

In the Fire of the Forge — Volume 04 eBook

In the Fire of the Forge — Volume 04 by Georg Ebers

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Contents

In the Fire of the Forge — Volume 04 eBook.....	1
Contents.....	2
Table of Contents.....	4
Page 1.....	5
Page 2.....	7
Page 3.....	9
Page 4.....	11
Page 5.....	12
Page 6.....	14
Page 7.....	15
Page 8.....	17
Page 9.....	19
Page 10.....	20
Page 11.....	21
Page 12.....	22
Page 13.....	23
Page 14.....	24
Page 15.....	26
Page 16.....	28
Page 17.....	30
Page 18.....	32
Page 19.....	34
Page 20.....	36
Page 21.....	38
Page 22.....	40

Page 23.....	41
Page 24.....	42
Page 25.....	43
Page 26.....	45
Page 27.....	46
Page 28.....	48
Page 29.....	49
Page 30.....	50
Page 31.....	52
Page 32.....	53
Page 33.....	55
Page 34.....	56
Page 35.....	57
Page 36.....	58
Page 37.....	60
Page 38.....	61
Page 39.....	63
Page 40.....	65
Page 41.....	67
Page 42.....	69
Page 43.....	70
Page 44.....	72

Table of Contents

Section	Table of Contents	Page
Start of eBook		1
CHAPTER XV.		1
CHAPTER XVI.		6
CHAPTER XVII.		16
CHAPTER XVIII.		26
ETEXT EDITOR'S BOOKMARKS:		39
Information about Project Gutenberg		40
(one page)		
(Three Pages)		41

Page 1

CHAPTER XV.

The city gates were already open. Peasants and peasant women bringing vegetables and other farm produce to market thronged the streets, wains loaded with grain or charcoal rumbled along, and herds of cattle and swine, laden donkeys, the little carts of the farmers and bee keepers conveying milk and honey to the city, passed over the dyke, which was still softened by the rain of the preceding night.

The thunderstorm had cooled the air, but the rays of the morning sun were already scorching. A few heavy little clouds were darkly relieved against the blue sky, and a peasant, driving two sucking pigs before him, called to another, who was carrying a goose under each arm, that the sun was drawing water, and thundershowers seldom came singly.

Yet the city looked pleasant enough in the freshness of early June. The maidservants who were opening the shutters glanced gaily out into the streets, and arranged the flowers in front of the windows or bowed reverently as a priest passed by on his way to mass. The barefooted Capuchin, with his long beard, beckoned to the cook or the tradesman's wife and, as she put something into his beggar's sack and he thanked her kindly with some pious axiom, she felt as if she herself and all her household had gained a right to the blessing of Heaven for that day, and cheerily continued her work.

The brass counter in the low, broad bow window of the baker's house glittered brightly, and the pale apprentice wiped the flour from his face and gave his master's rosy-cheeked daughter fresh warm cakes to set on the shining shelves. The barber's nimble apprentice hung the towel and basin at the door, while his master, wearied by the wine-bibbing and talk at the tavern or his labour at the fire, was still asleep. His active wife had risen before him, strewed the shop with fresh sand, and renewed the goldfinch's food.

The workshops and stores were adorned with birch branches, and the young daughters of the burghers, in becoming caps, the maid servants and apprentices, who were going to market with baskets on their arms, wore a flower or something green on their breasts or in their caps.

The first notes of the bells, pealing solemnly, were summoning worshippers to mass, the birds were singing in the garden, and the cocks were crowing in the yards of the houses. The animals passing in the street lowed, grunted, and cackled merrily in the dawn of the young day.

Gay young men, travelling students who had sought cheap quarters in the country, now entered the city with a merry song on their lips just shaded by the first down of

manhood, and when a maiden met them she lowered her eyes modestly before the riotous fellows.

The terrors of the frightful thunderstorm seemed forgotten. Nuremberg looked gladsome; a carpet hung from many a bow-window, and flags and streamers fluttered from roofs and balconies to honour the distinguished guests. Many signs of their presence were visible, squires and equerries, in their masters' colours, were riding spirited horses, and a few knights who loved early rising were already in the saddle, their shining helmets and coats of mail flashing brightly in the sunshine.

Page 2

The gigantic figure of Sir Seitz Siebenburg moved with drooping head through the budding joy of this June day towards the Eysvogel dwelling.

His gloomy, haggard face and disordered attire made two neatly dressed young shoemaker's apprentices, on their way to their work, nudge each other and look keenly at him.

"I'd rather meet him here in broad daylight among houses and people than in the dusk on the highway," remarked one of them.

"There's no danger," replied the other. "He wears the curb now. He moved from the robber nest into the rich Eysvogel house opposite. That's Herr Casper's son-in-law. But such people can never let other folks' property alone. Only here they work in another way. The shoes he wears were made in our workshop, but the master still whistles for his pay, and he owes everybody—the tailor, the lacemaker, the armourer, the girdlemaker, and the goldsmith. If an apprentice reminds him of the debt, let him beware of bruises."

"The Emperor Rudolph ought to issue an edict against such injustice!" wrathfully exclaimed the other and taller youth, the handsome son of a master of the craft from Weissenburg on the Sand, who expected soon to take his father's place. "Up at Castle Graufels, which is saddled on our little town, master and man would be going barefoot but for us; yet for three years we haven't seen so much as a penny of his, though my father says times have already improved, since the Hapsburg, as a just man——"

"Things have not been so bad here for a long while, the saints be praised!" his companion broke in. "Siebenburg, or some of his wife's rich kindred, will at last be compelled to settle matters. We have the law and the Honourable Council to attend to that. Look up! Yonder stately old house gave its daughter to the penniless knight. She is one of our customers too; a handsome woman, and not one of the worst either. But her mother, who was born a countess—if the shoe doesn't make a foot small which Nature created big, there's such an outcry! True, the old woman, her mother, is worse still; she scolds and screams. But look up at the bow window. There she stands. I'm only a poor brewer's son, but before I——"

"You don't say so!" the other interrupted. Have you seen the owl in the cage in front of the guardhouse at the gate of the hospital? It is her living image; and how her chin projects and moves up and down, as though she were chewing leather!"

"And yet," said the other, as if insisting upon something difficult to believe, "and yet the old woman is a real countess."

The Weissenburg apprentice expressed his astonishment with another: "You don't say so!" but as he spoke he grasped his companion's arm, adding earnestly: "Let us go."

That ugly old woman just looked at me, and if it wasn't the evil eye I shall go straight to the church and drive away the misfortune with holy water."

Page 3

"Come, then," answered the Nuremberg youth, but continued thoughtfully: "Yet my master's grandmother, a woman of eighty, is probably older than the one up there, but nobody could imagine a kinder, pleasanter dame. When she looks approvingly at one it seems as if the dear God's blessing were shining from two little windows."

"That's just like my grandmother at home!" exclaimed the Weissenburg apprentice with sparkling eyes.

Turning from the Eysvogel mansion as they spoke, they pursued their way.

Siebenburg had overtaken the apprentices, but ere crossing the threshold of the house which was now his home he stopped before it.

It might, perhaps, be called the largest and handsomest in Nuremberg; but it was only a wide two-story structure, though the roof had been adorned with battlements and the sides with a small bow-windowed turret. At the second story a bracket, bearing an image of the Madonna, had been built out on one side, and on the other the bow window from which old Countess Rotterbach had looked down into the street.

The coat of arms was very striking and wholly out of harmony with the simplicity of the rest of the building. Its showy splendour, visible for a long distance, occupied the wide space between the door of the house and the windows of the upper story. The escutcheon of the noble family from which Rosalinde, Herr Casper's wife, had descended rested against the shield bearing the birds. The Rotterbach supporters, a nude man and a bear standing on its hind legs, rose on both sides of the double escutcheon, and the stone cutter had surmounted the Eysvogel helmet with a count's coronet.

This elaborate decoration of the ancient patrician house had become one of the sights of the city, and had often made Herr Casper, at the Honourable Council and elsewhere, clench his fist under his mantle, for it had drawn open censure and bitter mockery upon the arrogant man, but his desire to have it replaced by a more modest one had been baffled by the opposition of the women of his family. They had had it put up, and would not permit any one to touch it, though Wolff, after his return from Italy, had strenuously urged its removal.

It had brought the Eysvogels no good fortune, for on the day of its completion the business received its first serious blow, and it also served to injure the commercial house externally in a very obvious manner. Whereas formerly many wares which needed to be kept dry had been hoisted from the outer door and the street to the spacious attic, this was now prevented by the projecting figures of the nude men and the bears. Therefore it became necessary to hoist the goods to be stored in the attic from the courtyard, which caused delay and hindrances of many kinds. Various expedients had been suggested, but the women opposed them all, for they were glad

that the ugly casks and bales no longer found their way to the garret past their windows, and it also gratified their arrogance that they were no longer visible from the street.

Page 4

Siebenburg now looked up at the huge escutcheon and recalled the day when, after having been specially favoured by Isabella Eysvogel at a dance in the Town Hall, he had paused in the same place. A long line of laden waggons had just stopped in front of the door surmounted by the double escutcheon, and if he had previously hesitated whether to profit by the favour of Isabella, whose haughty majesty, which attracted him, also inspired him with a faint sense of uneasiness, he was now convinced how foolish it would be not to forge the iron which seemed aglow in his favour. What riches the men-servants were carrying into the vaulted entry, which was twice as large as the one in the Ortlieb mansion! Besides, the escutcheon with the count's coronet had given the knight assurance that he would have no cause to be ashamed, in an assembly of his peers, of his alliance with the Nuremberg maiden. Isabella's hand could undoubtedly free him from the oppressive burden of his debts, and she was certainly a magnificent woman! How well, too, her tall figure would suit him and the Siebenburgs, whose name was said to be derived from the seven feet of stature which some of them measured!

Now he again remembered the hour when she had laid her slender hand in his. For a brief period he had been really happy; his heart had not felt so light since early childhood, though at first he had ventured to confess only one half his load of debt to his father-in-law. He had even assumed fresh obligations to relieve his brothers from their most pressing cares. They had attended his brilliant wedding, and it had flattered his vanity to show them what he could accomplish as the wealthy Eysvogel's son-in-law.

But how quickly all this had changed! He had learned that, besides the woman who had given him her heart and inspired him with a passion hitherto unknown, he had wedded two others.

Now, as the image of old Countess Rotterbach, Isabella's grandmother, forced itself upon his mind, he unconsciously knit his brow. He had not heard her say much, but with every word she bestowed upon him he was forced to accept something bitter. She rarely left her place in the armchair in the bow window in the sitting-room, but it seemed as if her little eyes possessed the power of piercing walls and doors, for she knew everything that concerned him, even his greatest secrets, which he believed he had carefully concealed. More on her account than on that of his mother-in-law, who did nothing except what the former commanded, he had repeatedly tried to remove with his wife to the estate of Tannenreuth, which had been assigned to him on the day of the marriage, that its revenues might support the young couple, but the mother and grandmother detained his wife, and their wishes were more to her than his. Perhaps, however, he might have induced her to go with him had not his father-in-law made his debts a snare, which he drew whenever it was necessary to stifle his wishes, and he, too, wanted to retain his daughter at home.

Page 5

Since Wolff's return from Italy he had become aware that the stream of gold from the Eysvogel coffers flowed more sparingly, or even failed altogether to satisfy his extravagant tastes. Therefore his relations with his brother-in-law, whose prudent caution he considered avarice, and whose earnest protests against his often unprecedented demands frequently roused his ire, became more and more unfriendly.

The inmates of the Eysvogel house rendered his home unendurable, and from the experiences of his bachelor days he knew only too well where mirth reigned in Nuremberg. So he became a rare guest at the Eysvogels, and when Isabella found herself neglected and deceived, she made him feel her resentment in her own haughty and—as soon as she deemed herself injured —harsh manner.

At first her displeasure troubled him sorely, but the ardent passion which had absorbed him during the early days of their marriage had died out, and only flamed up with its old fervour occasionally; but at such times the haughty, neglected wife repulsed him with insulting severity.

Yet she had never permitted any one to disparage her husband behind his back. True, Siebenburg did not know this, but he perceived more and more plainly that both the Eysvogels, father and son, were oppressed by some grave anxiety, and that the sums which Wolff now paid him no longer sufficed to hold his creditors in check. He was not accustomed to impose any restraint upon himself, and thus it soon became known throughout the city that he did not live at peace with his wife and her family.

Yet five weeks ago matters had appeared to improve. The birth of the twins had brought something new into his life, which drew him nearer to Isabella.

The children at first seemed to him two lovely miracles. Both boys, both exactly like him. When they were brought to him on their white, lace-trimmed pillows, his heart had swelled with joy, and it was his greatest delight to gaze at them.

This was the natural result.

He, the stalwart Siebenburg, had not become the father of one ordinary boy, but of two little knights at once. When he returned home—even if his feet were unsteady—his first visit was to them, and he had often felt that he was far too poor and insignificant to thank his neglected wife aright for so precious a gift.

Whenever this feeling took possession of him he expressed his love to Isabella with tender humility; while she, who had bestowed her hand upon him solely from love, forgot all her wrongs, and her heart throbbed faster with grateful joy when she saw him, with fatherly pride, carry the twins about with bent knees, as if their weight was too heavy for his giant arms to bear.

The second week after their birth Isabella fell slightly ill. Her mother and grandmother undertook the nursing, and as the husband found them both with the twins whenever he came to see the infants and their mother, the sick-room grew distasteful to him. Again, as before their birth, he sought compensation outside of the house for the annoyance caused by the women at home; but the memory of the little boys haunted him, and when he met his companions at the tavern he invited them to drink the children's health in the host's best wine.

Page 6

So life went on until the Reichstag brought the von Montforts, whom he had met at a tournament in Augsburg, to the city of Nuremberg.

Mirth reigned wherever Countess Cordula appeared, and Siebenburg needed amusement and joined the train of her admirers—with what evil result he now clearly perceived for the first time.

He again stood before the stately dwelling where he had hoped to find luxury and wealth, but where his heart now throbbed more anxiously than those of his kinsmen had formerly done in the impoverished castle of his father, who had died so long ago.

The Eysvogel dwelling, with its showy escutcheon above the door, was threatened by want, and hand in hand with it, he knew, the most hideous of all her children—disgrace.

Now he also remembered what he himself had done to increase the peril menacing the ancient commercial house. Perhaps the old man within was relying upon the estate of Tannenreuth, which he had assigned to him, to protect some post upon which much depended, and he had gambled it away. This must now be confessed, and also the amount of his own debts.

An unpleasant task confronted him but, humiliating and harassing as was the interview awaiting him beyond the threshold before which he still lingered, at least he would not find Wolff there. This seemed a boon, since for the first time he would have felt himself in the wrong in the presence of his unloved brother-in-law. Even the burden of his debts weighed less heavily on his conscience than the irritating words with which he had induced his father-in-law to break off Wolff's betrothal to Els Ortlieb. The act was base and malicious. Greatly as he had erred, he had never before been guilty of such a deed, and with a curse upon himself on his bearded lips he approached the door; but when half way to it he stopped again and looked up to the second-story windows behind which the twins slept. With what delight he had always thought of them! But this time the recollection of the little boys was spoiled by Countess Cordula's message to his wife to rear them so that they would not be like him, their father.

An evil wish! And yet the warmest love could have devised no better one in behalf of the true welfare of the boys.

He told himself so as he passed beneath the escutcheon through the heavy open door with its iron ornaments. He was expected, the steward told him, but he arched his broad breast as if preparing for a wrestling match, pulled his mustache still longer, and went up the stairs.

CHAPTER XVI.

Page 7

The spacious, lofty sitting-room which Seitz Siebenburg entered looked very magnificent. Gay Flanders tapestries hung on the walls. The ceiling was slightly vaulted, and in the centre of each mesh of the net designed upon it glittered a richly gilded kingfisher from the family coat of arms. Bear and leopard skins lay on the cushions, and upon the shelf which surrounded three sides of the apartment stood costly vases, gold and silver utensils, Venetian mirrors and goblets. The chairs and furniture were made of rare woods inlaid with ebony and mother of pearl, brought by way of Genoa from Moorish Spain. In the bow window jutting out into the street, where the old grandmother sat in her armchair, two green and yellow parrots on brass perches interrupted the conversation, whenever it grew louder, with the shrill screams of their ugly voices.

Siebenburg found all the family except Wolff and the twins. His wife was half sitting, half reclining, on a divan. When Seitz entered she raised her head from the white arm on which it had rested, turned her oval face with its regular features towards him, and gathered up the fair locks which, released from their braids, hung around her in long, thick tresses. Her eyes showed that she had been weeping violently, and as her husband approached she again sobbed painfully.

Her grandmother seemed annoyed by her lamentations for, pointing to Isabella's tears, she exclaimed sharply, glancing angrily at Siebenburg:

"It's a pity for every one of them!"

The knight's blood boiled at the words, but they strengthened his courage. He felt relieved from any consideration for these people, not one of whom, except the poor woman shedding such burning tears, had given him occasion to return love for love. Had they flowed only for the lost wealth, and not for him and the grief he caused Isabella, they would not have seemed "a pity" to the old countess.

Siebenburg's breath came quicker.

The gratitude he owed his father-in-law certainly did not outweigh the humiliations with which he, his weak wife, and ill-natured mother-in-law had embittered his existence.

Even now the old gentleman barely vouchsafed him a greeting. After he had asked about his son, called himself a ruined man, and upbraided the knight with insulting harshness because his brothers—the news had been brought to him a short time before—were the robbers who had seized his goods, and the old countess had chimed in with the exclamation, "They are all just fit for the executioner's block!" Seitz could restrain himself no longer; nay, it gave him actual pleasure to show these hated people what he had done, on his part, to add to their embarrassments. He was no orator, but now resentment loosened his tongue, and with swift, scornful words he told Herr Casper

that, as the son-in-law of a house which liked to represent itself as immensely rich, he had borrowed from others what— he was justified in believing

Page 8

it—had been withheld through parsimony. Besides, his debts were small in comparison with the vast sums Herr Casper had lavished in maintaining the impoverished estates of the Rotterbach kindred. Like every knight whose own home was not pleasant, he sometimes gambled; and when, yesterday, ill luck pursued him and he lost the estate of Tannenreuth, he sincerely regretted the disaster, but it could not be helped.

Terror and rage had sealed the old countess's lips, but now they parted in the hoarse cry: "You deserve the wheel and the gallows, not the honourable block!" and her daughter, Rosalinde Eysvogel, repeated in a tone of sorrowful lamentation, "Yes, the wheel and the gallows."

A scornful laugh from Siebenburg greeted the threat, but when Herr Casper, white as death and barely able to control his voice, asked whether this incredible confession was merely intended to frighten the women, and the knight assured him of the contrary, he groaned aloud: "Then the old house must succumb to disgraceful ruin."

Years of life spent together may inspire and increase aversion instead of love, but they undoubtedly produce a certain community of existence. The bitter anguish of his aged household companion, the father of his wife, to whom bonds of love still unsevered united him, touched even Seitz Siebenburg. Besides, nothing moves the heart more quickly than the grief of a proud, stern man. Herr Casper's confession did not make him dearer to the knight, but it induced him to drop the irritating tone which he had assumed, and in an altered voice he begged him not to give up his cause as lost without resistance. For his daughter's sake old Herr Ortlieb must lend his aid. Els, with whom he had just spoken, would cling firmly to Wolff, and try to induce her father to do all that was possible for her lover's house. He would endeavour to settle with his own creditors himself. His sharp sword and strong arm would be welcome everywhere, and the booty he won— Here he was interrupted by the grandmother's query in a tone of cutting contempt: "Booty? On the highway, do you mean?"

Once more the attack from the hostile old woman rendered the knight's decision easier, for, struggling not to give way to his anger, he answered: "Rather, I think, in the Holy Land, in the war against the infidel Saracens. At any rate, my presence would be more welcome anywhere than in this house, whose roof shelters you, Countess. If, Herr Casper, you intend to share with my wife and the twins what is left after the old wealth has gone, unfortunately, I cannot permit you to do so. I will provide for them also. True, it was your duty; for ever since Isabella became my wife you have taken advantage of my poverty and impaired my right to command her. That must be changed from this very day. I have learned the bitter taste of the bread which you provide. I shall confide them to my uncle, the Knight Heideck. He was my dead mother's only brother, and his wife, as you know, is the children's godmother. They are childless, and would consider it the most precious of gifts to have such boys in the castle. My deserted wife must stay

with him, while I—I know not yet in what master’s service—provide that the three are not supported only by the charity of strangers——”

Page 9

"Oh, Seitz, Seitz!" interrupted Isabella, in a tone of urgent entreaty. She had risen from her cushions, and was hurrying towards him. "Do not go! You must not go so!"

Her tall figure nestled closely against him as she spoke, and she threw her arms around his neck; but he kissed her brow and eyes, saying, with a gentleness which surprised even her: "You are very kind, but I cannot, must not remain here."

"The children, the little boys!" she exclaimed again, gazing up at him with love-beaming eyes. Then his tortured heart seemed to shrink, and, pressing his hand on his brow, he paused some time ere he answered gloomily: "It is for them that I go. Words have been spoken which appeal to me, and to you, too, Isabella: 'See that the innocent little creatures are reared to be unlike their unhappy father.' And the person who uttered them——"

"A sage, a great sage," giggled the countess, unable to control her bitter wrath against the man whom she hated; but Siebenburg fiercely retorted:

"Although no sage, at least no monster spitting venom."

"And you permit this insult to be offered to your grandmother?" Frau Rosalinde Eysvogel wailed to her daughter as piteously as if the injury had been inflicted on herself. But Isabella only clung more closely to her husband, heeding neither her mother's appeal nor her father's warning not to be deluded by Siebenburg's empty promises.

While the old countess vainly struggled for words, Rosalinde Eysvogel stood beside the lofty mantelpiece, weeping softly. Before Siebenburg appeared, spite of the early hour and the agitating news which she had just received, she had used her leisure for an elaborate toilette. A long trailing robe of costly brocade, blue on the left side and yellow on the right, now floated around her tall figure. When the knight returned she had looked radiant in her gold and gems, like a princess. Now, crushed and feeble, she presented a pitiable image of powerless yet offensively hollow splendour. It would have required too much exertion to assail her son-in-law with invectives, like her energetic mother; but when she saw her daughter, to whom she had already appealed several times in a tone of anguished entreaty, rest her proud head so tenderly on her husband's broad breast, as she had done during the first weeks of their marriage, but never since, the unhappy woman clearly perceived that the knight's incredible demand was meant seriously. What she had believed an idle boast he actually requested. Yonder hated intruder expected her to part with her only daughter, who was far more to her than her unloved husband, her exacting mother, or the son who restricted her wishes, whom she had never understood, and against whom her heart had long been hardened. But it could not be and, losing all self-control and dignity, she shrieked aloud, tore the blue headband from her hair and, repeating the "never" constantly as if she had gone out of her senses, gasped: "Never, never, never, so long as I live!"

Page 10

As she spoke she rushed to her startled husband, pointed to her son-in-law, who still held his wife in a close embrace, and in a half-stifled voice commanded Herr Casper to strike down the gambler, robber, spendthrift, and kidnapper of children, or drive him out of the house like some savage, dangerous beast. Then she ordered Isabella to leave the profligate who wanted to drag her down to ruin; and when her daughter refused to obey, she burst into violent weeping, sobbing and moaning till her strength failed and she was really attacked with one of the convulsions she had often feigned, by the advice of her own mother, to extort from her husband the gratification of some extravagant wish.

Indignant, yet full of sincere sympathy, Herr Casper supported his wife, whose queenly beauty had once fired his heart, and in whose embrace he had imagined that he would be vouchsafed here below the joys of the redeemed. As she rested her head, with its long auburn tresses, still so luxuriant, upon his shoulder, exquisite pictures of the past rose before the mental vision of the elderly man; but the spell was quickly broken, for the kerchief with which he wiped her face was dyed red from her rouged cheeks.

A bitter smile hovered around his well-formed, beardless lips, and the man of business remembered the vast sums which he had squandered to gratify the extravagant wishes of the mother and daughter, and show these countesses that he, the burgher, in whose veins ran noble blood, understood as well as any man of their own rank how to increase the charm of life by luxury and splendour.

While he supported his wife, and the old countess was seeking to relieve her, Isabella also prepared to hasten to her mother's assistance, but her husband stopped her with resistless strength, whispering: "You know that these convulsions are not dangerous. Come with me to the children. I want to bid them farewell. Show me in this last hour, at least, that these women are not more to you than I." He released her as he spoke, and the mental struggle which for a short time made her bosom heave violently with her hurried breathing ended with a low exclamation, "I will come."

The nurse, whom Isabella sent out of the room when she entered with her husband, silently obeyed, but stopped at the door to watch. She saw the turbulent knight kneel beside the children's cradle before the wife whom he had so basely neglected, raise his tearful eyes to the majestic woman, whose stature was little less than his own and, lifting his clasped hands, make a confession which she could not hear; saw her draw him towards her, nestle with loving devotion against his broad breast, and place first one and then the other twin boy in his arms.

The young mother's cheeks as well as the father's were wet, but the eyes of both sparkled with grateful joy when Isabella, in taking leave of her husband, thanked him with a last loving kiss for the vow that, wherever he might go, he would treasure her and the children in his heart, and do everything in his power to secure a fate that should be worthy of them.

Page 11

As Siebenburg went downstairs he met his father-in-law on the second-story landing. Herr Casper, deadly pale, was clinging with his right hand to the baluster, pressing his left on his brow, as he vainly struggled for composure and breath. He had forgotten to strengthen himself with food and drink, and the terrible blows of fate which had fallen upon him during these last hours of trial crushed, though but for a short time, his still vigorous strength. The knight went nearer to help him, but when he offered Herr Casper his arm the old merchant angrily thrust it back and accepted a servant's support.

While the man assisted him upstairs he repented that he had yielded to resentment, and not asked his son-in-law to try to discover Wolff's hiding place, but no sooner had food and fiery wine strengthened him than his act seemed wise. The return of the business partner, without whose knowledge he had incurred great financial obligations, would have placed him in the most painful situation. The old gentleman would have been obliged to account to Wolff for the large sum which he owed to the Jew Pfefferkorn, the most impatient of his creditors, though he need not have told him that he had used it in Venice to gratify his love of gaming. How should he answer his son if he asked why he had rejected his betrothed bride, and soon after condescended to receive her again as his daughter and enter into close relations with her father? Yet this must be done. Ernst Ortlieb was the only person who could help him. It had become impossible to seek aid from Herr Berthold Vorchtel, the man whose oldest son Wolff had slain, and yet he possessed the means to save the sinking ship from destruction.

When the news of the duel reached him the messenger's blanched face had made him believe that Wolff had fallen. In that moment he had perceived that his loss would have rendered him miserable for the rest of his life. This was a source of pleasure, for since Wolff had extorted his consent to the betrothal with Els Ortlieb, and thus estranged him from the Vorchtels, he had seriously feared that he had ceased to love him. Nay, in many an hour when he had cause to feel shame in the presence of his prudent, cautious, and upright partner, it had seemed as if he hated him. Now the fear of the judge whom he saw in Wolff was blended with sincere anxiety concerning his only son, whose breach of the peace menaced him with banishment—nay, if he could not pay the price of blood which the Vorchtels might demand, with death. Doubtless he had done many things to prejudice Wolff against his betrothed bride, yet he who had cast the first stone at her now felt that, in her simple purity, she would be capable of no repudiation of the fidelity she owed her future husband. However strongly he had struggled against this conviction, he knew that she, if any one, could make his son happy—far happier than he had ever been with the tall, slender, snow-white, unapproachable countess, who had helped bring him to ruin.

Page 12

While consuming the food and drink, he heard his wife, usually a most obedient daughter, disputing with her mother. This was fortunate; for, if they were at variance, he need not fear that they would act as firm allies against him when he expressed the wish to have Wolff's marriage solemnised as soon as circumstances would permit.

It was not yet time to discuss the matter with any one. He would first go to the Jew Pfefferkorn once more to persuade him to defer his claims, and then, before the meeting of the Council, would repair to the Ortliebs, to commit to Herr Ernst the destiny of the Eysvogel firm and his partner Wolff, on which also depended the welfare of the young merchant's betrothed bride. If the father remained obdurate, if he resented the wrong he had inflicted yesterday upon him and his daughter, he was a lost man; for he had already availed himself of the good will of all those whose doors usually stood open to him. Doubtless the news of his recent severe losses were in every one's mouth, and the letter which he had just received threatened him with an indictment.

The luckless Siebenburg's creditors, too, would now be added to his own. It was all very well for him to say that he would settle his debts himself. As soon as it was rumoured abroad that he had gambled away the estate of Tannenreuth, whose value gave the creditors some security, they would rise as one man, and the house assailed would be his, Casper Eysvogel's.

The harried man's thoughts of his son-in-law were by no means the most kindly.

Meanwhile the latter set out for the second distasteful interview of the morning.

His purpose was to make some arrangement with Heinz Schorlin about the lost estate and obtain definite knowledge concerning his quarrel with him, of which he remembered nothing except that intoxication and jealousy had carried him further than would have happened otherwise. He had undoubtedly spoken insultingly of Els; his words, when uttered against a lady, had been sharper than beseemed a knight. Yet was not any one who found a maiden alone at night with this man justified in doubting her virtue? In the depths of his soul he believed in her innocence, yet he avoided confessing it. Why should not the Swiss, whom Nature had given such power over the hearts of women, have also entangled his brother-in-law's betrothed bride in a love affair? Why should not the gay girl who had pledged her troth to a grave, dull fellow like Wolff, have been tempted into a little love dalliance with the bold, joyous Schorlin?

Not until he had received proof that he had erred would he submit to recall his charges.

Page 13

He had left his wife with fresh courage and full of good intentions. Now that he was forced to bid her farewell, he first realised what she had been to him. No doubt both had much to forgive, but she was a splendid woman. Though her father's storehouses contained chests of spices and bales of cloth, he did not know one more queenly. That he could have preferred, even for a single moment, the Countess von Montfort, whose sole advantage over her was her nimble tongue and gay, bold manners, now seemed incomprehensible. He had joined Cordula's admirers only to forget at her feet the annoyances with which he had been wearied at home. He had but one thing for which to thank the countess—her remark concerning the future of the twins.

Yet was he really so base that it would have been a disgrace for his darlings to resemble him? "No!" a voice within cried loudly, and as the same voice reminded him of the victories won in tournaments and sword combats, of the open hand with which, since he had been the rich Eysvogel's son-in-law, he had lent and given money to his brothers, and especially of the manly resolve to provide for his wife and children as a soldier in the service of some prince, another, lower, yet insistent, recalled other things. It referred to the time when, with his brothers, he had attacked a train of freight waggons and not cut down their armed escort alone. The curse of a broad-shouldered Nordlinger carrier, whose breast he had pierced with a lance though he cried out that he was a father and had a wife and child to support, the shriek of the pretty boy with curling brown hair who clung to the bridle of his steed as he rode against the father, and whose arm he had cut off, still seemed to ring in his ears. He also remembered the time when, after a rich capture on the highway which had filled his purse, he had ridden to Nuremberg in magnificent new clothes at the carnival season in order, by his brothers' counsel, to win a wealthy bride. Fortune and the saints had permitted him to find a woman to satisfy both his avarice and his heart, yet he had neither kept faith with her nor even showed her proper consideration. But, strangely enough, the warning voice reproached him still more sharply for having, in the presence of others, accused and disparaged his brother-in-law's betrothed bride, whose guilt he believed proved. Again he felt how ignoble and unworthy of a knight his conduct had been. Why had he pursued this course? Merely—he admitted it now—to harm Wolff, the monitor and niggard whom he hated; perhaps also because he secretly told himself that, if Wolff formed a happy marriage, he and his children, not Siebenburg's twin boys, would obtain the larger share of the Eysvogel property.

This greed of gain, which had brought him to Nuremberg to seek a wife, was probably latent in his blood, though his reckless accumulation of debts seemed to contradict it. Yesterday, at the Duke of Pomerania's, it had again led him into that wild, mad dice-throwing.

Page 14

Seitz Siebenburg was no calm thinker. All these thoughts passed singly in swift flashes through his excited brain. Like the steady monotone of the bass accompanying the rise and fall of the air, he constantly heard the assurance that it would be a pity if his splendid twins should resemble him.

Therefore they must grow up away from his influence, under the care of his good uncle. With this man's example before their eyes they would become knights as upright and noble as Kunz Heideck, whom every one esteemed.

For the sake of the twins he had resolved to begin a new and worthier life himself. His wife would aid him, and love should lend him strength to conduct himself in future so that Countess von Montfort, and every one who meant well by his sons, might wish them to resemble their father.

He walked on, holding his head proudly erect. Seeing the first worshippers entering the Church of Our Lady, he went in, too, repeated several Paternosters, commended the little boys and their mother to the care of the gracious Virgin, and besought her to help him curb the turbulent impulses which often led him to commit deeds he afterwards regretted.

Many people knew Casper Eysvogel's tall, haughty son-in-law and marvelled at the fervent devotion with which, kneeling in the first place he found near the entrance, beside two old women, he continued to pray. Was it true that the Eysvogel firm had been placed in a very critical situation by the loss of great trains of merchandise? One of his neighbours had heard him sigh, and declared that something must weigh heavily upon the "Mustache." She would tell her nephew Hemerlein, the belt-maker, to whom the knight owed large sums for saddles and harnesses, that he would be wise to look after his money betimes.

Siebenburg quitted the church in a more hopeful mood than when he entered it.

The prayers had helped him.

When he reached the fruit market he noticed that people gazed at him in surprise. He had paid no heed to his dress since the morning of the previous day, and as he always consumed large quantities of food and drink he felt the need of refreshment. Entering the first barber's shop, he had the stubble removed from his cheeks and chin, and arranged his disordered attire, and then, going to a taproom close by, ate and drank, without sitting down, what he found ready and, invigorated in body and mind, continued his walk.

The fruit market was full of busy life. Juicy strawberries and early cherries, red radishes, heads of cabbages, bunches of greens, and long stalks of asparagus were offered for sale, with roses and auriculas, balsams and early pinks, in pots and

bouquets, and the ruddy peasant lasses behind the stands, the stately burgher women in their big round hats, the daughters of the master workmen with their long floating locks escaping from under richly embroidered caps, the maidservants with neat little baskets on their round arms, afforded a varied and pleasing scene. Everything that reached the ear, too, was cheery and amusing, and rendered the knight's mood brighter.

Page 15

Proud of his newly acquired power of resistance, he walked on, after yielding to the impulse to buy the handsomest bouquet of roses offered by the pretty flower girl Kuni, whom, on Countess Cordula's account, during the Reichstag he had patronised more frequently than usual. Without knowing why himself, he did not tell the pretty girl, who had already trusted him very often, for whom he intended it, but ordered it to be charged with the rest.

At the corner of the Bindergasse, where Heinz Schorlin lodged, he found a beggar woman with a bandaged head, whom he commissioned to carry the roses to the Eysvogel mansion and give them to his wife, Fran Isabella Siebenburg, in his—Sir Seitz's—name.

In front of the house occupied by the master cloth-maker Deichsler, where the Swiss had his quarters, the tailor Ploss stopped him. He came from Heinz Schorlin, and reminded Siebenburg of his by no means inconsiderable debt; but the latter begged him to have patience a little longer, as he had met with heavy losses at the gaming table the night before, and Ploss agreed to wait till St. Heinrich's day—[15th July].

How many besides the tailor had large demands! and when could Seitz begin to cancel his debts? The thought even darted through his mind that instead of carrying his good intentions into effect he had not paid for the roses—but flowers were so cheap in June!

Besides, he had no time to dwell upon this trifle, for while quieting the tailor he had noticed a girl who, notwithstanding the heat of the day, kept her face hidden so far under her Riese—[A kerchief for the head, resembling a veil, made of fine linen.]—that nothing but her eyes and the upper part of her nose were visible. She had given him a hasty nod and, if he was not mistaken, it was the Ortlieb sisters' maid, whom he had often seen.

When he again looked after the muffled figure she was hurrying up the cloth-maker's stairs.

It was Katterle herself.

At the first landing she had glanced back, and in doing so pushed the kerchief aside. What could she want with the Swiss? It could scarcely be anything except to bring him a message from one of her mistresses, doubtless Els.

So he had seen aright, and acted wisely not to believe the countess.

Poor Wolff! Deceived even when a betrothed lover! He did not exactly wish him happiness even now, and yet he pitied him.

Seitz could now stand before Heinz Schorlin with the utmost confidence. The Swiss must know how matters stood between the older E and him self, though his knightly

duty constrained him to deny it to others. Siebenburg's self-reproaches had been vain. He had suspected no innocent girl—only called a faithless betrothed bride by the fitting name.

Page 16

The matter concerning his estate of Tannenreuth was worse. It had been gambled away, and therefore forfeited. He had already given it up in imagination; it was only necessary to have the transfer made by the notary. The Swiss should learn how a true knight satisfies even the heaviest losses at the gaming table. He would not spare Heinz Schorlin. He meant to reproach the unprincipled fellow who by base arts had alienated the betrothed bride of an honest man—for that Wolff certainly was—when adverse circumstances prevented his watching the faithless woman himself. Twisting the ends of his mustache with two rapid motions, he knocked at the young knight's door.

CHAPTER XVII.

Twice, three times, Siebenburg rapped, but in vain. Yet the Swiss was there. His armour-bearer had told Seitz so downstairs, and he heard his voice within. At last he struck the door so heavily with the handle of his dagger that the whole house echoed with the sound. This succeeded; the door opened, and Biberli's narrow head appeared. He looked at the visitor in astonishment.

"Tell your master," said the latter imperiously, recognising Heinz Schorlin's servant, "that if he closes his lodgings against dunning tradesfolk—"

"By your knock, my lord," Biberli interrupted, "we really thought the sword cutler had come with hammer and anvil. My master, however, need have no fear of creditors; for though you may not yet know it, Sir Knight, there are generous noblemen in Nuremberg during the Reichstag who throw away castles and lands in his favour at the gaming table."

"And hurl their fists even more swiftly into the faces of insolent varlets!" cried Siebenburg, raising his right hand threateningly. "Now take me to your master at once!"

"Or, at any rate, within his four walls," replied the servitor, preceding Seitz into the small anteroom from which he had come. "As to the 'at once,' that rests with the saints, for you must know——"

"Nonsense!" interrupted the knight. "Tell your master that Siebenburg has neither time nor inclination to wait in his antechamber."

"And certainly nothing could afford Sir Heinz Schorlin greater pleasure than your speedy departure," Biberli retorted.

"Insolent knave!" thundered Seitz, who perceived the insult conveyed in the reply, grasping the neck of his long robe; but Biberli felt that he had seized only the hood, swiftly unclasped it, and as he hurried to a side door, through which loud voices echoed, Siebenburg heard the low cry of a woman. It came from behind a curtain spread over some clothes that hung on the wall, and Seitz said to himself that the person must be

the maid whom he had just met. She was in Els Ortlieb's service, and he was glad to have this living witness at hand.

Page 17

If he could induce Heinz to talk with him here in the anteroom it would be impossible for her to escape. So, feigning that he had noticed nothing, he pretended to be much amused by Biberli's nimble flight. Forcing a laugh, he flung the hood at his head, and before he opened the door of the adjoining room again asked to speak to his master. Biberli replied that he must wait; the knight was holding a religious conversation with a devout old mendicant friar. If he might venture to offer counsel, he would not interrupt his master now; he had received very sad news, and the tailor who came to take his measure for his mourning garments had just left him. If Seitz had any business with the knight, and expected any benefit from his favour and rare generosity——

But Siebenburg let him get no farther. Forgetting the stratagem which was to lure Heinz hither, he burst into a furious rage, fiercely declaring that he sought favour and generosity from no man, least of all a Heinz Schorlin and, advancing to the door, flung the servant who barred his passage so rudely against the wall that he uttered a loud cry of pain.

Ere it had died away Heinz appeared on the threshold. A long white robe increased the pallor of his face, but yesterday so ruddy, and his reddened eyes showed traces of recent tears.

When he perceived what had occurred, and saw his faithful follower, with a face distorted by pain, rubbing his shoulder, his cheeks flushed angrily, and with just indignation he rebuked Siebenburg for his unseemly intrusion into his quarters and his brutal conduct.

Then, without heeding the knight, he asked Biberli if he was seriously injured, and when the latter answered in the negative he again turned to Seitz and briefly enquired what he wanted. If he desired to own that, while in a state of senseless intoxication he had slandered modest maidens, and was ignorant of his actions when he staked his castle and lands against the gold lying before him, Heinz Schorlin, he might keep Tannenreuth. The form in which he would revoke his calumny to Jungfrau Ortlieb he would discuss with him later. At present his mind was occupied with more important matters than the senseless talk of a drunkard, and he would therefore request the knight to leave him.

As Heinz uttered the last words he pointed to the door, and this indiscreet, anything but inviting gesture robbed Siebenburg of the last remnant of composure maintained with so much difficulty.

Nothing is more infuriating to weak natures than to have others expect them to pursue a course opposite to that which, after a victory over baser impulses, they have recognised as the right one and intended to follow. He who had come to resign his lost property voluntarily was regarded by the Swiss as an importunate mendicant; he who stood here

to prove that he was perfectly justified in accusing Els Ortlieb of a crime, Schorlin expected to make a revocation

Page 18

against his better knowledge. And what price did the insolent fellow demand for the restored estate and the right to brand him as a slanderer? The pleasure of seeing the unwelcome guest retire as quickly as possible. No greater degree of contempt and offensive presumption could be imagined, and as Seitz set his own admirable conduct during the past few hours far above the profligate behaviour of the Swiss, he was fired with honest indignation and, far from heeding the white robe and altered countenance of his enemy, gave the reins to his wrath.

Pale with fury, he flung, as it were, the estate the Swiss had won from him at his feet, amid no lack of insulting words.

At first Heinz listened to the luckless gambler's outbreak of rage in silent amazement, but when the latter began to threaten, and even clapped his hand on his sword, the composure which never failed him in the presence of anything that resembled danger quickly returned.

He had felt a strong aversion to Siebenburg from their first meeting, and the slanderous words with which he had dragged in the dust the good name of a maiden who, Heinz knew, had incurred suspicion solely through his fault, had filled him with scorn. So, with quiet contempt, he let him rave on; but when the person to whom he had just been talking—the old Minorite monk whom he had met on the highroad and accompanied to Nuremberg—appeared at the door of the next room, he stopped Seitz with a firm “Enough!” pointed to the old man, and in brief, simple words, gave the castle and lands of Tannenreuth to the monastery of the mendicant friars of the Franciscan order in Nuremberg.

Siebenburg listened with a contemptuous shrug of the shoulders, then he said bitterly: “I thought that a life of poverty was the chief rule in the order of St. Francis. But no matter! May the gift won at the gaming table profit the holy Brothers. For you, Sir Knight, it will gain the favour of the Saint of Assisi, whose power is renowned. So you have acted wisely.”

Here he hesitated; he felt choked with rage. But while the Minorite was thanking Heinz for the generous gift, Siebenburg's eyes again rested on the curtain behind which the maid was concealed.

It was now his turn to deal the Swiss a blow. The old mendicant friar was a venerable person whose bearing commanded respect, and Heinz seemed to value his good opinion. For that very reason the Minorite should learn the character of this patron of his order.



“Since you so earnestly desire to be rid of my company, Sir Heinz Schorlin,” he continued, “I will fulfil your wish. Only just now you appeared to consider certain words uttered last night in reference to a lady—”

“Let that pass,” interrupted Heinz with marked emphasis.

“I might expect that desire,” replied Siebenburg scornfully; “for as you are in the act of gaining the favour of Heaven by pious works, it will be agreeable to you—”

Page 19

"What?" asked the Swiss sharply.

"You will surely desire," was the reply, "to change conduct which is an offence to honourable people, and still more to the saints above. You who have estranged a betrothed bride from her lover and lured her to midnight interviews, no doubt suppose yourself safe from the future husband, whom the result of a duel—as you know—will keep from her side. But Wolff happens to be my brother-in-law, and if I feel disposed to take his place and break a lance with you——"

Heinz, pale as death, interrupted him, exclaiming in a tone of the deepest indignation: "So be it, then. We will have a tilt with lances, and then we will fight with our swords."

Siebenburg looked at him an instant, as if puzzled by his adversary's sharp assault, but quickly regained his composure and answered: "Agreed! In the joust—[single combat in the tourney]—with sharp weapons it will soon appear who has right on his side."

"Right?" asked Heinz in astonishment, shrugging his shoulders scornfully.

"Yes, right," cried the other furiously, "which you have ceased to prize."

"So far from it," the Swiss answered quietly, "that before we discuss the mode of combat with the herald I must ask you to recall the insults with which yesterday, in your drunkenness, you injured the honour of a virtuous maiden in the presence of other knights and gentlemen."

"Whose protector," laughed Seitz, "you seem to have constituted yourself, by your own choice, in her bridegroom's place."

"I accept the position," replied Heinz with cool deliberation. "Not you, nay, I will fight in Wolff Eysvogel's stead—and with his consent, I think. I know him, and esteem him so highly——"

"That you invite his plighted bride to nocturnal love dalliance, and exchange love messages with her," interrupted the other.

This was too much for Heinz Schorlin and, with honest indignation, he cried: "Prove it! Or, by our Lord's blood!—My sword, Biberli!—Spite of the peace proclaimed throughout the land, you shall learn, ere you open your slandering lips again——"

Here he paused suddenly, for while Biberli withdrew to obey the command which, though it probably suited his wishes, he was slow in executing, doubtless that he might save his master from a reckless act, Siebenburg, frantic with fury, rushed to the curtain. Ere Heinz could interfere, he jerked it back so violently that he tore it from the fastenings and forced the terrified maid, whose arm he grasped, to approach the knight with him.

Heinz had seen Katterle only by moonlight and in the twilight, so her unexpected appearance gave him no information. He gazed at her enquiringly, with as much amazement as though she had risen from the earth. Siebenburg gave him no time to collect his thoughts, but dragged the girl before the monk and, raising his voice in menace, commanded: "Tell the holy Brother who you are, woman!"

Page 20

"Katterle of Sarnen," she answered, weeping. "And whom do you serve?" the knight demanded.

"The Ortlieb sisters, Jungfrau Els and Jungfrau Eva," was the reply.

"The beautiful Es, as they are called here, holy Brother," said Siebenburg with a malicious laugh, "whose maid I recognise in this girl. If she did not come hither to mend the linen of her mistress's friend—"

But here Biberli, who on his return to the anteroom had been terrified by the sight of his sweetheart, interrupted the knight by turning to Heinz with the exclamation: "Forgive me, my lord. Surely you know that she is my betrothed bride. She came just now—scarcely a dozen Paternosters ago—to talk with me about the marriage."

Katterle had listened in surprise to the bold words of her true and steadfast lover, yet she was not ill pleased, for he had never before spoken of their marriage voluntarily. At the same time she felt the obligation of aiding him and nodded assent, while Siebenburg rudely interrupted the servant by calling to the monk: "Lies and deception, pious Brother. Black must be whitened here. She stole, muffled, to her mistress's gallant, to bring a message from the older beautiful E, with whom this godly knight was surprised last night."

Again the passionate outbreak of his foe restored the Swiss to composure. With a calmness which seemed to the servant incomprehensible, though it filled him with delight, he turned to the monk, saying earnestly and simply: "Appearances may be against me, Pater Benedictus. I will tell you all the circumstances at once. How this maid came here will be explained later. As for the maiden whom this man calls the older beautiful E, never—I swear it by our saint—have I sought her love or received from her the smallest token of her favour."

Then turning to Siebenburg he continued, still calmly, but with menacing sternness: "If I judge you aright, you will now go from one to another telling whom you found here, in order to injure the fair fame of the maiden whom your wife's valiant brother chose for his bride, and to place my name with hers in the pillory."

"Where Els Ortlieb belongs rather than in the honourable home of a Nuremberg patrician," retorted Siebenburg furiously. "If she became too base for my brother-in-law, the fault is yours. I shall certainly take care that he learns the truth and knows where, and at what an hour, his betrothed bride met foreign heartbreakers. To open the eyes of others concerning her will also be a pleasant duty."

Heinz sprang towards Biberli to snatch the sword from his hand, but he held it firmly, seeking his master's eyes with a look of warning entreaty; but his faithful solicitude would have been futile had not the monk lent his aid. The old man's whispered

exhortation to his young friend to spare the imperial master, to whom he was so deeply indebted, a fresh sorrow, restored to the infuriated young knight his power of self-control. Pushing the thick locks back from his brow with a hasty movement, he answered in a tone of the most intense contempt:

Page 21

“Do what you will, but remember this: Beware that, ere the joust begins, you do not ride the rail instead of the charger. The maidens whose pure name you so yearn to sully are of noble birth, and if they appear to complain of you——”

“Then I will proclaim the truth,” Siebenburg retorted, “and the Court of Love and Pursuivant at Arms will deprive you, the base seducer, of the right to enter the lists rather than me, my handsome knight!”

“So be it,” replied Heinz quietly. “You can discuss the other points with my herald. Wolff Eysvogel, too—rely upon it—will challenge you, if you fulfil your base design.”

Then, turning his back upon Seitz without a word of farewell, he motioned the monk towards the open door of the antechamber, and letting him lead the way, closed it behind them.

“He will come to you, you boaster!” Siebenburg shouted contemptuously after the Swiss, and then turned to Biberli and the maid with a patronising question; but the former, without even opening his lips in reply, hastened to the door and, with a significant gesture, induced the knight to retire.

Seitz submitted and hastened down the stairs, his eyes flashing as if he had won a great victory. At the door of the house he grasped the hilt of his sword, and then, with rapid movements, twisted the ends of his mustache. The surprise he had given the insolent Swiss by the discovery of his love messenger—it had acted like a spell—could not have succeeded better. And what had Schorlin alleged in justification? Nothing, absolutely nothing at all. Wolff Eysvogel’s herald should challenge the Swiss, not him, who meant to open the deceived lover’s eyes concerning his betrothed bride.

He eagerly anticipated the joust and the sword combat with Heinz. The sharper the herald’s conditions the better. He had hurled more powerful foes than the Swiss from the saddle, and from knightly “courtoisie” not even used his strength without consideration. Heinz Schorlin should feel it.

He gazed around him like a victor, and throwing his head back haughtily he went down the Bindergasse, this time past the Franciscan monastery towards the Town Hall and the fish market. Eber, the sword cutler, lived there and, spite of the large sum he owed him, Seitz wished to talk with him about the sharp weapons he needed for the joust. On his way he gave his imagination free course. It showed him his impetuous onset, his enemy’s fall in the sand, the sword combat, and the end of the joust, the swift death of his hated foe.

These pictures of the future occupied his thoughts so deeply that he neither saw nor heard what was passing around him. Many a person for whom he forgot to turn aside looked angrily after him. Suddenly he found his farther progress arrested. The crier

had just raised his voice to announce some important tidings to the people who thronged around him between the Town Hall and the Franciscan monastery. Perhaps

Page 22

he might have succeeded in forcing a passage through the concourse, but when he heard the name “Ernst Ortlieb,” in the monotonous speech of the city crier, he followed the remainder of his notice. It made known to the citizens of Nuremberg that, since the thunderstorm of the preceding night, a maid had been missing from the house of the Honourable Herr Ernst Ortlieb, of the Council, a Swiss by birth, Katharina of Sarnen, called Katterle, a woman of blameless reputation. Whoever should learn anything concerning the girl was requested to bring the news to the Ortlieb residence.

What did this mean?

If the girl had vanished at midnight and not returned to her employers since, she could scarcely have sought Heinz Schorlin as a messenger of love from Els. But if she had not come to the Swiss from one of the Es, what proof did he, Seitz, possess of the guilt of his brother-in-law’s bride? How should he succeed in making Wolff understand that his beloved Els had wronged him if the maid was to play no part in proving it? Yesterday evening he had not believed firmly in her guilt; that very morning it had even seemed to him a shameful thing that he had cast suspicion upon her in the presence of others. The encounter with the maid at the Swiss knight’s lodgings had first induced him to insist on his accusation so defiantly. And now? If Heinz Schorlin, with the help of the Ortliebs, succeeded in proving the innocence of those whom he had accused, then—ah, he must not pursue that train of thought—then, at the lady’s accusation, he might be deprived of the right to enter the lists in the tournament; then all the disgrace which could be inflicted upon the slanderous defamer of character threatened him; then Wolff would summon him to a reckoning, as well as Heinz Schorlin. Wolff, whom he had begun to hate since, with his resistless arm of iron, he had exposed him for the first time to the malicious glee of the bystanders in the fencing hall.

Yet it was not this which suddenly bowed his head and loudly admonished him that he had again behaved like a reckless fool. Cowardice was his least fault. He did not fear what might befall him in battle. Whether he would be barred out from the lists was the terrible question which darkened the bright morning already verging towards noon. He had charged Els with perfidy in the presence of others, and thereby exposed her, the plighted bride of a knight, to the utmost scorn. And besides—fool that he was!—his brothers had again attacked a train of waggons on the highway and would soon be called to account as robbers. This would certainly lead the Swiss and others to investigate his own past, and the Pursuivant at Arms excluded from joust and tourney whoever “injured trade or merchant.” What would not his enemy, who was in such high favour with the Emperor, do to compass his destruction? But—and at the thought he uttered a low imprecation—how could he ride to the joust

Page 23

if his father-in-law closed his strong box which, moreover, was said to be empty? If the old man was forced to declare himself bankrupt Siebenburg's creditors would instantly seize his splendid chargers and costly suits of armour, scarcely one half of which were paid for. How much money he needed as security in case of defeat! His sole property was debts. Yet the thought seemed like an illumination—his wife's valuable old jewels could probably still be saved, and she might be induced to give him part of the ornaments for the tournament. He need only make her understand that his honour and that of the twins were at stake. Would that Heaven might spare his boys such hours of anxiety and self-accusation!

But what was this? Was he deluding himself? Did his over-excited imagination make him hear a death knell pealing for his honour and his hopes, which must be borne to their grave? Yet no! All the citizens and peasants, men and women, great and small, who thronged the salt market, which he had just entered, raised their heads to listen with him; for from every steeple at once rang the mournful death knell which announced to the city the decease of an "honourable" member of the Council, a secular or ecclesiastical prince. The mourning banner was already waving on the roof of the Town Hall, towards which he turned. Men in the service of the city were hoisting other black flags upon the almshouse, and now the Hegelein—[Proclaimer of decrees]—in mourning garments, mounted on a steed caparisoned with crepe, came riding by at the head of other horsemen clad in sable, proclaiming to the throng that Hartmann, the Emperor Rudolph's promising son, had found an untimely end. The noble youth was drowned while bathing in the Rhine.

It seemed as if a frost had blighted a blooming garden. The gay bustle in the market place was paralysed. The loud sobs of many women blended with exclamations of grief and pity from bearded lips which had just been merrily bargaining for salt and fish, meat and game. Messengers with crepe on their hats or caps forced a passage through the throng, and a train of German knights, priests, and monks passed with bowed heads, bearing candles in their hands, between the Town Hall and St. Sebald's Church towards the corn magazine and the citadel.

Meanwhile dark clouds were spreading slowly over the bright-blue vault of the June sky. A flock of rooks hovered around the Town Hall, and then flew, with loud cries, towards the castle.

Seitz watched them indifferently. Even the great omnipotent sovereign there had his own cross to bear; tears flowed in his proud palace also, and sighs of anguish were heard. And this was just. He had never wished evil to any one who did not injure him, but even if he could have averted this sore sorrow from the Emperor Rudolph he would not have stirred a finger. His coronation had been a blow to him and to his brothers. Formerly they had been

Page 24

permitted to work their will on the highways, but the Hapsburg, the Swiss, had pitilessly stopped their brigandage. Now for the first time robber-knights were sentenced and their castles destroyed. The Emperor meant to transform Germany into a sheepfold, Absbach exclaimed. The Siebenburg brothers were his faithful allies, and though they complained that the joyous, knightly clank of arms would be silenced under such a sovereign, they themselves took care that the loud battle shouts, cries of pain, and shrieks for aid were not hushed on the roads used for traffic by the merchants. But this was not Seitz's sole reason for shrugging his shoulders at the expressions of the warmest sympathy which rose around him. The Emperor was tenderly attached to Heinz Schorlin, and the man who was so kindly disposed to his foe could never be his friend. Perhaps to-morrow Rudolph might behead his brothers and elevate Heinz Schorlin to still greater honors. Seitz, whose eyes had overflowed with tears when the warder of his native castle lost his aged wife, who had been his nurse, now found no cause to grieve with the mourners.

So he continued his way, burdened with his own anxieties, amid the tears and lamentations of the multitude. The numerous retinue of servants in the Eysvogel mansion were moving restlessly to and fro; the news of the prince's death had reached them. Herr Casper had left the house. He was probably at Herr Ernst Ortlieb's. If the latter had already learned what he, Seitz Siebenburg, had said at the gaming table of his daughter, perhaps his hand had dealt the first decisive blow at the tottering house where, so long as it stood, his wife and the twins would under any circumstances find shelter. Resentment against the Swiss, hatred, and jealousy, had made him a knave, and at the same time the most shortsighted of fools.

As he approached the second story, in which the nursery was situated and where he expected to find his wife, it suddenly seemed as if a star had risen amid the darkness. If he poured out his heart to Isabella and let her share the terrible torture of his soul, perhaps it would awaken a tender sympathy in the woman who still loved him, and who was dearer to him than he could express. Her jewels were certainly very valuable, but far more precious was the hope of being permitted to rest his aching head upon her breast and feel her slender white hand push back the hair from his anxious brow. Oh, if misfortune would draw her again as near to him as during the early months of their married life and directly before it, he could rise from his depression with fresh vigour and transform the battle, now half lost, into victory. Besides, she was clever and had power over the hearts of her family, so perhaps she might point out the pathway of escape, which his brain, unused to reflection, could not discover.

His heart throbbed high as, animated by fresh hope, he entered the corridor from which opened the rooms which he occupied with her. But his wish to find her alone was not to be fulfilled; several voices reached him.

Page 25

What was the meaning of the scene?

Isabella, her face deadly pale, and her tall figure drawn up to its full height, stood before the door of the nursery with a stern, cold expression on her lovely lips, like a princess pronouncing sentence upon a criminal. She was panting for breath, and before her, her mother, and her grandmother, Countess Cordula's pretty page, whom Siebenburg knew only too well, was moving to and fro with eager gestures. He held in his hand the bunch of roses which Seitz had sent to his newly-won wife and darling as a token of reconciliation, and Siebenburg heard his clear, boyish tones urge: "I have already said so and, noble lady, you may believe me, this bouquet, which the woman brought us, was intended for my gracious mistress, Countess von Montfort. It was meant to give her a fair morning greeting, and—Do not let this vex you, for it was done only in the joyous game of love, as custom dictated. Ever since we came here your lord has daily honoured my countess with the loveliest flowers whose buds unfold in the region near the Rhine. But my gracious mistress, as you have already heard, believes that you, noble lady, have a better right to these unusually beautiful children of the spring than she who last evening bade your lord behold in you, not in her, fair lady, the most fitting object of his homage. So she sent me hither, most gracious madam, to lay what is yours at your feet."

As he spoke, the agile boy, with a graceful bow, tried to place the flowers in Isabella's hand, but she would not receive the bouquet, and the abrupt gesture with which she pushed them back flung the nosegay on the floor. Paying no further heed to it, she answered in a cold, haughty tone: "Thank your mistress, and tell her that I appreciated her kind intention, but the roses which she sent me were too full of thorns." Then, turning her back on the page, she advanced with majestic pride to the door of the nursery.

Her mother and grandmother tried to follow, but Siebenburg pressed between them and his wife, and his voice thrilled with the anguish of a soul overwhelmed by despair as he cried imploringly: "Hear me, Isabella! There is a most unhappy misunderstanding here. By all that is sacred to me, by our love, by our children, I swear those roses were intended for you, my heart's treasure, and for you alone."

But Countess Rotterbach cut him short by exclaiming with a loud chuckle: "The unripe early pears will probably come from the fruit market to the housewife's hands later; the roses found their way to Countess von Montfort more quickly."

The malicious words were followed like an echo by Frau Rosalinde's tearful "It is only too true. This also!"

The knight, unheeding the angry, upbraiding woman, hastened in pursuit of his wife to throw himself at her feet and confess the whole truth; but she, who had heard long before that Sir Seitz was paying Countess Cordula more conspicuous attention than

beseemed a faithful husband, and who, after the happy hour so recently experienced, had expected, until the arrival of the page, the dawn of brighter, better days, now felt doubly abased, deceived, betrayed.

Page 26

Without vouchsafing the unfortunate man even a glance or a word, she entered the nursery before he reached her; but he, feeling that he must follow her at any cost, laid his hand on the lock of the door and tried to open it. The strong oak resisted his shaking and pulling. Isabella had shot the heavy iron bolt into its place. Seitz first knocked with his fingers and then with his clenched fist, until the grandmother exclaimed: "You have destroyed the house, at least spare the doors."

Uttering a fierce imprecation, he went to his own chamber, hastily thrust into his pockets all the gold and valuables which he possessed, and then went out again into the street. His way led him past Kuni, the flower girl from whom he had bought the roses. The beggar who was to carry them to his wife did not hear distinctly, on account of her bandaged head, and not understanding the knight, went to the girl from whom she had seen him purchase the blossoms to ask where they belonged. Kuni pointed to the lodgings of the von Montforts, where she had already sent so many bouquets for Siebenburg. The latter saw both the flower-seller and the beggar woman, but did not attempt to learn how the roses which he intended for his wife had reached Countess Cordula. He suspected the truth, but felt no desire to have it confirmed. Fate meant to destroy him, he had learned that. The means employed mattered little. It would have been folly to strive against the superior power of such an adversary. Let ruin pursue its course. His sole wish was to forget his misery, though but for a brief time. He knew he could accomplish this by drink, so he entered the Mirror wine tavern and drained bumper after bumper with a speed which made the landlord, though he was accustomed to marvellous performances on the part of his guests, shake the head set on his immensely thick neck somewhat suspiciously.

The few persons present had gathered in a group and were talking sadly about the great misfortune which had assailed the Emperor. The universal grief displayed so hypocritically, as Seitz thought, angered him, and he gazed at them with such a sullen, threatening look that no one ventured to approach him. Sometimes he stared into his wine, sometimes into vacancy, sometimes at the vaulted ceiling above. He harshly rebuffed the landlord and the waiter who tried to accost him, but when the peasant's prediction was fulfilled and the thunderstorm of the preceding night was followed at midnight by one equally severe, he arose and left the hostelry. The rain tempted him into the open air. The taproom was so sultry, so terribly sultry. The moisture of the heavens would refresh him.

CHAPTER XVIII.

The fury of the tempest had ceased, but the sky was still obscured by clouds. A cool breeze blew from the northeast through the damp, heavy air.

Page 27

Heinz Schorlin was coming from the fortress, and after crossing the Diligengasse went directly towards his lodgings. His coat of mail, spurs, and helmeted head were accoutrements for the saddle, yet he was on foot. A throng of men, women, and children, whispering eagerly together, accompanied him. One pointed him out to another, as if there was something unusual about him. Two stalwart soldiers in the pay of the city followed, carrying his saddle and the equipments of his horse, and kept back the boys or women who boldly attempted to press too near.

Heinz did not heed the throng. He looked pale, and his thick locks, falling in disorder from under his helmet, floated around his face. The chain armour on his limbs and his long surcoat were covered with mire. The young knight, usually so trim, looked disordered and, as it were, thrown off his balance. His bright face bore the impress of a horror still unconquered, as he gazed restlessly into vacancy, and seemed to be seeking something, now above and now in the ground.

The pretty young hostess, Frau Barbara Deichsler, holding her little three-year-old daughter by the hand, stood in front of the house in the Bindergasse where he lodged. The knight usually had a pleasant or merry word for her, and a gay jest or bit of candy for Annele. Nay, the young noble, who was fond of children, liked to toss the little one in his arms and play with her.

Frau Barbara had already heard that, as Heinz was returning from the fortress, the lightning had struck directly in front of him, killing his beautiful dun charger, which she had so often admired. It had happened directly before the eyes of the guard, and the news had gone from man to man of the incredible miracle which had saved the life of the young Swiss, the dearest friend of the Emperor's dead son.

When Heinz approached the door Frau Barbara stepped forward with Annele to congratulate him that the dear saints had so graciously protected him, but he only answered gravely: "What are we mortals? Rejoice in the child, Frau Barbara, so long as she is spared to you."

He passed into the entry as he spoke, but Frau Deichsler hastily prepared to call his armour-bearer, a grey-bearded Swiss who had served the knight's father and slept away the hours not devoted to his duties or to the wine cup. He must supply the place of Biberli, who had left the house a long time before, and for the first time in many years was keeping his master waiting. But Heinz knew where he was, and while the armour-bearer was divesting him, awkwardly enough, of his suit of mail and gala attire, he was often seized with anxiety about his faithful follower, though many things with which the morning had burdened his soul lay nearer to his heart.

Never had he been so lucky in gambling as last night in the Duke of Pomerania's quarters. Biberli's advice to trust to the two and five had been repeatedly tested, and

besides the estate of Tannenreuth, which Siebenburg had staked against all his winnings, he had brought home more gold than he had ever seen before.

Page 28

Yet he had gone to rest in a mood by no means joyous. It was painful to him to deprive any one of his lands and home. He had even resisted accepting Siebenburg's reckless stake, but his obstinate persistence and demand could not be opposed. The calumnies by which the "Mustache" had assailed the innocent Els Ortlieb haunted him, and many others had shown their indignation against the traducer. Probably thirty gentlemen at the gaming table had been witnesses of these incidents, and if, to-morrow, it was in everybody's mouth that he, Heinz, had been caught at mid-night in an interview with the elder beautiful Ortlieb E, the fault was his, and he would be burdened with the guilt of having sullied the honour and name of a pure maiden, the betrothed bride of an estimable man.

And Eva!

When he woke in the morning his first thought had been of her. She had seemed more desirable than ever. But his relatives at home, and the counsel Biberli had urged upon him during their nocturnal wandering, had constantly interposed between him and the maiden whom he so ardently loved. Besides, it seemed certain that the passion which filled his heart must end unhappily. Else what was the meaning of this unexampled good luck at the gaming table? The torture of this thought had kept him awake a long time. Then he had sunk into a deep, dreamless sleep. In the morning Biberli, full of delight, roused him, and displayed three large bags filled with florins and zecchins, the gains of the night before.

The servant had begged to be permitted to count the golden blessing, which in itself would suffice to buy the right to use the bridge from the city of Luzerne twice over, and the best thing about which was that it would restore the peace of mind of his lady mother at Schorlin Castle.

Now, in the name of all the saints, let him continue his life of liberty, and leave the somnambulist to walk over the roofs, and suffer Altrosen, who had worn her colour so patiently, to wed the countess.

But how long the servitor's already narrow face became when Heinz, with a grave resolution new to Biberli, answered positively that no ducats would stray from these bags to Schorlin Castle. If, last night, anxiety had burdened his mind like the corpse of a murdered man, these gains weighed upon his soul like the loathsome body of a dead cat. Never in his whole life had he felt so poor as with this devil's money. The witch-bait which Biberli had given him with the two and the five had drawn it out of the pockets of his fellow gamblers. He would be neither a cut-purse nor a dealer in the black arts. The wages of hell should depart as quickly as they came. While speaking, he seized the second largest bag and gave it to the servant, exclaiming: "Now keep your promise to Katterle like an honest man. The poor thing will have a hard time at her employer's. I make but one condition: you are to remain in my service. I can't do without you."

Page 29

While the armour-bearer, in the agile Biberli's place, was handing him the garments to be worn in the house, Heinz again remembered how the faithful fellow had thrown himself on his knees and kissed his master's hands and arms in the excess of his joyful surprise, and yet he had felt as if a dark cloud was shadowing the brightness of his soul. The morning sun had shone so radiantly into his window, and Annele had come with such bewitching shyness to bring him a little bunch of lilies of the valley with a rose in the centre, and a pleasant morning greeting from her mother, that the cloud could not remain, yet it had only parted occasionally to close again speedily, though it was less dense and dark than before.

Yet he had taken the child in his arms and looked down into the narrow street to show her the people going to market so gaily in the early morning. But he soon put her down again, for he recognised in a horseman approaching on a weary steed Count Curt Gleichen, the most intimate friend of young Prince Hartmann and himself, and when he called to him he had slid from his saddle with a faint greeting.

Heinz instantly rushed out of the house to meet him, but he had found him beside his steed, which had sunk on its knees, and then, trembling and panting, dragged itself, supported by its rider's hand, into the entry. There it fell, rolled over on its side, and stretched its limbs stiffly in death. It was the third horse which the messenger had killed since he left the Rhine, yet he was sure of arriving too soon; for he had to announce to a father the death of his promising son.

Heinz listened, utterly overwhelmed, to the narrative of the eye-witness, who described how Hartmann, ere he could stretch out a hand to save him, had been dragged into the depths by the waves of the Rhine.

In spite of the sunny brightness of the morning the young Swiss had had a presentiment of some great misfortune, and had told himself that he would welcome it if it relieved him from the burden which had darkened his soul since the disgraceful good luck of the previous night. Now it had happened, and how gladly he would have continued to bear the heaviest load to undo the past. He had sobbed on his friend's breast like a child, accusing Heaven for having visited him with this affliction.

Hartmann had been not only his friend but his pupil—and what a pupil! He had instructed him in horsemanship and the use of the sword, and during the last year shared everything with him and young Count Gleichen as if they were three brothers and, like a brother, the prince had constantly grown closer to his heart. Had he, Heinz, accompanied Hartmann to the Rhine and been permitted to remain with him, neither or both would have fallen victims to the river! And Hartmann's aged father, the noble man to whom he owed everything, and who clung with his whole soul to the beloved youth, his image in mind and person—how

Page 30

would the Emperor Rudolph endure this? But a few months ago death had snatched from him his wife, the love of his youth, the mother of his children, the companion of his glorious career! The thought of him stirred Heinz to the depths of his soul, and he would fain have hastened at once to the castle to help the stricken father bear the new and terrible burden imposed upon him. But he must first care for the messenger of these terrible tidings who, with lips white from exhaustion, needed refreshment.

Biberli, who saw and thought of everything, had already urged the hostess to do what she could, and sent the servant to the tailor that, when Heinz rode to the fortress, he might not lack the mourning—a tabard would suffice—which could be made in a few hours.

Frau Barbara had just brought the lunch and promised to obey the command to keep the terrible news which she had just heard a secret from every one, that the rumor might not reach the fortress prematurely, when another visitor appeared—Heinz Schorlin's cousin, Sir Arnold Maier of Silenen, a tall, broad-shouldered man of fifty, with stalwart frame and powerful limbs.

His grave, bronzed countenance, framed by a grey beard, revealed that he, too, brought no cheering news. He had never come to his young cousin's at so early an hour.

His intelligent, kindly grey eyes surveyed Heinz with astonishment. What had befallen the happy-hearted fellow? But when he heard the news which had wet the young knight's eyes with tears, his own lips also quivered, and his deep, manly tones faltered as he laid his heavy hands on the mourner's shoulders and gazed tearfully into his eyes. At last he exclaimed mournfully: "My poor, poor boy! Pray to Him to whom we owe all that is good, and who tries us with the evil. Would to God I had less painful tidings for you!"

Heinz shrank back, but his cousin told him the tidings learned from a Swiss messenger scarcely an hour before. The dispute over the bridge toll had caused a fight. The uncle who supplied a father's place to Heinz and managed his affairs—brave old Walther Ramsweg—was killed; Schorlin Castle had been taken by the city soldiery and, at the command of the chief magistrate, razed to the ground. Wendula Schorlin, Heinz's mother, with her daughter Maria, had fallen into the hands of the city soldiers and been carried to the convent in Constance, where she and her youngest child now remained with the two older daughters.

Heinz, deeply agitated by the news, exclaimed: "Uncle Ramsweg, our kind second father, also in the grave without my being able to press his brave, loyal hand in farewell! And Maria, our singing bird, our nimble little squirrel, with those grave, world-weary Sisters! And my mother! You, too, like every one, love her, Cousin—and you know her.

She who has been accustomed to command, and to manage the house and the lands,
who like a saint dried tears far and near amid trouble

Page 31

and deprivation— she, deprived of her own strong will, in a convent! Oh, Cousin, Cousin! To hear this, and not be able to rush upon the rabble who have robbed us of the home of our ancestors, as a boy crushes a snail shell! Can it be imagined? No Castle Schorlin towering high above the lake on the cliff at the verge of the forest. The room where we all saw the light of the world and listened to our mother's songs destroyed; the sacred chamber where the father who so lovingly protected us closed his eyes; the chapel where we prayed so devoutly and vowed to the Holy Virgin a candle from our little possessions, or, in the lovely month of May, brought flowers to her from our mother's little garden, the cliff, or the dark forest. The courtyard where we learned to manage a steed and use our weapons, the hall where we listened to the wandering minstrels, in ruins! Gone, gone, all gone! My mother and Maria weeping prisoners!"

Here his cousin broke in to show him that love was leading him to look on the dark side. His mother had chosen the convent for her daughter's sake; she was by no means detained there by force. She could live wherever she pleased, and her dowry, with what she had saved, would be ample to support her and Maria, in the city or the country, in a style suited to their rank.

This afforded Heinz some consolation, but enough remained to keep his grief alive, and his voice sounded very sorrowful as he added: "That lessens the bitterness of the cup. But who will re build the ancient castle? Who will restore our uncle? And the Emperor, my beloved, fatherly master, dying of grief! Our Hartmann dead! Washed away like a dry branch which the swift Reuss seizes and hurries out of our sight! Too much, too hard, too terrible! Yet the sun shines as brightly as before! The children in the street below laugh as merrily as ever!"

Groaning aloud, he covered his face with his hands, and those from whom he might have expected consolation were forced to leave him in the midst of the deepest sorrow; for the Swiss mail, which had come to Maier of Silenen as the most distinguished of his countrymen, was awaiting distribution, and Count Gleichen was forced to fulfill his sorrowful duty as messenger. His friend Heinz had lent him his second horse, the black, to ride to the fortress.

While Heinz, pursued by grief and care, sometimes paced up and down the room, sometimes threw himself into the armchair which Frau Barbara, to do him special honour, had placed in the sitting-room, the Minorite monk Benedictus, whom he had brought to Nuremberg, had come uninvited from the neighbouring monastery to give him a morning greeting. The enthusiasm with which St. Francis had filled his soul in his early years had not died out in his aged breast. He who in his youth had borne the escutcheon of his distinguished race in many a battle and tourney, as a knight worthy of all honour, sympathised with his young equal in

Page 32

rank, and found him in the mood to provide for his eternal salvation. On the ride to Nuremberg he had perceived in Heinz a pious heart and a keen intellect which yearned for higher things. But at that time the joyous youth had not seemed to him ripe for the call of Heaven; when he found him bowed with grief, his eyes, so radiant yesterday, swimming in tears, the conviction was aroused that the Omnipotent One Himself had taken him by the hand to lead the young Swiss, to whom he gratefully wished the best blessings, into the path which the noble Saint of Assisi himself had pointed out to him, and wherein he had found a bliss for which in the world he had vainly yearned.

But his conversation with his young friend had been interrupted, first by the tailor who was to make his mourning garb, then by Siebenburg, and even later he had had no opportunity to school Heinz; for after Seitz had gone Biberli and Katterle had needed questioning. The result of this was sufficiently startling, and had induced Heinz to send the servant and his sweetheart on the errand from which the former had not yet returned.

When the young knight found himself alone he repeated what the monk had just urged upon him. Then Eva's image rose before him, and he had asked himself whether she, the devout maiden, would not thank her saint when she learned that he, obedient to her counsel, was beginning to provide for his eternal salvation.

Moved by such thoughts, he had smiled as he told himself that the Minorite seemed to be earnestly striving to win him for the monastery. The old man meant kindly, but how could he renounce the trade of arms, for which he was reared and which he loved?

Then he had been obliged to ride to the fortress to wait upon the Emperor and tell him how deeply he sympathised with his grief. But he was denied admittance. Rudolph desired to be alone, and would not see even his nearest relatives.

On the way home he wished to pass through the inner gate of the Thiergartnerthor into Thorstrasse to cross the milk market. The violence of the noonday thundershower had already begun to abate, and he had ridden quietly forward, absorbed in his grief, when suddenly a loud, rattling crash had deafened his ears and made him feel as if the earth, the gate, and the fortress were reeling. At the same moment his horse leaped upward with all four feet at once, tossed its clever head convulsively, and sank on its knees.

Half blinded by the dazzling light he saw, and bewildered by the sulphurous vapour he noticed, Heinz nevertheless retained his presence of mind, and had sprung from the saddle ere the quivering steed fell on its side. Several of the guard at the gate quickly hastened to his assistance, examined the horse with him, and found the noble animal already dead. The lightning had darted along the iron mail on its forehead and the steel bit, and struck the ground without injuring Heinz himself. The soldiers and a Dominican

monk who had sought shelter from the rain in the guardhouse extolled this as a great miracle. The people who had crowded to the spot were also seized with pious awe, and followed the knight to whom Heaven had so distinctly showed its favour.

Page 33

Heinz himself only felt that something extraordinary had happened. The world had gained a new aspect. His life, which yesterday had appeared so immeasurably long, now seemed brief, pitifully brief. Perhaps it would end ere the sun sank to rest in the Haller meadows. He must deem every hour that he was permitted to breathe as a gift, like the earnest money he, placed in the trainer's hand in a horse trade. According to human judgment the lightning should have killed him as well as the horse. If he still lived and breathed and saw the grey clouds drifting across the sky, this was granted only that he might secure his eternal salvation, to which hitherto he had given so little concern. How grateful he ought to be that this respite had been allowed him—that he had not been snatched away unwarned, like Prince Hartmann, in the midst of his sins!

Would not Eva feel the same when she learned what had befallen him? Perhaps Biberli would come back soon—he had been gone so long—and could tell him about her.

Even before the thunderbolt had stirred the inmost depths of his being, when he was merely touched by his deep grief and the monk's admonition, he had striven to guide the servant and his sweetheart into the right path, and the grey-haired monk aided him. The monastic life, it is true, would not have suited Biberli, but he had shown himself ready to atone for the wrong done the poor girl who had kept her troth for three long years and, unasked, went back with her to her angry master.

Ere Heinz set forth on his ride to the fortress he had gone out declaring that he would prove the meaning of his truth and steadfastness, thereby incurring a peril which certainly gave him a right to wear the T and St on his long robe and cap forever. He must expect to be held to a strict account by Ernst Ortlieb. If the incensed father, who was a member of the Council, used the full severity of the law, he might fare even worse than ill. But he had realised the pass to which he had brought his sweetheart, and the Minorite led his honest heart to the perception of the sin he would commit if he permitted her to atone for an act which she had done by his desire—nay, at his command.

With the gold Heinz had given him, and after his assurance that he would retain him in his service even when a married man, he could, it is true, more easily endure being punished with her who, as his wife, would soon be destined to share evil with him as well as good. He had also secured the aid of both his master and the Minorite, and had arranged an account of what had occurred, which placed his own crime and the maid's in a milder light. Finally—and he hoped the best result from this—Katterle would bring the Ortliebs good news, and he was the very man to make it useful to Jungfrau Els.

So he had committed his destiny to his beloved master, behind whom was the Emperor himself, to the Minorite, who, judging from his great age and dignified aspect, might be an influential man, St. Leodogar, and his own full purse and, with a heart throbbing anxiously, entered the street with the closely muffled Katterle, to take the unpleasant walk to the exasperated master and father.

Page 34

The morning had been rife with important events to Biberli also. The means of establishing a household, the conviction that it would be hard for him to remain a contented man without the idol of his heart, and the still more important one that it would not be wise to defer happiness long, because, as the death of young Prince Hartmann had shown, and Pater Benedictus made still more evident, the possibility of enjoying the pleasures of life might be over far too speedily.

He had been within an ace of losing his Katterle forever, and through no one's guilt save that of the man on whose truth and steadfastness she so firmly relied. After Siebenburg's departure she had confessed with tears to him, his master, and the monk, what had befallen her, and how she had finally reached the Bindergasse and Sir Heinz Schorlin's lodgings.

When, during the conflagration, fearing punishment, she had fled, she went first to the Dutzen pond. Determined to end her existence, she reached the goal of her nocturnal and her life pilgrimage. The mysterious black water with its rush-grown shore, where ducks quacked and frogs croaked in the sultry gloom, lay before her in the terrible darkness. After she had repeated several Paternosters, the thought that she must die without receiving the last unction weighed heavily on her soul. But this she could not help, and it seemed more terrible to stand in the stocks, like the barber's widow, and be insulted, spit upon by the people, than to endure the flames of purgatory, where so many others—probably among them Biberli, who had brought her to this pass—would be tortured with her.

So she laid down the bundle which—she did not know why herself— she had brought with her, and took off her shoes as if she were going into the water to bathe. Just at that moment she suddenly saw a red light glimmering on the dark surface of the water. It could not be the reflection of the fires of purgatory, as she had thought at first. It certainly did not proceed from the forge on the opposite shore, now closed, for its outlines rose dark and motionless against the moon. No—a brief glance around verified it—the light came from the burning of the convent. The sky was coloured a vivid scarlet in two places, but the glow was brightest towards the southeastern part of the city, where St. Klarengasse must be. Then she was overpowered by torturing curiosity. Must she die without knowing how much the fire had injured the newly built convent, on whose site she had enjoyed the springtime of love, and how the good Sisters fared? It seemed impossible, and her greatest fault for the first time proved a blessing. It drew her back from the Dutzen pond to the city.

On reaching the Marienthurm she learned that only a barn and a cow stable had been destroyed by the flames. For this trivial loss she had suffered intense anxiety and been faithless to her resolution to seek death, which ends all fears.

Page 35

Vexed by her own weakness, she determined to go back to her employer's house and there accept whatever fate the saints bestowed. But when she saw a light still shining through the parchment panes in the room occupied by the two Es, she imagined that Herr Ernst was pronouncing judgment upon Eva. In doing so her own guilt must be recalled, and the thought terrified her so deeply that she joined the people returning from the fire, for whom the Frauenthor still stood open, and allowed the crowd to carry her on with them to St. Kunigunde's chapel in St. Lawrence's church; and when some, passing the great Imhof residence, turned into the Kotgasse, she followed.

Hitherto she had walked on without goal or purpose, but here the question where to seek shelter confronted her; for the torchbearers who had lighted the way disappeared one after another in the various houses. Deep darkness suddenly surrounded her, and she was seized with terror. But ere the last torch vanished, its light fell upon one of the brass basins which hung in front of the barbers' shops.

The barber! The woman whom she had seen in the stocks was the widow of one, and the house where she granted the lovers the meeting, on whose account she had been condemned to so severe a punishment, was in the Kotgasse, and had been pointed out to her. It must be directly opposite. The thought entered her mind that the woman who had endured such a terrible punishment, for a crime akin to her own, would understand better than any one else the anguish of her heart. How could the widow yonder refuse her companion in guilt a compassionate reception!

It was a happy idea, but she would never have ventured to rouse the woman from her sleep, so she must wait. But the first grey light of dawn was already appearing in the eastern horizon on the opposite side of the square of St. Lawrence, and perhaps Frau Ratzer would open her house early.

The street did honour to the name of Kotgasse—[Kot or koth-mire]. Holding her dress high around her, Katterle waded across to the northern row of houses and reached the plank sidewalk covered with mud to her ankles; but at the same moment a door directly in front of her opened, and two persons, a man and a woman, entered the street and glided by; but they came from Frau Ratzer's—she recognised it by the bow-window above the entrance. The maid hurried towards the door, which still stood open, and on its threshold was the woman to whom she intended to pay her early visit.

Almost unable to speak, she entreated her to grant a poor girl, who did not know where to seek shelter at this hour, the protection of her house.

Page 36

The widow silently drew Katterle into the dark, narrow entry, shut the door, and led her into a neat, gaily ornamented room. A lamp which was still burning hung from the ceiling, but Frau Ratzer raised the tallow candle she had carried to the door, threw its light upon her face, and nodded approvingly. Katterle was a pretty girl, and the flush of shame which crimsoned her cheeks was very becoming. The widow probably thought so, too, for she stroked them with her fat hand, promising, as she did so, to receive her and let her want for nothing if she proved an obedient little daughter. Then she pinched the girl's arm with the tips of her fingers so sharply that she shrank back and timidly told the woman what had brought her there, saying that she was and intended to remain a respectable girl, and had sought shelter with Frau Ratzer because she knew what a sore disgrace she had suffered for the same fault which had driven her from home.

But the widow, starting as if stung by a scorpion, denounced Katterle as an impudent hussy, who rightfully belonged in the stocks, to which the base injustice of the money-bags in the court had condemned her. There was no room in her clean house for anyone who reminded her of this outrage and believed that she had really committed so shameful an act. Then, seizing the maid by the shoulders, she pushed her into the street.

Meanwhile it had grown light. The sun had just risen in the east above the square of St. Lawrence and spread a golden fan of rays over the azure sky. The radiant spectacle did not escape the eyes of the frightened girl, and she rejoiced because it gave her the assurance that the terrifying darkness of the night was over.

How fresh the morning was, how clear and beautiful the light of the young day! And it shone not only on the great and the good, but on the lowly, the poor, and the wicked. Even for the horrible woman within the sky adorned itself with the exquisite blue and glorious brilliancy.

Uttering a sigh of relief she soon reached the Church of St. Lawrence, which the old sexton was just opening. She was the first person who entered the stately house of God that morning and knelt in one of the pews to pray.

This had been the right thing for her to do. Dear Lord! Where was there any maid in greater trouble, yet Heaven had preserved her from the death on a red-hot gridiron which had rendered St. Lawrence, whose name the church bore, a blessed martyr. Compared with that, even standing in the pillory was not specially grievous. So she poured out her whole soul to the saint, confessing everything which grieved and oppressed her, until the early mass began. She had even confided to him that she was from Sarnen in Switzerland, and had neither friend nor countryman here in Nuremberg save her lover, the true and steadfast Biberli. Yet no! There was one person from her home who probably would do her a kindness, the wife of the gatekeeper in the von Zollern castle, a native of Berne, who had come to Nuremberg and the fortress as the maid of the Countess Elizabeth of Hapsburg, the present Burgravine. This excellent

woman could give her better counsel than any one, and she certainly owed the recollection of Frau Gertrude to her patron saint.

Page 37

After a brief thanksgiving she left the church and went to the fortress.

As she expected, her countrywoman received her kindly; and after Katterle had confided everything to her, and in doing so mentioned Wolff Eysvogel, the betrothed husband of the elder of her young mistresses, Frau Gertrude listened intently and requested her to wait a short time.

Yet one quarter of an hour after another elapsed before she again appeared. Her husband, the Bernese warder, a giant of a man to whom the red and yellow Swiss uniform and glittering halberd he carried in his hand were very becoming, accompanied his wife.

After briefly questioning Katterle, he exacted a solemn promise of secrecy and then motioned to her to follow him. Meanwhile the maid had been informed how the duel between Wolff Eysvogel and Ulrich Vorchtel had ended, but while she still clasped her hands in horror, the Swiss had opened the door of a bright, spacious apartment, where Els Ortlieb's betrothed husband received her with a kind though sorrowful greeting. Then he continued his writing, and at last gave her two letters. One, on whose back he drew a little heart, that she might not mistake it for the other, was addressed to his betrothed bride; the second to Heinz Schorlin, whom Wolff—no, her ears did not deceive her—called the future husband of his sister-in-law Eva. At breakfast, which she shared with her country people and their little daughter, Katterle would have liked to learn how Wolff reached the fortress, but the gatekeeper maintained absolute silence on this subject.

The maid at last, without hindrance, reached the Deichsler house and found Biberli (not) at home. She ought to have returned to the Ortliebs in his company long before, but the knight still vainly awaited his servant's appearance. He missed him sorely, since it did not enter his head that his faithful shadow, Biberli, knew nothing of the thunderbolt which had almost robbed him of his master and killed his pet, the dun horse. Besides, he was anxious about his fate and curious to learn how he had found the Ortlieb sisters; for, though Eva alone had power to make Heinz Schorlin's heart beat faster, the misfortune of poor Els affected him more deeply as the thought that he was its cause grew more and more painful.

Wolff's letter, which Katterle delivered to him, revealed young Eysvogel's steadfast love for the hapless girl. In it he also alluded to his nocturnal interview with Heinz, and in cordial words admitted that he thought he had found in him a sincere friend, to whom, if to any one, he would not grudge his fair young sister-in-law Eva. Then he described how the unfortunate duel had occurred.

Page 38

After mentioning what had excited young Ulrich Vorchtel's animosity, he related that, soon after his interview with Heinz, he had met young Vorchtel, accompanied by several friends. Ulrich had barred his way, loading him with invectives so fierce and so offensive to his honour, that he was obliged to accept the challenge. As he wore no weapon save the dagger in his belt, he used the sword which a German knight among Ulrich's companions offered him. Calm in the consciousness that he had given his former friend's sister no reason to believe in his love, and firmly resolved merely to bestow a slight lesson on her brother, he took the weapon. But when Ulrich shouted to the crusader that the blade he lent was too good for the treacherous hand he permitted to wield it, his blood boiled, and with his first powerful thrust all was over.

The German knight had then introduced himself as a son of the Burgrave von Zollern and taken him to the castle, where, with his father's knowledge, the noble young Knight Hospitaller concealed him, and the point now was to show the matter, which was undoubtedly a breach of the peace, to the Emperor Rudolph in the right light. The young Burgrave thought that he, Heinz Schorlin, could aid in convincing the sovereign, who would lend him a ready ear, that he, Wolff, had only drawn his sword under compulsion. So truly as Heinz himself hoped to be a happy man through Eva's love, he must help him to bridge the chasm which, by his luckless deed, separated him from his betrothed bride.

Heinz had had this letter read aloud twice. Then when Biberli had gone and he rode to the fortress, he had resolved to do everything in his power for the young Nuremberg noble who had so quickly won his regard, but the sorely stricken imperial father had refused to see him, and therefore it was impossible to take any step in the matter.

Yet Wolff's letter had showed that he believed him in all earnestness to be Eva's future husband, and thus strengthened his resolve to woo her as soon as he felt a little more independent.

After the thunderbolt had killed the horse under him, and the old Minorite had again come and showed him that the Lord Himself, through the miracle He had wrought, had taken him firmly and swiftly by the hand as His chosen follower, it seemed to his agitated mind, when he took up the letter a second time, as though everything Wolff had written about him and Els's sister was not intended for him.

Eva was happiness—but Heaven had vouchsafed a miracle to prove the transitoriness of earthly life, that by renunciation here he might attain endless bliss above. Sacrifice and again sacrifice, according to the Minorite, was the magic spell that opened the gates of heaven, and what harder sacrifice could he offer than that of his love? "Renounce! renounce!" he heard a voice within cry in his ears as, with much difficulty, he himself read Wolff's letter, but whatever he might cast away of all that was his, he still would fail to take up his cross as Father Benedictus required; for even as an unknown beggar he would have enjoyed—this he firmly believed—in Eva's love the highest

earthly bliss. Yet divine love was said to be so much more rapturous, and how much longer it endured!

Page 39

And she? Did not the holy expression of her eyes and the aspiration of her own soul show that she would understand him, approve his sacrifice, imitate it, and exchange earthly for heavenly love? Neither could renounce it without inflicting deep wounds on the heart, but every drop of blood which gushed from them, the Minorite said, would add new and heavy weight to their claim to eternal salvation.

Ay, Heinz would try to resign Eva! But when he yielded to the impulse to read Wolff's letter again he felt like a dethroned prince whom some stranger, ignorant of his misfortune, praises for his mighty power.

The visions of the future which the greyhaired monk conjured up, all that he told hint of his own regeneration, transformation, and the happiness which he would find as a disciple of St. Francis in poverty, liberty, and the silent struggle for eternal bliss, everything which he described with fervid eloquence, increased the tumult in the young knight's deeply agitated soul.

ETEXT EDITOR'S BOOKMARKS:

Deem every hour that he was permitted to breathe as a gift

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