

In the Fire of the Forge — Volume 03 eBook

In the Fire of the Forge — Volume 03 by Georg Ebers

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CHAPTER X.

One person only besides Sir Seitz Siebenburg had not been deceived—the young knight Boemund Altrosen, whose love for Cordula was genuine, and who, by its unerring instinct, felt that she had invented her tale and for a purpose which did honour to her kindness of heart. So his calm black eyes rested upon the woman he loved with proud delight, while Seitz Siebenburg twisted his mustache fiercely. Not a look or movement of either of the two girls had escaped his notice, and Cordula's bold interference in behalf of the reckless Swiss knight, who now seemed to have ensnared his future sister-in-law also, increased the envy and jealousy which tortured him until he was forced to exert the utmost self-restraint in order not to tell the countess to her face that he, at least, was far from being deceived by such a fable. Yet he succeeded in controlling himself. But as he forced his lips to silence he gazed with the most open scorn at the bales of merchandise heaped around him. He would show the others that, though the husband of a merchant's daughter, he retained the prejudices of his knightly rank.

But no one heeded the disagreeable fellow, who had no intimate friends in the group. Most of the company were pressing round Heinz Schorlin with jests and questions, but bluff Count von Montfort warmly clasped Els's hand, while he apologised for the bold jest of his young daughter who, in spite of her recklessness, meant kindly.

Nothing could have been more unwelcome to a girl in so unpleasant a situation than this delay. She longed most ardently to get away but, ere she succeeded in escaping from the friendly old noble, two gentlemen hastily entered the brightly lighted entry, at sight of whom her heart seemed to stop beating.

The old count, who noticed her blanched face, released her, asking sympathisingly what troubled her, but Els did not hear him.

When she felt him loose her hand she would fain have fled up the stairs to her mother and sister, to avoid the discussions which must now follow. But she knew into what violent outbursts of sudden anger her usually prudent father could be hurried if there was no one at hand to warn him.

There he stood in the doorway, his stern, gloomy expression forming a strange contrast to the merry party who had entered in such a jovial mood.

His companion, Herr Casper Eysvogel, had already noticed his future daughter-in-law, recognised her by an amazed shrug of the shoulders which was anything but a friendly greeting, and now eyed the excited revellers with a look as grave and repellent as that of the owner of the house. Herr Casper's unusual height permitted him to gaze over the heads of the party though, with the exception of Count von Montfort, they were all tall,



nay, remarkably tall men, and the delicacy of his clear-cut, pallid, beardless face had never seemed to Els handsomer or more sinister. True, he was the father of her Wolff, but the son resembled this cold-hearted man only in his unusual stature, and a chill ran through her veins as she felt the stately old merchant's blue eyes, still keen and glittering, rest upon her.

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On the day of her betrothal she had rushed into his arms with a warm and grateful heart, and he had kissed her, as custom dictated; but it was done in a strange way—his thin, well-cut lips had barely brushed her brow. Then he stepped back and turned to his wife with the low command, “It is your turn now, Rosalinde.” Her future mother-in-law rose quickly, and doubtless intended to embrace her affectionately, but a loud cough from her own mother seemed to check her, for ere she opened her arms to Els she turned to her and excused her act by the words, “He wishes it.” Yet Els was finally clasped in Frau Rosalinde’s arms and kissed more warmly than—from what had previously occurred—she had expected.

Wolff’s grandmother, old Countess Rotterbach, who rarely left the huge gilt armchair in her daughter’s sitting-room, had watched the whole scene with a scornful smile; then, thrusting her prominent chin still farther forward, she said to her daughter, loud enough for Els to hear, “This into the bargain?”

All these things returned to the young girl’s memory as she gazed at the cold, statuesque face of her lover’s father. It seemed as if he held his tall, noble figure more haughtily erect than usual, and that his plain dark garments were of richer material and more faultless cut than ever; nay, she even fancied that, like the lion, which crouches and strains every muscle ere it springs upon its victim, he was summoning all his pride and sternness to crush her.

Els was innocent; nay, the motive which had brought her here to defend her sister could not fail to be approved by every well-disposed person, and certainly not last by her father, and it would have suited her truthful nature to contradict openly Countess Cordula’s friendly falsehood had not her dread of fatally exposing Eva imposed silence.

How her father’s cheeks glowed already! With increasing anxiety, she attributed it to the indignation which overpowered him, yet he was only heated by the haste with which, accompanied by his future son-in-law’s father, he had rushed here from the Frauenthor as fast as his feet would carry him. Casper Eysvogel had also attended the Vorchtel entertainment and accompanied Ernst Ortlieb into the street to discuss some business matters.

He intended to persuade him to advance the capital for which he had just vainly asked Herr Vorchtel. He stood in most urgent need for the next few days of this great sum, of which his son and business partner must have no knowledge, and at first Wolff Eysvogel’s future father-in-law saw no reason to refuse. But Herr Ernst was a cautious man, and when his companion imposed the condition that his son should be kept in ignorance of the loan, he was puzzled. He wished to learn why the business partner should not know what must be recorded in the books of the house; but Casper Eysvogel needed this capital to silence the Jew Pfefferkorn, from whom he had secretly borrowed large sums to conceal the heavy losses sustained in Venice the year before at the gaming table.

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At first courteously, then with rising anger, he evaded the questions of the business man, and his manner of doing so, with the little contradictions in which the arrogant man, unaccustomed to falsehood, involved himself, showed Herr Ernst that all was not as it should be.

By the time they reached the Frauenthor, he had told Casper Eysvogel positively that he would not fulfil the request until Wolff was informed of the matter.

Then the sorely pressed man perceived that nothing but a frank confession could lead him to his goal. But what an advantage it would give his companion, what a humiliation it would impose upon himself! He could not force his lips to utter it, but resolved to venture a last essay by appealing to the father, instead of to the business man; and therefore, with the haughty, condescending manner natural to him, he asked Herr Ernst, as if it were his final word, whether he had considered that his refusal of a request, which twenty other men would deem it an honour to fulfil, might give their relations a form very undesirable both to his daughter and himself?

“No, I did not suppose that a necessity,” replied his companion firmly, and then added in an irritated tone: “But if you need the loan so much that you require for your son a father-in-law who will advance it to you more readily, why, then, Herr Casper—”

Here he paused abruptly. A flood of light streamed into the street from the doorway of the Ortlieb house. It must be a fire, and with the startled cry, “St. Florian aid us! my entry is burning!” he rushed forward with his companion to the endangered house so quickly that the torchbearers, who even in this bright night did good service in the narrow streets, whose lofty houses barred out the moonlight, could scarcely follow.

Thus Herr Ernst, far more anxious about his invalid, helpless wife than his imperilled wares, soon reached his own door. His companion crossed the threshold close behind him, sullen, deeply incensed, and determined to order his son to choose between his love and favour and the daughter of this unfriendly man, whom only a sudden accident had prevented from breaking the betrothal.

The sight of so many torches blazing here was an exasperating spectacle to Ernst Ortlieb, who with wise caution and love of order insisted that nothing but lanterns should be used to light his house, which contained inflammable wares of great value; but other things disturbed his composure, already wavering, to an even greater degree.

What was his Els doing at this hour among these gentlemen, all of whom were strangers?

Without heeding them or the countess, he was hastening towards her to obtain a solution of this enigma, but the young Burgrave Eitelfritz von Zollern, the Knight of

Altrosen, Cordula von Montfort, and others barred his way by greeting him and eagerly entreating him to pardon their intrusion at so late an hour.

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Having no alternative, he curtly assented, and was somewhat soothed as he saw old Count von Montfort, who was still standing beside Els, engaged in an animated conversation with her. His daughter's presence was probably due to that of the guests quartered in his home, especially Cordula, whom, since she disturbed the peace of his quiet household night after night, he regarded as the personification of restlessness and reckless freedom. He would have preferred to pass her unnoticed, but she had clung to his arm and was trying, with coaxing graciousness, to soften his indignation by gaily relating how she had come here and what had detained her and her companions. But Ernst Ortlieb, who would usually have been very susceptible to such an advance from a young and aristocratic lady, could not now succeed in smoothing his brow. In his excitement he was not even able to grasp the meaning of the story she related merrily, though with well-feigned contrition. While listening to her with one ear, he was straining the other to catch what Sir Seitz Siebenburg was saying to his father-in-law, Casper Eysvogel.

He gathered from Countess Cordula's account that she had succeeded in playing some bold prank in connection with Els and the Swiss knight Heinz Schorlin, and the words "the Mustache" was whispering to his father-in-law—the direction of his glance betrayed it—also referred to Els and the Swiss. But the less Herr Ernst heard of this conversation the more painfully it excited his already perturbed spirit.

Suddenly his pleasant features, which, on account of the lady at his side, he had hitherto forced to wear a gracious aspect, assumed an expression which filled the reckless countess with grave anxiety, and urged the terrified Els, who had not turned her eyes from him, to a hasty resolution. That was her father's look when on the point of an outbreak of fury, and at this hour, surrounded by these people, he must not allow himself to yield to rage; he must maintain a tolerable degree of composure.

Without heeding the young Burgrave Eitelfritz or Sir Boemund Altrosen, who were just approaching her, she forced her way nearer to her father. He still maintained his self-control, but already the veins on his brow had swollen and his short figure was rigidly erect. The cause of his excitement—she had noticed it—was some word uttered by Seitz Siebenburg. Her father was the only person who had understood it, but she was not mistaken in the conjecture that it referred to her and the Swiss knight, and she believed it to be base and spiteful.

In fact, after his father-in-law had told him that Ernst Ortlieb thought his house was on fire, "the Mustache," in reply to Herr Casper's enquiry how his son's betrothed bride happened to be there, answered scornfully: "Els? She did not hasten hither, like the old man, to put the fire out, but because one flame was not enough for her. Wolff must know it to-morrow. By day the slender little flame of honourable betrothed love flickers for him; by night it blazes more brightly for yonder Swiss scoundrel. And the young lady chooses for the scene of this toying with fire the easily ignited warehouse of her own father!"

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"I will secure mine against such risks," Casper Eysvogel answered; then, casting a contemptuous glance at Els and a wrathful one at the Swiss knight, he added with angry resolution: "It is not yet too late. So long as I am myself no one shall bring peril and disgrace upon my house and my son."

Then Herr Ernst had suddenly become aware of the suspicion with which his beautiful, brave, self-sacrificing child was regarded. Pale as death, he struggled for composure, and when his eyes met the imploring gaze of the basely defamed girl, he said to himself that he must maintain his self-control in order not to afford the frivolous revellers who surrounded him an entertaining spectacle.

Wolff was dear to him, but before he would have led his Els to the house where the miserable "Mustache" lived, and whose head was the coldhearted, gloomy man whose words had just struck him like a poisoned arrow, he, whom the Lord had bereft of his beloved, gallant son, would have been ready to deprive himself of his daughters also and take both to the convent. Eva longed to go, and Els might find there a new and beautiful happiness, like his sister, the Abbess Kunigunde. In the Eysvogel house, never!

During these hasty reflections Els extended her hand toward him, and the shining gold circlet which her lover had placed on her ring finger glittered in the torchlight. A thought darted through his brain with the speed of lightning, and without hesitation he drew the ring from the hand of his astonished daughter, whispering curtly, yet tenderly, in reply to her anxious cry, "What are you doing?"

"Trust me, child."

Then hastily approaching Casper Eysvogel, he beckoned to him to move a little aside from the group.

The other followed, believing that Herr Ernst would now promise the sum requested, yet firmly resolved, much as he needed it, to refuse.

Ernst Ortlieb, however, made no allusion to business matters, but with a swift gesture handed him the ring which united their two children. Then, after a rapid glance around had assured him that no one had followed them, he whispered to Herr Casper: "Tell your Wolff that he was, and would have remained, dear to us; but my daughter seems to me too good for his father's house and for kindred who fear that she will bring injury and shame upon them. Your wish is fulfilled. I hereby break the betrothal."

"And, in so doing, you only anticipate the step which I intended to take with more cogent motives," replied Casper Eysvogel with cool composure, shrugging his shoulders contemptuously. "The city will judge to-morrow which of the two parties was compelled

to sever a bond sacred in the sight of God and men. Unfortunately, it is impossible for me to give your daughter the good opinion you cherish of my son.”

Drawing his stately figure to its full height as he spoke, he gazed at his diminutive adversary with a look of haughty contempt and, without vouchsafing a word in farewell, turned his back upon him.

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Repressed fury was seething in Ernst Ortlieb's breast, and he would scarcely have succeeded in controlling himself longer but for the consolation afforded by the thought that every tie was sundered between his daughter and this cold, arrogant, unjust man and his haughty, evil disposed kindred. But when he again looked for the daughter on whom his hasty act had doubtless inflicted a severe blow, she was no longer visible.

Directly after he took the ring she had glided silently, unnoticed by most of the company, up the stairs to the second story. Cordula von Montfort told him this in a low tone.

Els had made no answer to her questions, but her imploring, tearful eyes pierced the young countess to the heart. Her quick ear had caught Siebenburg's malicious words and Casper Eysvogel's harsh response and, with deep pity, she felt how keenly the poor girl must suffer.

The happiness of a whole life destroyed without any fault of her own! From their first meeting Els had seemed to her incapable of any careless error, and she had merely tried, by her bold, interference, to protect her from the gossip of evil tongues. But Heinz Schorlin had just approached and whispered that, by his knightly honour, Els was a total stranger to him, and he only wished he might find his own dear sister at home as pure and free from any fault.

Poor child! But the countess knew who had frustrated her intervention in behalf of Els. It was Sir Seitz Siebenburg, "the Mustache," whose officious homage, at first amusing, had long since become repulsive. Her heart shrank from the thought that, merely from vain pleasure in having a throng of admirers, she had given this scoundrel more than one glance of encouragement. The riding whip fairly quivered in her right hand as, after informing Ernst Ortlieb where Els had gone, she warned the gentlemen that it was time to depart, and Seitz Siebenburg submissively, yet as familiarly as if he had a right to her special favour, held out his hand in farewell.

But Countess Cordula withdrew hers with visible dislike, saying in a tone of chilling repulse: "Remember me to your wife, Sir Knight. Tell her to take care that her twin sons resemble their father as little as possible."

"Then you want to have two ardent admirers the less?" asked Siebenburg gaily, supposing that the countess's remark was a jest.

But when she did not, as he expected, give these insulting words an interpretation favourable to him, but merely shrugged her shoulders scornfully, he added, glancing fiercely at the Swiss knight:

"True, you would doubtless be better pleased should the boys grow up to resemble the lucky Sir Heinz Schorlin, for whose sake you proved yourself the inventor of tales more marvellous, if not more credible, than the most skilful travelling minstrel."

“Perhaps so,” replied the countess with contemptuous brevity. “But I should be satisfied if the twins—and this agrees with my first wish should grow up honest men. If you should pay me the honour of a visit during the next few days, Sir Seitz, I could not receive it.”

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With these words she turned away, paying no further heed to him, though he called her name aloud, as if half frantic.

CHAPTER XI.

It was after midnight when the servants closed the heavy door of the Ortlieb mansion. The late guests had left it, mounted their horses, and ridden away together through the Frauenthor into the city.

The moon no longer lighted their way. A sultry wind had swept from the southwest masses of grey clouds, which constantly grew denser and darker. Heinz Schorlin did not notice it, but his follower, Biberli, called his attention to the rising storm and entreated him to choose the nearest road to the city. To remain outside the gate in such darkness would be uncomfortable, nay, perhaps not without peril, but the knight merely flung him the peevish answer, "So much the better," and, to Biberli's surprise, turned into St. Klarengasse, which brought him by no means nearer to his distant lodgings in the Bindergasse.

It was unfortunate to be warmly devoted to a master who had no fear, whom he was obliged to serve as a messenger of love, and who now probably scarcely knew himself whither this love would lead him.

But true and steadfast Biberli would really have followed Sir Heinz, not only in a dangerous nocturnal ramble, but through all the terrors of hell. So he only glanced down at his long, lean legs, which would be exposed here to the bites of the dogs, with whom he stood on especially bad terms, raised his long robe higher, as the paths over which they must pass were of doubtful cleanliness, and deemed it a good omen when his foot struck against a stout stick, which his patron saint had perhaps thrown in his way as a weapon. Its possession was somewhat soothing, it is true, yet he did not regain the pleasant consciousness of peace in which his soul had rejoiced a few short hours before.

He knew what to expect from the irritable mood into which recent events appeared to have thrown his master. Heinz usually soon forgot any such trivial disappointment, but the difficulty threatening himself and Katterle was far worse—nay, might even assume terrible proportions.

These alarming thoughts made him sigh so deeply that Heinz turned towards him.

He would gladly have relieved his own troubled breast in the same way. Never before had the soul of this light-hearted child of good fortune served as the arena for so fierce a struggle of contending emotions.



He loved Eva, and the image of her white, supernaturally beautiful figure, flooded by the moonlight, still stood before him as distinctly as when, after her disappearance, he had resolved to plead his suit for her to her sister; but the usually reckless fellow asked himself, shuddering, what would have happened had he obeyed Eva's summons and been found with her, as he had just been surprised with her sister. She was not wholly free from guilt, for her note

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had really contained an invitation to a meeting; yet she escaped. But his needless impetuosity and her sudden appearance before the house had placed her modest, charming sister, the betrothed bride of the gallant fellow who had fought with him in the Marchfield, in danger of being misunderstood and despised. If the finger of scorn were pointed at her, if a stain rested on her fair fame, the austere Wolff Eysvogel would hardly desire to make her his wife, and then this also would be his fault.

His kind, honest heart suffered keenly under these self-accusations, the first which he had ever heeded.

Hitherto the volatile young fellow, who had often gaily risked his life in battle and his last penny at the gaming table, had never thought of seriously examining his own soul, battling by his own strength of will against some secret longing and shunning its cause. On the contrary, from childhood he had accustomed himself to rely on the protection and aid of the Virgin and the saints; and when they passed the image with the ever-burning lamp, where Katterle had just sought and found consolation, he implored it not to let his bold intrusion into the home of the maiden he loved bring evil upon her and her sister. He also vowed to the convent and its saint—which, come what might, should also be his—a rich gift whenever the Emperor or the gaming table again filled his purse.

The thought of being burdened his whole life long with the reproach of having made two such charming, innocent creatures miserable seemed unendurable. He would gladly have given gold and blood to remove it.

It was too late that day, but he resolved to go to the confessional on the morrow, for absolution had always relieved and lightened his heart. But how trivial his errors had been! True, the wrong he had now committed was not a mortal sin, and would hardly impose a severe penance upon him, yet it burdened him like the most infamous crime. He did not understand himself, and often wondered why he, reckless Heinz, thus made a mountain out of a molehill. Yet when, after this reflection, he uttered a sigh of relief, it seemed as if a voice within commanded him not to think lightly of what had passed, for on that evening he had ceased to bestow pleasure on every one, and instead of, as usual, being helpful and agreeable, he had plunged others who had done him no wrong — nay, perhaps a whole household, whose daughter had given him the first love of her young heart—into misery and disgrace. Had he considered the consequences of his act, he would still be merry Heinz. Then he remembered how, when a boy, playing with other lads high up among the mountains just as it was beginning to thaw, he had hurled the work they had finished with so much toil, a snow man, down the slope, rejoicing with his playfellows over its swift descent towards the valley, until they noticed with what frightful speed its bulk increased as it sped over its snowy road, till at last, like a terrible avalanche, it swept away a herdsman's hut—fortunately an empty one. Now, also, his

heedlessness had set in motion a mass which constantly rolled onward, and how terrible might be the harm it would do!

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If Hartmann, the Emperor's son, were only there! He confided everything to him, for he was sure of his silence. Both his duty as a knight and his conscience forbade him to relate his experiences and ask counsel from any one else.

He was still absorbed in these gloomy thoughts when, just before reaching the Walch, he heard Biberli's deep sigh. Here, behind and beside the frames of the cloth weavers, stood the tents before which the followers and soldiers of the princes and dignitaries who had come to the Reichstag were still sitting around the camp fire, carousing and laughing.

Any interruption was welcome to him, and to Biberli it seemed like a deliverance to be permitted to use his poor endangered tongue, for his master had asked what grief oppressed him.

"If you desired to know what trouble did not burden my soul I could find a speedier answer," replied Biberli piteously. "Oh, this night, my lord! What has it not brought upon us and others! Look at the black clouds rising in the south. They are like the dark days impending over us poor mortals."

Then he confided to Heinz his fears for himself and Katterle. The knight's assurance that he would intercede for him and, if necessary, even appeal to the Emperor's favour, somewhat cheered his servitor's drooping spirits, it is true, but by no means restored his composure, and his tone was lugubrious enough as he went on:

"And the poor innocent girl in the Ortlieb house! Your little lady, my lord, broke the bread she must now eat herself, but the other, the older E."

"I know," interrupted the knight sorrowfully. "But if the gracious Virgin aids us, they will continue to believe in the wager Cordula von Montfort——"

"She! she!" Biberli exclaimed, enthusiastically waving his stick aloft. "The Lord created her in a good hour. Such a heart! Such friendly kindness! And to think that she interposed so graciously for you—you, Sir Heinz, to whom she showed the favour of combing your locks, as if you were already her promised husband, and who afterwards, for another's sake, left her at the ball as if she wore a fern cap and had become invisible. I saw the whole from the musician's gallery. True, the somnambulist is marvellously beautiful."

But the knight interrupted him by exclaiming so vehemently: "Silence!" that he paused.

Both walked on without speaking for some distance ere Heinz began again:

"Even though I live to grow old and grey, never shall I behold aught more beautiful than the vision of that white-robed girlish figure on the stairs."

True and steadfast Biberli sighed faintly. Love for Eva Ortlieb held his master as if in a vise; but a Schorlin seemed to him far too good a match for a Nuremberg maiden who had grown up among sacks of pepper and chests of goods and, moreover, was a somnambulist. He looked higher for his Heinz, and had already found the right match for him. So, turning to him again, he said earnestly:

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“Drive the bewitching vision from your mind, Sir Heinz. You don’t know—but I could tell you some tales about women who walk in their sleep by moonlight.”

“Well?” asked Heinz eagerly.

“As a maiden,” Biberli continued impressively, with the pious intention of guarding his master from injury, “the somnambulist merely runs the risk of falling from the roof, or whatever accident may happen to a sleepwalker; but if she enters the estate of holy matrimony, the evil power which has dominion over her sooner or later transforms her at midnight into a troll, which seizes her husband’s throat in his sleep and strangles him.”

“Nursery tales!” cried Heinz angrily, but Biberli answered calmly:

“It can make no difference to you what occurs in the case of such possessed women, for henceforward the Ortlieb house will be closed against you. And—begging your pardon—it is fortunate. For, my lord, the horse mounted by the first Schorlin—the chaplain showed it to you in the picture—came from the ark in which Noah saved it with the other animals from the deluge, and the first Lady Schorlin whom the family chronicles mention was a countess. Your ancestresses came from citadels and castles; no Schorlin ever yet brought his bride from a tradesman’s house. You, the proudest of them all, will scarcely think of making such an error, though it is true—”

“Ernst Ortlieb, spite of his trade, is a man of knightly lineage, to whom the king of arms opens the lists at every tournament!” exclaimed Heinz indignantly.

“In the combat with blunt weapons,” replied Biberli contemptuously.

“Nay, for the jousts and single combat,” cried Heinz excitedly. “The Emperor Frederick himself dubbed Herr Ernst a knight.”

“You know best,” replied Biberli modestly. But his coat of arms, like his entry, smells of cloves and pepper. Here is another, however, who, like your first ancestress, has a countess’s title, and who has a right— My name isn’t Biberli if your lady mother at home would not be more than happy were I to inform her that the Countess von Montfort and the darling of her heart, which you are:

“The name of Montfort and what goes with it,” Heinz interrupted, “would surely please those at home. But the rest! Where could a girl be found who, setting aside Cordula’s kind heart, would be so great a contrast to my mother in every respect?”

“Stormy mornings merge into quiet days,” said the servant. “Everything depends, my lord, upon the heart of which you speak so slightly—the heart and, even above that, upon the blood. ‘Help is needed there,’ cried the kind heart just now, and then the blood did its ‘devoir’. The act followed the desire as the sound follows the blow of the hammer, the thunder the flash of lightning. Well for the castle that is ruled by such a



mistress! I am only the servant, and respect commands me to curb my tongue; but to-day I had news from home through the Provost Werner, of Lucerne, whom I knew at Stansstadt. I meant to tell you of it over the wine at the Thirsty Troopers, but that accursed note and the misfortune which followed prevented. It will not make either of us more cheerful, but whoever is ordered by the leech to drink gall and wormwood does wisely to swallow the dose at one gulp. Do you wish to empty the cup now?"

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The knight nodded assent, and Biberli went on. "Home affairs are not going as they ought. Though your uncle's hair is already grey, the knightly blood in his veins makes him grasp the sword too quickly. The quarrel about the bridge-toll has broken out again more violently than ever. The townsfolk drove off our cattle as security and, by way of punishment, your uncle seized the goods of their merchants, and they came to blows. True, the Schorlin retainers forced back the men from town with bloody heads, but if the feud lasts much longer we cannot hold out, for the others have the money, and since the war cry has sounded less frequently there has been no lack of men at arms who will serve any one who pays. Besides, the townsfolk can appeal to the treaty of peace, and if your uncle continues to seize the merchant's wares they will apply to the imperial magistrate, and then:

"Then," cried Heinz eagerly, "then the time will have come for me to leave the court and return home to look after my rights."

"A single arm, no matter how strong it may be, can avail nothing there, my lord," Biberli protested earnestly. "Your Uncle Ramsweg has scarcely his peer as a leader, but even were it not so you could not bring yourself to send the old man home and put yourself in his place. Besides, it would be as unwise as it is unjust. What is lacking at home is money to pay the town what it demands for the use of the bridge, or to increase the number of your men, and therefore:

"Well?" asked Heinz eagerly.

"Therefore seek the Countess von Montfort, who favours you above every one else," was the reply; "for with her all you need will be yours without effort. Her dowry will suffice to settle twenty such bridge dues, and if it should come to a fray, the brave huntress will ride to the field at your side with helmet and spear. Which of the four Fs did Countess Cordula von Montfort ever lack?"

"The four Fs?" asked Heinz, listening intently. "The Fs," explained the ex-pedagogue, "are the four letters which marriageable knights should consider. They are: Family, figure, favour, and fortune. But hold your cap on! What a hot blast this is, as if the storm were coming straight from the jaws of hell. And the dust! Where did all these withered leaves come from in the month of June? They are whirling about as if the foliage had already fallen. There are big raindrops driving into my face too B-r-r! You need all four Fs. No rain will wash a single one of them away, and I hope it won't efface the least word of my speech either. What, according to human foresight, could be lacking to secure the fairest happiness, if you and the countess—"

"Love," replied Heinz Schorlin curtly.

"That will come of itself," cried Biberli, as if sure of what he was saying, "if the bride is Countess Cordula."

“Possibly,” answered the knight, “but the heart must not be filled by another’s image.”

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Here he paused, for in the darkness he had stumbled into the ditch by the road.

The whirlwind which preceded the bursting of the storm blew such clouds of dust and everything it contained into their faces that it was difficult to advance. But Biberli was glad, for he had not yet found a fitting answer. He struggled silently on beside his master against the wind, until it suddenly subsided, and a violent storm of rain streamed in big warm drops on the thirsty earth and the belated pedestrians. Then, spite of Heinz's protestations, Biberli hurriedly snatched the long robe embroidered with the St from his shoulders and threw it over his master, declaring that his shirt was as safe from injury as his skin, but the rain would ruin the knight's delicate embroidered doublet.

Then he drew over his head the hood which hung from his coat, and meanwhile must have decided upon an answer, for as soon as they moved on he began again: "You must drive your love for the beautiful sleepwalker out of your mind. Try to do so, my dear, dear master, for the sake of your lady mother, your young sister who will soon be old enough to marry, our light-hearted Maria, and the good old castle. For your own happiness, your lofty career, which began so gloriously, you must hear me! O master, my dear master, tear from your heart the image of the little Nuremberg witch, tempting though it is, I admit. The wound will bleed for a brief time, but after so much mirthful pleasure a fleeting disappointment in love, I should think, would not be too hard to bear if it will be speedily followed by the fairest and most enduring happiness."

Here a flash of lightning, which illumined the hospital door close before them, and made every surrounding object as bright as day, interrupted the affectionate entreaty of the faithful fellow, and at the same time a tremendous peal of thunder crashed and rattled through the air.

Master and servant crossed themselves, but Heinz exclaimed:

"That struck the tower yonder. A little farther to the left, and all doubts and misgivings would have been ended."

"You can say that!" exclaimed Biberli reproachfully while passing with his master through the gate which had just been opened for an imperial messenger. "And you dare to make such a speech in the midst of this heavenly wrath! For the sake of a pair of lovely eyes you are ready to execrate a life which the saints have so blessed with every gift that thousands and tens of thousands would not give it up from sheer gratitude and joy, even if it were not a blasphemous crime!"

Again the lightning and thunder drowned his words. Biberli's heart trembled, and muttering prayers beseeching protection from the avenging hand above, he walked swiftly onward till they reached the Corn Market. Here they were again stopped, for, notwithstanding the late hour, a throng of people, shouting and wailing, was just pouring from the Ledergasse into the square, headed by a night watchman provided with spear,

horn, and lantern, a bailiff, torchbearers, and some police officers, who were vainly trying to silence the loudest outcries.

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Again a brilliant flash of lightning pierced the black mass of clouds, and Heinz, shuddering, pointed to the crowd and asked, "Do you suppose the lightning killed the man whom they are carrying yonder?"

"Let me see," replied Biberli, among whose small vices curiosity was by no means the least. He must have understood news gathering thoroughly, for he soon returned and informed Heinz, who had sought shelter from the rain under the broad bow window of a lofty house, that the bearers were just carrying to his parents' home a young man whose thread of life had been suddenly severed by a stab through the breast in a duel. After the witnesses had taken the corpse to the leech Otto, in the Ledergasse, and the latter said that the youth was dead, they had quickly dispersed, fearing a severe punishment on account of the breach of the peace. The murdered man was Ulrich Vorchtel, the oldest son of the wealthy Berthold Vorchel, who collected the imperial taxes.

Again Heinz shuddered. He had seen the unfortunate young man the day before yesterday at the fencing school, and yesterday, full of overflowing mirth, at the dance, and knew that he, too, had fought in the battle of Marchfield. His foe must have been master of the art of wielding the sword, for the dead man had been a skilful fencer, and was tall and stalwart in figure.

When the servant ended his story Heinz stood still in the darkness for a time, silently listening. The bells had begun to ring, the blast of the watchman's horn blended with the wailing notes summoning aid, and in two places—near the Thiergartenthor and the Frauenthor—the sky was crimsoned by the reflection of a conflagration, probably kindled by some flash of lightning, which flickered over the clouds, alternately rising and falling, sometimes deeper and anon paler in hue. Throngs of people, shouting "Fire!" pressed from the cross streets into the square. The stillness of the night was over.

When Heinz again turned to Biberli he said in a hollow tone:

"If the earth should swallow up Nuremberg tonight it would not surprise me. But over yonder—look, Biber, the Duke of Pomerania's quarters in the Green Shield are still lighted. I'll wager that they are yet at the gaming table. A plague upon it! I would be there, too, if my purse allowed. I feel as if yonder dead man and his coffin were burdening my soul. If it was really good fortune in love that snatched the zecchins from my purse yesterday:

"Then," cried Biberli eagerly, "to-night is the very time, ere Countess Cordula teaches you to forget what troubles you, to win them back. The gold for the first stake is at your disposal."

"From the Duke of Pomerania, you think?" asked Heinz; then, in a quick, resolute tone, added: "No! Often as the duke has offered me his purse, I never borrow from my peers when the prospect of repayment looks so uncertain."

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"Gently, my lord," returned Biberli, slapping his belt importantly. "Here is what you need for the stake as your own property. No miracles have been wrought for us, only I forgot. But look! There are the black clouds rolling northward over the castle. That was a frightful storm! But a spendthrift doesn't keep house long-and the thunder has not yet followed that last flash of lightning. There is plenty of uproar without it. It's hard work to hear one's self speak amid all the ringing, trumpeting, yelling, and shrieking. It seems as if they expected to put out the fire with noise. The fathers of the city can attend to that. It doesn't appear to disturb the duke and his guests at their dice; and here, my lord, are fifty florins which, I think, will do for the beginning."

Biberli handed the knight a little bag containing this sum, and when Heinz asked in perplexity where he obtained it, the ex-schoolmaster answered gaily: "They came just in the nick of time. I received them from Suss, the jockey, while you were out riding this afternoon."

"For the black?" Heinz enquired.

"Certainly, my lord. It's a pity about the splendid stallion. But, as you know, he has the staggers, and when I struck him on the coronet he stood as if rooted to the earth, and the equerry, who was there, said that the disease was proved. So the Jew silently submitted, let the horse be led away, and paid back what we gave him. Fifty heavy florins! More than enough for a beginning. If I may advise you, count on the two and the five when fixed numbers are to be thrown or hit. Why? Because you must turn your ill luck in love to advantage: and those from whom it comes are the two beautiful Ortlieb Es, as Nuremberg folk call the ladies Els and Eva. That makes the two. But E is the fifth letter in the alphabet, so I should choose the five. If Biberli did not put things together shrewdly—"

"He would be as oversharper as he has often been already," Heinz interrupted, but he patted Biberli's wet arm as he spoke, and added kindly "Yet every day proves that my Biberli is a true and steadfast fellow; but where in the wide world did you, a schoolmaster, gain instruction in the art of throwing the dice?"

"While we were studying in Paris, with my dead foster brother," replied the servant with evident emotion. "But now go up, my lord, before the fire alarm, and I know not what else, makes the people upstairs separate. The iron must be forged during this wild night. Only a few drops of rain are falling. You can cross the street dry even without my long garment."

While speaking he divested the knight of his robe, and continued eagerly: "Now, my lord, from the coffin, or let us say rather the leaden weight, which oppresses your soul, let a bolt be melted that will strike misfortune to the heart. Glittering gold has a cheering colour."

“Stop! stop!” Heinz interrupted positively. “No good wishes on the eve of hunting or gaming.

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“But if I come bounding down the stairs of the Green Shield with a purse as heavy as my heart is just now—why, Biberli, success puts a new face on many things, and yours shall again look at me without anxiety.”

CHAPTER XII,

The thunderclouds had gathered in the blackest masses above the Frauenthor and the Ortlieb mansion. Ere the storm burst the oppressive atmosphere had burdened the hearts within as heavily as it weighed outside upon tree, bush, and all animated creation.

In the servants' rooms under the roof the maids slept quietly and dreamlessly; and the men, with their mouths wide open, snored after the labour of the day, unconscious of what was passing outside in the sky or the events within which had destroyed the peace of their master and his family.

The only bed unoccupied was the one in the little room next to the stairs leading to the garret, which was occupied by Katterle. The Swiss, kneeling before it with her face buried in the coarse linen pillow case, alternately sobbed, prayed, and cursed herself and her recklessness.

When the gale, which preceded the thunderstorm, blew leaves and straws in through the open window she started violently, imagining that Herr Ortlieb had come to call her to account and her trial was to begin. The barber's widow, whom she had seen a few days before in the pillory, with a stone around her neck, because she had allowed a cloth weaver's heedless daughter to come to her lodging with a handsome trumpeter who belonged to the city musicians, rose before her mental vision. How the poor thing had trembled and moaned after the executioner's assistant hung the heavy stone around her neck! Then, driven frantic by the jeers and insults of the people, the missiles flung by the street boys, and the unbearable burden, she could control herself no longer but, pouring forth a flood of curses, thrust out her tongue at her tormentors.

What a spectacle! But ere she, Katterle, would submit to such disgrace she would bid farewell to life with all its joys; and even to the countryman to whom her heart clung, and who, spite of his well-proven truth and steadfastness, had brought misery upon her.

Now the memory of the hateful word which she, too, had called to the barber's widow weighed heavily on her heart. Never, never again would she be arrogant to a neighbour who had fallen into misfortune.

This vow, and many others, she made to St. Clare; then her thoughts wandered to the city moat, to the Pegnitz, the Fischbach, and all the other streams in and near Nuremberg, where it was possible to drown and thus escape the terrible disgrace which



threatened her. But in so doing she had doubtless committed a heavy sin; for while recalling the Dutzen Pond, from whose dark surface she had often gathered white water lilies after passing through the Frauenthor into the open fields, and wondering in what part of its reedy shore her design could be most easily executed, a brilliant flash of lightning blazed through her room, and at the same time a peal of thunder shook the old mansion to its foundations.

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That was meant for her and her wicked thoughts. No! For the sake of escaping disgrace here on earth, she dared not trifle with eternal salvation and the hope of seeing her dead mother in the other world.

The remembrance of that dear mother, who had laboured so earnestly to train her in every good path, soothed her. Surely she was looking down upon her and knew that she had remained upright and honest, that she had not defrauded her employers of even a pin, and that the little fault which was to be so grievously punished had been committed solely out of love for her countryman, who in his truth and steadfastness meant honestly by her. What Biberli requested her to do could be no heavy sin.

But the powers above seemed to be of a different opinion; for again a dazzling glare of light illumined the room, and the crash and rattle of the thunder of the angry heavens accompanied it with a deafening din. Katterle shrieked aloud; it seemed as if the gates of hell had opened before her, or the destruction of the world had begun.

Frantic with terror, she sprang back from the window, through which the raindrops were already sprinkling her face. They cooled her flushed cheeks and brought her back to reality. The offence she had just committed was no trivial one. She, whom Herr Ortlieb, with entire confidence, had placed in the service of the fair young girl whose invalid mother could not care for her, had permitted herself to be induced to persuade Eva, who was scarcely beyond childhood, to a rendezvous with a man whom she represented to the inexperienced maiden as a godly, virtuous knight, though she knew from Biberli how far the latter surpassed his master in fidelity and steadfastness.

“Lead us not into temptation!” How often she had repeated the words in the Lord’s Prayer, and now she herself had become the serpent that tempted into sin the innocent child whom duty should have commanded her to guard.

No, no! The guilt for which she was threatened with punishment was by no means small, and even if her earthly judge did not call her to account, she would go to confession to-morrow and honestly perform the penance imposed.

Moved by these thoughts, she gazed across the courtyard to the convent. Just at that moment the lightning again flashed, the thunder pealed, and she covered her face with her hands. When she lowered her arms she saw on the roof of the nuns’ granary, which adjoined the cow-stable, a slender column of smoke, followed by a narrow tongue of flame, which grew steadily brighter.

The lightning had set it on fire.

Sympathy for the danger and losses of others forced her own grief and anxiety into the background and, without pausing to think, she slipped on her shoes, snatched her

shawl from the chest, and ran downstairs, shouting: "The lightning has struck! The convent is burning!"

Just at that moment the door of the chamber occupied by the two sisters opened, and Ernst Ortlieb, with tangled hair and pallid cheeks, came toward her.

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Within the room the dim light of the little lamp and the fiery glare of the lightning illumined tear-stained, agitated faces.

After Heinz Schorlin had called to her, and Els had hurried to her aid, Eva, clad in her long, plain night robe, and barefooted, just as she had risen from her couch, followed the maid to her room. What must the knight, who but yesterday, she knew, had looked up to her as to a saint, think of her now?

She felt as if she were disgraced, stained with shame. Yet it was through no fault of her own, and overwhelmed by the terrible conviction that mysterious, supernatural powers, against which resistance was hopeless, were playing a cruel game with her, she had felt as if the stormy sea were tossing her in a rudderless boat on its angry surges.

Unable to seek consolation in prayer, as usual, she had given herself up to dull despair, but only for a short time. Els had soon returned, and the firm, quiet manner with which her prudent, helpful friend and sister met her, and even tried to raise her drooping courage by a jest ere she sent her to their mother's sick room, had fallen on her soul like refreshing dew; not because Els promised to act for her—on the contrary, what she intended to do roused her to resistance.

She had been far too guilty and oppressed to oppose her, yet indignation concerning the sharp words which Els had uttered about the knight, and her intention of forbidding him the house, perhaps forever, had stimulated her like strong acid wine.

Not until after her sister had left her did she become capable of clearly understanding what she had felt during her period of somnambulism.

While her mother, thanks to a narcotic, slept soundly, breathing quietly, and in the entry below something, she knew not what, perhaps due to her father's return, was occurring, she sat thinking, pondering, while an impetuous throng of rebellious wishes raised their voices, alternately asking and denying, in her agitated breast.

How she had happened to rise from her couch and go out had vanished utterly from her memory, but she was still perfectly conscious of her feelings during the night walk. If hitherto she had yearned to drain heavenly bliss from the chalice of faith, during her wanderings through the house she had longed for nothing save to drink her fill from the cup of earthly joy. Ardent kisses, of which she had forbidden herself even to think, she awaited with blissful delight. Her timorous heart, held in check by virgin modesty, accustomed to desire nothing save what she could have confessed to her sister and the abbess, seemed as if it had cast off every fetter and boldly resolved to risk the most daring deeds. The somnambulist had longed for the moment when, after Heinz Schorlin's confession that he loved her, she could throw her arms around his neck with rapturous gratitude.

If, while awake, she had desired only to speak to him of her saint and of his duty to overthrow the foes of the Church, she had wished while gazing at the moon from the stairs, and in front of the house door, to whisper sweet words of love, listen to his, and in so doing forget herself, the world, and everything which did not belong to him, to her, and their love.

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And she remembered this longing and yearning in a way very unlike a mere dream. It seemed rather as if, while the moon was attracting her by its magic power, something, which had long slumbered in the depths of her soul, had waked to life; something, from which formerly, ere her heart and mind had been able rightly to understand it, she had shrunk with pious horror, had assumed a tangible form.

Now she dreaded this newly recognised sinful part of her own nature, which she had imagined a pure vessel that had room only for what was noble, sacred, and innocent.

She, too—she knew it now—was only a girl like those on whose desire for love she had looked down with arrogant contempt, no bride of heaven or saint.

She had not yet taken the veil, and it was fortunate, for what would have become of her had she not discovered until after her profession this part of her nature, which she thought every true nun, if she possessed it, must discard, like the hair which was shorn from her head, before taking the vow of the order.

During this self-inspection it became more and more evident that she was not one person, but two in one—a twofold nature with a single body and two distinct souls; and this conviction caused her as much pain as if the cut which had produced the separation were still bleeding.

Just at that moment her eyes fell upon the image of the Virgin opposite, and the usual impulse to lift her soul in prayer took possession of her even more powerfully than a short time before.

With fervent warmth she besought her to release her from this newly awakened nature, which surely could not be pleasing in the sight of Heaven, and let her once more become what she was before the unfortunate ramble in the moonlight.

But the composure she needed for prayer was soon destroyed, for the image of the knight rose before her again and again, and it seemed as if her own name, which he had called with such ardent longing, once more rang in her ears.

Whoever thus raises his voice in appeal to another loves that person. Heinz Schorlin's love was great and sincere and, instead of heeding the inner voice that warned her to return to prayer, she cried defiantly, "I will not!"

She could not yet part from the man for whom her heart throbbed with such passionate yearning, who was so brave and godly, so ardently devoted to her.

True, it had been peacefully beautiful to dream herself into the bright glory of heaven, yet the stormy rapture she had felt while thinking of him and his love seemed richer and greater. She could not, would not part from him.



Then she remembered her sister's intention of driving Heinz—Eva already called the knight by that name in her soliloquy—from her presence, and the thought that she might perhaps wound him so keenly that knightly honour would forbid his return alarmed and incensed her.

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What right had Els to distrust him? A godly knight played no base game with the chosen lady of, his heart, and that, yes, that she certainly was, since she had named her colour to him. Nothing should separate them. She needed him for her happiness as much as she did light and air. Hitherto she had longed for bliss in another world, but she was so young she probably had a long life before her, and what could existence on earth offer if robbed of the hope of his possession?

The newly awakened part of her nature demanded its rights. It would never again allow itself to be forced into the old slumber.

If her sister came back and boasted of having driven away the dangerous animal forever, she would show her that she had a different opinion of the knight, and would permit no one to interpose between them. But, while still pondering over this plan, the door of the sick-room was softly opened and her father beckoned to her to follow him.

Silently leading the way through the dusky corridor, no longer illumined by the moonlight, he entered his daughter's room before her. The lamp, still burning there, revealed the agitated face of her sister who, resting her chin on her hand, sat on the stool beside the spinning wheel.

Eva's courage, which had blazed up so brightly, instantly fell again.

"Good heavens! What has happened?" she cried in terror; but her father answered in a hollow tone:

"For the sake of your noble sister, to whom I pledged my word, I will force myself to remain calm. But look at her! Her poor heart must be like a graveyard, for she was doomed to bury what she held dearest. And who," he continued furiously, so carried away by grief and indignation as to be unmindful of his promise to maintain his composure, "who is to blame for it all, save you and your boundless imprudence?"

Eva, with uplifted hands, tried to explain how, unconscious of her acts, she had walked in her sleep down the stairs and out of the house, but he imperiously cut her short with:

"Silence! I know all. My daughter gave a worthless tempter the right to expect the worst from her. You, whom we deemed the ornament of this house, whose purity hitherto was stainless, are to blame if people passing on the street point at it! Alas! alas! Our honour, our ancient, unsullied name!"

Groaning aloud, the father struck his brow with his clenched hand; but when Els rose and passed her arm around his shoulders to speak words of consolation, Eva, who hitherto had vainly struggled for words, could endure no more.

"Whoever says that of me, my father," she exclaimed with flashing eyes; scarcely able to control her voice, "has opened his ears to slander; and whoever terms Heinz Schorlin

a worthless tempter, is blinded by a delusion, and I call him to his face, even were it my own father, to whom I owe gratitude and respect—”

But here she stopped and extended her arms to keep off the deeply angered man, for he had started forward with quivering lips, and—she perceived it clearly—was already under the spell of one of the terrible fits of fury which might lead him to the most unprecedented deeds. Els, however, had clung to him and, while holding him back with all her strength, cried out in a tone of keen reproach, “Is this the way you keep your promise?”

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Then, lowering her voice, she continued with loving entreaty: "My dear, dear father, can you doubt that she was asleep, unconscious of her acts, when she did what has brought so much misery upon us?"

And, interrupting herself, she added eagerly in a tone of the firmest conviction: "No, no, neither shame nor misery has yet touched you, my father, nor the poor child yonder. The suspicion of evil rests on me, and me alone, and if any one here must be wretched it is I."

Then Herr Ernst, regaining his self-control, drew back from Eva, but the latter, as if fairly frantic, exclaimed: "Do you want to drive me out of my senses by your mysterious words and accusations? What, in the name of all the saints, has happened that can plunge my Els into misery and shame?"

"Into misery and shame," repeated her father in a hollow tone, throwing himself into a chair, where he sat motionless, with his face buried in his hands, while Els told her sister what had occurred when she went down into the entry to speak to the knight.

Eva listened to her story, fairly gasping for breath. For one brief moment she cherished the suspicion that Cordula had not acted from pure sympathy, but to impose upon Heinz Schorlin a debt of gratitude which would bind him to her more firmly. Yet when she heard that her father had given back his daughter's ring to Herr Casper Eysvogel and broken his child's betrothal she thought of nothing save her sister's grief and, sobbing aloud, threw herself into Els's arms.

The girls held each other in a close embrace until the first flash of lightning and peal of thunder interrupted the conversation.

The father and daughters had been so deeply agitated that they had not heard the storm rising outside, and the outbreak of the tempest surprised them. The peal of thunder, which so swiftly followed the lightning, also startled them and when, soon after, a second one shook the house with its crashing, rattling roar, Herr Ernst went out to wake the chief packer. But old Endres was already keeping watch among the wares entrusted to him and when, after a brief absence, the master of the house returned, he found Eva again clasped in her sister's arms, and saw the latter kissing her brow and eyes as she tenderly strove to comfort her.

But Eva seemed deaf to her soothing words. Els, her faithful Els, was no longer the betrothed bride of her Wolff; her great, beautiful happiness was destroyed forever. On the morrow all Nuremberg would learn that Herr Casper had broken his son's betrothal pledge, because his bride, for the sake of a tempter, Sir Heinz Schorlin, had failed to keep her troth with him.

How deeply all this pierced Eva's heart! how terrible was the torture of the thought that she was the cause of this frightful misfortune! Dissolved in an agony of tears, she entreated the poor girl to forgive her; and Els did so willingly, and in a way that touched her father to the very depths of his heart. How good the girls must be who, spite of the sore suffering which one had brought upon the other, were still so loving and loyal!

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Convinced that Eva, too, had done nothing worthy of punishment, he went towards them to clasp both in his arms, but ere he could do so the clap of thunder which had frightened Katterle so terribly shook the whole room. "St. Clare, aid us!" cried Eva, crossing herself and falling upon her knees; but Els rushed to the window, opened it, and looked down the street. Nothing was visible there save a faint red glow on the distant northern horizon, and two mailed soldiers who were riding into the city at a rapid trot. They had been sent from the stables in the Marienthurm to keep order in case a fire should break out. Several men with hooks and poles followed, also hurrying to the Frauenthor.

In reply to the question where the fire was and where they going, they answered: "To the Fischbach, to help. Flames have burst out apparently under the fortress at the Thiergartenthor."

The long-drawn call for help from the warder's horn, which came at the same moment, proved that the men were right.

Herr Ernst hastened out of the room just as Katterle's shriek, "The lightning struck! the convent is burning!" rung from the upper step of the stairs.

He had already pronounced her sentence, and the sight of her roused his wrath again so vehemently that, spite of the urgent peril, he shouted to her that, whatever claimed his attention now, she certainly should not escape the most severe punishment for her shameful conduct.

Then he ordered old Endres and two of the menservants to watch the sleeping-room of his invalid wife, that in case anything should happen the helpless woman might be instantly borne to a place of safety.

Ere he himself went to the scene of the conflagration he hurried back to his daughters.

While the girls were giving him his hat and cloak he told them where the fire had broken out, and this caused another detention of the anxious master of the house, for Eva seized her shoes and stockings and, kicking her little slippers from her feet, declared that she, too, would not remain absent from the place when her dear nuns were in danger. But her father commanded her to stay with her mother and sister, and went to the door, turning back once more on the threshold to his daughters with the anxious entreaty: "Think of your mother!"

Another peal of thunder drowned the sound of his footsteps hurrying down the stairs. When Els, who had watched her father from the window a short time, went back to her sister, Eva dried her eyes and cheeks, saying: "Perhaps he is right; but whenever my heart urges me to obey any warm impulse, obstacles are put in my way. What a weak nonentity is the daughter of an honourable Nuremberg family!"

Els heard this complaint with astonishment. Was this her Eva, her “little saint,” who yesterday had desired nothing more ardently than with humble obedience, far from the tumult of the world, to become worthy of her Heavenly Bridegroom, and in the quiet peace of the convent raise her soul to God? What had so changed the girl in these few hours? Even the most worldly-minded of her friends would have taken such an impeachment ill.

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But she had no time now to appeal to the conscience of her misguided sister. Love and duty summoned her to her mother's couch. And then! The child had become aware of her love, and was she, Els, who had been parted from Wolff by her own father, and yet did not mean to give him up, justified in advising her sister to cast aside her love and the hope of future happiness with and through the man to whom she had given her heart?

What miracles love wrought! If in a single night it had transformed the devout future Bride of Heaven into an ardently loving woman, it could accomplish the impossible for her also.

While Eva was gazing out of the window Els returned to her mother. She was still asleep and, without permitting either curiosity or longing to divert her from her duty, Els kept her place beside the couch of the beloved invalid, spite of the fire alarm which, though somewhat subdued, was heard in the room.

CHAPTER XIII.

Eva was standing at the open window. The violence of the storm seemed exhausted. The clouds were rolling northward, and the thunder followed the flashes of lightning at longer and longer intervals. Peace was restored to the heavens, but the crowd and noise in the city and the street constantly increased.

The iron tongues of the alarm bells had never swung so violently, the warder's horn had never made the air quiver with such resonant appeals for aid.

Nor did the metallic voices above call for help in vain, for while a roseate glow tinged the linden in front of her window and the houses on the opposite side of the street with the hues of dawn, the crowds thronging from the Frauenthor to St. Klarengasse grew denser and denser.

The convent was not visible from her chamber, but the acrid odor of the smoke and the loud voices which reached her ear from that direction proved that the fire was no trivial one. While she was seeking out the spot from which Heinz must have looked up to her window, the Ortlieb menservants, with some of the Montfort retainers, came out of the house with pails and ladders.

A female figure glided into the dark street after them. A black shawl concealed her head and the upper part of her figure, and she held a bundle in her hand.

It must be Katterle.

Where was she going at this hour? As she was carrying the package, she could scarcely intend to help in putting out the fire. Was she stealing away from fear of punishment? Poor thing! Even the maid was hurled into misfortune through her guilt.



It pierced her very heart. But while she called to Katterle to stop her, something else, which engrossed her still more, diverted her attention— the loud voice of Countess Cordula reached her from the street door. With whom was she talking? Did the girl, who ventured upon so many things which ill-beseemed a modest maiden, intend to join the men? Eva forgot that she, too, would have hurried to the nuns had not her father prevented it. The countess was already standing in the courtyard.

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After Eva had given her a hasty glance she again looked for the maid, but Katterle had already vanished in the darkness. This grieved her; she had neglected something which might have saved the girl, to whom she was warmly attached, from some imprudent act. But while attracted by the strange appearance of the countess she had forgotten the other.

Cordula had probably just left her couch, for she wore only a plain dress tucked up very high, short boots, which she probably used in hunting, and a shawl crossed over her bosom; another was wound round her head in the fashion of the peasant women who brought their goods to market on cold winter days. No farmer's wife could be more simply clad, and yet—Eva was forced to admit it—there was something aristocratic in her firm bearing.

Her companions were her father's chaplain and the equerry who had grown grey in his service. Both were trying to dissuade her. The former pointed to a troop of women who were following the chief of police and some city constables, and said warningly: "Those are all wanton queans, whom the law of this city compels to lend their aid in putting out fires. How would it beseem your rank to join these who shame their sex—— No, no! It would be said to-morrow that the ornament of the house of Montfort had——"

"That Countess Cordula had used her hands in extinguishing the fire," she interrupted with gay self-confidence. "Is there any disgrace in that? Must my noble birth debar me from being numbered among those who help their neighbours so far as lies in their power? If any good is accomplished here, those poor women yonder will make it no worse by their aid. If people here believe that they do, it will give me double pleasure to ennoble it by working with them. Putting out the flames will not degrade me, and will make the women better. So, forward! See how the fire is blazing yonder! Help is needed there and, thank Heaven, I am no weakling. Besides, there are women who want assistance and, to women in peril, the most welcome aid is woman's."

The old equerry, his eyes glittering with tears, nodded assent, and led the way into the street; but the countess, instead of following instantly, glanced back for the page who was to carry the bandages which she had learned to use among her retainers at home. The agile boy did not delay her long; but while his mistress was looking to see that he had forgotten nothing of importance, he perceived at the window Eva, whose beauty had long since fired his young heart, and cast a languishing glance at her. Then Cordula also noticed her and called a pleasant greeting. Eva was on the point of answering in the same tone, when she remembered that Cordula had spoken of Heinz Schorlin in the presence of others as if he were awaiting her in all submission. Anger surged hotly in her breast, and she drew back into the room as if she had not heard the salutation.

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The countess perceived it, and shrugged her shoulders pityingly.

Eva, dissatisfied with herself, continued to gaze down into the street long after the crowds of people flocking from the city had concealed Cordula from her eyes. It seemed as though she would never again succeed in anything that would bring contentment. Never had she felt so weak, so ill-tempered, so devoid of self-reliance. Yet she could not, as usual, seek consolation with her saint. There was so much here below to divert her attention.

The roseate glow on the linden had become a crimson glare, the flickering light on the opposite walls a dazzling illumination. The wind, now blowing from the west, bore from St. Klarengasse burning objects which scattered sparks around them—bundles of hay caught by the flames—from the convent barn to the Marienthurm opposite, and into the street. Besides, the noise above and behind, before and below her, grew louder and louder. The ringing of the bells and the blare of trumpets from the steeples continued, and with this constant ringing, pealing, and crashing from above, mingled the high, clear voices of the choir of nuns in the convent, beseeching in fervent litanies the help of their patron saint. True, the singing was often drowned by the noise from the street, for the fire marshals and quartermasters had been informed in time, and watchmen, soldiers in the pay of the city, men from the hospital, and the abandoned women (required by law to help put out the fires) came in little groups, while bailiffs and servants of the Council, barbers (who were obliged to lend their aid, but whose surgical skill could find little employment here), members of the Council, priests and monks arrived singly. The street also echoed with the trampling of many steeds, for mounted troopers in coats of mail first dashed by to aid the bailiffs in maintaining order, then the inspector of water works, with his chief subordinate, trotted along to St. Klarengasse on the clumsy horses placed at their disposal by the Council in case of fire. He was followed by the millers, with brass fire engines. While their well-fed nags drew on sledges, with little noise, through the mire of the streets now softened by the rain, the heavy wooden water barrels needed in the work of extinguishing the flames, there was a loud rattling and clanking as the carts appeared on which the men from the Public Works building were bringing large and small ladders, hooks and levers, pails and torches, to the scene of the conflagration.

Besides those who were constrained by the law, many others desired to aid the popular Sisters of St. Clare and thereby earn a reward from God. A brewer had furnished his powerful stallions to convey to the scene of action, with their tools, the eight masons whose duty it was to use their skill in extinguishing the flames. All sorts of people—men and women— followed, yelling and shrieking, to seek their own profit during the work of rescue.

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But the bailiffs kept a sharp eye on them, and made way when the commander of the German knights, with several companions on whose black mantles the white cross gleamed, appeared on horseback, and at last old Herr Berthold Vorchtel trotted up on his noble grey, which was known to the whole city. He still had a firm seat in the saddle, but his head was bowed, and whoever knew that only one hour before the corpse of his oldest son, slain in a duel, had been brought home, admired the aged magistrate's strength of will. As First Losunger and commander in chief he was the head of the Council, and therefore of the city also. Duty had commanded him to mount his steed, but how pale and haggard was his shrewd face, usually so animated!

Just in front of the Ortlieb mansion the commander of the German knights rode to his side, and Eva saw how warmly he shook him by the hand, as if he desired to show the old man very cordially his deep sympathy in some sore trouble which had assailed him.

Ever since Wolff's betrothal to Els had been announced the Vorchtels had ceased to be on terms of intimacy with the Ortliebs; but old Herr Berthold, though he himself had probably regarded young Eysvogel as his "Ursel's" future husband, had always treated Eva kindly, and she was not mistaken—tears were glittering on his cheeks in the torchlight. The sight touched the young girl's inmost heart. How eagerly she desired to know what had befallen the Vorchtels, and to give the old man some token of sympathy! What could have caused him so much sorrow? Only a few hours before her father had returned from a gay entertainment at his house. It could scarcely concern Herr Berthold's wife, his daughter Ursula, or either of his two vigorous sons. Perhaps death had only bereft him of some more distant, though beloved relative, yet surely she would have known that, for the Ortliebs were connected by marriage both with the old gentleman and his wife.

Tortured by a presentiment of evil, Eva gazed after him, and also watched for Heinz Schorlin among the people in the street. Must not anxiety for her bring him hither, if he learned how near her house the fire was burning?

Whenever a helmet or knight's baret appeared above the crowd she thought that he was coming. Once she believed that she had certainly recognised him, for a tall young man of knightly bearing appeared, not mounted, but on foot, and stopped opposite to the Ortlieb house. That must be he! But when he looked up to her window, the reflection of the fire showed that the man who had made her heart beat so quickly was indeed a young and handsome knight, but by no means the person for whom she had mistaken him. It was Boemund Altrosen, famed as victor in many a tournament, who when a boy had often been at the house of her uncle, Herr Pfinzing. There was no mistaking his coal-black, waving locks. It was said that the dark-blue sleeve of a woman's robe which he wore on his helmet in the jousts belonged to the Countess von Montfort. She was his lady, for whom he had won so many victories.

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Heinz Schorlin had mentioned him at the ball as his friend, and told her that the gallant knight would vainly strive to win the reckless countess. Perhaps he was now looking at the house so intently on Cordula's account. Or had Heinz, his friend, sent him to watch over her while he was possibly detained by the Emperor?

But, no; he had just gone nearer to the house to question a man in the von Montfort livery, and the reply now led him to move on towards the convent.

Were the tears which filled Eva's eyes caused by the smoke that poured from the fire more and more densely into the street, or to disappointment and bitter anguish?

The danger which threatened her aunt and her beloved nuns also increased her excitement. True, the sisters themselves seemed to feel safe, for snatches of their singing were still audible amid the ringing of the bells and the blare of the trumpets, but the fire must have been very hard to extinguish. This was proved by the bright glow on the linden tree and the shouts of command which, though unintelligible, rose above every other sound.

The street below was becoming less crowded. Most of those who had left their beds to render aid had already reached the scene of the conflagration. Only a few stragglers still passed through the open gate towards the Marienthurm. Among them were horsemen, and Eva's heart again throbbed more quickly, but only for a short time. Heinz Schorlin was far taller than the man who had again deceived her, and his way would hardly have been lighted by two mounted torch bearers. Soon her rosy lips even parted in a smile, for the sturdy little man on the big, strong-boned Vinzgau steed, whom she now saw distinctly, was her dearest relative, her godfather, the kind, shrewd, imperial magistrate, Berthold Pfinzing, the husband of her father's sister, good Aunt Christine.

If he looked up he would tell her about old Herr Vorchtel. Nor did he ride past his darling's house without a glance at her window, and when he saw Eva beckon he ordered the servants to keep back, and stopped behind the chains.

After he had briefly greeted his niece and she had enquired what had befallen the Vorchtels, he asked anxiously: "Then you know nothing yet? And Els—has it been kept from her, too?"

"What, in the name of all the saints?" asked Eva, with increasing alarm.

Then Herr Pfinzing, who saw that the door of the house was open, asked her to come down. Eva was soon standing beside her godfather's big bay, and while patting the smooth neck of the splendid animal he said hurriedly, in a low tone: "It's fortunate that it happened so. You can break it gradually to your sister, child. To-night Summon up your courage, for there are things which even a man—To make the story short, then: Tonight

Wolff Eysvogel and young Vorchtel quarreled, or rather Ulrich irritated your Wolff so cruelly that he drew his sword—”

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“Wolff!” shrieked Eva, whose hand had already dropped from the horse. “Wolff! He is so terribly strong, and if he drew his sword in anger——”

“He dealt his foe one powerful thrust,” replied the imperial magistrate with an expressive gesture. “The sword pierced him through. But I must go on Only this one thing more: Ulrich was borne back to his parents as a corpse. And Wolff Where is he hiding? May the saints long be the only ones who know! A quarrel with such a result under the Emperor’s eyes, now when peace has just been declared throughout the land! Who knows what sentence will be pronounced if the bailiffs show themselves shrewder this time than usual! My office compelled me to set the pack upon him. That is the reason I am so late. Tell Els as cautiously as possible.”

He bowed gallantly and trotted on, but Eva, as if hunted by enemies, rushed up the staircase, threw herself on her knees before the prie dieu, and sobbed aloud.

Young Vorchtel had undoubtedly heard of the events in the entry, taunted Wolff with his betrothed bride’s nocturnal interview with a knight, and thus roused the strong man to fury. How terrible it all was! How could she bear it! Her thoughtlessness had cost a human life, robbed parents of their son! Through her fault her sister’s betrothed husband, whom she also loved, was in danger of being placed under ban, perhaps even of being led to the executioner’s block!

She had no thought of any other motive which might have induced the hot-blooded young men to cross swords and, firmly convinced that her luckless letter had drawn Heinz Schorlin to the house and thus led to all these terrible things, she vainly struggled for composure.

Sometimes she beheld in imagination the despairing Els; sometimes the aged Vorchtels, grieving themselves to death; sometimes Wolff, outlawed, hiding like a hunted deer in the recesses of the forest; sometimes the maid, fleeing with her little bundle into the darkness of the night; sometimes the burning convent; and at intervals also Heinz Schorlin, as he knelt before her and raised his clasped hands with passionate entreaty.

But she repelled every thought of him as a sin, and even repressed the impulse to look out into the street to seek him. Her sole duty now was to pray to her patron saint and the Mother of God in behalf of her sister, whom she had hurled into misfortune, and her poor heart bleeding from such deep wounds; but the consolation which usually followed the mere uplifting of her soul in prayer did not come, and it could not be otherwise, for amid her continual looking into her own heart and listening to what went on around her no real devotion was possible.

Although she constantly made fresh efforts to collect her thoughts, and continued to kneel with clasped hands before the prie dieu, not a hoof-beat, not a single loud voice,

escaped her ear. Even the alternate deepening and paling of the reflection of the fire, which streamed through the window, attracted her attention, and the ringing of bells and braying of trumpets, which still continued, maintained the agitation in her soul.

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Yet prayer was the sole atonement she could make for the wrong she had done her sister; so she did not cease her endeavours to plead for her to the Great Helper above, but her efforts were futile. Yet even when she heard voices close by the house, among which she distinguished Countess Cordula's and—if she was not mistaken—her father's, she resisted the impulse to rise from her knees.

At last the vain struggle was ended by an interruption from without. After unusually loud voices exclaiming and questioning had reached her from the entry, the door of her chamber suddenly opened and old Martsche looked in. The housekeeper was seeking something; but when she found the devout child on her knees she did not wish to disturb her, and contented herself with the evidence of her eyes. But Eva stopped her, and learned that she was searching for Katterle, who could neither be found in her room, or anywhere else. Herr Ortlieb had brought Countess von Montfort home severely burned, and there were all sorts of things for the maid to do.

Eva clung shuddering to the back of the prie dieu, for the certainty that the unfortunate girl had really fled was like strewing salt on her wounds.

When Martsche left her and Els entered, her excitement had risen to such a pitch that she flung herself before her, as if frantic and, clinging to her knees, heaping self-accusations upon herself with passionate impetuosity, she pleaded, amid her sobs, for pardon and mercy.

Meanwhile Els had been informed by her father of her lover's fatal deed, and as soon as she perceived what tortured her sister she relieved her, with loving words of explanation, from the reproach of being the cause of this misfortune also, for the quarrel had taken place so early that no tidings of the meeting in the entry could have reached young Vorchtel when he became involved in the fray with Wolff.

Nor was it solely to soothe Eva that she assured her that, deeply as she mourned the death of the hapless Ulrich and his parents' grief, Wolff's deed could not diminish either her love or her hope of becoming his.

Eva listened to this statement with sparkling eyes. The love in her sister's heart was as immovably firm as the ancient stones of her native stronghold, which defied every storm, and on which even the destroying, kindling lightning could inflict no injury. This made her doubly dear, and from the depths of dull despair her soul, ever prone to soar upwards, rose swiftly to the heights of hopeful exaltation.

When Els at last entreated her to go to rest without her, she willingly consented, for her mother was comfortable, and Sister Renata was watching at her bedside.



Eva kept her promise, after Els, who wanted to see the Countess von Montfort, had satisfied her concerning the welfare of the nuns and promised to go to rest herself as soon as possible.

The stopping of the alarm bells proved that the fire was under control. Even its reflection had disappeared, but the eastern sky was beginning to be suffused with a faint tinge of rose colour.

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When her sister left her Eva herself drew the curtains before the window, and sleep soon ended her thoughts and yearnings, her grief and her hope.

CHAPTER XIV.

Countess Cordula von Montfort's room faced the east and looked out into the garden. The sun of the June morning had just risen, filling it with cheerful light.

The invalid's maid had wished to deny Els admittance, but the countess called eagerly to her, and then ordered the windows to be opened, because she never felt comfortable unless it was light around her and she could breathe God's pure air.

The morning breeze bore the smoke which still rose from the fire in another direction, and thus a refreshing air really entered the room from the garden, for the thunderstorm had refreshed all nature, and flower beds and grass, bush and tree, exhaled a fresh odour of earth and leafage which it was a delight to breathe.

The leech Otto, to whom the severely wounded Ulrich Vorchtel had been carried, had just left the countess. The burns on her hands and arms had been bandaged—nay, the old gentleman had cut out the scorched portions of her tresses with his own hand. Cordula's energetic action had made the famous surgeon deem her worthy of such care. He had also advised her to seek the nursing of the oldest daughter of her host, whose invalid wife he was attending, and she had gladly assented; for Els had attracted her from their first meeting, and she was accustomed to begin the day at sunrise.

"How does it happen that you neither weep nor even hang your head after all the sorrow which last night brought you?" asked Cordula, as the Nuremberg maiden sat down beside her bed. "You are a stranger to the Swiss knight, and when we surprised you with him you had not come to a meeting—I know that full well. But if so true and warm a love unites you to young Eysvogel, how does it happen that your joyous courage is so little damped by his father's denial and his own unhappy deed, which at this time could scarcely escape punishment? You do not seem frivolous, and yet—"

"Yet," replied Els with a pleasant smile, "many things have made a deeper impression. We are not all alike, Countess, yet there is much in your nature which must render it easy for you to understand me; for, Countess——"

"Call me Cordula," interrupted the girl in a tone of friendly entreaty. "Why should I deny that I am fond of you? and at the risk of making you vain, I will betray——"

"Well?" asked Els eagerly.

"That the splendid old leech described you to me exactly as I had imagined you," was the reply. You were one of those, he said, whose mere presence beside a sick-bed was



as good as medicine, and so you are; and, dear Jungfrau Els, this salutary medicine benefits me.”

“If I am to dispense with the ‘Countess,’” replied the other, “you must spare me the ‘Jungfrau.’ Nursing you will give me all the more pleasure on account of the warm gratitude——”

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"Never mind that," interrupted Cordula. "But please look at the bandage, beneath which the flesh burns and aches more than is necessary, and then go on with your explanation."

Els examined the countess's arm, and then applied a household remedy whose use she had learned from the wife of Herr Pfinzing, her Aunt Christine, who was familiar with the healing art. It relieved the pain, and when Cordula told her so, Els went on with her explanation. "When all these blows fell upon me, they at first seemed, indeed, unprecedented and scarcely possible to endure. When afterwards my Wolff's unhappy deed was added, I felt as though I were standing in a dense, dark mist, where each step forwards must lead me into a stifling morass or over a precipice. Then I began to reflect upon what had happened, as is my custom; I separated, in my thoughts, the evil menacing in the future from the good, and had scarcely made a little progress in this way when morass and abyss lost their terrors; both, I found, could be left to take care of themselves, since neither Wolff nor I lack love and good will, and we possess some degree of prudence and caution."

"Yes, this thinking and considering!" cried the countess, with a faint sigh. "It succeeds in my case, too, only, unluckily, I usually don't begin until it is too late and the folly has been committed."

"Then, henceforth, you must reverse the process," answered Els cheerily. But directly after she changed her tone, which sounded serious enough as she added: "The sorrow of the poor Vorchtels and the grief my betrothed husband must endure, because the dead man was once a dear friend, certainly casts a dark shadow upon many things; but you, who love the chase, must surely be familiar with the misty autumn mornings to which I allude. Everything, far and near, is covered by a thick veil, yet one feels that there is bright sunshine behind it. Suddenly the mist scatters——"

"And mountain and forest, land and water, lie before us in the radiant sunlight!" cried the countess. "How well I know such scenes! And how I should rejoice if a favourable wind would sweep the grey mist away for you right speedily! Only—indeed, I am not disposed to look on the dark side—only, perhaps you do not know how resolute the Emperor is that the peace of the country shall be maintained. If your lover allowed himself to be carried away——"

"This was not the first time," Els eagerly interrupted, "that young Vorchtel tried to anger him in the presence of others; and he believed that he was justified in bearing a grudge against his former friend—it was considered a settled thing that Wolff and his sister Ursula were to marry."

"Until," Cordula broke in, "he gazed into your bright eyes."

"How could you know that?" asked Els in confusion.

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“Because, in love and hate, as well as in reckoning, two and three follow one,” laughed the countess. “As for your Wolff, in particular, I will gladly believe, with you, that he can succeed in clearing himself before the judges. But with regard to old Eysvogel, who looks as though, if he met our dear Lord Himself, he would think first which of the two was the richer, your future brother-in-law Siebenburg, that disagreeable ‘Mustache,’ and his poor wife, who sits at home grieving over her dissolute husband—what gratitude you can expect from such kindred—”

“None,” replied Els sadly. Yet a mischievous smile hovered around her lips as, bending over the invalid, she added in a whisper: “But the good I expect from all the evil is, that we and the Eysvogels will be separated as if by wall and moat. They will never cross them, but Wolff would find the way back to me, though we were parted by an ocean, and mountains towering to the sky divided——”

“This confidence, indeed, maintains the courage,” said the countess, and with a faint sigh she added: “Whatever evil may befall you, many might envy you.”

“Then love has conquered you also?” Els began; but Cordula answered evasively:

“Let that pass, dear Jungfrau. Perhaps love treats me as a mother deals with a froward child, because I asked too much of her. My life has become an endless battue. Much game of all kinds is thus driven out to be shot, but the sportsman finds true pleasure only in tracking the single heathcock, the solitary chamois. Yet, no,” and in her eagerness she flung her bandaged hand so high into the air that she groaned with pain and was forced to keep silence. When able to speak once more, still tortured by severe suffering, she exclaimed angrily: “No, I want neither driving nor stalking. What do I care for the prey? I am a woman, too. I would fain be the poor persecuted game, which the hunter pursues at the risk of breaking his bones and neck. It must be delightful; one would willingly bear the pain of a wound for its sake. I don’t mean these pitiful burns, but a deep and deadly one.”

“You ought to have spared yourself these,” said Els in a tone of affectionate warning. “Consider what you are to your father, and how your suffering pains him! To risk a precious human life for the sake of a stupid brute——”

“They call it a sin, I know,” Cordula burst forth. “And yet I would commit the same tomorrow at the risk of again—Oh, you cautious city people, you maidens with snow-white hands! What do you know of a girl like me? You cannot even imagine what my child life was; and yet it is told in a single word—motherless! I was never permitted to see her, to hear her dear, warning voice. She paid with her own life for giving me mine. My father? How kind he is! He meant to supply his dead wife’s place by anticipating my every wish. Had I desired to feast my eyes on the castle in flames, it would,

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perhaps, now lie in ashes. So I became what I am. True—and this is something—I grew to be at least one person's joy—his. No, no, at home there are others also, though they dwell in wretched hovels, who would gladly welcome me back. But except these, who will ask about the reckless countess? I myself do not care to linger long when the mirror shows me my image. Do you wish to know what this has to do with the fire? Much; for otherwise I should scarcely have been wounded. The lightning had struck only the convent barn; the cow stable, when we arrived, was still safe, but the flames soon reached it also. Neither the nuns nor the men had thought of driving the cattle out. Poor city cattle! In the country the animals have more friendly care. When the work of rescue was at last commenced the cows naturally refused to leave their old home. Some prudent person had torn the door off the hinges that they might not stifle. Just in front of it stood a pretty red cow with a white star on her face. A calf was by her side, and the mother had already sunk on her knees and was licking it in mortal terror. I pitied the poor thing, and as Boemund Altrosen, the black-haired knight who entered your house with the rest after the ride to Kadolzburg, had just come there, I told him to save the calf. Of course he obeyed my wish, and as it struggled he dragged it out of the stable with his strong arms. The building was already blazing, and the thatched roof threatened to fall in. Just at that moment the old cow looked at me so piteously and uttered such a mournful bellow that it touched me to the heart. My eyes rested on the calf, and a voice within whispered that it would be motherless, like me, and miss during the first part of its life God's best gift. But since, as you have heard, I act before I think, I went myself—I no longer know how—into the burning stable. It was hard to breathe in the dense smoke, and fiery sparks scorched my shawl and my hair, but I was conscious of one thought: You must save the helpless little creature's mother! So I called and lured her, as I do at home, where all the cows are fond of me, but it was useless; and just as I perceived this the thatched roof fell in, and I should probably have perished had not Altrosen this time carried my own by no means light figure out of the stable instead of the calf."

"And you?" asked Els eagerly.

"I submitted," replied the countess.

"No, no," urged Els. "Your heart throbbed faster with grateful joy, for you saw the desire of your soul fulfilled. A hunter, and one of the noblest of them all, risked his life in the pursuit of your love. O Countess Cordula, I remember that knight well, and if the dark-blue sleeve which he wore on his helm in the tournament was yours—"

"I believe it was," Cordula interrupted indifferently. "But, what was of more importance, when I opened my eyes again the cow was standing outside, licking her recovered calf."

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"And the knight?" asked Els. "Whoever so heroically risks his life for his lady's wish should be sure of her gratitude."

"Boemund can rely on that," said Cordula positively. "At least, what he did this time for my sake weighs more heavily in the scale than the lances he has broken, his love songs, or the mute language of his longing eyes. Those are shafts which do not pierce my heart. How reproachfully you look at me! Let him take lessons from his friend Heinz Schorlin, and he may improve. Yes, the Swiss knight! He would be the man for me, spite of your involuntary meeting with him and your devout sister, for whom he forgot every one else, and me also, in the dancing hall. O Jungfrau Els, I have the hunter's eyes, which are keen-sighted! For his sake your beautiful Eva, with her saintly gaze, might easily forget to pray. It was not you, but she, who drew him to-night to your house. Had this thought entered my head downstairs in the entry I should probably, to be honest, have omitted my little fairy tale and let matters take their course. St. Clare ought to have protected her future votary. Besides, it pleases the arrogant little lady to show me as plainly as possible, on every occasion, that I am a horror to her. Let those who will accept such insults. My Christianity does not go far enough to offer her the right cheek too. And shall I tell you something? To spoil her game, I should be capable, in spite of all the life preservers in the world, of binding Schorlin to me in good earnest."

"Do not!" pleaded Els, raising her clasped hands beseechingly, and added, as if in explanation: "For the noble Boemund Altrosen's sake, do not."

"To promise that, my darling, is beyond my power," replied Cordula coolly, "because I myself do not know what I may do or leave undone tomorrow or the day after. I am like a beech leaf on the stream. Let us see where the current will carry it. It is certain," and she looked at her bandaged hands, "that my greatest beauty, my round arms, are disfigured. Scars adorn a man; on a woman they are ugly and repulsive. At a dance they can be hidden under tight sleeves, but how hot that would be in the 'Schwabeln' and 'Rai'! So I had better keep away from these foolish gaieties in future. A calf turns a countess out of a ballroom! What do you think of that? New things often happen."

Here she was interrupted; the housekeeper called Els. Sir Seitz Siebenburg, spite of the untimely hour, had come to speak to her about an important matter. Her father had gone to rest and sleep. The knight also enquired sympathisingly about Countess von Montfort and presented his respects.

"Of which I can make no use!" cried Cordula angrily. "Tell him so, Martsche."

As the housekeeper withdrew she exclaimed impatiently: "How it burns! The heat would be enough to convert the rescued calf into an appetising roast. I wish I could sleep off the pain of my foolish prank! The sunlight is beginning to be troublesome. I cannot bear it; it is blinding. Draw the curtain over the window."

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Cordula's own maid hastened to obey the order. Els helped the countess turn on her pillows, and as in doing so she touched her arm, the sufferer cried angrily: "Who cares what hurts me? Not even you!"

Here she paused. The pleading glance which Els had cast at her must have pierced her soft heart, for her bosom suddenly heaved violently and, struggling to repress her sobs, she gasped, "I know you mean kindly, but I am not made of stone or iron either. I want to be alone and go to sleep."

She closed her eyes as she spoke and, when Els bent to kiss her, tears bedewed her cheeks.

Soon after Els went down into the entry to meet her lover's brother-in-law. He had refused to enter the empty sitting-room. The Countess von Montfort's unfriendly dismissal had vexed him sorely, yet it made no lasting impression. Other events had forced into the background the bitter attack of Cordula, for whom he had never felt any genuine regard.

The experiences of the last few hours had converted the carefully bedizened gallant into a coarse fellow, whose outward appearance bore visible tokens of his mental depravity. The faultlessly cut garment was pushed awry on his powerful limbs and soiled on the breast with wine stains. The closely fitting steel chain armour, in which he had ridden out, now hung in large folds upon his powerful frame. The long mustache, which usually curled so arrogantly upwards, now drooped damp and limp over his mouth and chin, and his long reddish hair fell in dishevelled locks around his bloated face. His blue eyes, which usually sparkled so brightly, now looked dull and bleared, and there were white spots on his copper-coloured cheeks.

Since Countess Cordula gave him the insulting message to his wife he had undergone more than he usually experienced in the course of years.

"An accursed night!" he had exclaimed, in reply to the housekeeper's question concerning the cause of his disordered appearance.

Els, too, was startled by his looks and the hoarse sound of his voice. Nay, she even drew back from him, for his wandering glance made her fear that he was intoxicated.

Only a short time before, it is true, he had scarcely been able to stand erect, but the terrible news which had assailed him had quickly sobered him.

He had come at this unwontedly early hour to enquire whether the Ortliebs had heard anything of his brother-in-law Wolff. There was not a word of allusion to the broken betrothal.



In return for the promise that she would let the Eysvogels know as soon as she received any tidings of her lover, which Els gave unasked, Siebenburg, who had always treated her repellently or indifferently, thanked her so humbly that she was surprised. She did not know how to interpret it; nay, she anticipated nothing good when, with urgent cordiality, he entreated her to forget the unpleasant events of the preceding

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night, which she must attribute to a sudden fit of anger on Herr Casper's part. She was far too dear to all the members of the family for them to give her up so easily. What had occurred—she must admit that herself—might have induced even her best friend to misunderstand it. For one brief moment he, too, had been tempted to doubt her innocence. If she knew old Eysvogel's terrible situation she would certainly do everything in her power to persuade her father to receive him that morning, or—which would be still better—go to his office. The weal and woe of many persons were at stake, her own above all, since, as Wolff's betrothed bride, she belonged to him inseparably.

"Even without the ring?" interrupted Els bitterly; and when Siebenburg eagerly lamented that he had not brought it back, she answered proudly "Don't trouble yourself, Sir Seitz! I need this sacred pledge as little as the man who still wears mine. Tell your kinsfolk so. I will inform my father of Herr Casper's wish; he is asleep now. Shall I guess aright in believing that the other disasters which have overtaken you are connected with the waggon trains Wolff so anxiously expected?"

Siebenburg, twirling his cap in confusion, assented to her question, adding that he knew nothing except that they were lost and, after repeating his entreaty that she would accomplish a meeting between the two old gentlemen, left her.

It would indeed have been painful for him to talk with Els, for a messenger had brought tidings that the waggons had been attacked and robbed, and the perpetrators of the deed were his own brothers and their cousin and accomplice Absbach. True, Seitz himself had had no share in the assault, yet he did not feel wholly blameless for what had occurred, since over the wine and cards he had boasted, in the presence of the robbers, of the costly wares which his father-in-law was expecting, and mentioned the road they would take.

Seitz Siebenburg's conscience was also burdened with something quite different.

Vexed and irritated by the countess's insulting rebuff, he had gone to the Green Shield to forget his annoyance at the gaming table in the Duke of Pomerania's quarters. He had fared ill. There was no lack of fiery Rhine wine supplied by the generous host; the sultry atmosphere caused by the rising thunderstorm increased his thirst and, half intoxicated, and incensed by the luck of Heinz Schorlin, in whom he saw the preferred lover of the lady who had so suddenly withdrawn her favour, he had been led on to stakes of unprecedented amount. At last he risked the lands, castle, and village which he possessed in Hersbruck as his wife's dower. Moreover, he was aware of having said things which, though he could not recall them to memory in detail, had roused the indignation of many of those who were present. The remarks referred principally to the Ortlieb sisters.

Amid the wild uproar prevailing around the gaming table that night the duel which had cost young Vorchtel his life was not mentioned until the last dice had been thrown. In the discussion the victor's betrothed bride had been named, and Siebenburg clearly remembered that he had spoken of the breaking of his brother-in-law's engagement, and connected it with accusations which involved him in a quarrel with several of the guests, among them Heinz Schorlin.

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Similar occurrences were frequent, and he was brave, strong, and skilful enough to cope with any one, even the dreaded Swiss; only he was vexed and troubled because he had disputed with the man to whom he had lost his property. Besides, his father-in-law had so earnestly enjoined it upon him to put no obstacle in the way of his desire to make peace with the Ortliebs that he was obliged to bow his stiff neck to them.

The arrogant knight's position was critical, and real inward dignity was unknown to him. Yet he would rather have been dragged with his brothers to the executioner's block than humbled himself before the Swiss. But he must talk with him for the sake of his twin sons, whose heritage he had so shamefully gambled away. True, the utmost he intended was the confession that, while intoxicated, he had staked his property at the gaming table and said things which he regretted. Heinz Schorlin's generosity was well known. Perhaps he might offer some acceptable arrangement ere the notary conveyed his estate to him. He did not yet feel that he could stoop so low as to receive a gift from this young upstart.

If his father-in-law, who supported him, was really ruined, as he had just asserted, he would indeed be plunged into beggary, with his wife, whose stately figure constantly rose before him, with a look of mute reproach, his beautiful twin boys, and his load of debt.

The gigantic man felt physically crushed by the terrible blows of fate which had fallen upon him during this last wakeful night. He would fain have gone to the nearest tavern and there left it to the wine to bring forgetfulness. To drink, drink constantly, and in the intervals sleep with his head resting on his arms, seemed the most tempting prospect. But he was obliged to return to the Eysvogels. There was too much at stake. Besides, he longed to see the twins who resembled him so closely, and of whom Countess Cordula had said that she hoped they would not be like their father.

ETEXT EDITOR'S BOOKMARKS:

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