

## The Project Gutenberg eBook of The Imperial Crown, by Wilhelm Raabe

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Produced by English translation produced by Michael Wooff

The Imperial Crown

A story by Wilhelm Raabe (1831-1910)

On the fifty-third day of the siege, one and a half thousand years after the fall of Rome as a republic and nine hundred and seventy seven years after Odoacer the Barbarian had exiled the boy emperor Romulus Augustulus to the estate that had once belonged to Lucullus in Catania, Constantinople had fallen. God placed two empires and twelve kingdoms in the hands of the son of Murad, Mehmet the Second. What Christendom in its comatose dullness, tearing itself to pieces in wars of religion and feuds between peoples and their princes, had been unable to defend itself against, had now happened. The great bogeyman had finally arrived.

On Saint Lawrence's day in the year 1453 an old man sits in a narrow room in a house on the Banner Mountain in Nuremberg writing what we are about to read. The low window looks out on a small vegetable patch and up to the town wall beyond. The small room is bare and without any ornament, but the sun shines down on the garden, the day is pleasant and the sky is blue.

It is quiet and yet not quiet. The writer's room does indeed face the town and the streets, but a strange noise and a humming sound buzzes through the air and the brave old high protective walls and towers resonate most singularly. The writer's room is also filled with a humming and ringing and wondrous rushing. Someone insecure and not in control of their thoughts and their quill would find it hard today in Nuremberg to execute calligraphy with stylus, ink, paper and parchment.

The grey-haired old man now and again holds his head in his hands and listens to the ruckus, but it does not have the power to disturb him. His eye only looks to the sky for a moment with just a little less pensiveness. He does not, however, put down his quill for such trifles.

He has talent as a scribe and has something to say of lasting value despite the sounds and interplay of colours of the world outside.

Tolle! Lege! Take and read! Let us see what Saint Augustine has to say on the subject: "I heard come from a neighbouring house a soft and gentle voice repeating itself as if a boy or girl were speaking: Tolle! Lege! Take and read! And my face was drained of colour and I wondered if these words were part of a children's game but could not remember ever having heard them before. And, suddenly, tears came to my eyes and I stood up interpreting this as a voice from heaven!" That's it in a nutshell! Thanks to this great privilege, by the grace of God, I too heard this siren voice, half that of a child, half that of a messenger of the Most High and discovered the Logos that made sense of worldly hubbub and gave me peace. Like Augustine I no longer breathed the air of bread and circuses, of the military might of the

Emperor and his erstwhile glory nor indeed the splendour that once was Rome.

I heard and saw—things wonderful to tell of and describe. While I was still young I saw a bright light in the gloom. While I was still young my life also underwent a change.

What does the great bell *Benedicta* in the church of Saint Sebaldus want with its solemn tolling? What do the other bells in all the belltowers of my home town want by ringing so? I can hear their tones, both near and far, intermingle with each other. I can hear my brothers and sisters making their way through streets and marketplaces singing psalms and plaintive hymns. I hear the people tramp like the roar of a faraway river breaking its banks.

To the churchyard of Saint Sebaldus, to the sound of its iron clapper voice they stream as one: *Vox ego sum vitae, voco vos, orate, venite!* (I am the voice of life, I am calling you to pray, come!) Friar Johannes Capistranus is standing in the stone pulpit outside the walls of the church to preach about the pagan victory, the fall of the Eastern Empire, the coming of the Anti-Christ and the end of the world. His call to repentance has been tolled out by all the bells. In all the towns through which he has passed people have lit fires and thrown on them with cries and sobs their ephemeral vain things: dice and board games, little bells and sledges, quilted hoods and pointed shoes. This they will do today too in Nuremberg, rid themselves a hundredfold of aids to sensuality and find themselves beset by courtly love and the pride of life yet again tomorrow as they were yesterday and are today.

Truly this zealous Franciscan friar speaks well. The whole of Christendom, to whom he addresses himself, has learnt that. He does not speak to bandy words with the foolish and the weak. He tugs at the heartstrings of the strongest man. He spares no-one. He grips men in armour so that even their iron breastplates become no more than the flimsy garment that a woman wears. He seizes them and those who wear crowns on their helmets must get down on their knees like the women who have come here from the cradles of their children, like the young women who have been weaving garlands and gathering bunches of flowers, who have come here from their spindles and their looms. Brother Johannes speaks well. He drowns out the sound of the bells, but how could he drown out the gentle voice that once spoke to me?

I have no more board games and dice games, pointed shoes and modish clothes to throw into the flames. I do not need to jostle with the others at the church of Saint Sebaldus. How potent the words of that fiery monk Johannes Capistranus though! The great unrest he has caused in the feelings of the people in this town has laid hold of me too. I have not been able to defend myself against them and so here I sit on St Lawrence's day in the year of the fall of Byzantium and write down what I experienced in my youth when the crown belonging to the German people was almost lost and when I too was led to fight for it along with others. While the town heaves and swells and thunders like a far-off sea, I am writing what the gentle voice once said that set me so soon on the way through life and that penetrated both my ear and heart in the wildest and the most anarchic of times.

I am from an old and resourceful Nuremberg family. I studied, not without diligence and understanding, law in Prague before moving to Leipzig when the Hussite heresy began to trouble us. I wielded my sword for my town and the Empire, had command of the town of Gleven in hard-fought battles and was the town's envoy to the Republic of Venice and to the Queen of Naples, Joanna the Second. Marsilio Ficino called me his friend and Cosimo de' Medici took me into his Platonic Academy in Florence. I am master of my own body and master in my own house. I am a wealthy man and am tired of life.

Tired of life? Perhaps not, but I have had many long years of experiencing it and Brother Johannes at St Sebaldus today has nothing to tell me.

Truly I am not tired of life, but like the saintly bishop of Hippo, Aurelius Augustinus, I know that the games of grown-ups are called business and, as I early rejected the games of my youth, so I have now foresworn the games of adults. I am now at peace by the grace of God.

At peace! I am still pleased with my great and splendid alma mater, its art and its cleverness, the favour and the fame it enjoys among nations. I take pleasure in remembering the beauty of the world, how, for instance, I can bring to mind the shining of the Tyrrhenian sea in the sunshine even today. I take pleasure in the noble men and women who have met with me under Germany's sky as well as that of Italy. Truly I have seen much in the world, truly I have lived and live still. Only today it is not of the earth's splendour I write under this tolling of bells occasioned by one who is preaching atonement at the church of Saint Sebaldus.

With heartfelt devotion I have always supported my home town and it has been second to no other town for me no matter how fair the laurel groves that town was steeped in. Others may boast of their Arno and the blueness of their Adriatic. I prize the town of my father and my mother. It has always lain

quietly inside me when I thought of them along life's byways. I hold dear in this place and in this hour the town that was there to witness the birth of Mechthild Grossin.

When I was young my father's house was full of people, full of life. That life has gradually faded and grown silent, one voice after another. My parents are dead and my brothers and sisters too. I have been left on my own and my footfall in this old house is the only one now that those of a veritable host of friends and relations have gone to echo on the stairs and in the passages and rooms. And so too I am excluded from those rooms which once were full of cheerful noise and overlook the gaudy street. I sit once again in that room that was mine as a boy and after, when I was a student in Prague. A narrow space is enough for me, a bare wall preferable to one that has been decorated. I love my garden more than the tumultuous streets and the treetops that come up as far as my windowsill give me more pleasure than the parades of noble and not so noble families, of the councillors and clergy of this gracious town of Nuremberg.

I have left the proud rooms of the front of the house with their decorations, ornaments, carvings and weapons on display to the spiders and the maids. It is my youth that has brought me in old age back to my tiny schoolroom. It is my garden and the garden in which Mechthild Grossin played as a little girl and strolled in as a young woman that have brought me back here.

But I did not live alone then in the small room. In the year 1390 the knight Hans Groland with his brother Ulrich had placed his Laufenholz stables in the town of Nuremberg on the open market and both brothers had sworn that neither they nor any of their descendants would sell the property to anyone other than a citizen or a citizeness of Nuremberg. When in 1392 the great bell of Saint Sebaldus was blessed, both brothers had already died and Hans's son, Michael Groland, became my father's ward and was brought to our home as no-one else wanted to take him in. My father's guardianship extended to little more than the wild young squire himself for the Groland family had managed their affairs badly from of old and for the last scion of their race little remained of ancient property rights. His parents, however, had held the stables in perpetuity from the time of Emperor Ludwig the Second of Bavaria.

The wild young squire Michael was my friend and Mechthild Grossin grew up to be his bride. Their voices too are silent now and their footsteps no more heard. Tolle! Lege! Tolle! Lege!

From the time of Conrad Hainzen onwards, who was called Conrad the Leper and then Conrad the Great, no more imposing family has arisen in Nuremberg and on the strong tree with a hundred branches no fairer blossom than Mechthild Grossin whose father on Banner Mountain was my father's neighbour. For me it is a miracle, even if it is not one, that today, withered and grey, I can overlook the window of the fair maid's summer garden, while she departed this life many years ago as she left her room in all her youthful beauty.

Yes, she left and no-one was able to stop her—not her father, not her mother, not the might, power and reputation of the great town nor those of her great and honourable family.

She listened to the voice of love and followed the promptings of her forefather. Tolle! Lege!

It was a one-year-old child that was brought to my father in his home and grew to be like a young eaglet that fell out of its parents' nest and was taken home by a beekeeper under his arm. My father learnt the hard way what it is to feed a bird of prey. But I, who was only slightly older than Squire Michael, took pleasure in having a good playmate until we were both eligible bachelors and had gone from being playmates to being friends for life until death came to part us.

Yes, we were boys in the time of the wild and merry king Wenceslas and the way things stood in the Empire at that time and the feuds the town had on its hands with Heinrich von Buchteck, Georg von Wichsenstein, Sybold Schelm of Bergen and dozens of other thorns in its side, even the careworn face of my father, the keeper of the public purse who had to keep an eye on the town's treasure, seals and documents, could often not repress with its grim lines the youthful merriment in the house on Banner Mountain. And that fateful day in Rense that brought to a wondrous end the splendour of King Wenceslas on German soil was really not able to put paid to the splendour of our youth.

In the year of Our Lord 1400 Mechthild Grossin was born into this vale of tears in the house next door to us. In the reign of King Ruprecht Squire Groland von Laufenholz and myself became young men.

Look at that sun! It lies like gold over the grey wall of the town and the turret of the watchtower opposite my window. In my north-facing room it cannot of course penetrate, but I see it as I saw it in the days of my youth. Why is the monk at Saint Sebaldus preaching about the end of the world? The world won't come to an end because Constantinople has fallen into the hands of the heathen, because

the Holy Roman Empire's fortresses are threatened, because poor mankind wanders into sin as it has to wander in pain and inexpressible misery! A friendly swaying moves the trees of my youth. They bow to each other over the gates that separate neighbours' gardens. The unsteady shadows of branch and leaf dance on the ground. The happy birds hop and flutter in the treetops. The summer flowers of my youth bloom in my garden and in the gardens of my neighbours. The world defends itself today as it did in olden days through beauty and loveliness against the words of the angry monk. Tolle! Lege! Take and read and understand rightly and take care not to attribute a false meaning to the word that is opened up to you and stands for your life and the life of your contemporaries!

When Michael and I had become young men and played our part in torchlit dances and bearded masques, our neighbour's little girl slipped through the green hedge and came shyly and yet deliberately to the bower where we first sat with our teacher Theodoros Antoniadēs, exiled from Chios, whose evil star had led him, to prove a real blessing to me, to Nuremberg. In his flight from the Turks he had only been able to take with him a few rolled-up parchments and books he had written himself and his language, which was like a revelation to me and fell on my soul like a rainbow. I helped the homeless refugee to live and he taught me his Greek tongue and tried to teach it to my friend and would perhaps have managed it if the child had not stuck her curly little head into the green bower. Master Theodoros was just drawing his first gamma on the table with a piece of chalk when the child appeared and Greek went out of the window for the wild child Michael Groland von Laufenholz. He caught up the child with a laugh, lifted her, made much of her and disrupted the lesson in no uncertain way. I told him off severely, but he laughed all the more and the girl got no further than the alphabet. But his fate was decided thereby and so was mine.

The little girl came to every lesson that we held in the garden and, though Michael did not continue to annoy us any further, he seated his little friend on his knee and she, Mechthild, learnt more from Master Theodoros Antoniadēs than Michael did, for she listened attentively and quietly enough to him and watched with big, earnest eyes the careworn face of the wise, banished teacher. After the lesson she ran more or less wild admittedly and she and Michael Groland chased each other through the garden round bushes and trees so that all the neighbours stuck their heads out of their windows and women and young women working for the owner of the House of the Golden Shield leaned on their garden fence in happy astonishment and witnessed smiling the game between the young child and the grown-up one. Even the ancient landlady, the owner's old mother in the House of the Shield, who was newly married when the Emperor and his Empire's representatives had held council in the presence of the Golden Seal, who had knelt before the house's altar next to the Elector of the Holy Roman Empire, even she came, supported by her staff and her granddaughter's arm, to the fence and took pleasure in the pleasure evinced by the two youngsters.

Tolle! Lege! This old mother, Anna Grundherrin, on whom such a great honour was bestowed by Emperor and Empire, took upon herself an even greater honour after in the cause of mercy and humility. She was the first Mater Leprosorum, the first patroness of the lepers, Usslingerin's first helper, and as I am writing not of the Emperor or the Empire, but of myself and my own family, no more need be said of the Golden Seal, but a lot about the lepers, and truly I have a sad right to, as will be recognized after I have put this quill down tonight.

In the year of Our Lord's Grace 1394 the hearts of Christians first turned to lepers hereabouts. At that time there was a pious preacher in the town, Master Nicholas at the Holy Spirit Hospice. He it was who first succeeded, with God's help, in waking the hearts of the people in Nuremberg. He began in his church to preach sermons for the lepers and made a loud appeal for charitable actions to alleviate this great, inexpressible misery and appealed above all to kindly women, stirred their hearts and they responded to his call.

The first three devout women to turn up were: the Usslingerin, then Anna Grundherrin from the Golden Seal and then Anna Weidingin. They started by feeding the lepers, for three days in Holy Week to begin with—Wednesday, Maundy Thursday and Good Friday. And others followed their example and then others and a shining work of charity came out of it. Then more than two thousand lost ones came to the churchyard of Saint Sebaldus where the fiery friar Johannes Capistranus is now holding forth and sat down in an orderly fashion at table and a foundation was enthusiastically founded then for all time, the Leprosy Foundation, and tasks were assigned as by right and because they were cheap to be carried out by women. The eldest woman was named the Mother of the Sick.

Everything sprang up in a wave of enthusiasm! And although in the breasts of women a slight flame remained, the interest of the council soon waned in light and heat and finally went out in the year 1401. Then there arose because of overcrowding a decree whereby lepers should no more be allowed into the town, that the healthy should be protected from them, and the Lord Himself must intervene from heaven so that the good works and words of Master Nicholas of the Holy Spirit Hospice should not cause even greater grief than they already had.

The Lord acted speedily and sharply and sent sickness to the town without the lepers being there and sent plagues that had never happened before in human memory. Sick people ran through the streets like the mad, for the scourge robbed them of sense and reason and there was no distinction between rich and poor, high-born and low-born and sane and insane.

The Lord in heaven acted sharply and once again in churches sermons were preached on behalf of the lepers, and every pulpit orator reproached his now penitent congregation with what he described as God's punishment for cruelty to those who could not help themselves. It was therefore soon public as well as personal opinion that it should be decided and openly proclaimed that the lepers be released from their hovels outside the walls and again be allowed to beg for alms inside the town. Mistress Anna Grundherrin replaced the Usslingerin now as the Mother of the Sick.

Mistress Anna did not watch much longer the game between Mechthild and Michael. She departed this life and received a state funeral. Our children's games also hastened to their end. The time came for both me and Michael von Laufenholz to be packed off to university in Prague and we remained there of our own volition, each in his own way, right up until 1409.

Now everybody knows what happened in that year, how the quarrel between Realists and Nominalists was finally decided, how King Wenceslas approved the use of German as a medium of instruction at the new university of Prague founded by the Emperor Charles the Fourth and how we left it, along with five thousand foreign teachers and students and broke with the cream of the cream of that famous school. But what was in deadly earnest for some of us was for others an enjoyable game and to these, who laughed the thing off, belonged my good roommate Michael and a great deal of ink could be spilled in describing all the things he got up to on the great procession from Prague to Leipzig. So that nothing should be lacking to the new university that graced the old one, Squire Michael Groland von Laufenholz came with us to Leipzig and Margrave Friedrich the Serious had to welcome him along with the others and could like it or lump it as he chose.

But in Leipzig too Michael stayed my good and faithful friend and persevered for me and with me in our scholarly life until the following year 1410. Then both of us went back home where we found all our nearest and dearest still living including our Greek teacher Theodoros Antoniadēs. Mechthild Grossin was now ten having just outgrown her nanny, but, without a word of a lie—*pulcherrima puella infans!*

And once more the old game between this child and the squire started up. The rest of us, who all regarded the girl with cordial affection and took pleasure in her beauty, were all with almost cheerful jealousy pushed away by the crazy student and warrior from his chosen one. The chosen one, however, responded to his wondrous display of affection wholeheartedly and clung to her handsome friend with heart and mind totally.

It was a frequent cause of laughter, but the two did not lead each other astray and it would be a matter of great tenderness how affection grew from day to day, changed and yet remained the same until the year 1415 when Squire Michael Groland von Laufenholz performed his first duty for the town and for a further five years afterwards was lost to the friendship and neighbourliness on Banner Mountain.

On 20 October 1414 the Bohemian cleric Jan Huss arrived in Nuremberg with an imperial escort on his way to the Council of Constance. He was well received and had fastened to all the church doors in the town the following notice in German and in Latin:

"Jan Huss is journeying to Constance where, with God's help, he will defend to the end the beliefs he has held, still holds and always will hold."

And the call for disputation was immediately echoed. Master Albert, the parish priest of Saint Sebaldus, held enthusiastic dispute with his Bohemian counterpart for a full four hours till they had both come to a peaceful conclusion. And then Master Jan, with a happy memory of the good reception he had received in Nuremberg, continued on his way to the Council of Constance, to incarceration and burning at the stake. Around the time of the council my good friend, Squire von Laufenholz, went missing. In the following year, 1415, the town council of Nuremberg represented by Peter Volkhamer and the preacher at the church of Saint Lawrence, Johann von Hollfeldt, along with his factor, Ulrich Teuchsler, prepared itself to go to Constance too. Squire Groland from Gleven went with them from the town square as the leader of their military escort. He delivered them to Constance happy and intact, was knighted by the Emperor Sigismund himself and lost himself in Italy till the year 1420.

The men our town council had sent to Constance came home and told what they knew. My wild friend conveyed his thanks to the town for soundly nurturing him, a thanks bordering on tongue-in-cheekness, for he added that he hoped to pay them back twice and three times over. All they had to do was to be patient and to wait willingly. How it would come about, he would be the first to admit that he did not

know himself. But time would fortunately attend to these matters, so that all would come good in the end.

At this all heads were thoroughly shaken. But I for my part knew best how the land lay in my friend's feelings and thoughts. I had been the one closest to how the young eagle had pulled at his chains from the day on which that unfledged nestling had been brought to my father's house for the first time.

Now we sat alone, the Greek tutor Theodoros Antoniadis and I, in a small room during winter, in the bower during summer and Michael Groland never once disturbed us by pushing parchments across the table with his elbow and getting Mechthild to look at the handwriting on them and laughing: "The world today is still as merry as it was a thousand years ago! A whole sack full of your Aristotle, Master Theodoros, does not outweigh it. Laugh at them, child, these sullen fools, laugh and get bigger and wait for me. We'll show this peevish world then that we can still earn a wreath of flowers for ourselves on Judgement Day with a brave heart and a merry mind!"

Mechthildis means heroine, mighty female warrior, and there is no other name among men that has so noble a sound as this one! I have grown old and see each year how the youth and the beauty of women come to pass anew. But no bud, as far as my eyes can reach, has opened to a blossom that was more sweet-natured and more beautiful than that which grew to fullness in the great neighbouring garden among sisters awaiting there the crowning glory of its fate.

And it grew and unfolded while my brave friend was absent abroad in the pursuit of feats of arms and knightly adventures. And what we had all thought of in the final analysis as a children's game became serious with a gravity that stretched far beyond our poor life on earth. What my friend had spoken of laughingly as fidelity and perseverance, Mechthild had stored up in her heart and had waited for my friend patiently and quietly. It came as a wonder to us all, for none of us knew anything about it until the night of the feast of Saints Simon and Jude in 1420 when the sweet mystery was revealed in the light of fires and the noise of weaponry.

In the night of Saints Simon and Jude 1420 Christoph of Leining, the dependent of Duke Ludwig the Bearded of Ingolstadt, captured the walled town of Nuremberg with cunning and force after having beforehand concluded a secret pact with the council of which few were aware, although a thousand voices shouted the news of it to the rest of the world afterwards.

Christoph of Leining conveyed his respects to the council to the effect that the town need not stir. He, Sir Christopher, was coming to inflict defeat on the local counts and the best that could come out of such a feud could only be a positive thing for the inhabitants of Nuremberg.

Not only did the council not stir, but it did something else, over which the citizens of Nuremberg kicked up before Emperor and Empire no little fuss. Namely, as the hordes of their enemies lay hidden in ambush under their walls, the council prepared for citizens of both sexes a dance at the town hall and a most merry and most extraordinary dance night it was too. At that time the elders, the town fathers did not take for truth the gossip of the elderly and none of the young suspected to what ends the strings behind their backs were being put to. We had not wondered in the slightest at the sudden urge for entertainment that had come over the town's leaders, upper classes and the whole strict Collegium Septemvirorum but had caught hold of pleasure by the wing without question as young people do. We had gone out to team up with the fairest maidens in the town and I had led off with Mechthild, the fairest of them all. The men of the citadel, tempted by the noise of kettledrums and music away from their fortress, we scarcely paid attention to, although we were only too happy otherwise with their swords, clubs and spears. The soldiers of the local counts looked like our greybeards and how they, while the dancers turned, strained to listen to events in the fortress we had no inkling of.

Only once after that did I see Mechthild more beautiful than that night of the feast of Saints Simon and Jude in the year 1420. That was on another day when the setting sun shone on the portal of the Church of the Holy Ghost before the shrine that bore the Imperial Crown and nightfall followed at once upon that glorious brilliance.

On that eve of Saints Simon and Jude she appeared in the joyous splendour of her youth and as she elegantly slipped smiling through the winding movements of the round dance in the glare of lights and torches, there was not a single eye that did not follow the most beautiful child in Nuremberg with joy and pride. I think that even those old men standing there and waiting in such deadly earnest spared a glance and a word for that fair maiden.

But the hour has come that Christoph Leininger has already discussed with the council and he has been as good as his word. Suddenly, with the general merriment at its height, there has been a great shock, a flaring up, a trembling has descended on the feast. A more undisciplined noise has added itself

to the brass and wind sections of the band. People have cried out in the streets. Before anyone realised, the red glow from the vanquished citadel came through the windows and over the pale with fear faces of the guests of Nuremberg's honourable council.

Those in the know, the veterans, sprang up from their seats and cried "Victory!" and "Freedom!" The swords of young men flashed above the wreathed heads of young women and all the town's bells sounded the alarm and the call to arms waking both children and the sick. Men ran out into the streets with their weapons to help the council and Christoph Leininger to win this dangerous game.

The feast and the dance in the town hall then came to an end it has to be admitted, but another wilder feast and dance began. Those burgers who, in their mocking and disdainful way, had stooped to spoiling and offending the people's joy, were thrown to the floor in the middle of the council chamber and disarmed. They might well have cried out "Treachery!" but the town would rightfully rejoice when the townsfolk learned just what, on this night, that roll of the dice had been for.

Only a few years later Baron Friedrich, who became the first Elector of Brandenburg sold the burnt-out ruin of the citadel of Nuremberg complete with all accessories lock, stock and barrel and all rights included to the Forest of Sebald and Lorenz reserving to himself only the right of asylum and escort and the free movement of his subjects. And thus no-one could show a greater right to the happiness of that night in Nuremberg than Nuremberg itself and the Emperor. But I will say no more of that, only that on that very same night of the feast of Saints Simon and Jude along with Christopher of Leiningen another knight, who had gone missing, climbed over the wall, sword in hand, to do great service to the town as he had promised: my dear friend and brother Michael Groland of Laufenholz, the wild squire Groland, for whom our neighbour's beautiful daughter had been waiting in that little garden since they had played together as children!

Through the hubbub of the town, down the lane that led to the castle, from the citadel in flames, danced, swinging their drawn swords and their clubs, with torches in their hands, the first of the happy conquerors. Wave after wave of the excited populace palpitated through the mayoral function room and we had enough to do stopping old and young women from being crushed. The town elders had got up from their raised seats and were happily stroking their grey and white beards, nodding contentedly to anyone they knew in the crowd. It was a long time, however, before one of them could make himself heard over the overwhelming din. This only happened when, borne on the shoulders of citizens, the first of the Leininger's messengers were carried in, and then I felt how Mechthildis's arm, which was linked to mine, suddenly trembled. The young woman had just recognized her friend in the heaving turmoil over the heads of the crowd, backlit by the red reflection of the burning castle. My heart too rejoiced at the unexpected sight. Then all became silent in the room before the mighty voice of the knight Michael Groland of Laufenholz. Our friend then proclaimed the deed that had just come to pass in fine detail, but the blare of trumpets and hooters blocked it all out again. Friendship and affinity led us to the knight and so it was that on that wild night male friend and female friend were again reunited for the first time in years and wonderful days ensued in the wake of this wonderful reunion.

Groland had rendered good service to the town of Nuremberg and the town acknowledged it gratefully. But if he had slipped into the heart of Mechthild almost as he had into Nuremberg Castle, now he had to lay siege to her heart all over again before she was able to confess that she had given it to him already while still a child. This is the way women are and figures among the wiles that preserve beauty and loveliness on earth in the midst of the anger, quarrels and rages endemic to the times. However bad and bloody it may seem to be around us we were quiet and happy and at ease in our twenty first and twenty second springs.

Groland von Laufenholz now no longer elbowed us in the bower to spoil our handwriting so that he could put a blooming life onto the table in its place. The young woman stayed chastely in her garden, hidden by thick foliage, and only seldom did her outer garments shine from a distance through the green. But our Greek teacher Theodoros Antoniadis of Chios had just translated the poems of Anacreon into Latin and read them out to us and had no more attentive listener than my once rumbustious friend Michael Groland. He stole from me then many a good sheet of first-rate parchment and I laughed when I came upon him sitting there, tearing his hair out, trying to write German verse like Wolfram von Eschenbach, Walther von der Vogelweide and Heinrich Frauenlob that the women of Mainz carried on their shoulders to his grave and on whose tombstone they shed so much precious wine that the church overflowed with it and men wrang their hands and tore their hair out.

Thus we lived, truly, during those early days of the Hussite Wars! And it was Mechthild who ushered us out of this unworldliness into the world as it really was then—devastated, bloody, in flames— and led us to fight for the imperial crown.

We had, as German men are apt to do, suddenly forgotten everything to do with the present moment. We saw and heard nothing else apart from our present happiness. We scarcely took in that already

Johannes Ziska of the Chalice, the captain of the Taborites so help them God, had taken the field against us and, tired and frustrated, we paid scant attention to the strange and great events that were occurring within the very walls of our own home town. And truly there were wonderful things afoot in it.

Already in 1421 Cardinal Brando Placentius di Regniostoli, the papal nuncio, had come to Nuremberg to await, with the electoral princes and the princes, the arrival of the Emperor. But Emperor Sigismund, held back by an emergency, had had to establish a temporary court in Wesel and only came to Nuremberg the following year, in 1422, to set up a judgement seat and then, of course, there was an elegant assembly on hand.

While Michael and I read the poets of ancient Greece with Master Theodoros, the electors of Mainz, Trier and Cologne rode in, the Elector Palatine, the Electoral Prince of Saxony and Friedrich von Hohenzollern, the Elector of Brandenburg also came and with them, behind them and in front of them, a countless throng of princes and prelates, barons and knights and some emissaries from imperial free towns besides. In St Sebaldus Hermann von Neunkirchen, the head of the Chapter of the Holy Cross, said high mass. A crusade against the Hussites was called for and the papal legate, the Cardinal di Regniostoli, placed the flag of the crusade into the hands of the Emperor himself. The Emperor then put, along with the banner, a sword in the hands of Friedrich the First as a sign he should lead the imperial army and rescue the imperial crown.

What a ringing of bells there was in Nuremberg! And, as the bells rang and resounded in the air, the hidden gate opened that led from the big garden of our neighbour into ours and through the narrow, hedged-off path came the young woman who, as a little girl, had so much more happily slid through the hedge's foliage, and now arose, serious and proud, and raised us up from where we were sitting like the appearance of an angel from heaven.

She stood before us angrily and spoke uninhibitedly. Groland and I became tense and stayed on our feet, but the homeless refugee from Chios, Master Theodoros Antoniadis, covered his face with both hands and his tears rolled down it between his fingers.

"Do you not know what has happened to the imperial crown?" the young woman cried. "How can you sit here and while away the time with foreign signs and words in a dead language while the crown, sceptre and sword of your own living people is so hard pressed by an enemy of whom we knew nothing before we ourselves, through our own stupidity, made him great? What good are you doing while Emperor and Empire and all the people are crying out for help to recover the crown that Charlemagne wore on his sanctified head in Aachen? Master Theodoros, tell them that today they need to have their armour on if they want to protect their women, their children, their homes from death, disgrace and pulling down, if they do not want to be exiled, strangers in a foreign land! How long will the golden headband of the Emperor Constantine still shine forth, you men of Byzantium? Did you Greeks not fight for the preservation of his crown as was right and fitting? Woe unto your wives and daughters had they not thrust a sword into your hand while there was still time!"

At this point Mechthild broke off her discourse with loud weeping, but my crazy friend, the doughty knight Michael, lay down at her feet and he too with tears in his eyes kissed the hem of her garment. She though lightly touched his head and ran off. The exiled Greek among us picked up his writings with trembling hands and his knees were shaking. Like one pierced with a crossbow bolt he looked at us and said:

"Woe unto you if you do not hear what your children, the weaker sex and the graves of your ancestors shout in your ears—woe indeed!"

And he too withdrew in giddy haste from the bower. In this way Michael Groland and I were won over to the struggle for the imperial crown.

In the middle of turbulent Bohemia, where the Berounka flows, stood the proud castle that the Emperor Charles, the Fourth of that name, whom Bohemians idolized, had built and called after his own name—Karlstein. There, next to the Bohemian crown jewels, lay the much greater treasures of the Holy Roman Empire, Charlemagne's crown, his sceptre, sword and orb along with the Holy Lance which had pierced the side of Our Lord and Saviour and all the rest. And they lay there contrary to right and what had been promised.

Against right and what had been promised, for having broken the promise he had given to the electoral princes that they would always be kept safe in either Nuremberg or Frankfurt, the Luxemburger had sneakily taken them to Castle Karlstein because all good fortune and favour was owed to Bohemia and to the German part of his empire, whose head he was and whose increaser he was ever to be, he granted little or nothing other than the crumbs that fell from Bohemia's table.



From the year 1350 onwards ancient treasures had lain in Castle Karlstein, which in 1422 men of Prague had besieged and overrun with wave upon wave of armed might so as to bring the Holy Roman Empire's crown into their possession and totally humiliate the German people and there was hardly anything else one could say once they had made themselves masters of those holy relics.

The heart of Nuremberg was most enamoured of the coat, sword and sceptre of Charlemagne, for it was the greatest honour for that dear town that it had formerly been singled out as the repository of the crown jewels and to have them back again everyone in Nuremberg, no matter how lacking in sense or obtuse he might be, would have gladly laid down his life to his last drop of blood.

And so it was, after emperor and empire had placed themselves in the hands of Nuremberg's council and citizens, that the following were conscripted— two hundred footsoldiers, thirty cavalymen, and Elector Friedrich of the state of Brandenburg undertook to provide thirty snipers for the crusade so that there was a mighty press of all these young heroes within the city walls.

In response to our maiden's fine exhortation we too, Michael Groland and I, went with the others and in the first days of September of the year 1422 we sat there all three of us for the last time together, hopeful and happy, amusing ourselves with bright thoughts about an uncertain future. What Michael and Mechthilde had promised each other could be said with certainty however. Their thoughts were of the brightest and their promise was one of sublime happiness if the imperial crown could be rescued from our terrible foe.

It was not long before we were with the army. Our friends and relations gazed after us from the Laufer Gate and from the walls and we often, as we rode out, turned our heads and looked back at the high wall where the fair maid waved her scarf and next to her stood our Greek master, Theodoros Antoniadès, on the parapet with his careworn head supported by his hand, lost in painful thoughts of his own harassed homeland.

And so, for the first time, I came to bear arms for the Empire in the army's vanguard as its bannerman and truly a great honour was vouchsafed to him who was permitted to take for himself a part in this trial and tribulation.

This was the cruellest war I have ever seen and the territory that we were crossing through looked for all the world as if the end times had come to it. All the villages and most of the towns had been reduced to fire-blackened rubble. The fields were strewn with bones and corpses. The Lord went before the Hussite armies to punish the sins of the world as a cloud of smoke by day and a column of fire by night. All colour paled before the hot breath of the Taborites and there was nothing left over behind it apart from waste land and darkness. And in the middle of that wilderness, that howling wilderness, we knew that the high castle was situated that was unlawfully concealing the crown jewels of our people, though they were now being watched by good watchmen. With hot breath and panting chest we ranged abroad to set the watchmen free and rescue the crown.

We came to Saaz to begin with, not that it did us much good, for the German nation was indeed fated not to have much luck in the course of this brutal war. The great sin committed at Konstanz had to be atoned for and it was!

Brother Johannes Capistranus, take note: Constantinople has fallen now into the hands of the pagans. The eastern Roman Empire has vanished, but we saved the German imperial crown, we, the citizens of the noble town of Nuremberg, and Friedrich of Hohenzollern, the first electoral prince of Brandenburg, who led us and bore on his shoulders the golden shrine that hid the sceptre and the sword of Charlemagne, helping to take them away from Karlstein, which the foreigner had built as a prison for the greatest treasure of the German nation.

We came to Saaz to begin with, not that it did us much good. There was a Herr von Plauen in the army, who wanted to set fire to this stronghold of the Hussites with doves and sparrows to which he attached burning twigs. But the birds, driven by pain, fluttered back to our own camp and set that on fire so that we had to withdraw from the town and the Taborites claimed yet another great victory. They shouted after us from the walls. Swollen by the influx of the detachment of Count Ludwig of the Palatinate we moved on through the wood, engaged in constant combat, day after day.

Shield to shield, shoulder to shoulder we went on, leaving brave and dear comrades in arms wounded and dead behind us with each step we took. The wounded held their hands out after us and waved goodbye, but none of them stretched out their hand to hold back those who were advancing. The worst of them fought with their last ounce of strength for the imperial crown and the one behind made a superhuman effort to push the one in front into the way forward, grim though it was. We rode and fought as in a fever. We laughed at the arrows that flew at us from the depths of the forest, from behind each bush and rock. Feverish eyes shone, arms and fists had a twofold increase in force and the smaller

the army became, the more splendidly the belief rose up in each chest in the final success of our enterprise. We were all willing to die for Charlemagne's crown jewels and therefore, as no-one paid death any attention, we had our way this time and broke through the enemy hordes, through the wicked unfamiliar forest, crossed over streams and mountains and beheld Castle Karlstein as the first crusaders looked upon the battlements of the holy city of Jerusalem!

First there was a cry and then a great silence. The wild wood before us thinned out and from on high the golden crosses of the tower that hid our treasure trove looked down on us. Another cry went up from the declivity at our feet where the Hussite encampment stretched out and we saw and heard them working at fever pitch with heavy rifles, mangonels and grappling ladders. We saw too the guardians of the Holy Roman Empire's treasure on the high walls of the citadel and Elector Friedrich turned, brandishing his sword, and waved.

Then we broke out of the wood down into the valley to where the Hussites were encamped, following the electoral prince, an angry river of fire. There we fell upon the Taborites and flung our torches at their tents and trampled on their bodies through the thick smoke and flames. Already we had fought our way to the steep cliffs bearing the mighty castle on top of them and saw above us, above the smoke and the throng of the castle watch the waving of the imperial flag, heard the cries of joy of the crown's guardians on the battlements and over and above all the noise of battle, solemn and sonorous, the exalted tolling of the bell of the Holy Cross, the tolling of the bell that swings over the shrine erected to contain the Holy Roman Empire's imperial crown jewels.

The battle did not last long. We choked all those who would not yield to us. We beat these men from Prague and drove them back from the walls that they had so ruthlessly attacked. We won the one and only piece of luck that German arms had had in that dreadful war against the continental followers of Wycliffe's doctrines. We rescued for the German people its holy of holies from the utmost degradation at the hands of foreigners and brought it out of Bohemia that it might enjoy better days unmolested in our empire.

The men of Prague fled and we pressed on up the steep path. Those above us stretched out their tired hands to us from the battlements. We saw them kneeling and we saw them dancing in their watchtowers, those brave guardians of Charlemagne's crown. We pressed on up the steep and narrow path, each of us in harness lifted and shoved by those climbing up behind. We climbed up to the bronze gate, which had stood up so long and so well to the attack by the Hussites. Prince Friedrich, who had led us so ably to the imperial crown, let his bloody battleaxe dangle and took his helmet from his head. The bronze gate opened to him and to us. The first of us fell back now to join those behind them in sudden shyness and holy dread. Our army came to a standstill having redeemed Charlemagne's orb and sceptre. We saw the first inner courtyard full of sick and wounded guardians. We saw the healthy with battle fatigue and weakened by hunger. We had arrived with our leader, the electoral prince of Brandenburg, at the right time. May that always be true in all the centuries to come till the world really does come to an end!

They called down health and blessings on us as they stretched out to us their drooping arms and embraced the vanguard of our relieving army with heaving chests.

Health and blessings, yes. For us that was a truly blessed and elevated moment. A great silence fell yet again in close proximity to us, so that only the light clink of armour and the jingling of weapons could be heard and out of the valley ascended the never ending victory roar of thousands of German men who had accompanied us on this journey, but could not share the honour of being the first to enter the citadel.

Now we saw with amazement all around us the walls reaching up to heaven behind which the Luxemburger had hidden the treasure he had borrowed as his own property. We saw the three inner courtyards, one upon the other, stretching up to the clouds. We saw the royal residence in all its splendour before us and the clergy that served it, the deacon, the four canons and the castle chaplains. We strode from gate to gate, from one resounding drawbridge to another, as far as the church of St Catherine where we all, pushed up close to one another, knelt with the electoral prince in silent prayer before we dared to approach the even greater inner sanctum, the chapel of the Holy Cross.

Now all courtyards and passageways, all halls and rooms in the castle were filled with German helmets, storm hoods, spears and swords. Where formerly only the foremost men and noblest lords in Bohemia were allowed to set foot, where even the king himself trod lightly, today the least of men who had come out for the crown had more right to be. In the king's private chambers Nurembergers laid their pikes against the brightly painted walls or hung their axes on hooks on richly gilded wainscoting.

There was still a drawbridge that had not been lowered, still a gate barred with nine locks. This was the drawbridge that led to the Church of the Cross. These were the nine locks that guarded the crown

of a Holy Roman Emperor. This drawbridge was lowered and these locks were opened for no-one else normally apart from the king and the guardians of the crown. Men in armour with drawn swords kept watch here day and night.

But who today had a greater right to be admitted to this treasure, King Sigismund or us?

At a signal from the electoral prince all our banners were lowered and the raised drawbridge, which was still barring our way, now came down. Then the nine locks on the gate were heard to clatter open and we entered the sacred space in deep silence. From the ceiling and the walls and pillars a red, green and blue fire shone towards us. The place shone everywhere with the adornment of the most precious stones and now only a high, artful golden grille still separated us from the Holy of Holies.

Then I felt a heavy hand upon my shoulder. It was the armoured hand and arm of my friend who had come up behind me.

We had supported each other whenever one of us had stumbled on the way. We had covered each other with our shields and the weapon of one had a hundred times turned away death from the other, but what more can I say of myself and Michael Groland other than that we were in the imperial army's procession to Karlstein? Both of us were merely two drops in the stream and all that we were able to experience on the way the whole army likewise learned with pain or with pleasure, in glory or in ignominy.

Suddenly here on the turret of Charles the Fourth's castle, in the church of the Holy Cross, before the shrine in which the imperial crown jewels were kept, we got our own lives back.

My friend and brother, Michael Groland, bent his mouth to my ear and spoke softly: "Pray for my happiness. Here in this place, after so much effort on our part to attain it, here before the inner sanctum of the German people, pray for me that I might win a crowning glory for myself one day!"

A lightning flash did not come out of the golden niche from the lance of Saint Maurice or from the sword of Charlemagne to strike my wild friend for his strange and daring words. But a deep down shudder, a cold feeling and a fiery flame went through my legs.

At that moment however the castle deacon with his chaplains and canons intoned a Gloria. All those present joined in the singing and the pictures on the walls, the painted images set in precious stones of all the stars of heaven in the lofty vault, the nobles of the Empire swayed in the flaming red light that the evening sun threw through the gaudy windows. Everything swayed around me and never did the noise of the greatest battle ever amaze me as much as this moment did. I said the prayer for my friend and for the love of him before the imperial crown itself.

Tolle! Lege! Listen to the cries of the people from the churchyard of Saint Sebaldus. The whole of the rest of the town is as silent as the grave. All of Nuremberg's sins and vanities have gathered together and fled to one spot. Listen how thousands are addressed about their misery! That monk there in the pulpit is really going deep into their hearts! They might well cry out, they might well beat their breasts as the grim Franciscan calls them to penitence, but what are the words he is shrieking in comparison to the sweet, soft voice that spoke to me? Of what importance is what the monk says in comparison with the warning I received in the days of my youth?

The scribes in towns and monasteries have outlined the story of the German people's collective grief such as they must have experienced it subsequent to the disgrace perpetrated in Constance, have put it down on parchment and paper outstandingly year by year, day by day so that in future happier generations will be able to leaf through the blood-spattered pages. Everyone knows how things were then in the Empire, how a place for human happiness and peace of mind was nowhere to be found other than behind the highest walls of the most fortified towns, and even there only under the gravestones in churches or the grass of churchyards. Everyone knows how the Hussites victoriously and ever more victoriously came and went and how the fiery glow that had risen from Lake Constance was not for many long and dreadful years extinguished among the people of Germany. And as it was for the citizens of the Empire, so also was it for the imperial crown that found no resting place anywhere on its native earth. The sword of Charlemagne had lost its power, the lance of Saint Maurice no longer moved in its sheath to defend the splendour of the Holy Germanic Roman Empire. Emperor Sigismund now had to spirit away the crown jewels to Blindenburg in Hungary, to hide them among the Huns. It was to Hungary then that my dear friend and brother, the good knight Michael Groland of Laufenholz, was obliged to escort them on behalf of the town of Nuremberg and he could not refuse to render this service, even though, before the altar in the Church of the Cross at the heart of the Luxemburger's Bohemian citadel, he had just dedicated himself, in the joy of victory, to the service of seeking another crown for himself.

By order of the electoral prince he was prevented from riding home with us. His way took him to Hungary—for the sake of the Empire's crown jewels he worked his way through ruin. Only in the year 1423 did he come back from Ofen in the depths of despair. But never have greater honours been bestowed on a man by a woman than those bestowed on him after he had sunk into misery and all the waves of earthly wretchedness had swallowed him up. Truly he had won for himself the crown as he called the highest virtue attainable!

As only a tiny group of healthy and fighting-fit men did we come back from the army's journey to Bohemia and came once again to the Laufer Gate in Nuremberg after Castle Karlstein and our town was also glad of the few who came home and a civic reception was made ready for us in the highest of spirits. As the councillors, the citizens and the fairest damsels had escorted us as far as that gate on our outward journey, so now they waited for us there and I called out from my horse on reaching the gate to Mechthilde, pale with fright at the absence of our friend, the good news that Michael Groland had not been killed in the battle with the Hussites but that he was still alive, as happy and courageous as ever, and had only been called away to reap new honours.

The young lady bowed to us, hand on heart. We rode on through the streets past St Egidia to the Herrenmarkt. And on the way a hundred people at least reached out their hands to me while I was still on the horse including Theodoros Antoniadēs the Greek. Our army's journey lay like a bad dream behind us and well might we enjoy our homecoming, for who was there in this throng of people who had not forgotten on what poor and shaky grounds the splendour of Nuremberg had been founded! Had the Greek from Chios not been there on hand, even I might have forgotten that these strong men and these high walls had not been thought strong or high enough to trust them with the imperial crown jewels that we had rescued at so high a cost.

Once we had reached the Herrenmarkt we each sought the comfort of our own homes. I found on Banner Mountain all my friends and relatives gathered and all most eager to hear what I had to tell them of my struggle against the Hussites. The members of the Grosse family too came to see us from the neighbouring house and among them was Mechthild. Then I talked as if I were speaking to the whole wide circle of devout men and women but, ultimately, I was only talking to Mechthild and she understood that very well. But I could not make known to her in that crowd of the curious the most intimate thing that had been confided in me before the crown of the great emperor Charlemagne in the Church of the Cross in Castle Karlstein. I would have to save that up for a quieter time when none of our friends and relations were turning round to look at us. This time also came and then the white roses on the cheeks of Mechthilde blushed red. Red they remained at the oath Michael Groland had sworn before the crown and red they remained through winter, spring and summer and they were a gift from God to the pride and joy of the young, loving maid. Now there were no more mysteries between myself and her and nor could there be. But the fact that we knew of this mystery and the rest of the world did not bound us to each other with chains of gold and in the middle of that grey and devastated world we knew that our greatest treasures were safe.

Truly that bold utterance, which the brave knight Michael had whispered in my ear before the sanctuary of the German people in Castle Karlstein, produced a fine and splendid resonance in the breast of a certain quiet young lady that Michael Groland had called his highest crown of all!

Now we lived again together as good neighbours through the winter of 1422 and the spring and summer of 1423. And no fairy tale, no golden legend was more full of wonders than that realm of bliss that the young lady built up in silence. She was not in the least anxious about her beloved. A wonderful unshakeable trust in the fulfillment of all sweet hopes held her in its arms.

How could it have been wrong before God to have spoken proudly and certain of victory those words that had been in the shimmering light of the prize possessions of the German people? This love was now well and truly covered by an imperial mantle, illuminated by the crown of Charlemagne himself. There was no doubt in the mind of Mechthilde Grossin that Charlemagne's sword and the holy lance of St Maurice could not but lead her love safe and sound through all dangers and that the solemn promise that had been made in that high fortified place in Bohemia had made this love holy and impossible to damage, beyond space and time.

Beyond space and time! There were no two ways about it! That oath made in the Church of the Cross in Castle Karlstein defied both space and time. That oath made before the holiest holy of holies of the the Holy Roman Empire had borne bloom and fruit, but, as far as this poor world went, the fruit had been lost in misery and shame.

We later learned how the imperial crown jewels arrived with great pomp and circumstance at the castle of Blindenburg, five miles from the town of Ofen. Eberhard von Windek wrote how, on the Wednesday before Christmas in the year 1422, the jewels had been received with great delight there and installed. And our friend and brother, the good knight Michael Groland of Laufenholz, was present

at the beginning of this new two-year stay for the jewels abroad and we thought of him without a care in the world through winter storms and snowfalls and also when spring arrived.

Spring was lovely that year. I pondered once more the Greek texts of Master Theodoros Antoniadēs and the trust and happiness of Mechthilde rubbed off on me. The hard work of learning the noble language of the ancient Greeks was easier than ever to me. Having said that, however, we no longer read Anacreon.

Bent over Homer's Iliad, the story of that epic war with Troy, I fought once again in my head the battles I had fought with the belligerent Hussites, and my old teacher, who had even more hurt and atrocities to forget than I did, modestly praised me for my aptitude. When summer came we once more had our desk in that fair rose-filled bower up against Nuremberg's protective city wall. We, that is to say the refugee from Chios and myself, and now the maid came too, as in the days of her childhood, no more shy and reserved, from the flowers, the sunshine and the greenery of her own garden and sat there quietly all ears to Homer's account of the various doings of noble Hector, fearless Achilles and worthy Ajax and thought of the knight her friend with music in her heart and awaited his homecoming from his latest military expedition with love and fidelity.

The trees shed their blossoms over our writings. I cast my parchment to one side in order to run after a multi-coloured butterfly with Mechthild and even our master, the now grey haired teacher, the old Greek banished and driven from his homeland by a pagan foe, the homeless person, whose last ideal abode, the glorious city of Constantinople, was now even more at risk of violent assault and destruction than our German homeland, laughed at our indiscipline and was able to smile at our light and happy hearts.

Never had each blossom been so dear to me, each ray of sunlight in the green foliage appeared so wonderfully bright as it did that summer. My life drifted gently by between forgetfulness and hope, through Homer's epic poem and Mechthild's happiness. I no longer thought of that iron-clad time when I had fought for a dream of gold.

Tolle! Lege! Tolle! Lege! Take and read. I heard these words in the blowing of the autumn wind and, as with Saint Augustine, I grew pale and "I wondered if these words were part of a children's game, and I could not remember ever having heard them before. Tears sprang in me and I got up and took it to be a voice from God."

That autumn, in October of the year of Our Lord 1423, my friend and good knight Michael Groland of Laufenholz came back to the town of Nuremberg from Hungary as a poor, sick, lost soul, who could now only use his sword as a staff to support himself and the following relates how he came to arrive in this way.

It was a gloomy afternoon and I had sat on the window seat in a curiously melancholic frame of mind, but not in my own room, rather in the main room that connected with the street. I sat there quietly, disinclined to work or study. Over the rooftops and gable ends a strong wind blew, quickly driving grey clouds through the sky, and people too were in a hurry in the streets, for everyone wanted to be home. And yet I felt strangely ill at ease in mine.

The walls pressed in on me, the ceiling sank and the wind that was moving the embroidered pictures on the wall hangings and making the weapons of my forebears hung on columns clink slightly took my breath away more than the pear-shaped gag that a torturer uses to stop the mouths of felons in a torture chamber. Then a messenger came, a boy who looked in a hurry sent by my cousin, Cecilia Stollhoferin. He caught his breath with difficulty and delivered and spoke out a greeting from her in the name of God and told me that, outside the New Gate, in the hospice for the sick of Saint John, someone was waiting to speak to me. My cousin was at that time what was termed the mother to the lepers—Mater Leprosorum, the oldest of those do-gooding women of patrician descent who, as a result of the edifying sermons of Master Nicholas in the church of the Holy Ghost, had been the first to reach out to these poor sick people for the sake of God as I have already written in a previous sheet of this chronicle. This hasty summons surprised me somewhat, yet I responded to it immediately with a right good will and would, as any good person in Nuremberg would, have done the same at any hour of day or night, irrespective of whether the leper mother had summoned me from a wedding feast, a baptism or a morgue to her higher service.

While I was despondent like this, my cousin's summons seemed to me of all things the most bearable that could happen to me. The pressure weighing down on my soul lifted at the seriousness of this call for assistance. A grey sky and a bad mood no longer had power to oppress me. I sent the messenger back with a warm greeting to my cousin, put on a mantle as quickly as possible over my dappled tunic and went out on that dark autumn day.

The human turmoil, into which I was straightaway admitted outside in the street, released me completely from the attacks of my bad demons. From the bay window of the Grossen house Mechthild waved me a greeting with a friendly smile. I could well have marvelled at myself being now quite a different person from the one I had been only an hour before, but that I did not do, but berated myself as a fool and walked on and on, past the ruins of Leininger's citadel, to the New Gate.

On the way many a good friend greeted me and stopped me with a "Where are you off to then?" When I told them where I was going, they shrugged their shoulders and looked at the threatening clouds and one or another of them invited me to this pub or that pub for the night. As I knew that Master Theodoros would have no more need of me that day, I accepted an invitation and promised myself a lively evening for long after the night bell had sounded.

In this way I arrived before the gate and intended, despite all that my cousin might present me with, to hold on to my good mood come what may. But that day, which had failed to please me at home, pleased me even less outside in front of the city wall. The field there was bare and the trees stood stripped of leaves and the wind, which had already been having its own way in the streets, had no longer anything to cage it and tame it. It romped about and went from place to place as it willed and scared dry dust into violent swirls in the air and laughed disdainfully at the oncoming dusk. I pulled my cloak more tightly around me and walked on in a sprightly fashion to the Hospice of Saint John.

At that time there was only a sort of shed for the sick, erected in 1323 next to the church by the Lords of Tezeln, out in the open. The great Churchyard of the Holy Grave was not yet available. At present anyone can go there and reflect upon the first gravestone that shows Saint Sebastian bound to a tree trunk with an inscription dating back to 1427:

This day there was an awful and piteous moaning;  
Thirteen died including me in the house I was alone in.

Truly the great churchyard was not set up in vain at the time that it was.

In the year 1423 the house of the sick stood next to the church, both on their own in the middle of a field, surrounded by scant undergrowth. The former of these two buildings was a low, long drawn out edifice, away from which a wanderer was glad to turn his face if he ever took the road that far into the country. The place was, even in glorious summer, not a welcoming sight. Even the year's fairest blossoms were impotent to ward off a shiver. But today the sky was grey and black clouds were moving in over the roof of the sick bay and black ravens flapped their wings around it as on a high place where there were gallows. No living soul could have pictured a worse ossuary.

There was also a hedge that stretched for a long way round the house and where the Roman road came into it a door. A stone cross had been put up near it and under the cross was a bench also made of stone.

As I came nearer I saw two forms under the cross. On the bench sat a man wearing a long brown habit like a Capuchin monk with his head deeply bowed and completely covered with a hood. A few steps away from him stood my cousin. She too had bowed her head and was wringing her hands as if in some great grief. And four steps in front of them, back in the direction of the road, a sword had been stuck in the ground as a warning not to come any nearer.

Already I knew now from a distance the likely meaning of all this and why my cousin Cecilia had bid me come. But who the hooded man was I had no idea. I stood still near the sword and said: "Good day to you, cousin. I am at your service. For mercy's sake, who is it?"

A sudden shudder shook me to the core, but I still did not know what I was about to learn.

"Who is it, cousin," I asked for the second time. The old woman sobbed and raised her hands up to the glowering sky. The man in the monk's habit supported his hooded head on his left hand and gestured with the other to the sword sticking upright in the ground.

Then I had another shock—a shock to end all shocks—that shook me body and soul. I looked at the sword and reeled backwards as if hit by a battle hammer. The world I looked on grew confused before my very eyes. I staggered and cried out, loudly I cried out.

This was the sword, the trusty sword, which had so often and so merrily made the old house on Banner Mountain shake. This was the sword that had shone next to me in the pitched battle against the Hussites, the trusty weapon that had helped to deliver the imperial crown out of enemy hands! This was the sword of my friend, my blood brother's sword! The bent hooded man on the stone bench in the brown habit of a pilgrim was the proud knight Michael Groland of Laufenholz, my brother, more than my brother, my friend, my joyful classmate and comrade in arms, poor Michael Groland!

I swayed on my feet, staggered and fell. I fell head first into soft sand and heard a great thunder in my ear and a sound like whistling, like the whistle of the serpent in the Garden of Eden, in my chest. And when I got back up the awful spectre had vanished from the bench and so had the sword from the ground. But my cousin, the leper mother, was still standing next to me, wrapped in her black cloak. But I had knelt down, grasped the hem of her garment and shouted:

"Mother, it isn't so! Tell me it isn't so, mother!"

My cousin took one of her hands out of the folds of her cloak as if she wanted to pull my hands away, but she only covered her eyes with it and said with a deep sigh: "It is so! Who can fight against God's will?"

Then she pulled me up and laid her arm on my shoulder and turned round back in the direction of the town. I pulled myself away from her and pushed her back brutally and ran to the door of Saint John's Church sick bay. She ran after me, held me back and shouted over the wind:

"Come, my son. I won't let you and neither will he let you. Let it be. He has taken an oath on it. No-one must come near him from the land of the living. My heart bleeds like yours, my son. But he's right and we must act in accordance with his will."

I called out: "Michael! Michael!"

My only answer was the sound of the sharp, hissing wind through the dry grass. My old, grey-haired cousin had to support me, the strong young man, and lead me like a child back to the road leading to the town. My feet were like a weight of iron and my knees like broken reeds. My eyes beheld chaos.

Woe is me, what had become of the world? There loomed the hundred ramparts and battlements, gables and towers of the great dear town of Nuremberg and over there on the left the ruin of the citadel, which the brave knight Michael had also helped to conquer for our beloved community. Never had my eye other than with joy and hope rested thereon, whatever the way I chose to take to get there. Now there was nothing left of it. Had flames with a thousand red tongues suddenly licked the roofs, surrounded the towers and, as in a rush of wind born of an apocalypse, swallowed the town whole, my view of what was there could not have witnessed greater annihilation.

I was horrified by Nuremberg, how it looked, how it lay there darkly under the dark evening sky. Flames had already licked the citadel. There it lay, already blackened by torches, with burst roofs, broken towers, demolished walls! What did I care now if the town around it still stood upright?

Everything mocked and laughed at me. No green leaf, no flower, no ray of light had been left intact to comfort suffering humanity. It was laughable that we had gone out to rescue a crown for an empire that was no longer there. The Greek from Chios, my clever teacher, Theodoros Antoniadis, had done the right thing. He had fled from his homeland before the last pillars and columns shattered and, in this bad moment, I derived comfort from one thing only and that was in the thought that I should do as he had and set off into the unknown devoid of property, homeland, wishes and hopes.

It degraded me that I did not think once then of Mechthild Grossin, but that too would come by and by.

We walked slowly and the Mater Leprosorum talked to me constantly, but I heard little in my state of dizziness. But the little I did hear was each time like a bolt of lightning on a thundery night. The leper mother told me how the poor man had spoken to her softly out of the blue before the sick bay of St John's Church.

In Ofen in Hungary leprosy fell on the German contingent that had gone there with the crown. Many soldiers in the detachment had died there, many others had simply stayed. Some had died on the way. Only Michael Groland had got back home, supporting himself on his knight's sword.

"Nobody knows him here in St John's hospice," said the cousin. "Even his own mother would not know him any more. I did not recognize him. You would not recognize him. God's hand has smitten him horribly. Your friend has descended into hell, misery has buried him alive. Today he has lost all the vanity of earthly desires. Tell me what we should do, my son! His will is to remain missing. Will you comply with it? Will you take upon yourself the burden of silence when it comes to Mechthild?"

Mechthilde! Mechthilde! That was the name that pushed me even deeper into the abyss and yet alone had the potential to redeem me. I began to remember her name again.

I asked my cousin a direct question. "You did not recognize him, cousin Cecilia, but you saw him. You are a mother to these lepers. You have the answer. Is there any hope of him recovering? Is there any

hope that we can have him back again if we wait a year, two years, ten years?"

Cousin Stollhoferin lowered her head and thought about this for a long time. We stood on the bridge at the New Gate and those who guarded it had already uncovered their heads before the leper mother. My cousin bowed to me and said: "God's will be done and He is wholly good as He is wholly awesome. I will not mention the homecoming of her betrothed to Mechthild."

Then I remembered that night, that sleepless night, that followed this day of horrors and I weighed my strength to bear with discretion the fate of my two friends through years to come.

"He can bear it!" said my cousin as if she could read the innermost thoughts of my heart as from a slate. "He can bear it. He is a true knight. He has fought for the crown of life and will attain it."

I too was able to bear it.

The summer air is still full of the wails that are buzzing about in the churchyard of Saint Sebaldus. How this same air would tremble if that wild and fiery Franciscan there could speak as urgently as the drops of black ink now flowing from my quill pen down onto a white sheet of parchment. From leaving my room to go to the hospice of Saint John to coming back to it again my life had changed. Nothing was left of the person who had gone out only two hours before. Everything now seemed strange to me and when I lay there on my bed that night the darkness was like a tombstone in a crypt. I lay awake all night without being able to move. In the sick bay of Saint John my friend and brother also lay awake among the legion of the lost and waited, as did I, for a new day to dawn in abject misery.

And dawn broke, it was day and I could not understand how people went back to their daily work. It came as a shock to me that people in Banner Street did not stop and point to my house quite grief-stricken. I thought that even my worst enemy would have done as much.

I only understood that people were going about the hard business of earning a living when I saw my friend's poor betrothed, having stepped through the narrow door of her house into the garden, wander calmly amid the autumnal trees, over fallen branches through brown bushes. My teacher of Greek Theodoros came and saw at a glance that I was ill and asked after me most anxiously. He took leave of me shaking his head. Then a messenger came from Konrad Senior and Peter Junior with a document. It demanded legal support and advice from me because of a charitable foundation of these gentlemen for an enclosed order of nuns, and this was a good thing, for the act of doing this plunged me once more into the hurly-burly of a working day and did not leave me without anything to do as my grief would have wished. Other people whose futile needs and disputes I had to settle and decide according to the rule of law in Nuremberg, came and went and I was obliged to converse with them till evening and then night came round again. This was a very good thing, but it did not save me from the dread inspired by darkness.

On the second day after my meeting at the stone cross at the gate to Saint John's Church I eventually came to the attention of my fair female next door neighbour for the first time since then. I took it as good fortune that Master Theodoros Antoniades had already been there before me and had had misgivings about me being threatened by a serious illness. Mechthilde was most understanding towards me and I had to laugh even with a broken heart and I replied in a light tone that no bodily fragility oppressed me and no hidden torment of love and no mean rejection had made my cheeks pale so fast and furrowed my brow with such rapidity.

This was a time of change for me. These were days to make my bones rot and crumble and the blood run thicker in my veins. By night and by day I wandered through fields, gnashing my teeth as I did so in my struggles with a gruesome ghost. The shadow of the hooded leper never once left my side.

"If you force your way into his lostness, he will kill himself. He has sworn he will!" said my cousin Cecilia. "He is a true knight. He wants to bear his fate alone. His message to you through me is that you should be happy, my son. You should think that he fell in battle or died in Hungary. You should remember him amicably in the circle of your comrades and not grieve for him."

"And what about Mechthild?" I asked. And cousin Cecilia waved me aside and silently left me.

Friends and relations made more of me then than at other times of year, but the hardest obstacle I had to overcome was Mechthilde's tender loving care. November came and with it the first snow of winter. They danced and feasted a lot and made a big thing of it in Nuremberg and pulled me out of every hiding place and dragged me forcibly with threats to their junketings to rid me of my fancies and to make my viscous blood flow soundly and freely again. They had no idea what I saw in their banqueting halls nor of what I was not permitted to talk about. Michael Groland's sword, the sword of my friend and brother stood everywhere stuck in the ground before me, stood to ward off every joy and every pleasure. How could I reach out my own hand to the pretty, smiling girl who so friendly offered



me hers so that I could dance with her? The sword stood everywhere in my way, not just in the banqueting hall, but also in church, in lawyers' chambers, in my own quiet room. I could not get past it—it stood there on the defensive and all lust for life deserted me. There was no getting away from that sword that my dear friend had once so happily and bravely wielded.

The living corpse's bride to be was further transformed in her sweet trust in God's goodness during November and December of that ill-fated year. She too, in obedience to time-honoured custom, was not allowed to miss youthful festivals and dances. Even she, a happy prisoner of hope, who would have much preferred to stay behind in the peace and solitude of her little room, had had to socialize and so we were always bumping into each other and her fine trust and confidence made the frightful burden on my soul even heavier from one day to the next. When she suddenly broke away from me, it was like when a crossbow bolt is pulled from a wound in one's side and in the red flow of blood that then spurts out the rubble and corpse-strewn waste of the battlefield sinks around one, all is eclipsed and the whole world vanishes before one's eyes.

Just before Christmas Mechthild came home beaming in all the fullness of her happiness from the house of Sigmund Stromer where Barbara Stromerin had made ready a festivity. Mysteriously and out of breath one of the Grosse family maids summoned me that very same night to meet with her young mistress. With her finger to her lips, half way between laughter and tears, Mechthildis whispered to me that a great and precious piece of news had gone from ear to ear in Herr Stromer's house among the female guests. It was still a mystery, but still a truth for all that—the Holy Roman Empire's crown, the sword and the mantle of Charlemagne was coming back to Nuremberg; all the imperial treasures were returning to Nuremberg as of right. There was no doubt about it. The Emperor wanted it, the council knew about it and Barbara Stromerin had also known about it and because of the good knight Michael Groland the great and splendid mystery had circulated among the young women in the mayor's house, but without his knowledge.

"It's the return of summer, my friend!" cried Mechthild. "Blessed be the Emperor for returning the crown to our safekeeping. All my companions kissed me and we females were more pleased about it than the mayor and his aldermen. You be pleased about it too, dear friend, and shake off the grief that oppresses you and which I should like to redeem you from with my own heart's blood. Why do you not wish to be happy with your brother and myself now that the good old days will soon be with us again and twice the good fortune?"

The friends of Barbara Stromer really were the first ones in Nuremberg to know of the planned return of the imperial crown jewels, for they, the mayor and the Collegium Triumvirorum, the three most highly placed people in the town, had held the key to these treasures formerly and the key to the gate of the town and its banners.

Mechthild had brought the news home from the mayor's wife's get-together as a great mystery and made me swear not to divulge it, although it had spread from the party already throughout the town and was arousing the highest degree of jubilation in every heart.

There it was then! What I had borne alone in deference to my unhappy friend and the leper mother as long as I could keep it secret, had now to come out and there were no dams to throw up against it. The great honour that had fallen to my native town was the straw that broke the camel's back of our misfortune and on the same night on which Mechthild had returned in such bliss from Sigmund Stromer's house, I confided my fear and my suffering to Master Theodoros Antoniadis. Of the hundreds of people that I knew and interacted with, he was the only one to whom I wanted to and could disclose all the misery in my soul.

The homeless Greek listened to me silently and with a deeply furrowed brow. Then he said this to me: "On the island of Chios, under the burning rubble of my home town, I left behind the corpses of my wife and my young sons and daughters. My homeland is perishing, has perished. The imperial eagle of the Eastern Roman Empire circles the old walls of great emperors with weary wings. There is no salvation for the great city of Constantinople. I carry a dead language among foreigners and when they are pleased with its beauty, the pain of loss I feel is that much greater. I carry my pain in silence, my son, and wait to see what God will do. The world is coming to an end not only for the ancient might and splendour of Byzantium. Who will care much for the time of its fall when it finally comes? The youngest of the young are prematurely old. Why should they care? Who still wants to defend himself against the inevitable Day of Judgement? I remember that day when the fair maid came to us and drove you two young men out to fight in that futile struggle. If you want me to, my son, I'll tell Mechthild what fate has had in store for her."

I led my Greek schoolmaster to my cousin Cecilia Stollhoferin, the leper mother, and the following morning all three of us went to see the betrothed of Michael Groland, opened up for her the Book of the Dead and pointed to the entry in letters of flame that determined her fate.

There comes to my ear a sound of trumpets and trombones which does not accompany the shouting coming from the churchyard of Saint Sebaldus. Hark to the bells once again, Saint Benedicta first and foremost! Yes, now the Preacher Johannes has said what he had to say. The people of Nuremberg process through the streets with psalms and litanies strewing ashes on their heads in the darkest corners of their houses and tomorrow they will resume their life of old. The noise of trumpets and trombones that imbues the story of my own life comes from the day after the Feast of Our Blessed Lady's Annunciation during Lent of the year 1424, for on this day the German imperial crown came back to Nuremberg.

Sigmund Stromer and Sebaldus Pfinzing had been sent by the town council to Ofen, to King Sigismund, and, in total confidentiality and secrecy the King of Rome had handed over to them the regalia. So secret was this transaction that no more than six people knew about it. And a week after Candlemas the great regalia were loaded by Nuremberg's twin envoys onto a waggon whose drivers thought they were carrying a load of the fish they call sturgeon. It was only when they were a mile from Nuremberg that the drivers learned just what an honour they had been found worthy of and, getting off their horses with fearful reverence, they humbled themselves in the dust and venerated the imperial regalia on their knees.

Bells and people singing! Woodwinds and trumpets! We all turned out when the approach of the envoys and the treasure they were bringing with them was rumoured. By the thousand and ten thousand—men and women, greybeards and children, we went to meet the crown. A greater day since records began has not been listed in the town's chronicles. Before all others though the heavy laden came as they did every year on the feast of the Arms of Christ, as long as the regalia were kept in the town's care, to lay their sorrows down in front of Our Lord's weapons and to pray for redemption. All sick people who could walk knelt with others at the roadside and all those who suffered from anguish of mind threw themselves down next to those who had only bodily ailments. There were no distinctions made between people. No class of people was allowed to take precedence over any other class. Before the crown, sceptre, sword and orb of the holy German race, before the holy iron of the lance that opened Christ's side, before the five thorns of his crown of thorns all were accounted equal, all brothers and sisters in this vale of tears we call the world. In the ranks of the young women went the saddest of them, Mechthilde, to the Church of the Holy Ghost, where, in the middle of the institution founded by her ancestor, Konrad Grossen, in the garden frequented by the lepers, the holy regalia had their dwelling formerly and where they were now to be housed again.

A hundred years before one slept there—a rich man, a poor man, a leper himself, Konrad, one of the Hainzen, there in the spot where today the imperial regalia of the German people rest safely. He was sleeping in his garden under a linden tree and there came to him in sleep a dream of a great treasure that lay in the ground owned by his forebears. And the place where the treasure was was also shown to him and the leper went there in his dream and followed a bright light leading him on. In order to mark the spot that had been indicated to him he grabbed a handful of leaves from the linden tree and put them where the treasure was buried. Then he woke up and remembered. When he wandered round the garden full of doubt and did not know if he should take things at face value, he found there the little heap of linden leaves and recovered with it a belief in the truth of his dream. His family came to visit him and listened to his wonderful story with astonishment. Then they started to help him dig up the ground. Konrad the leper made a promise to God that he would use anything he found in the service of the poor and sick, and behold: a great treasure really was excavated from the garden of the Hainzen of Pegnitz and Konrad kept to his vow. The hospice and the Church of the Holy Ghost were founded and built on the strength of the subterranean treasure, and now the imperial crown reposes in the place where the leper's hand and will pointed out to architect and stone masons the site they were about to build on. The man stricken with leprosy, as I have already mentioned elsewhere in this chronicle, was henceforth known as Konrad the Great and, by way of an eternal memorial to him, Emperor Ludwig the Bavarian gave him in his coat of arms the twenty-four linden leaves together with the hill to which he took them in his dream.

While Mechthild Grossin has made her way to the porch of the Holy Ghost Church to wait for the crown, I too have gone with my companions and others to the door of this church. Half a mile from the town we caught sight of the waggon and its escort.

The horses were indeed imposing in their harnesses and went with heads bowed as if they knew what they were pulling. And Sigismund Stromer and Sebaldus Pfinzing walked bareheaded on the right and the left of the waggon respectively. The armed escort rode in silence and it was quiet too in the crowd coming out of the town. The people's songs of praise fell silent and one could only still hear in the distance the bells ring out from all the towers of Nuremberg. Those who were on horseback got down and knelt at the roadside still holding on to the reins. Everyone knelt down and we watched as the waggon that was laden with so great a treasure and had come here all the way from Blindenburg in

Hungary slowly moved towards us. And when it had gone past each of us got up off our knees once more, joined the procession and once again intoned songs of praise. In the town all the bells rang more and more brightly and joyfully and from its walls and towers too thousands rejoiced. Then we saw quite clearly how great a passion play old Nuremberg was playing host to within its noble walls. There was a throng from the gates of the town through all the streets and market places like a raging sea, but even where the throng was thickest that day no harsh words or blows were proffered. No knife or sword was loosened from its sheath. Each person felt a restraining hand on their heart and the wildest among them let themselves be pushed into corners and dead ends without complaint.

Thus we moved on with the crown through the streets to the square in front of the Church of the Holy Ghost. How I felt in that great swell of people pushing and shoving me willy nilly I cannot put into words. I was in a tearful and yet sweet state of ecstasy. My soul was trapped and earthbound and yet hovered high up over things of earth and there was in me a feeling of a splendid pardon I was torn away from. And then we arrived in the square in front of the Church of the Holy Ghost where with a legion of young women, councillors and clergy the town's most unfortunate inhabitants awaited the coming of the regalia.

No barrier had been erected. All the sick and suffering who wanted to go had been allowed to go. And there they all were—the unclean from Saint John's hospice, the homeless of Saint Martha's parish, the poor of every charitable foundation. They are all permitted to touch the casket of the living presence with their hands and to implore for help, for no sanctuary is held to be more gracious than this one that contains the crown of the German people and the trappings of Christ!

Tolle! Lege! The restraining hand that all of us felt on their hearts suddenly glowed in mine like fire then froze like ice. With outstretched arms the leper mother was making a way through the crowd for a hooded man and, on the steps of the church, I caught a brief glimpse of Master Theodoros near a pale female face. With beating heart I now set down what happened next.

The people were like a wall separating me from the two lovers and holding me upright. I had now lost sight of Master Theodoros, the hooded Michael Groland and my cousin Cecilia. But I could still see over the heads of the crowd the fair pale virgin on the steps in the last rays of the setting sun standing in the middle of her family and looking down at the waggon with the holy casket and the bad, horrific legion of the lost and sick. A memory came back to me then of that time when, in the Church of the Holy Cross in Karlstein castle, the good knight Michael Groland had knelt down next to me in front of the imperial crown and swore that he would gain the Empire's other crown, the best wife from the best town in the Empire. And as this thought came to me there was a cry of amazement and the crowd drew back and in the evening light I saw Mechthilde smiling over the heads of the people and waving at the lepers. I felt myself shiver with fright and watched the maid climb down and vanish from under the red light that stained the portal of the Church of the Holy Ghost, but a sudden racket moved the people mightily. Under the porch the other young women raised their arms and cried out. The councillors too rushed forward and climbed down. I was dragged forward by a human surge and an arm grabbed me just in time and pulled me away from horses' hooves just as the imperial regalia were passing. The horses had reared and kicked out, but Master Theodoros Antoniades had saved me from their hooves and the feet of the crowd. And behold, and I saw before the shrine that concealed the most holy relics of the German nation that love truly is stronger than death, yes, even a fate worse than death.

In vain my friend and brother tried to draw back to the gruesome crush of his co-sufferers. The sword that had stood between him and the world outside the hospice of Saint John had no power here to protect him. In vain the grey-haired leper mother threw herself in Mechthild's way and tried to push her back with outstretched arms. In vain her relatives, her parents and her brothers rushed up to her. No-one was able to hold Mechthild back. She advanced with a firm step and placed both her arms on the shoulders of the lost one and laid her fair pale cheek against the hair shirt covering his chest. Healthy people drew back in fear whereas the lepers of Saint John's sick bay pushed forward. Deep silence descended.

"Michael," declared Mechthild. "Michael, look, you hid from me, but here on the holy ground of my forebears I have won you back for myself. I knew this moment would come when no power on earth could stop me. How else could I have put up with life? Will you not now keep your promise to me, my friend? The promise that you made before the imperial crown? Today before the same crown, I am reminding you of it. The earth is on its last legs, but we, you and me, have survived. You will not drive me from you! You'll not hide any longer from your bride, from your wife!"

Gently and yet almost wildly and with great panache she threw back his monk's hood from his brow and for the first time since we had said goodbye to each other in Castle Karlstein, I once again looked on my friend's beloved face. The scourge with which God punishes nations had not been kind to the proud knight and his fine head was dreadfully impaired. The leprosy that was eating away at his strong

arms and feet and his brave true heart had rendered his face terribly old and gaunt and consumed all the fire in his eyes. And his hitherto so solid feet could not support this poor leper longer in his mixture of misery and unspeakable good fortune. He fell down onto the bright form of his betrothed and she bent down towards him as if she were comforting a child.

And because they were all well-informed now in Nuremberg about the love between this couple and the cruel fate that they now shared, a cry arose, an extraordinary cry. All of a sudden all the sick had started to shout: "Lord, have mercy on us!" From the Church of the Holy Ghost at the same time they had struck up with: "Gloria in excelsis Deo!" The doors were thrown open and across from the high altar lights and candles glimmered out into the night. The press of people on all sides grew and a wave of them eddied round the shrine containing the imperial crown jewels. In every street people moved towards the portal of the Holy Ghost Church in droves as the holy of holies was borne up the steps high upon the shoulders of its chosen bearers. In the crowd no-one was in control of themselves any more. I helped Cecilia Stollhoferin up from the ground and my Greek master Theodoros and I protected her with our bodies. The beautiful Mechthild was dragged off with the lepers and no longer visible when the imperial crown was laid on the altar and one could finally look for her. The storm and stress of the constant crush had slackened off.

How we searched for her in the streets of Nuremberg! The cousins and friends of the Grossen waited at the gates with drawn swords, but hundreds of lepers in dark patches had now got as far as the Church of Our Lady, were crossing the Herrenmarkt, going past the Town Hall and across the wine market through the night back to the New Gate. No-one in the course of that evening or that night was able to glimpse the knight Groland von Laufenholz and the charming Mechthildis in that awful procession.

At the New Gate I spoke to cousins and friends of the family. Truly Brother Johannes Capistranus today in his pulpit has not shed his heart's blood in his words as I did that night. With weeping and gnashing of teeth the noble lords withdrew and noble ladies and young ladies who were also related helped me to make sure that no wild action was committed out of madness, impotence and grief.

When everything had calmed down, I followed alone the way that the lepers had gone out of the town to the hospice of Saint John. It was not quite dark, but there was still some light in the darkness and when I came near to the stone cross, next to which the year before a sword had stood in the ground, I made out a dark shape sitting on the bench.

Shuddering I hesitated and called out to the shadow from afar.

Then a voice answered through the darkness: "Makaríoi oi penthountes, hoti autoi paraklethesontai! Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted!"

It was the old faithful teacher, the homeless Greek man from the island of Chios who spoke to me the words from Our Lord Jesus Christ's Sermon on the Mount. I walked to him in silence and he took my hand, said nothing else, but pulled me down to the stone bench and pointed to the light streaming out of the windows of Saint John's hospice.

There was a humming sound and a crowd both in the house and around the house that was dreadful to hear and even worse to imagine during the night like that. We sat there until after midnight in the cold and dark and listened to the singing of lost souls and the sad tones dying away towards dawn. We sat there numb to night, frost and cutting wind. We sat there quietly, the Byzantine teacher and I, the old man and the young one and there was no difference in our state of mind.

That was the night in which my whole life changed. Through the dirges sung in Saint John's hospice I heard the sweet and childish voice as Saint Augustine once did. From the earliest times onward down to the present horrid time all that I experienced as I lived and breathed went past me and behold, out of great suffering great peace grew. Yes, I am a man and have become serene. The penance that Brother Capistranus demanded of the people of Nuremberg today is not the same as that imposed upon me by God's grace in the days of my youth when we fought for the imperial crown and the imperial crown was returned to us. I have witnessed with patience the barbaric noise of earthly battles, with patience the passing play and change in nature. Nevermore have I grieved when leaves in autumn turned to grey and gold. I take too but a modest pleasure when a new spring tempts forth fresh green grass to decorate the world. I have said goodbye to fear and remained unswerving in my resistance to the things that time has seen fit to torment me with.

Time's torments were appalling admittedly. Once more I rode out against the Hussites and saw at Aussig Germans laid low. I came home wounded from this bitter battle and found my friend and good knight Michael Groland of Laufenholz no more in need of things of earth. I encountered his wife in the streets, fine and upstanding in the habit of a nun. She was supporting old Stollhoferin, the leper mother

and greeted me quietly. Foolish people made the sign of the cross on account of her strange fate, but the time was at hand when wise people too would envy her peace of mind. Mechthilde Grossin had a great life and eventually succeeded to the title of Mater Leprosorum. She picked up the name like a laurel wreath in the miserable surroundings of Saint John's hospice from the floor thereof and wore it like a crown till she died and there were many who called her the imperial crown herself though that name never got as far as her ears and would have had no meaning for her lofty heart.

I saw much that was splendid: the wealth and the hubbub of Venice, the ancient monuments of Rome and the sunshine and blue sea of Naples. I became aware of everything with open eyes and, applying my will and my knowledge to them, did not miss any of the things that my daylight paths offered. I spoke before princes and the senates of proud republics and my efforts for the health and good of my noble home town did not go unrewarded. Now all that is behind me. These are my twilight years.

In May of the year 1453 Constantinople fell into the hands of a pagan foe. The half moon of Diana, the crest of Byzantium, stood upon the Turkish field insignia against the cross of Christendom. But the books and parchment rolls, written out laboriously by the hands of monks and scribes, the noble manuscripts our good friend Michael Groland, when we were young, elbowed off the table in the garden bower, were put into the hands of humanity at large by the new art of printing. Tolle! Lege!

Master Theodoros Antoniadis was spared the experience of the total collapse of the Eastern Roman Empire, but he saw the first printed book and had wise things to say about it.

The Holy Roman Empire's crown is still in Nuremberg. Who will once again bring honour to it in the world?

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