horse; the horse bounded forward and knocked down one of the Guards who stood round Stephen. Then the King, neither challenging Stephen to yield, nor giving him time to stand aside, being carried away by passion, raised his sword and rode full at him. And the Princess from within caught sight of his face, and she fell on her knees with a moan and hid her face. Then Stephen saw that it was the King and none other who rode against him; and even had the King given him time, it may be that he would not have yielded, for he was a very resolute man, and he had pledged his promise to Osra the Princess. But he had no time for thought, for the King was on him in the space of a second, and he could do nothing but drop

the staff that he held, and stand defenceless in the doorway; for he would neither strike the King nor yield the passage. But the King, in his fury not heeding that Stephen had dropped his staff, drew back his arm and lunged with his sword, and thrust the smith through the chest; and Stephen reeled and fell on one knee, and his blood flowed out on the stone of the doorstep. Then the King reined in his horse, and sat looking down on Stephen; but Rudolf leapt to the ground, and came and caught hold of Stephen, supporting him, and asking, "What does it mean, man, what does it mean?"

Then Stephen, being very faint with his wound, said with difficulty: "Come in alone – you and the King alone."

Prince Rudolf looked at the King, who sheathed his sword and dismounted from his horse; the Prince supported Stephen inside the house, and the King followed them, shutting the door on all the people outside.

Then King Henry saw his daughter, crouching now in the middle of the room, her face hidden in her hands. Surprise and wonder banished his rage and he could not do more than gasp her name, while the Prince, who knelt supporting Stephen, cried to her, asking how she came there; but she answered nothing. She took her hands from her face and looked at Stephen; and when she saw that he was hurt and bleeding, she fell to sobbing and hid her face again. And she did not know whether she would have him live or die; for if he lived he could not be hers, and if he died her heart would ache sorely for him. Then Stephen, being supported by the arms of Prince Rudolf, made shift to speak, and he told the King how, at his persuasion, the Princess had brought the Countess thither; how he himself had contrived the presence of the Prince at the same time, how again the Princess had been prevailed upon to aid the lovers; how they assumed the disguise of apprentices; and how, hearing the arrival of the Guard, they had escaped out into the street; and lastly, how that the Prince and the Countess had got out of the city. But he said nothing of the fire at the fruit-seller's, nor of how he himself had bribed the fruit-seller to set the hay on fire, speaking to him from the back windows of the house, and flinging a purse of gold pieces across to him; nor did this ever become known to the King. And when Stephen had said his say, he fell back very faint in the arms of the Prince; and the Prince tore a scarf from his waist, and tried to staunch the blood from Stephen's wound. But the old King, who was a hard man, smiled grimly.

"Indeed he has tricked us finely, this smith, and he is a clever fellow," said he; "but unless he would rather hang than bleed to death, let his wound be, Rudolf. For by heaven, if you cure him, I will hang him."

"Do not be afraid, sire," said Stephen; "the Prince cannot cure me. You still strike straight, though you are hard on seventy."

"Straight enough for a rascal like you," said the King well pleased; and he added, "Hold the fellow easily, Rudolf, I would not have him suffer." And this was, they say, the only time in all his life that Henry the Lion shewed a sign of pity to any man.

But Stephen was now very faint, and he cast his eyes towards the Princess; and Rudolf followed his eyes. Now Rudolf had an affection for Stephen, and he loved his sister, and was a man of soft heart; so he cried gently to Osra, "Come, sister, and help me with him." And she rose, and came and sat down by the wall, and gathered Stephen's head into her lap; and there he lay, looking up at her, with a smile on his lips. But still he bled, and his blood stained the white cloak that she wore over her robe; and her tears dropped on his face. But Rudolf took his father by the arm, and led him a little way off, saying:

"What matter, sire? The girl is young, and the man is dying. Let them be."

The old King, grumbling, let himself be led away; and perhaps even he was moved, for he forgot Prince Henry and the Countess, and did not think of sending men in pursuit of them, for which reason they obtained a fair and long start in their flight.

Then Stephen, looking up at Osra, said:

"Do not weep, madame. They will escape now, and they will be happy."

"I was not weeping for them," said the Princess.

Stephen was silent for a little, and then he said:

"In very truth it was no trick, madame; it was even as I said, from the first day that you rode along the street here; it was always the same in my heart, and would always have been, however long I had lived."

"I do not doubt it, Stephen; and it is not for doubt of it that I weep," said she.

Then, after a little while, he said:

"Do you weep, madame, because I am dying?"

"Yes, I weep for that."

"Would you have me live, madame?" he asked.

"No, I would not – no – but I do not know," she said.

Then Stephen the smith smiled, and his smile was happy.

"Yet," said he, "it would make small difference to the Princess Osra whether Stephen the smith lived or died."

At this, although he lay there a dying man, a sudden flush of red spread all over her cheeks, and she turned her eyes away from his, and would not meet his glance; she made him no answer, and he said again:

"What can it concern the Princess whether I live or die?"

Still the blush burnt on her cheek, and still she had no answer to give to Stephen, as he lay dying with his head on her lap. And a bright gleam came into his eyes, and he tried to move a hand towards her hand; and she, seeing the effort, put out her hand and held his; and he whispered very low, for he could hardly speak:

"You have not yet refused me three times, madame."

At that her eyes came back to his, and their eyes dwelt long on one another. And for a moment it seemed to them that all things became possible, life and joy and love. Yet since all could not be, they were content that none should be.

Then the Princess bent low over his head, and she whispered to him:

"No, I have not refused you thrice, Stephen."

His lips just moved once again, and, being very near him, she heard:

"And you will not?" he said.

"No," said she, and she kissed his lips, and he smiled and turned on his side; and he nestled his head, as it were cosily, on her lap, and he said no more.

Thus died Stephen the silversmith of Strelsau, happy in his death because Osra the Princess had not refused him thrice. And she laid him gently on the ground, and rose, and went across to where the King sat with Rudolf.

"Sire, he is dead," said she.

"It is well," said the King. And he bade Rudolf go and cause all the people to leave the streets, and return to their houses; and when all the streets were cleared, the Princess veiled herself, and her brother mounted her on his horse, and thus she rode back to the palace; and none knew that she had been in the house of Stephen the silversmith.

And after many months Prince Henry, who had made good his escape and married the lady whom he loved, was reconciled to his father and returned to the city of Strelsau. And when he heard how Stephen had died, he raised a stately monument over him, and had carved on it his name, and the day and year in which he had died; and underneath he caused to be engraved the words, "From a Friend to a Friend." But when this monument had stood three days in its place, there came thither a lady closely veiled; she prayed on her knees by the monument for a long while, and then rose and stood regarding it; and her eyes rested on the last words that Prince Henry had written on the stone. Then she came nearer, and kissed the words, and, when she had kissed them, she whispered softly, "From a Lover to a Lover"; and, having whispered this, she turned away and went back to the palace,

and came no more to the tomb, for fear that the people should remark her coming. Yet often in the days that followed she would open the window of her bed-chamber by night, and she would whisper to the silent trusty darkness, that holds secrets and comforts sore hearts:

"Not thrice, Stephen, not thrice!"

Therefore it may be that there had been a sweet madness in her heart, and that Stephen the silversmith had done a great thing, a thing that would appear impossible, before he died. And, as Prince Rudolf said, what matter? For the girl was young, and the dream was sweet, and the man was dead, and in death at last are all men equal.

CHAPTER II.

The Wager of the Marquis de Mérosailles

In the year 1734, as spring began, there arrived at Strelsau a French nobleman of high rank and great possessions, endowed also with many accomplishments. He came to visit Prince Rudolf, whose acquaintance he had made while the Prince was at Paris in the course of his travels. King Henry received M. de Mérosailles – for such was his name – most graciously, and sent a guard of honour to conduct him to the Castle of Zenda, where the Prince was then staying in company with his sister Osra. There the Marquis, on his arrival, was greeted with much joy by Prince Rudolf, who found his sojourn in the country somewhat irksome and was glad of the society of a friend with whom he could talk, and sport, and play at cards. All these things he did with M. de Mérosailles, and a great friendship arose between the young men, so that they spoke very freely to one another at all times, and most of all when they had drunk their wine and sat together in the evening in Prince Rudolf's chamber that looked across the moat towards the gardens; for the new *château* that now stands on the site of these gardens was not then built. And one night M. de Mérosailles made bold to ask the Prince how it fell out that his sister the Princess, a lady of such great beauty, seemed sad, and shewed no pleasure in the society of any gentleman, but treated all alike with coldness and disdain. Prince Rudolf, laughing, answered that girls were strange creatures, and that he had ceased to trouble his head about them (of his heart he said nothing) and he finished by exclaiming: "On my honour, I doubt if she so much as knows you are here, for she has not looked at you once since your arrival!" And he smiled maliciously, for he knew that the Marquis was not accustomed to be neglected by ladies, and would take it ill that even a Princess should be unconscious of his presence. In this he calculated rightly, for M. de Mérosailles was greatly vexed, and, twisting his glass in his fingers, he said:

"If she were not a Princess, and your sister, sir, I would engage to make her look at me."

"I am not hurt by her looking at you," rejoined the Prince: for that evening he was very merry. "A look is no great thing."

The Marquis, being no less merry, and knowing that Rudolf had not the regard for his dignity that a Prince should have, threw out carelessly:

"A kiss is more, sir."

"It is a great deal more," laughed the Prince, tugging his moustache.

"Are you ready for a wager, sir?" asked M. de Mérosailles, leaning across the table towards him.

"I'll lay you a thousand crowns to a hundred that you do not gain a kiss, using what means you will, save force."

"I'll take that wager, sir," cried the Marquis. "But it shall be three, not one."

"Have a care," said the Prince. "Don't go too near the flame, my lord! There are some wings in Strelsau singed at that candle."

"Indeed the light is very bright," assented the Marquis courteously. "That risk I must run, though, if I am to win my wager. It is to be three then, and by what means I will, save force?"

"Even so," said Rudolf, and he laughed again. For he thought the wager harmless, since by no device could M. de Mérosailles win so much as one kiss from the Princess Osra, and the wager stood at three. But he did not think how he wronged his sister by using her name lightly, being in all such matters a man of careless mind.

But the Marquis, having made his wager, set himself steadily to win it. Therefore he brought forth the choicest clothes from his wardrobe, and ornaments, and perfumes; and he laid fine presents at the Princess's feet; and he waylaid her wherever she went, and was profuse of glances, sighs, and hints; and he wrote sonnets, as fine gentlemen used in those days, and lyrics and pastorals, wherein she figured under charming names. These he bribed the Princess's waiting-women to leave in their

mistress's chamber. Moreover he looked now sorrowful, now passionate, and he ate nothing at dinner, but drank his wine in wild gulps, as though he sought to banish sadness. So that, in a word, there was no device in Cupid's armoury that the Marquis de Mérosailles did not practise in the endeavour to win a look from the Princess Osra. But no look came, and he got nothing from her but cold civility. Yet she had looked at him when he looked not – for Princesses are much like other maidens – and thought him a very pretty gentleman, and was highly amused by his extravagance. Yet she did not believe it to witness any true devotion to her, but thought it mere gallantry.

Then, one day, M. de Mérosailles, having tried all else that he could think of, took to his bed. He sent for a physician, and paid him a high fee to find the seeds of a rapid and fatal disease in him: and he made his body-servant whiten his face and darken his room; and he groaned very pitifully, saying that he was sick, and that he was glad of it; for death would be better far than the continued disdain of the Princess Osra. And all this, being told by the Marquis's servants to the Princess's waiting-women, reached Osra's ears, and caused her much perturbation. For she now perceived that the passion of the Marquis was real and deep, and she became very sorry for him: the longer the face of the rascally physician grew the more sad the Princess became: she walked up and down, bewailing the terrible effects of her beauty, wishing that she were not so fair, and mourning very tenderly for the sad plight of the unhappy Marquis.

Through all Prince Rudolf looked on, but was bound by his wager not to undeceive her; moreover he found much entertainment in the matter, and swore that it was worth three times a thousand crowns.

At last the Marquis sent by the mouth of his physician a very humble and pitiful message to the Princess, in which he spoke of himself as near to death, hinted at the cruel cause of his condition, and prayed her of compassion to visit him in his chamber, and speak a word of comfort, or at least let him look on her face: for the brightness of her eyes, he said, might cure even what it had caused.

Deceived by this appeal, Princess Osra agreed to go; moved by some strange impulse, she put on her choicest array, dressed her hair most splendidly, and came into the chamber looking like a goddess. There lay the Marquis, white as a ghost and languid on his pillows; and they were left, as they thought, alone. Then Osra sat down and began to talk very gently and kindly to him, glancing only at the madness which brought him to his sad state, and imploring him to summon his resolution, and conquer his sickness for his friends' sake at home in France, and for the sake of her brother, who loved him.

"There is nobody who loves me," said the Marquis petulantly; and when Osra cried out at this, he went on, "For the love of those whom I do not love is nothing to me, and the only soul alive I love – ." There he stopped, but his eyes, fixed on Osra's face, ended the sentence for him. And she blushed, and looked away. Then thinking the moment was come, he burst suddenly into a flood of protestations and self-reproach, cursing himself for a fool and a presumptuous madman, pitifully craving her pardon, and declaring that he did not deserve her kindness, and yet that he could not live without it, and that anyhow he would be dead soon, and thus cease to trouble her. But she, being thus passionately assailed, showed such sweet tenderness and compunction and pity, that M. de Mérosailles came very near to forgetting that he was playing a comedy, and threw himself into his part with eagerness, redoubling his vehemence, and feeling now full half of what he said. For the Princess was to his eyes far more beautiful in her softer mood. Yet he remembered his wager, and, at last, when she was nearly in tears and ready, as it seemed, to do anything to give him comfort, he cried desperately:

"Ah, leave, leave me! Leave me to die alone! Yet, for pity's sake, before you go, and before I die, give me your forgiveness, and let your lips touch my forehead in token of it. Then I shall die in peace."

At that the Princess blushed still more, and her eyes were wet, and shone, for she was deeply touched at his misery and at the sad prospect of the death for love of so gallant a gentleman. Thus she could scarcely speak for emotion; and the Marquis seeing her emotion was himself deeply affected; and she rose from her chair, and bent over him, and whispered comfort to him. Then she leant down,

and very lightly touched his forehead with her lips; he felt her eyelashes, which were wet with tears, brush the skin of his forehead; and then she sobbed and covered her face with her hands. Indeed his state seemed to her most pitiful.

Thus M. de Mérosailles had won one of his three kisses; yet, strange to tell, there was no triumph in him, but now he perceived the baseness of his device; and the sweet kindness of the Princess, working together with the great beauty of her softened manner, so affected him that he thought no more of his wager and could not endure to carry on his deception; nothing would serve his turn but to confess to the Princess what he had done, humbling himself in the dust before her, and entreating her to pardon him and let him find forgiveness.

Impelled by these feelings, after he had lain still a few moments listening to the Princess weeping, he leapt suddenly out of bed, showing himself fully dressed under the bed-gown which he now eagerly tore off; and he rubbed all the white he could from his cheeks, and then he fell on his knees before the Princess, crying to her that he had played the meanest trick on her, and that he was a scoundrel, and no gentleman, and that unless she forgave him he should in very truth die; nay, that he would not consent to live unless he could win from her pardon for his deceit. And in all this he was now absolutely in earnest, wondering only how he had not been as passionately enamoured of her from the first as he had feigned himself to be. For a man in love can never conceive himself out of it, nor he that is out of it in it; for if he can, he is half way to the one or the other, however little he may know it.

At first the Princess sat as though she were turned to stone: but when he finished his confession, and she understood the trick that had been played on her, and how not only her kiss, but also her tears, had been won from her by fraud, and when she thought, as she did, that the Marquis was playing another trick on her, and that there was no more truth or honesty in his present protestations than in those which went before, she fell into great shame and into a great rage; her eyes flashed like the eyes of her father himself, as she rose to her feet and looked down on M. de Mérosailles as he knelt imploring her. Now her face turned pale from red, and she set her lips, and she drew her gown close round her, lest his touch should defile it (so the unhappy gentleman understood her gesture) and she picked her steps daintily round him, for fear she should happen to come in contact with so foul a thing. Thus she walked to the door, and, having reached it, she turned and said to him:

"Your death may blot out the insult – nothing less." And with her head held high, and her whole air full of scorn, she swept out of the room, leaving the Marquis on his knees. He started up to follow her, but dared not; he flung himself on the bed in a paroxysm of shame and vexation, and now of love also, and he cried out loud:

"Then my death shall blot it out, since nothing else will serve!"

He was in a desperate mood. For a long time he lay there, and then, having risen, dressed himself in a sombre suit of black, and buckled his sword by his side, and, having put on his riding boots and summoned his servant, bade him saddle his horse. "For," said he to himself, "I will ride into the forest, and there kill myself; and perhaps when I am dead the Princess will forgive, and will believe in my love, and grieve a little for me."

Now as he went from his chamber to cross the moat by the drawbridge, he encountered Prince Rudolf returning from hawking. They met full in the centre of the bridge, and the Prince, seeing M. de Mérosailles dressed all in black from the feather in his hat to his boots, called out mockingly:

"Who is to be buried to-day, my lord, and whither do you ride to the funeral? It cannot be yourself, for I see that you are marvellously recovered of your sickness."

"But it is myself," answered the Marquis, coming near, and speaking low that the servants and the falconers might not overhear. "I ride, sir, to my own funeral."

"The jest is still afoot, then?" asked the Prince. "Yet I do not see my sister at the window to watch you go, and I warrant you have made no way with your wager yet."

"A thousand curses on my wager!" cried the Marquis. "Yes, I have made way with the accursed thing, and that is why I now go to my death."

"What, has she kissed you?" cried the Prince, with a merry astonished laugh.

"Yes, sir, she has kissed me once, and therefore I go to die."

"I have heard of many a better reason, then," answered the Prince.

By now the Prince had dismounted, and he stood by M. de Mérosailles in the middle of the bridge, and heard from him how the trick had prospered. At this he was much tickled, and, alas, he was even more diverted when the penitence of the Marquis was revealed to him, and was most of all moved to merriment when it appeared that the Marquis, having gone too near the candle, had been caught by its flame, and was so terribly singed and scorched that he could not bear to live. And while they talked on the bridge the Princess looked out on them from a lofty narrow window, but neither of them saw her. But when the Prince had done laughing, he put his arm through his friend's and bade him not be a fool, but come in and toast the Princess's kiss in a draught of wine. "For," he said, "though you will never get the other two, yet it is a brave exploit to have got one."

But the Marquis shook his head, and his air was so resolute, and so full of sorrow, that not only was Rudolf alarmed for his reason, but Princess Osra also, at the window, wondered what ailed him and why he wore such a long face; and now she noticed that he was dressed all in black, and that his horse waited for him across the bridge.

"Not," said she, "that I care what becomes of the impudent rogue!" Yet she did not leave the window, but watched very intently to see what M. de Mérosailles would do.

For a long while he talked with Rudolf on the bridge, Rudolf seeming more serious than he was wont to be; and at last the Marquis bent to kiss the Prince's hand, and the Prince raised him and kissed him on either cheek; then the Marquis went and mounted his horse, and rode off, slowly and unattended, into the glades of the forest of Zenda; but the Prince, with a shrug of the shoulders and a frown on his brow, entered under the portcullis, and disappeared from his sister's view.

Upon this the Princess, assuming an air of great carelessness, walked down from the room where she was, and found her brother, sitting still in his boots and drinking wine; and she said:

"M. de Mérosailles has taken his leave then?"

"Even so, madame," rejoined Rudolf.

Then she broke into a fierce attack on the Marquis, and on her brother also; for a man, said she, is known by his friends, and what a man Rudolf must be to have a friend like the Marquis de Mérosailles!

"Most brothers," she said in fiery temper, "would make him answer for what he has done with his life. But you laugh, nay, I daresay you had a hand in it."

As to this last charge the Prince had the discretion to say nothing; he chose rather to answer the first part of what she said, and shrugging his shoulders again rejoined:

"The fool saves me the trouble, for he has gone off to kill himself."

"To kill himself?" she said, half incredulous, but also half believing, because of the Marquis's gloomy looks and black clothes.

"To kill himself," repeated Rudolf. "For in the first place you are angry, so he cannot live; in the second he has behaved like a rogue, so he cannot live; and in the third place you are so lovely, sister, that he cannot live; and in the first, second, and third places he is a fool, so he cannot live." And the Prince finished his flagon of wine with every sign of ill-humour in his manner.

"He is well dead," she cried.

"Oh, as you please," said he. "He is not the first brave man who has died on your account." And he rose and strode out of the room very surlily; for he had a great friendship for M. de Mérosailles, and had no patience with men who let love make dead bones of them.

The Princess Osra, being left alone, sat for a little time in deep thought. There rose before her mind the picture of M. de Mérosailles riding mournfully through the gloom of the forest to his death.

And although his conduct had been all and more than all that she had called it, yet it seemed hard that he should die for it. Moreover, if he now in truth felt what he had before feigned, the present truth was an atonement for the past treachery; and she said to herself that she could not sleep quietly that night if the Marquis killed himself in the forest. Presently she wandered slowly up to her chamber, and looked in the mirror, and murmured low, "Poor fellow!" and then with sudden speed she attired herself for riding, and commanded her horse to be saddled, and darted down the stairs and across the bridge, and mounted, and, forbidding any one to accompany her, rode away into the forest, following the marks of the hoofs of M. de Mérosailles's horse. It was then late afternoon, and the slanting rays of the sun, striking through the tree-trunks, reddened her face as she rode along, spurring her horse, and following hard on the track of the forlorn gentleman. But what she intended to do if she came up with him she did not think.

When she had ridden an hour or more, she saw his horse tethered to a trunk; and there was a ring of trees and bushes near, encircling an open grassy spot. Herself dismounting, and fastening her horse by the Marquis's horse, she stole up, and saw M. de Mérosailles sitting on the ground, his drawn sword lying beside him; and his back was towards her. She held her breath and waited a few moments. Then he took up the sword and felt the point and also the edge of it, and sighed deeply; and the Princess thought that this sorrowful mood became him better than any she had seen him in before. Then he rose to his feet, and took his sword by the blade beneath the hilt, and turned the point of it towards his heart. But Osra, fearing that the deed would be done immediately, called out eagerly, "My lord, my lord!" and M. de Mérosailles turned round with a great start. When he saw her, he stood in astonishment, his hand still holding the blade of the sword. And, standing just on the other side of the trees, she said:

"Is your offence against me to be cured by adding an offence against Heaven and the Church?"

And she looked on him with great severity, yet her cheek was flushed, and after a while she did not meet his glance.

"How came you here, madame?" he asked in wonder.

"I heard," she said, "that you meditated this great sin, and I rode after you to forbid it."

"Can you forbid what you cause?" he asked.

"I am not the cause of it," she said, "but your own trickery."

"It is true. I am not worthy to live," cried the Marquis, smiting the hilt of his sword on the ground. "I pray you, madame, leave me alone to die. For I cannot tear myself from the world so long as I see your face." And as he spoke he knelt on one knee, as though he were doing homage to her.

The Princess caught at the bough of the tree under which she stood, and pulled the bough down, so that its leaves half hid her face, and the Marquis saw little more than her eyes from among the foliage. Thus being better able to speak to him, she said softly:

"And dare you die, unforgiven?"

"I had prayed for forgiveness before you found me, madame," said he.

"Of heaven, my lord?"

"Of heaven, madame. For of heaven I dare to ask it."

The bough swayed up and down; now Osra's gleaming hair, and now her cheek, and always her eyes were seen through the leaves. And presently the Marquis heard a voice asking:

"Does heaven forgive unasked?"

"Indeed, no," he said, wondering.

"And," she said, "are we poor mortals kinder than heaven?"

The Marquis rose, and took a step or two towards where the bough swayed up and down, and then knelt again.

"A great sinner," said he, "cannot believe himself forgiven."

"Then he wrongs the power of which he seeks forgiveness; for forgiveness is divine."

"Then I will ask it, and, if I obtain it, I shall die happy."

Again the bough swayed: and Osra said:

"Nay, if you will die, you may die unforgiven."

M. de Mérosailles hearing these words sprang to his feet, and came towards the bough, until he was so close that he touched the green leaves; through them the eyes of Osra gleamed: the sun's rays struck on her eyes, and they danced in the sun; and her cheeks were reddened by the same or some other cause. And the evening was very still, and there were no sounds in the forest.

"I cannot believe that you forgive. The crime is so great," said he.

"It was great: yet I forgive."

"I cannot believe it," said he again, and he looked at the point of his sword, and then he looked through the leaves at the Princess.

"I cannot do more than say that if you will live, I will forgive. And we will forget."

"By heaven, no," he whispered. "If I must forget to be forgiven, then I will remember and be unforgiven."

The faintest laugh reached him from among the foliage.

"Then I will forget, and you shall be forgiven," said she.

The Marquis put up his hand, and held a leaf aside, and he said again:

"I cannot believe myself forgiven. Is there no token of forgiveness?"

"Pray, my lord, do not put the leaves aside."

"I still must die, unless I have sure warrant of forgiveness."

"Ah, you try to make me think that!"

"By heaven, it is true!" And again he pointed his sword at his heart, and he swore on his honour that unless she gave him a token he would still kill himself.

"Oh," said the Princess with great petulance, "I wish I had not come!"

"Then I should have been dead by now – dead, unforgiven."

"But you will still die!"

"Yes, I must still die, unless – "

"Sheathe your sword, my lord. The sun strikes it, and it dazzles my eyes."

"That cannot be: for your eyes are brighter than sun and sword together."

"Then I must shade them with the leaves."

"Yes, shade them with the leaves," he whispered. "Madame, is there no token of forgiveness?"

In the silence that followed his eyes spoke, at last she said:

"Why did you swear on your honour?"

"Because it is an oath that I cannot break."

"Indeed I wish that I had not come," sighed Princess Osra.

Again came silence. The bough was pressed down for an instant; then it swayed swiftly up again; and its leaves brushed the cheek of M. de Mérosailles. And he laughed loudly and joyfully.

"Something touched my cheek," said he.

"It must have been a leaf," said Princess Osra.

"Ah, a leaf!"

"I think so," said Princess Osra.

"Then it was a leaf of the Tree of Life," said M. de Mérosailles.

"I wish some one would set me on my horse," said Osra.

"That you may ride back to the castle – alone?"

"Yes, unless you would relieve my brother's anxiety."

"It would be courteous to do that much," said the Marquis.

So they mounted, and rode back through the forest.

In an hour the Princess had come, and in the space of something over two hours they returned; yet during all this time they spoke hardly a word: and although the sun was now set, yet the glow

remained on the face and in the eyes of Princess Osra; while M. de Mérosailles, being forgiven, rode with a smile on his lips.

But when they came to the castle, Prince Rudolf ran out to meet them, and he cried almost before he reached them:

"Hasten, hasten! There is not a moment to lose, if the Marquis values life or liberty!" And when he came to them he told them that a waiting-woman had been false to M. de Mérosailles and, after taking his money, had hid herself in his chamber, and seen the first kiss that the Princess gave him, and, having made some pretext to gain a holiday, had gone to the King, who was hunting near, and betrayed the whole matter to him.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

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

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