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Title: In the Fire of the Forge: A Romance of Old Nuremberg — Volume 02

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Release date: April 1, 2004 [EBook #5544]

Most recently updated: December 28, 2020

Language: English

*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK IN THE FIRE OF THE FORGE: A ROMANCE OF OLD NUREMBERG — VOLUME 02 ***

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IN THE FIRE OF THE FORGE

A ROMANCE OF OLD NUREMBERG

By Georg Ebers

Volume 2.

CHAPTER V.

As her father had ordered the servants not to disturb the young girls, Els did not wake till the sun was high in the heavens. Eva's place at her side was empty. She had already left the room. For the first time it had been impossible to sleep even a few short moments, and when she heard from the neighbouring cloister the ringing of the little bell that summoned the nuns to prayers, she could stay in bed no longer.

Usually she liked to dress slowly, thinking meanwhile of many things which stirred her soul. Sometimes while the maid or Els braided her hair she could read a book of devotion which the abbess had given her. But this morning she had carried the clothes she needed into the next room on tiptoe, that she might not wake her sister, and urged Katterle, who helped her dress, to hurry.

She longed to see her aunt at the convent. While kneeling at the prie-dieu, she had reached the certainty that her patron saint had led Heinz Schorlin to her. He was her knight and she his lady, so he must render her obedience, and she would use it to estrange him from the vanity of the world and make him a champion of the holy cause of the Church of Christ, the victorious conqueror of her foes. Sky-blue, the Holy Virgin's colour, should be hers, and thus his also, and every victory gained by the knight

with the sky-blue on his helmet, under St. Clare's protection, would then be hers.

Heinz Schorlin was already one of the boldest and strongest knights; her love must render him also one of the most godly. Yes, her love! If St. Francis had not disdained to make a wolf his brother, why might she not feel herself the loving sister of a youth who would obey her as a noble falcon did his mistress, and whom she would teach to pursue the right quarry? The abbess would not forbid such love, and the impulse that drew her so strongly to the convent was the longing to know how her aunt would receive her confession.

The night before when, after her conversation with Els, she began to pray, she had feared that she had fallen into the snare of earthly love, and dreaded the confession which she had to make to her aunt Kunigunde. Now she found that it was no fleshly bond which united her to the knight. Oh, no! As St. Francis had gone forth to console, to win souls for the Lord, to bring peace and exhort to earnest labour in the service of the Saviour, as his disciples had imitated him, and St. Clare had been untiring in working, in his spirit, among women, she, too, would obey the call which had come to her saint in Portiuncula, and prove herself for the first time, according to the Scripture, "a fisher of souls."

Now she gladly anticipated the meeting; for though her sister did not understand her, the abbess must know how to sympathise with what was passing in her mind. This expectation was fulfilled; for as soon as she was alone with her aunt she poured forth all her hopes and feelings without reserve, eagerly and joyfully extolling her good fortune that, through St. Clare, she had been enabled to find the noblest and most valiant knight, that she might win him for the Holy War under her saint's protection and to her honour.

The abbess, who knew women's hearts, had at first felt the same fear as Els; but she soon changed her opinion, and thought that she might be permitted to rejoice over the new emotion in her darling's breast.

No girl in love talked so openly and joyously of the conquest won, least of all would her truthful, excitable niece, whom she had drawn into her own path, speak thus of the man who disturbed her repose. No sensitive girl, unfamiliar with the world and scarcely beyond childhood, would decide with such steadfast firmness, so wholly free from every selfish wish, the future of the man dearest to her heart. No, no! Eva had already attained her new birth, and was not to be compared with other girls. She had already once reached that ecstatic rapture which followed only a long absorption in God and an active sympathy with the deep human love of the Saviour and the unspeakable sufferings which he had taken upon himself. Little was to be feared from earthly love for one who devoted herself with all the passion of her fervid nature to the divine Bridegroom. Among the many whom Kunigunde received into the convent as novices, she was most certainly "called." If she felt something which resembled love for the young knight—and she made no concealment of it—it was only the result of the sweet joy of winning for the Lord, the faith, and her saint a soul which seemed to her worthy of such grace.

Dear, highly gifted child!

She, the abbess Kunigunde, was willing it should be so, and that Eva should surpass herself. She should prove that genuine piety conquers even the yearning of a quickly throbbing heart.

True, she must keep her eyes open in order to prevent Satan, who is everywhere on the watch, from mingling in a game not wholly free from peril. But, on the other hand, the abbess intended to help her beloved niece to reap the reward of her piety.

It was scarcely to be doubted that Heinz Schorlin was fired with ardent love for Eva; but, for that very reason, he would be ready to yield her obedience, and therefore it was advisable to tell her exactly to what she must persuade him. She must win him to join the Order of Malta, and if the famous champion of Marchfield performed heroic deeds with the white cross on his black mantle, or in war on his red tunic, he, the Emperor's favourite, would be sure of a high position among the military members of the order.

The young girl listened eagerly, but the elderly abbess herself became excited while encouraging the young future "Sister" to her noble task. The days when, with the inmates of the convent, she had prayed that the Emperor Rudolph might fulfil the Pope's desire, and in a new crusade again wrest the Holy Land from the infidels, came back to her memory, and Heinz Schorlin, guided by the nuns of St. Clare, seemed the man to bring the fulfilment of this old and cherished wish.

It appeared like a leading of the saints and a sign from God that Heinz had been dubbed a knight, and commenced his glorious career at Lausanne while the Emperor Rudolph pledged himself to a new crusade.

She detained Eva so long that dinner was over at the Ortlieb mansion, and her impatient father would

have sent for her had not the invalid mother urged him to let her remain.

True, she longed to have a talk with her darling, who for the first time in her life had attended a great entertainment, and doubtless it grieved her to think that Eva did not feel the necessity of pouring out her heart to her own mother rather than to any one else, and sharing with her all the new emotions which undoubtedly had thrilled it; but she knew her child, and would have considered it selfish to place any obstacle in the pathway to eternal salvation of the elect whom God summoned with so loud a voice. Formerly she would rather have seen the young girl, whose charms were developing into such rare beauty, wedded to some good man; but now she rejoiced in the idea that Eva was summoned to rule over the nuns in the neighbouring cloister some day as abbess, in the place of her sister-in-law Kunigunde. Her own days, she knew, were numbered, but where could her child more surely find the happiness she desired for her than with the beloved sisters of St. Clare, whose home she and her husband had helped to build?

Els had concealed from her parents what she fancied she had discovered, for any anxiety injured the invalid, and no one could anticipate how her irritable father might receive the information of her fear. On the other hand, she could confide her troubles without anxiety to Wolff, her betrothed husband. He was wise, prudent, loved Eva like a sister, and in exchanging thoughts with him she always discovered the right course to pursue; but though she expected him so eagerly and confidently, he did not come.

When, in the afternoon, Eva returned home, her whole manner expressed such firm, cheerful composure that Els began to hope she might have been mistaken. The undemonstrative yet tender affection with which she met her mother, too, by no means harmonised with her fears.

How lovely the young girl looked as she sat on a low stool at the head of the invalid's couch and, with her mother's emaciated hand clasped in hers, told her all that she had seen and experienced the evening before! To please the beloved sufferer, she dwelt longer on the description of the gracious manner of the Emperor Rudolph and his sister to her and her father, the conversation with which the Burgrave had honoured her, and his son's invitation to dance. Then for the first time she mentioned Heinz Schorlin, whom she had found a godly knight, and finally spoke briefly of the distinguished foreign nobles and ladies whom he had pointed out and named.

All this reminded the mother of former days and, in spite of the warning of watchful Els not to talk too much, she did not cease questioning or recalling the time when she herself attended such festivals, and as one of the fairest maidens received much homage.

It had been a good day, for it was long since she had enjoyed so much quiet in her own home. The von Montforts, she told Eva, had set off early, with a great train of knights and servants, to ride to Radolzburg, the castle of the Burgrave von Zollern. Her father thought they would probably have a dance there, for the young sons of the Burgrave would act as hosts.

Eva asked carelessly who rode with Cordula this time to submit to her whims, but Els perceived by her sister's flushed cheeks and the tone of her voice what she desired to know, and answered as if by accident that Sir Heinz Schorlin certainly was not one of her companions, for he had ridden through the Frauenthor that afternoon in the train of the Emperor Rudolph and his Bohemian daughter-in-law.

Twilight was already beginning to gather, and Els could not see whether this news afforded Eva pleasure or annoyance, for her mother had taken too little heed of her weakness, and one of the attacks which the physician so urgently ordered her to avoid by caution commenced.

Els and the convent Sister Renata, who helped her nurse the invalid, were now completely absorbed in caring for her, but Eva turned away from the beloved sufferer—her sensitive nature could not endure the sight of her convulsions.

As soon as her mother again lay weak but quiet on the pillows which Els had rearranged for her, Eva obeyed her entreaty to go away, and went to her own chamber. When another attack drew her back to the invalid, a sign from her sister as she reached the threshold bade her keep away from the couch. Should it prove necessary, she whispered, she would call her. If Wolff came, Eva was to tell him that she could not leave her mother, but he must be sure to return early the next morning, as she had a great deal to say to him.

Eva then went to her father, who was dressing to attend a banquet at the house of Herr Berthold Vorchtel, the first Losunger—[Presiding Officer]—in the Council, from which he would be loath to absent himself for the very reason that his host's family had been hostile to him ever since the rumour of the betrothal of Wolff Eysvogel, whom the Vorchtels had regarded as their daughter Ursula's future husband.

Nevertheless, Herr Ernst would not have gone to the entertainment had his wife's condition given

cause for anxiety. But he was familiar with these convulsions which, it is true, weakened the invalid, but produced no other results; so he permitted Eva to help him put the last touches to his dress, on which he lavished great care. Spick and span as if he were just out of a bandbox, the elderly man, before leaving the house, went once more to the sick-room, and Eva stood near as, after many questions and requests, he whispered something to Els which she did not hear. With excited curiosity she asked what he had said so secretly, but he only answered hurriedly, "The name of the Man in the Moon's dog," kissed her cheek, and ran downstairs.

At the foot he again turned to Eva and told her to send for him if her mother should grow worse, for these entertainments at the Vorchtels usually lasted a long time.

"Will the Eysvogels be there too?" asked the girl.

"Who knows," replied her father. "I shall be glad if Wolff comes."

The tone in which he uttered the name of his future son-in-law distinctly showed how little he desired to meet any other member of the family, and Eva said sympathisingly, "Then I hope you will have an opportunity to remember me to Wolff."

"Shall I say nothing to Ursel?" asked the father, pressing a good-night kiss upon the young girl's forehead.

"She would not care for it," was the reply. "It cannot be easy to forget a man like Wolff."

"I wish he had stuck to Ursel, and let Els alone," her father answered angrily. "It would have been better for both."

"Why, father," interrupted Eva reproachfully, "do not our lovers seem really created for each other?"

"If the Eysvogels were only of the same opinion," exclaimed Ernst Ortlieb, shrugging his shoulders with a faint sigh. "Whoever marries, child, weds not only a man or a woman; all their kindred, unhappily, must be taken into the bargain. However, Els did not lack earnest warning. When your time comes, girl, your father will be more careful."

Smiling tenderly, he passed his hand over the little cap which covered her thick, fair hair, and went out.

Eva returned to her room and sat down at the spinning-wheel in the bow window, where Katterle had just drawn the curtains closely and lighted the hanging lamp. But the distaff remained untouched, and her thoughts wandered swiftly to the evening before and the ball at the Town Hall. Heinz Schorlin's image rose more and more distinctly before her mind, and this pleased her, for she fancied that he wore on his helm the blue favour which she had chosen, and it led her to consider against what foe she should first send him in the service of his lady and the Holy Church.

CHAPTER VI.

Eva had gazed into vacancy a long time, and beheld a succession of pleasing pictures, in every one of which, Heinz Schorlin appeared. Once, in imagination, she placed a wreath on his helmet after a great victory over the infidels.

Why should not this vision become a reality? Doubtless it owed its origin to a memory, for Wolff Eysvogel had been fired with love for her sister while Els was winding laurel around his helmet.

After the Honourable Council had resolved that the youths belonging to noble families, who had fought in the battle of Marchfield and returned victorious, should be adorned with wreaths by the maidens of their choice, Fate had appointed her sister to crown Eysvogel.

At that time Wolff had but recently recovered from the severe wounds with which he had returned from the campaign. But while he knelt before Els and his eyes met hers, love had overmastered him so swiftly and powerfully, that at the end of a few days he determined to woo her.

Meanwhile his own family resolutely opposed his choice. The father declared that he had made an agreement with Berthold Vorchtel to marry him to his daughter Ursula, and withdrawal on his son's part would embarrass him. His grandmother, the arrogant old Countess Rotterbach, agreed with him,

and declared that Wolff ought to wed no one except a lady of the most aristocratic birth or an heiress like Ursula. Her daughter Rosalinde Eysvogel, as usual, was the echo of her mother.

Herr Ernst Ortlieb, too, would far rather have seen his Els marry into another home; but Wolff himself was a young man of such faultless honour, and the bride he had chosen was so eager to become his, that he deemed it a duty to forget the aversion inspired by the suitor's family.

As for Wolff, he had so firmly persisted in his resolve that his parents at last permitted him to ask for his darling's hand, but his father had made it a condition that the betrothal, on account of the youth of the lovers, should not be announced till after Wolff had returned from Milan, where he was to finish the studies commenced in Venice. True, everyone had supposed that they were completed long ago, but Eysvogel senior insisted upon his demand, and afterwards succeeded in deferring the announcement of the betrothal, until the resolute persistence of Wolff, who meanwhile had entered the great commercial house, and the wish of his own aged mother, a sensible woman, who from the first had approved her grandson's choice and to whom Herr Casper was obliged to show a certain degree of consideration, compelled him to give it publicity.

A few days later Herr Casper's brother died, and soon after his estimable old mother. He used these events as a pretext for longer delay, saying that both he and his wife needed at least six months' interval ere they could forget their mourning in a gay wedding festival. Besides, he would prefer not to have the marriage take place until after Wolff's election to the Council, which, in all probability, would occur after Walpurgis of the coming year.

Ernst Ortlieb had sullenly submitted to all this. Nothing but his love for his child and respect for Herr Casper's dead mother, who had taken Els to her heart like a beloved granddaughter, would have enabled him to conquer his hasty temper in his negotiations with the man whom he detested in his inmost soul, and not hurl back the consent so reluctantly granted to his son.

The friends who knew him admired the strength of will with which he governed his impetuous nature in this transaction. Some asserted that secret obligations compelled him to yield to the rich Eysvogel; for though the Ortlieb mercantile house was reputed wealthy, the business prudence of its head resulted in smaller profits, and people had not forgotten that it had suffered heavy losses during the terrible period of despotism which had preceded the Emperor Rudolph's accession to the throne.

The insecurity of the high-roads had injured every merchant, but in trying to find some explanation for Herr Ortlieb's submission the attacks which had cost him one and another train of wares were regarded as specially disastrous.

Finally, the dowry which Els was to bring bore no comparison to the large sums Ernst Ortlieb had lavished upon the erection of the St. Clare Convent, and hence it was inferred that the wealth of the firm had sustained considerable losses. This found ready credence, owing to the retired life led by the Ortliebs,—whose house had formerly been one of the most hospitable in the city,—ever since the wife had become an invalid and Eva had grown up with an aversion to the world. Few took the trouble to inquire into the very apparent causes for the change.

Yet this view of the matter was opposed by many-nay, when the conversation turned upon these subjects, Herr Berthold Vorchtel, perhaps the richest and most distinguished man in Nuremberg, who rented the imperial taxes, made comments from which, had it not been so difficult to believe, people might have inferred that Casper Eysvogel was indebted to Ernst Ortlieb rather than the latter to him.

Yet the cautious, prudent man never explained the foundation of his opinion, for he very rarely mentioned either of the two firms; yet prior to the battle of Marchfield he had believed that his own daughter Ursula and Wolff Eysvogel would sooner or later wed. Herr Casper, the young man's father, had strengthened this expectation. He himself and his wife esteemed Wolff, and his "Ursel" had shown plainly enough that she preferred him to the other friends of her elder brother Ulrich.

When he returned home the two met like brother and sister, and the parents of Ursula Vorchtel had expected Wolff's proposal until the day on which the wreaths were bestowed had made them poorer by a favourite wish and destroyed the fairest hope of their daughter Ursula.

The worthy merchant, it is true, deemed love a beautiful thing, but in Nuremberg it was the parents who chose wives and husbands for their sons and daughters; yet, after marriage, love took possession of the newly wedded pair. A transgression of this ancient custom was very rare, and even though Wolff's heart was fired with love for Els Ortlieb, his father, Herr Vorchtel thought, should have refused his consent to the betrothal, especially as he had already treated Ursel as his future daughter. Some compulsion must have been imposed upon him when he permitted his son to choose a wife other than the one selected.

But what could render one merchant dependent upon another except business obligations?—and Berthold Vorchtel was sharp-sighted. He knew the heavy draft which Herr Casper had made upon the confidence reposed in the old firm, and thought he had perceived that the great splendour displayed by the women of the Eysvogel family, the liberality with which Herr Casper had aided his impoverished noble relatives, and the lavish expenditure of his son-in-law, the debt-laden Sir Seitz Siebenburg, drew too heavily upon the revenues of the ancient house.

Even now Casper Eysvogel's whole conduct proved how unwelcome was his son's choice. To him, Ursula's father, he still intimated on many an occasion that he had by no means resigned every hope of becoming, through his son, more nearly allied to his family, for a betrothal was not a wedding.

Berthold Vorchtel, however, was not the man to enter into such double-dealing, although he saw plainly enough how matters stood with his poor child. She had confided her feelings to no one; yet, in spite of Ursula's reserved nature, even a stranger could perceive that something clouded her happiness. Besides, she had persistently refused the distinguished suitors who sought the wealthy Herr Berthold's pretty daughter, and only very recently had promised her parents, of her own free will, to give up her opposition to marriage.

Ever since the betrothal, to the sincere sorrow of Els, she had studiously avoided Wolff's future bride, who had been one of her dearest friends; and Ulrich, Herr Vorchtel's oldest son, took his sister's part, and at every opportunity showed Wolff—who from a child, and also in the battle of Marchfield, had been a favourite comrade—that he bore him a grudge, and considered his betrothal to any one except Ursula an act of shameful perfidy.

The fair-minded father did not approve of his son's conduct, for his wife had learned from her daughter that Wolff had never spoken to her of love, or promised marriage.

Therefore, whenever Herr Berthold Vorchtel met Els's father—and this often happened in the Council—he treated him with marked respect, and when there was an entertainment in his house sent him an invitation, as in former years, which Ernst Urtlieb accepted, unless something of importance prevented.

But though the elder Vorchtel was powerless to change his children's conduct, he never wearied of representing to his son how unjust and dangerous were the attacks with which, on every occasion, he irritated Wolff, whose strength and skill in fencing were almost unequalled in Nuremberg. In fact, the latter would long since have challenged his former friend had he not been so conscious of his own superiority, and shrunk from the thought of bringing fresh sorrow upon Ursula and her parents, whom he still remembered with friendly regard.

Eva was fond of her future brother-in-law, and it had not escaped her notice that of late something troubled him.

What was it?

She thoughtfully gave the wheel a push, and as it turned swiftly she remembered the Swiss dance the evening before, and suddenly clenched her small right hand and dealt the palm of her left a light blow.

She fancied that she had discovered the cause of Wolff's depression, for she again saw distinctly before her his sister Isabella's husband, Sir Seitz Siebenburg, as he swung Countess Cordula around so recklessly that her skirt, adorned with glittering jewels, fluttered far out from her figure. In the room adjacent to the hall he had flung himself upon his knees before the countess, and Eva fancied she again beheld his big, red face, with its long, thick, yellow mustache, whose ends projected on both sides in a fashion worn by few men of his rank. The expression of the watery blue eyes, with which he stared Cordula in the face, were those of a drunkard.

To-day he had followed her to the Kadolzburg, and probably meant to spend the night there. So Wolff had ample reason to be anxious about his sister and her peace of mind. That must be it!

Perhaps he would yet come that evening, to give Els at least a greeting from the street. How late was it?

She hastily tried to draw the curtains aside from the window, but this was not accomplished as quickly as she expected—they had been care fully fastened with pins. Eva noticed it, and suddenly remembered her father's whispered words to Els.

They were undoubtedly about the window. According to the calendar, the moon would be full that day, and she knew very well that it had a strange influence upon her. True, within the past year it appeared to have lost its power; but formerly, especially when she had devoted herself very earnestly to religious exercises, she had often, without knowing how or why, left her bed and wandered about,

not only in her chamber but through the house. Once she had climbed to the dovecot in the courtyard, and another time had mounted to the garret where, she did not know in what way, she had been awakened. When she looked around, the moon was shining into the spacious room, and showed her that she was perched on one of the highest beams in the network of rafters which, joined with the utmost skill, supported the roof. Below her yawned a deep gulf, and as she looked down into it she was seized with such terror that she uttered a loud shriek for help, and did not recover her calmness until the old housekeeper, Martsche, who had started from her bed in alarm, brought her father to her.

She had been taken down with the utmost care. No one was permitted to help except white-haired Nickel, the old head packer, who often let a whole day pass without opening his lips; for Herr Ernst seemed to lay great stress upon keeping the moon's influence on Eva a secret. There was indeed something uncanny about this night-walking, for even now it seemed incomprehensible how she had reached the beam, which was at least the height of three men above the floor. A fall might have cost her life, and her father was right in trying to prevent a repetition of such nocturnal excursions. This time Els had helped him.

How faithfully she cared for them all!

Yes, she had barred out even the faintest glimmer. Eva smiled as she saw the numerous pins with which her sister had fastened the curtain, and an irresistible longing seized her to see once more the wonderful light that promoted the growth of the hair if cut during its increase, and also exerted so strange an influence upon her.

She must look up at the moon!

Swiftly and skilfully, as if aided by invisible hands, her dainty fingers opened curtain and window.

Drawing a deep breath, with an emotion of pleasure which she had not experienced for a long time, she gazed at the linden before the house steeped in silvery radiance, and upward to the pure disk of the full moon sailing in the cloudless sky. How beautiful and still the night was! How delightful it would be to walk up and down the garden, with her aunt the abbess, with Els, and perhaps—she felt the blood crimson her cheeks— with Heinz Schorlin!

Where was he now?

Undoubtedly with the Emperor and his ladies, perhaps at the side of the Bohemian princess, the young Duchess Agnes, who yesterday had so plainly showed her pleasure in his society.

Just then the watch, marching from the Marienthurn to the Frauenthor, gave her vagrant thoughts a new turn. The city guard was soon followed by a troop of horse, which probably belonged to the Emperor's train.

It was delightful to gaze, at this late hour, into the moonlit street, and she wondered that she had never enjoyed it before. True, it would have been still pleasanter had Els borne her company; and, besides, she longed to tell her the new explanation she had found for Wolff's altered manner.

Perhaps her mother was asleep, and she could come with her.

How still the house was!

Cautiously opening the door of the sick-room, she glanced in. Els was standing at the head of the bed, supporting her mother with her strong young arms, while Sister Renata pushed the cushions between the sufferer's back and the bedstead.

The old difficulty of breathing had evidently attacked her again.

Yes, yes, the dim light of the lamp was shining on her pale face, and the large sunken eyes were gazing with imploring anguish at the image of the Virgin on the opposite wall.

How gladly Eva would have afforded her relief! She looked with a faint sense of envy at her sister, whose skilful, careful hands did everything to the satisfaction of the beloved sufferer, while in nursing she failed only too often in giving the right touch. But she could pray—implore the aid of her saint very fervently; nay, she was more familiar with her, and might hope that she would fulfil a heartfelt wish of hers more quickly than for her sister. It would not do to call Els to the window. She closed the door gently, returned to her chamber, knelt and implored St. Clare, with all the fervour of her heart, to grant her mother a good night. Then she again drew the curtains closely over the window, and went to call Katterle to help her undress.

But the maid was just entering with fresh water. What was the matter with her?

Her hand trembled as she braided her young mistress's hair and sometimes, with a faint sigh, she stopped the movement of the comb.

Her silence could be easily explained; for Eva had often forbidden Katterle to talk, when she disturbed her meditation. Yet the girl must have had some special burden on her mind, for when Eva had gone to bed she could not resolve to leave the room, but remained standing on the threshold in evident embarrassment.

Eva encouraged her to speak, and Katterle, so confused that she often hesitated for words and pulled at her ribbons till she was in danger of tearing them from her white apron, stammered that she did not come on her own account, but for another person. It was well known in the household that her betrothed husband, the true and steadfast Walther Biberli, served a godly knight, her countryman.

"I know it," said Eva with apparent composure, "and your Biberli has commissioned you to bear me the respectful greeting of Sir Heinz Schorlin."

The girl looked at her young mistress in surprise. She had been prepared for a sharp rebuke, and had yielded to her lover's entreaties to under take this service amid tears, and with great anxiety; for if her act should be betrayed, she would lose, amid bitter reproaches, the place she so greatly prized. Yet Biberli's power over her and her faith in him were so great that she would have followed him into a lion's den; and it had scarcely seemed a more desirable venture to carry a love-greeting to the pious maiden who held men in such disfavour, and could burst into passionate anger as suddenly as her father.

And now?

Eva had expected such a message. It seemed like a miracle to Katterle.

With a sigh of relief, and a hasty thanksgiving to her patron saint, she at once began to praise the virtue and piety of the servant as well as his lord; but Eva again interrupted, and asked what Sir Heinz Schorlin desired.

Katterle, with new-born confidence, repeated, as if it were some trivial request, the words Biberli had impressed upon her mind.

"By virtue of the right of every good and devout knight to ask his lady for her colour, Sir Heinz Schorlin, with all due reverence, humbly prays you to name yours; for how could he hold up his head before you and all the knights if he were denied the privilege of wearing it in your honour, in war as well as in peace?"

Here her mistress again interrupted with a positive "I know," and, still more emboldened, Katterle continued the ex-schoolmaster's lesson to the end:

"His lord, my lover says, will wait here beneath the window, in all reverence, though it should be till morning, until you show him your sweet face. No, don't interrupt me yet, Mistress Eva, for you must know that Sir Heinz's lady mother committed her dear son to my Biberli's care, that he might guard him from injury and illness. But since his master met you, he has been tottering about as though he had received a spear-thrust, and as the knight confessed to his faithful servitor that no leech could help him until you permitted him to open his heart to you and show you with what humble devotion——"

But here the maid was interrupted in a manner very different from her expectations, for Eva had raised herself on her pillows and, almost unable to control her voice in the excess of her wrath, exclaimed:

"The master who presumes to seek through his servant—— And by what right does the knight dare thus insolently—— But no! Who knows what modest wish was transformed in your mouth to so unprecedented a demand? He desired to see my face? He wanted to speak to me in person, to confess I know not what? From you—you, Katterle, the maid—the knight expects——"

Here she struck her little hand angrily against the wood of the bedstead and, panting for breath, continued:

"I'll show him!—— Yet no! What I have to answer no one else—— From me, from me alone, he shall learn without delay. There is paper in yonder chest, on the very top; bring it to me, with pen and ink."

Katterle silently hurried to obey this order, but Eva pressed her hand upon her heaving bosom, and gazed silently into vacancy.

The manservant and the maid whom Heinz Schorlin had made his messengers certainly could have no

conception of the bond that united her to him; even her own sister had misunderstood it. He should now learn that Eva Ortlieb knew what beseeemed her! But she, too, longed for another meeting, and this conduct rendered it necessary.

The sooner they two had a conversation, the better. She could confidently venture to invite him to the meeting which she had in view; her aunt, the abbess, had promised to stand by her side, if she needed her, in her intercourse with the knight.

But her colour?

Katterle had long since laid the paper and writing materials before her, but she still pondered. At last, with a smile of satisfaction, she seized the pen. The manner in which she intended to mention the colour should show him the nature of the bond which united them.

She was mistress of the pen, for in the convent she had copied the gospels, the psalms, and other portions of the Scriptures, yet her hand trembled as she committed the following lines to the paper:

"I am angered—nay, even grieved—that you, a godly knight, who knows the reverence due to a lady, have ventured to await my greeting in front of my father's house. If you are a true knight, you must be aware that you voluntarily promised to obey my every glance. I can rely upon this pledge, and since I find it necessary to talk with you, I invite you to an interview—when and where, my maid, who is betrothed to your servant, shall inform him. A friend, who has your welfare at heart as well as mine, will be with me. It must be soon, with the permission of St. Clare, who, since you have chosen her for your patron saint, looks down upon you as well as on me.

"As for my colour, I know not what to name; the baubles associated with earthly love are unfamiliar to me. But blue is the colour of the pure heaven and its noble queen, the gracious Virgin. If you make this colour yours and fight for it, I shall rejoice, and am willing to name it mine."

At the bottom of the little note she wrote only her Christian name "Eva," and when she read it over she found that it contained, in apt and seemly phrases, everything that she desired to say to the knight.

While folding the paper and considering how she could fasten it, as there was no wax at hand, she thought of the narrow ribbons with which Els tied together, in sets of half a dozen, the fine kerchiefs worn over the neck and bosom, when they came from the wash. They were sky-blue, and nothing could be more suitable for the purpose.

Katterle brought one from the top of the chest. Eva wound it swiftly around the little roll, and the maid hastily left the room, sure of the gratitude of the true and steadfast Biberli.

When Eva was again alone, she at first thought that she might rejoice over her hasty act; but on asking herself what Els would say, she felt certain that she would disapprove of it and, becoming disconcerted, began to imagine what consequences it might entail.

The advice which her father had recently given Wolff, never to let any important letter pass out of his hands until at least one night had elapsed, returned to her memory, and from that instant the little note burdened her soul like a hundred-pound weight.

She would fain have started up to get it back again, and a strong attraction drew her towards the window to ascertain whether Heinz Schorlin had really come and was awaiting her greeting.

Perhaps Katterle had not yet delivered the note. What if she were still standing at the door of the house to wait for Biberli? If, to be absolutely certain, she should just glance out, that would not be looking for the knight, and she availed herself of the excuse without delay.

In an instant she sprang from her bed and gently drew the curtain aside. The street was perfectly still. The linden and the neighbouring houses cast dark, sharply outlined shadows upon the light pavement, and from the convent garden the song of the nightingale echoed down the quiet moonlit street.

Katterle had probably already given the note to Heinz Schorlin who, obedient to his lady's command, as beseeemed a knight, had gone away. This soothed her anxiety, and with a sigh she went back to bed.

But the longing to look out into the street again was so strong that she yielded to the temptation; yet, ere she reached the window, she summoned the strength of will which was peculiar to her and, lying down, once more closed her lids, with the firm resolve to see and hear nothing. As she had not shut her eyes the night before and, from dread of the ball, had slept very little during the preceding one, she soon, though the moon was shining in through the parted curtains, lapsed into a condition midway between sleep and waking. Extreme fatigue had deadened consciousness, yet she fancied that at times

she heard the sound of footsteps on the pavement outside, and the deep voices of men.

Nor was what she heard in her half-dozing state, which was soon followed by the sound slumber of youth, any delusion of the senses.

CHAPTER VII.

The moon found something in front of the Ortlieb house worth looking at. Rarely had she lighted with purer, brighter radiance the pathway of the mortals who excited her curiosity, than that of the two handsome young men who, at a moderate interval of time, passed through the Frauenthor, and finally entered the courtyard of the Ortlieb residence almost at the same instant.

Luna first saw them pace silently to and fro, and delighted in the resentful glances they cast at each other. This joy increased as the one in the long coat, embroidered on the shoulder with birds, and then the other, whose court costume well became his lithe, powerful limbs, sat down, each on one of the chains connecting the granite posts between the street and the courtyard.

The very tall one, who looked grave and anxious, was Wolff Eysvogel; the other, somewhat shorter, who swung gaily to and fro on the chain as if it afforded him much amusement, Heinz Schorlin.

Both frequently glanced up at the lighted bow-window and the smaller one on the second story, behind which Eva lay half asleep. This was the first meeting of the two men.

Wolff, aware of his excellent right to remain on this-spot, would have shown the annoying intruder his displeasure long before, had he not supposed that the other, whom at the first glance he recognised as a knight, was one of Countess Cordula von Montfort's admirers. Yet he soon became unable to control his anger and impatience. Yielding to a hasty impulse, he left the chain, but as he approached the stranger the latter gave his swaying seat a swifter motion and, without vouchsafing him either greeting or introductory remark, said carelessly, "This is a lovely night."

"I am of the same opinion," replied Wolff curtly. "But I would like to ask, sir, what induced you to choose the courtyard of this house to enjoy it?"

"Induced?" asked the Swiss in astonishment; then, looking the other in the face with defiant sharpness, he added scornfully:

"I am warming the chain because it suits me to do so."

"You are allowed the pleasure," returned Wolff in an irritated tone; "nay, I can understand that night birds of your sort find no better amusement. Still, it seems to me that a knight who wishes to keep iron hot might attain his object better in another way."

"Why, of course," cried Heinz Schorlin, springing swiftly to his feet with rare elasticity. "It gives a pleasant warmth when blade strikes blade or the hot blood wets them. I am no friend to darkness, and it seems to me, sir, as if we were standing in each other's light here."

"There our opinions concur for the second time this lovely night," quietly replied the patrician's son, conscious of his unusual strength and skill in fencing, with a slight touch of scorn. "Like you, I am always ready to cross blades with another; only, the public street is hardly the fitting place for it."

"May the plague take you!" muttered the Swiss in assent to Wolff's opinion. "Besides, sir, who ever grasps iron so swiftly is worth a parley. To ask whether you are of knightly lineage would be useless trouble, and should it come to a genuine sword-dance.

"You will find a partner in me at any time," was the reply, "as I, who wear my ancient escutcheon with good right, would gladly give you a crimson memento of this hour—though you were but the son of a cobbler. But first let us ascertain—for I, too, dislike darkness—whether we are really standing in each other's light. With all due respect for your fancy for warming chains, it would be wise, ere Sir Red Coat—[The executioner]—puts his round our ankles for disturbing the peace, to have a sensible talk."

"Try it, for aught I care," responded Heinz Schorlin cheerily. "Unluckily for me, I live in a state of perpetual feud with good sense. One thing, however, seems certain without any serious reflection: the attraction which draws me here, as well as you, will not enter the cloister as a monk, but as a little nun,

wears no beard, but braids her hair. Briefly, then, if you are here for Countess Cordula von Montfort's sake, your errand is vain; she will sleep at Kadolzburg to-night."

"May her slumber be sweet!" replied Wolff calmly. "She is as near to me as yonder moon."

"That gives the matter a more serious aspect," cried the knight angrily.
"You or I. What is your lady's name?"

"That, to my mind, is asking too much," replied Wolff firmly.

"And the law of love gives you the right to withhold an answer. But, sir, we must nevertheless learn for the sake of what fairest fair we have each foregone sleep."

"Then tell me, by your favour, your lady's colour," Wolff asked the Swiss.

The latter laughed gaily: "I am still putting that question to my saint."

Then, noticing Wolff's shake of the head, he went on in a more serious tone: "If you will have a little patience, I hope I may be able to tell you, ere we part."

This assurance also seemed to Wolff an enigma. Who in the wide world would come from under the respectable Ortlieb roof, at this hour, to tell a stranger anything whatsoever concerning one of its daughters? Neither could have given him the right to regard her as his lady, and steal at night, like a marten, around the house which contained his dearest treasure. This obscurity was an offence to Wolff Eysvogel, and he was not the man to submit to it. Yonder insolent fellow should learn, to his hurt, that he had made a blunder.

But scarcely had he begun to explain to Heinz that he claimed the right to protect both the daughters of this house, the younger as well as the older, since they had no brother, when the knight interrupted:

"Oho! There are two of them, and she, too, spoke of a sister. So, if it comes to sharing, sir, we need not emulate the judgment of Solomon. Let us see! The colour is uncertain, but to every Christian mortal a name clings as closely as a shadow and, if I mention the initial letter of the one which adorns my lady, I believe I shall commit no offence that a court of love could condemn. The initial, which I like because it is daintily rounded and not too difficult to write-mark it well—is 'E.'"

Wolff Eysvogel started slightly and gripped the dagger in his belt, but instantly withdrew his hand and answered with mingled amusement and indignation: "Thanks for your good will, Sir Knight, but this, too, brings us no nearer our goal; the E is the initial of both the Ortlieb sisters. The elder who, as you may know, is my betrothed bride, bears the name of Elizabeth, or Els, as we say in Nuremberg."

"And the younger," cried Heinz joyously, "honours with her gracious innocence the name of her through whom sin came into the world."

"But you, Sir Knight," exclaimed Wolff fiercely, "would do better not to name sin and Eva Ortlieb in the same breath. If you are of a different opinion——"

"Then," interrupted the Swiss, "we come back to warming the iron."

"As you say," cried Wolff resolutely. "In spite of the peace of the country, I will be at your service at any time. As you see, I went out unarmed, and it would not be well done to cross swords here."

"Certainly not," Heinz assented. "But many days and nights will follow this moonlight one, and that you may have little difficulty in finding me whenever you desire, know that my name is Heinrich—or to more intimate friends, among whom you might easily be numbered if we don't deprive each other of the pleasure of meeting again under the sun—Heinz Schorlin."

"Schorlin?" asked Wolff in surprise. "Then you are the knight who, when a beardless boy, cut down on the Marchfield the Bohemian whose lance had slain the Emperor's charger, the Swiss who aided him to mount the steed of Ramsweg of Thurgau—your uncle, if I am not mistaken—and then took the wild ride to bring up the tall Capeller, with his troops, who so gloriously decided the day."

"And," laughed Heinz, "who was finally borne off the field as dead before the fulfilment of his darling wish to redden Swiss steel with royal Bohemian blood. This closed the chronicle, Herr—what shall I call you?"

"Wolff Eysvogel, of Nuremberg," replied the other.

"Aha! A son of the rich merchant where the Duke of Gulich found quarters?" cried the Swiss, lifting

his cap bordered with fine miniver. "May confusion seize me! If I were not my father's son, I wouldn't mind changing places with you. It must make the neck uncommonly stiff, methinks, to have a knightly escutcheon on door and breast, and yet be able to fling florins and zecchins broadcast without offending the devil by an empty purse. If you don't happen to know how such a thing looks, I can show you."

"Yet rumour says," observed Wolff, "that the Emperor is gracious to you, and knows how to fill it again."

"If one doesn't go too far," replied Heinz, "and my royal master, who lacks spending money himself only too often, doesn't keep his word that it was done for the last time. I heard that yesterday morning, and thought that the golden blessing which preceded it would last the dear saints only knew how long. But ere the cock had crowed even once this morning the last florin had vanished. Dice, Herr Wolff Eysvogel—dice!"

"Then I would keep my hands off them," said the other meaningly.

"If the Old Nick or some one else did not always guide them back! Did you, a rich man's son, never try what the dice would do for you?"

"Yes, Sir Knight. It was at Venice, where I was pursuing my studies, and tried my luck at gambling on many a merry evening with other sons of mercantile families from Nuremberg, Augsburg, and Cologne."

"And your feathers were generously plucked?"

"By no means. I usually left a winner. But after they fleeced a dear friend from Ulm, and he robbed his master, I dropped dice."

"And you did so as easily as if it were a short fast after an abundant meal?"

"It was little more difficult," Wolff asserted. "My father would have gladly seen me outdo my countrymen, and sent me more money than I needed. Why should I deprive honest fellows who had less?"

"That's just the difficulty," cried his companion eagerly. "It was easy for you to renounce games of chance because your winnings only added more to the rest, and you did not wish to pluck poorer partners. But I! A poor devil like me cannot maintain armour-bearer, servants, and steeds out of what the dear little mother at home in her faithful care can spare from crops and interest. How could we succeed in making a fair appearance at court and in the tournament if it were not for the dice? And then, when I lose, I again become but the poor knight the saints made me; when I win, on the contrary, I am the great and wealthy lord I would have been born had the Lord permitted me to choose my own cradle. Besides, those who lose through me are mainly dukes, counts, and gentlemen with rich fiefs and fat bourgs, whom losing doubtless benefits, as bleeding relieves a sick man. What suits the soldier does not befit the merchant. We live wholly amid risks and wagers. Every battle, every skirmish is a game whose stake is life. Whoever reflects long is sure to lose. If I could only describe, Herr Eysvogel, what it is to dash headlong upon the foe!"

"I could imagine that vividly enough," Wolff eagerly interposed.

"I, too, have broken many a lance in the lists and shed blood enough."

"What a dunce I am!" cried Heinz in amazement, pressing his hand upon his brow. "That's why your face was so familiar! By my saint! I am no knight if I did not see you then, before the battle waxed hot. It was close beside your Burgrave Frederick, who held aloft the imperial banner."

"Probably," replied Wolff in a tone of assent. "He sometimes entrusted the standard to me, when it grew too heavy for his powerful arm, because I was the tallest and the strongest of our Nuremberg band. But, unluckily, I could not render this service long. A scimitar gashed my head. The larger part of the little scar is hidden under my hair."

"The little scar!" repeated Heinz gaily. "It was wide enough, at any rate, for the greatest soul to slip through it. A scar on the head from a wound received four years ago, and yet distinctly visible in the moonlight!"

"It should serve as a warning," replied Wolff, glancing anxiously up the street. "If the patrol, or any nocturnal reveller should catch sight of us, it would be ill for the fair fame of the Ortlieb sisters, for everybody knows that only one—Els's betrothed lover—has a right to await a greeting here at so late an hour. So follow me into the shadow of the linden, I entreat you; for yonder—surely you see it too—a

figure is gliding towards us."

Heinz Schorlin's laugh rang out like a bell as he whispered to the Nuremberg patrician: "That figure is familiar to me, and neither we nor our ladies need fear any evil from it. Excuse me moment, and I'll wager twenty gold florins against yonder linden leaf that, ere the moonlight has left the curbstone, I can tell you my lady's colour."

As he spoke he hastened towards the figure, now, standing motionless within the shadow of the door post beside the lofty entrance.

Wolff Eysvogel remained alone, gazing thoughtfully upon the ground.

CHAPTER VIII.

The silent wanderer above had expected to behold a scene very unlike an interview between two men. The latter required neither her purest, fullest light, nor the shadow of a blossoming linden.

Now Luna saw the young Nuremberg merchant gaze after the Swiss with an expression of such deep anxiety and pain upon his manly features that she felt the utmost pity for him. He did not look upward as usual to the window of his beautiful Els, but either fixed his eyes upon the spot where his new acquaintance was conversing with another person, or bent them anxiously upon the ground.

As Wolff thought of Heinz Schorlin, it seemed as if Fate had thrown him into the way of the Swiss that he might feel with twofold anguish the thorns besetting his own life path. The young knight was proffered the rose without the thorn. What cares had he? The present threw into his lap its fairest blessings, and when he looked into the future he beheld only the cheering buds of hope.

Yet this favourite of fortune had expressed a desire to change places with him. The thought that many others, too, would be glad to step into his shoes tortured Wolff's honest heart as though he himself were to blame for the delusion of these short-sighted folk.

Apart from his strength and health, his well-formed body, his noble birth, his faith in the love of his betrothed bride—at this hour he forgot how much these things were—he found nothing in his lot which seemed worth desiring.

He might not even rejoice in his stainless honesty with the same perfect confidence as in his betrothal.

Yes, he had cared for noble old Berthold Vorchtel's daughter as if she were his sister. He had even found pleasure in the thought that Ursula was destined to become his wife, yet no word either of love or allusion to future marriage had been exchanged between them. He had felt free, and had a right to consider himself so, when love for Els Ortlieb overwhelmed him so swiftly and powerfully.

Yet Ursula and her oldest brother treated him as if he had been guilty of base disloyalty. His pure conscience, however, enabled him to endure this more easily than the other burden, of which he became aware on the long-anticipated day when his father made him a partner in the old firm and gave him an insight into the condition of the property and the course of the business.

Then he had learned the heavy losses which had been sustained recently, and the sad disparity existing between the great display by which his father and mother, as well as his grandmother, the countess, maintained the appearance of their former princely wealth, and the balances of the last few years.

When he had just boasted to the reckless young knight that he had given up gaming, he told but half the truth, for though since his period of study in Venice, and later in Milan, he had not touched dice, he had been forced to consent to a series of enterprises undertaken by his father, whose stakes were far different from the gambling of the knights and nobles at the Green Shield or in the camp.

Yet he intended to bind the fate of the woman he loved to his own, for Els, spite of the opposition of his family, would have been already indissolubly united to him, had not one failure after another destroyed his courage to take her hand. Finally, he deemed it advisable to await the result of the last great enterprise, now on the eve of decision. It might compensate for many of the losses of recent years. Should it be favourable, the heaviest burden would be lifted from his soul; in the opposite case

the old house would be shaken to its foundations. Yet even its fall would have been easier for him to endure than this cruel uncertainty, to which was added the torturing anxiety of bearing the responsibility of things for which he was not to blame, and of which, moreover, he was even denied a clear view. Yet he felt absolutely certain that his father was concealing many things, perhaps the worst, and often felt as if he were walking in the darkness over a mouldering bridge. Ah, if it could only be propped up, and then rebuilt! But if it must give way, he hoped the catastrophe would come soon. He knew that he possessed the strength to build a new home for Els and himself. Even were it small and modest, it should be erected on a firm foundation and afford a safe abode for its inmates.

What did the young, joyous-hearted fellow who was wooing Eva know of such cares? Fate had placed him on the sunny side of life, where everything flourished, and set him, Wolff, in the shade, where grass and flowers died.

There is a magic in fame which the young soul cannot easily escape, and the name of Heinz Schorlin was indeed honoured and on every lip. The imagination associated with it the cheerful nature which, like a loyal comrade, goes hand in hand with success, deserved and undeserved good fortune, woman's favour, doughty deeds, the highest and strongest traits of character.

An atmosphere like sunshine, which melts all opposition, emanated from Heinz. Wolff had experienced it himself. He had seriously intended to make the insolent intruder feel his strong arm, but since he had learned the identity of the Swiss his acts and nature appeared in a new light. His insolence had gained the aspect of self-confidence which did not lack justification, and when a valiant knight talked to him so frankly, like a younger brother to an older and wiser one, it seemed to the lonely man who, of late, completely absorbed in the course of business, had held aloof from the sports, banquets, and diversions of the companions of his own age, that he had experienced something unusually pleasant. How tender and affectionate it sounded when Heinz alluded to the "little mother" at home! He, Wolff, on the contrary, could think only with a shade of bitterness of the weak woman to whom he owed his existence, and whom filial duty and earnest resolution alike commanded him to love, yet who made it so difficult for him to regard her with anything save anxiety or secret disapproval.

Perhaps the greatest advantage which the Swiss possessed over him was his manner of speaking of his family. How could it ever have entered Wolff Eysvogel's mind to call the tall, stiff woman, who was the feeble echo of her extravagant, arrogant mother, and who rustled towards him, even in the early morning, adorned with feathers and robed in rich brocade, his "dear little mother"?

Whoever spoke in the warm, loving tones that fell from the lips of Sir Heinz when he mentioned his relatives at home certainly could have no evil nature. No one need fear, though his usual mode of speech was so wanton, that he would trifle with a pure, innocent creature like Eva.

How Heinz had succeeded in winning so speedily the devout child, who was so averse to the idle coquetries of the companions of her own age, seemed incomprehensible, but he had no time to investigate now.

He must go, for he had long been burning with impatience to depart. The declaration of peace had taken effect only a few hours before, and the long waggon trains from Italy, of which he had told Els yesterday, were still delayed. The freight of spices and Levantine goods, Milan velvets, silks, and fine Florentine cloths, which they were bringing from the city of St. Mark, represented a large fortune. If it arrived in time, the profits would cover a great portion of the losses of the past two years, and the house would again be secure. If the worst should befall, how would his family submit to deprivation, perhaps even to penury? He had less fear of his grandmother's outbursts of wrath, but what would become of his feeble mother, who was as dependent as a child on her own mother? Yet he loved her; he felt deeply troubled by the thought of the severe humiliation which menaced her. His sister Isabella, too, was dear to him, in spite of her husband, the reckless Sir Seitz Siebenburg, in whose hands the gold paid from the coffers of the firm melted away, yet who was burdened with a mountain of debts.

Wolff had left orders at home to have his horse saddled. He had intended only to wave a greeting to his Els and then ride to Neumarkt, or, if necessary, as far as Ingolstadt, to meet the wains.

A word of farewell to the new acquaintance, who was probably destined to be his brother-in-law, and then—But just at that moment Heinz approached, and in reply to Wolff's low question "And your lady's colour?" he answered joyously, pointing to the breast of his doublet: "I am carrying the messenger which promises to inform me, here on my heart. In the darkness it was silent; but the bright moonlight yonder will loose its tongue, unless the characters here are too unlike those of the prayer-book."

Drawing out Eva's little roll as he spoke, he approached a brightly lighted spot, pointed to the ribbon which fastened it, and exclaimed: "Doubtless she used her own colour to tie it. Blue, the pure, exquisite blue of her eyes! I thought so Forget-me-not blue! The most beautiful of colours. You must pardon my

impatience!"

He was about to begin to read the lines; but Wolff stopped him by pointing to the Ortlieb residence and to two drunken soldiers who came out of the tavern "For Thirsty Troopers," and walked, singing and staggering, up the opposite side of the street. Then, extending his hand to Heinz in farewell, he asked in a low tone, pointing to Biberli's figure just emerging from the shade, who was the messenger of love who served him so admirably.

"My shadow," replied the knight. "I loosed him from my heels and bade him stand there. But no offence, Herr Wolff Eysvogel; you'll make the queer fellow's acquaintance if, like myself, it would be agreeable to you to meet often, not only on iron chains, but on friendly terms with each other."

"Nothing would please me more," replied the other. "But how in the world could it happen that this well-guarded fortress surrendered to you after so short a resistance?"

"Heinz Schorlin rides swiftly," he interrupted; but Wolff exclaimed:

"A swift ride awaits me, too, though of a different kind. When I return, I shall expect you to tell me how you won our 'little saint,' my sister-in-law Eva. The two beautiful Ortlieb 'Es' are one in the eyes of the townsfolk, so we also will be often named in the same breath, and shall do well to feel brotherly regard for each other. There shall be no fault on my part. Farewell, till we meet again, an' it please God in and not outside of our ladies' dwelling."

While speaking he clasped the knight's hand with so firm a grasp that it seemed as if he wished to force him to feel its pressure a long time, and hastened through the Frauenthor.

Heinz Schorlin gazed thoughtfully after him a short time, then beckoned to Biberli and, though the interval required for him to reach his master's side was very brief, it was sufficient for the bold young lover, tortured by his ardent longing, to form another idea.

"Look yonder, Biberli!" he exclaimed. "The holy-water basin on the door-post, the escutcheon on the lintel above, the helmet, which would probably bear my weight. From there I can reach the window-sill with my hand, and once I have grasped it, I need only make one bold spring and, hurrah! I'm on it."

"May our patron saint have mercy on us!" cried the servant in horror. "You can get there as easily as you can spring on your two feet over two horses; but the coming down would certainly be a long distance lower than you would fancy—into the 'Hole,' as they call the prison here, and, moreover, though probably not until some time later, straight to the flames of hell; for you would have committed a great sin against a noble maiden rich in every virtue, who deemed you worthy of her love. And, besides, there are two Es. They occupy the same room, and the house is full of men and maid servants."

"Pedagogue!" said the knight, peevishly.

"Ay, that was Biberli's calling once," replied the servant, "and, for the sake of your lady mother at home, I wish I were one still, and you, Sir Heinz, would have to obey me like an obedient pupil. You are well aware that I rarely use her sacred name to influence you, but I do so now; and if you cherish her in your heart and do not wish to swoop down on the innocent little dove like a destroying hawk, turn your back upon this place, where we have already lingered too long."

But this well-meant warning seemed to have had brief influence upon the person to whom it was addressed. Suddenly, with a joyous: "There she is!" he snatched his cap from his head and waved a greeting to the window.

But in a few minutes he replaced it with a petulant gesture of the hand, saying sullenly: "Vanished! She dared not grant me a greeting, because she caught sight of you."

"Let us thank and praise a kind Providence for it," said his servitor with a sigh of relief, "since our Lord and Saviour assumed the form of a servant, that of a scarecrow, in which he has done admirable service, is far too noble and distinguished for Biberli."

As he spoke he walked on before the knight, and pointing to the tavern beside the Frauenthurm whose sign bore the words "For Thirsty Troopers," he added: "A green bush at the door. That means, unless the host is a rogue, a cask fresh broached. I wonder whether my tongue is cleaving to my palate from dread of your over-hasty courage, or whether it is really so terribly sultry here!"

"At any rate," Heinz interrupted, "a cup of wine will harm neither of us; for I myself feel how oppressive the air is. Besides, it is light in the tavern, and who knows what the little note will tell me."

Meanwhile they passed the end of St. Klarengasse and went up to the green bush, which projected

from the end of a pole far out into the street.

Soldiers in the pay of the city, and men-at-arms in the employ of the Emperor and the princes who had come to attend the Reichstag, were sitting over their wine in the tavern. From the ceiling hung two crossed iron triangles, forming a six-pointed star. The tallow candles burning low in their sockets, which it contained, and some pitch-pans in the corners, diffused but a dim light through the long apartment.

Master and man found an empty table apart from the other guests, in a niche midway down the rear wall.

Without heeding the brawling and swearing, the rude songs and disorderly shouts, the drumming of clenched fists upon the oak tables, the wild laughter of drunken soldiers, the giggling and screeching of bar-maids, and the scolding and imperious commands of the host, they proved that the green bush had not lied, for the wine really did come from a freshly opened cask just brought up from the cellar. But as the niche was illumined only by the tiny oil lamp burning beneath the image of the Virgin, bedizened with flowers and gold and silver tinsel, fastened against the wall, Biberli asked the weary bar-maid for a brighter light.

When the girl withdrew he sighed heavily, saying: "O my lord, if you only knew! Even now, when we are again among men and the wine has refreshed me, I feel as if rats were gnawing at my soul. Conscience, my lord- conscience!"

"You, too, are usually quite ready to play the elf in the rose-garden of love," replied Heinz gaily. "Moreover, I shall soon need a T and an S embroidered on my own doublet, for—Why don't they bring the light? Another cup of wine, the note, and then with renewed vigour we'll go back again."

"For God's sake," interrupted Biberli, "do not speak, do not even think, of the bold deed you suggested! Doesn't it seem like a miracle that not one of the many Ortlieb and Montfort servants crossed your path? Even such a child of good luck as yourself can scarcely expect a second one the same evening. And if there is not, and you go back under the window, you will be recognised, perhaps even seized, and then—O my lord, consider this!—then you will bear throughout your life the reproach of having brought shame and bitter sorrow upon a maiden whom you yourself know is lovely, devout, and pure. And I, too, who serve you loyally in your lady mother's behalf, as well as the poor maid who, to pleasure me, interceded for you with her mistress, will run the risk of our lives if you are caught climbing into the window or committing any similar offence; for in this city they are prompt with the stocks, the stone collar, the rack, and the tearing of the tongue from the mouth whenever any one is detected playing the part of go-between in affairs of love."

"Usually, old fellow," replied Heinz in a tone of faint reproach, "we considered it a matter of course that, though we took the most daring risks in such things, we were certain not to be caught. Yet, to be frank, some incomprehensible burden weighs upon my soul. My feelings are confused and strange. I would rather tear the crown from the head of yonder image of the Virgin than do aught to this sweet innocence for which she could not thank me."

Here he paused, for the bar-maid brought a two-branched candelabrum, in which burned two tallow candles.

Heinz instantly opened the little roll.

How delicate were the characters it contained! His heart's beloved had committed them to the paper with her own hand, and the knight's blood surged hotly through his veins as he gazed at them. It seemed as though he held in his hand a portion of herself and, obeying a hasty impulse, he kissed the letter.

Then he eagerly began to study the writing; he had never seen anything so delicate and peculiar in form.

The deciphering of the first lines in which, it is true, she called him a godly knight, but also informed him that his boldness had angered her, caused him much difficulty, and Biberli was often obliged to help.

Would she have rebuffed him so ungraciously with her lips as with the pen? Was it possible that, on account of a request which every lover ventured to address to his lady, she would withdraw the favour which rendered him so happy? Oh, yes, for innocence is delicate and sensitive. She ought to have repelled him thus. He was secretly rejoiced to see the sweet modesty which had so charmed him again proved. He must know what the rest of the letter contained, and the ex-schoolmaster was at hand to give the information at once.

True, the hastily written sentences presented some difficulties even for Biberli, but after glancing through the whole letter, he exclaimed with a satisfied smile: "Just as I expected! At the first look one might think that the devout little lady was wholly unlike the rest of her sex, but on examining more closely she proves as much like any other beautiful girl as two peas. With good reason and prudent caution she forbids the languishing knight to remain beneath her window, yet she will risk a pleasant little interview in some safe nook. That is wise for so young a girl, and at the same time natural and womanly. I don't know why you knit your brows. Since the first Eve came from a crooked rib, all her daughters prefer devious ways. But first hear what she writes." Then, without heeding his master's gloomy face, he began to read the note aloud.

Heinz listened intently, and after he had heard that the lady of his love did not desire to meet him alone, but only under the protection of a friend and her saint, when he heard her name her colour, it is true, but also express the expectation that, as a godly knight, he would fight for her sake in honour of the gracious Virgin, his face brightened.

During Biberli's scoffing comments he had felt as if a tempest had hurled her pure image in the dust. But now that he knew what she asked of him, it returned as a matter of course to its old place and, with a sigh of relief, he felt that he need not be ashamed of the emotions which this wonderful young creature had awakened in his soul. She had opened her pious heart like a trusting sister to an older brother, and what he had seen there was something unusual—things which had appeared sacred to him even when a child. Since he took leave of her in the ball-room he had felt as though Heaven had loaned this, its darling, to earth for but a brief space, and her brocade robe must conceal angel wings. Should it surprise him that the pure innocence which filled her whole being was expressed also in her letter, if she summoned him, not to idle love-dalliance but to a covenant of souls, a mutual conflict for what was highest and most sacred? Such a thing was incomprehensible to Biberli; but notwithstanding her letter—nay, even on its account—he longed still more ardently to lead her home to his mother and see her receive the blessing of the woman whom he so deeply honoured.

He had Eva's letter read for the second and the third time. But when Biberli paused, and in a few brief sentences cast fresh doubts upon the writer, Heinz angrily stopped him. "The longing of the godly heart of a pure maiden—mark this well—has naught in common with that diabolical delight in secret love—dalliance for which others yearn. My wish to force my way to her was sinful, and it was punished severely enough, for during your rude scoffs I felt as though you had set fire to the house over my head. But from this I perceive in what a sacred, inviolable spot her image had found a place. True, it is denied you to follow the lofty, heavenward aspiration of a pure soul—"

"O my lord," interrupted the servitor with hands uplifted in defence, "who besought you not to measure this innocent daughter of a decorous household, who was scarcely beyond childhood, by the standard you applied to others? Who entreated you to spare her fair fame? And if you deem the stuff of which the servant is made too coarse to understand what moves so pure a soul, you do Biberli injustice, for, by my patron saint, though duty commanded me to interpose doubts and scruples between you and a passion from which could scarcely spring aught that would bring joy to your mother's heart I, too, asked myself the question why, in these days, a devout maiden should not long to try her skill in conversion upon a valiant knight who served her. Ever since St. Francis of Assisi appeared in Italy, barefooted monks and grey-robed nuns, who follow him, Franciscans and Sisters of St. Clare stream hither as water flows into a mill-race when the sluice-gates are opened. With what edification we, too, listened to the old Minorite whom we picked up by the wayside, at the tavern where we usually found pleasure in nothing but drinking, gambling, shouting, and singing! Besides, I know from my sweetheart with what exemplary devotion the lovely Eva follows St. Clare."

"Who is now and will remain my patron saint also, old Biber," interrupted Heinz with joyful emotion, as he laid his hand gratefully on his follower's shoulder; then rising and beckoning to the bar-maid, added: "The stuff of which you are made, old comrade, is inferior to no man's. Only now and then the pedagogue plays you a trick. Had you uttered your real opinion in the first place, the wine would have tasted better to us both. Let Eva try the work of conversion on me! What, save my lady's love, is more to me than our holy faith? It must indeed be a delight to take the field for the Church and against her foes!" While speaking, he paid the reckoning and went out with Biberli.

The moon was now pouring her silver beams, with full radiance, over the quiet street, the linden in front of the Ortlieb house, and its lofty gable roof. Only a single room in the spacious mansion was still lighted, the bow-windowed one occupied by the two sisters.

Heinz, without heeding Biberli's renewed protest, looked upward, silently imploring Eva's pardon for having misjudged her even a moment. His gaze rested devoutly on the open window, behind which a curtain was stirring. Was it the night breeze that almost imperceptibly raised and lowered it, or was her own dear self concealed behind it?

Just at that moment he suddenly felt his servant's hand on his arm, and as he followed his horror-stricken gaze, a chill ran through his own veins. From the heavy door of the house, which stood half open, a white-robed figure emerged with the solemn, noiseless footfall of a ghost, and advanced across the courtyard towards him.

Was it a restless spirit risen from its grave at the midnight hour, which must be close at hand? Through his brain, like a flash of lightning, darted the thought that Eva had spoken to him of her invalid mother. Had she died? Was her wandering soul approaching him to drive him from the threshold of the house which hid her endangered child?

But no!

The figure had stopped before the door and now, raising its head, gazed with wide eyes upward at the moon, and—he was not mistaken—it was no spectre of darkness; it was she for whom every pulse of his heart throbbed—Eva!

No human creature had ever seemed to him so divinely fair as she in her long white night-robe, over which fell the thick waves of her light hair. The horror which had seized him yielded to the most ardent yearning. Pressing his hand upon his throbbing heart, he watched her every movement. He longed to go forward to meet her, yet a supernatural spell seemed to paralyse his energy. He would sooner have dared clasp in his arms the image of a beautiful Madonna than this embodiment of pure, helpless, gracious innocence.

Now she herself drew nearer, but he felt as if his will was broken, and with timid awe he drew back one step, and then another, till the chain stopped him.

Just at that moment she paused, stretched out her white arm with a beckoning gesture, and again turned towards the house, Heinz following because he could not help it, her sign drew him after her with magnetic power.

Now Eva entered the dimly lighted corridor, and again her uplifted hand seemed to invite him to follow. Then—the impetuous throbbing of his heart almost stifled him—she set her little white foot on the first step of the stairs and led the way up to the first landing, where she paused, lifting her face to the open window, through which the moonbeams streamed into the hall, flooding her head, her figure, and every surrounding object with their soft light.

Heinz followed step by step. It seemed as if the wild surges of a sea were roaring in his ears, and glittering sparks were dancing before his yearning, watchful eyes.

How he loved her! How intense was the longing which drew him after her! And yet another emotion stirred in his heart with still greater power—grief, sincere grief, which pierced his in, most soul, that she could have beckoned to him, permitted him to follow her, granted him what he would never have ventured to ask. Nay, when he set his foot on the first step, it seemed as if the temple which contained his holiest treasure fell crashing around him, and an inner voice cried loudly: "Away, away from here! Would you exchange the purest and loftiest things for what tomorrow will fill you with grief and loathing?" it continued to admonish. "You will relinquish what is dearest and most sacred to secure what is ready to rush into your arms on all the high-roads.

"Hence, hence, you poor, deluded mortal, ere it is too late!"

But even had he known it was the fair fiend Venus herself moving before him under the guise of Eva, the spell of her unutterable beauty would have constrained him to follow her, though the goal were the Horselberg, death, and hell.

On the second landing she again stood still and, leaning against a pillar, raised her arms and extended them towards the moon, in whose silvery light they gleamed like marble. Heinz saw her lips move, heard his own name fall from them, and all self-control vanished.

"Eva!" he cried with passionate fervor, holding out his arms to clasp her; but, ere he even touched her, a shriek of despairing anguish echoed loudly back from the walls.

The sound of her own name had broken the threads with which the mysterious power of the moonlight had drawn her from her couch, down through the house, out of doors, and again back to the stairs.

Sleep vanished with the dream which she had shared with him and, shuddering, she perceived where she was, saw the knight before her, became conscious that she had left her chamber in her night-robe, with disordered hair and bare feet; and, frantic with horror at the thought of the resistless might with

which a mysterious force constrained her to obey it against her own will, deeply wounded by the painful feeling that she had been led so far across the bounds of maidenly modesty, hurt and angered by the boldness of the man before her, who had dared to follow her into her parents' house, she again raised her voice, this time to call her from whom she was accustomed to seek and find help in every situation in life.

"Els! Els!" rang up the stairs; and the next moment Els, who had already heard Eva's first scream, sprang down the few steps to her sister's side.

One glance at the trembling girl in her nightrobe, and at the moonlight which still bathed her in its rays, told Els what had drawn Eva to the stairs.

The knight must have slipped into the house and found her there. She knew him and, before Heinz had time to collect his thoughts, she said soothingly to her sister, who threw her arms around her as though seeking protection, "Go up to your room, child!—Help her, Katterle. I'll come directly."

While Eva, leaning on the maid's arm, mounted the stairs with trembling knees, Els turned to the Swiss and said in a grave, resolute tone: "If you are worthy of your escutcheon, Sir Knight, you will not now fly like a coward from this house across whose threshold you stole with shameful insolence, but await me here until I return. You shall not be detained long. But, to guard yourself and another from misinterpretation, you must hear me."

Heinz nodded assent in silence, as if still under the spell of what he had recently experienced. But, ere he reached the entry below, Martsche, the old housekeeper, and Endres, the aged head packer, came towards him, just as they had risen from their beds, the former with a petticoat flung round her shoulders, the latter wrapped in a horse-blanket.

Eva's shriek had waked both, but Els enjoined silence on everyone and, after telling them to go back to bed, said briefly that Eva in her somnambulism had this time gone out into the street and been brought back by the knight. Finally, she again said to Heinz, "Presently!" and then went to her sister.

CHAPTER IX.

When Biberli bade farewell to his sweetheart, who gave him Eva's little note, he had arranged to meet her again in an hour or, if his duties detained him longer, in two; but after the "true and steadfast" fellow left her, her heart throbbed more and more anxiously, for the wrong she had done in acting as messenger between the young daughter of her employers and a stranger knight was indeed hard to forgive.

Instead of waiting in the kitchen or entry for her lover's return, as she had intended, she had gone to the image of the Virgin at the gate of the Convent of St. Clare, before which she had often found consolation, especially when homesick yearning for the mountains of her native Switzerland pressed upon her too sorely. This time also it had been gracious to her, for after she had prayed very devoutly and vowed to give a candle to the Mother of God, as well as to St. Clare, she fancied that the image smiled upon her and promised that she should go unpunished.

On her return the knight had just followed Eva into the house, and Biberli pursued his master as far as the stairs. Here Katterle met her lover, but, when she learned what was occurring, she became greatly enraged and incensed by the base interpretation which the servant placed upon Eva's going out into the street and, terrified by the danger into which the knight threatened to plunge them all, she forgot the patience and submission she was accustomed to show the true and steadfast Biberli. But—resolved to protect her young mistress from the presumptuous knight—scarcely had she angrily cried shame upon her lover for this base suspicion, protesting that Eva had never gone to seek a knight but, as she had often done on bright moonlight nights, walked in her sleep down the stairs and out of doors, when the young girl's shriek of terror summoned her to her aid.

Biberli looked after her sullenly, meanwhile execrating bitterly enough the wild love which had robbed his master of reason and threatened to hurl him, Biberli, and even the innocent Katterle, whose brave defence of her mistress had especially pleased him, into serious misfortune.

When old Endres appeared he had slipped behind a wall formed of bales heaped one above another, and did not stir until the entry was quiet again.

To his amazement he had then found his master standing beside the door of the house, but his question—which, it is true, was not wholly devoid of a shade of sarcasm—whether the knight was waiting for the return of his sleep-walking sweetheart, was so harshly rebuffed that he deemed it advisable to keep silence for a time.

Though Heinz Schorlin had perceived that he had followed an unconscious somnambulist, he was not yet capable of calmly reflecting upon what had occurred or of regarding the future with prudence. He knew one thing only: the fear was idle that the lovely creature whose image, surrounded by a halo of light, still hovered before him like a vision from a higher, more beautiful world, was an unworthy person who, with a face of angelic innocence, transgressed the laws of custom and modesty. Her shriek of terror, her horror at seeing him, and the cry for help which had brought her sister to her aid and roused the servants from their sleep, gave him the right to esteem her as highly as ever; and this conviction fanned into such a blaze the feeling of happiness which love had awakened and his foolish distrust had already begun to stifle, that he was firmly resolved, cost what it might, to make Eva his own.

After he had reached this determination he began to reflect more quietly. What cared he for liberty and a rapid advance in the career upon which he had entered, if only his future life was beautified by her love!

If he were required to woo her in the usual form, he would do so. And what a charming yet resolute creature was the other E, who, in her anxiety about her sister, had crossed his path with such grave, firm dignity! She was Wolff Eysvogel's betrothed bride, and it seemed to him a very pleasant thing to call the young man, whom he had so quickly learned to esteem, his brother-in-law.

If the father refused his daughter to him, he would leave Nuremberg and ride to the Rhine, where Hartmann, the Emperor Rudolph's son, whom he loved like a younger brother, was now living. Heinz had instructed the lad of eighteen in the use of the lance and the sword, and Hartmann had sent him word the day before that the Rhine was beautiful, but without him he but half enjoyed even the pleasantest things. He needed him. Hundreds of other knights and squires could break in the new horses for the Emperor and the young Bohemian princess, though perhaps not quite so skilfully. Hartmann would understand him and persuade his imperial father to aid him in his suit. The warmhearted youth could not bear to see him sorrowful, and without Eva there was no longer joy or happiness.

He was roused from these thoughts and dreams by his own name called in a low tone.

Katterle had gone with Eva to the chamber, whither the older sister followed them. Tenderly embracing the weeping girl, she had kissed her wet eyes and whispered in an agitated voice, with which, however, blended a great deal of affectionate mischief: "The wolf who forced his way into the house does not seem quite so harmless as mine, whom I have succeeded in taming very tolerably. Go to mother now, darling. I'll be back directly."

"What do you intend to do?" asked Eva timidly, still unable, under the influence of her strange experiences, to regain her self-control.

"To look around the house," replied her sister, beckoning to Katterle to accompany her.

In the entry she questioned the maid with stern decision, and the trembling girl owned, amid her tears, that Eva had sent a little note to the knight in reply to his request that she would name her colour, and whatever else her anxious mistress desired hastily to learn.

After a threatening "We will discuss your outrageous conduct later," Els hurried down-stairs, and found in the entry the man whose pleasure in the pursuit of the innocent child whom she protected she meant to spoil. But though she expressed her indignation to the knight with the utmost harshness, he besought a hearing with so much respect and in such seemly words, that she requested him, in a gentler tone, to speak freely. But scarcely had he begun to relate how Eva, at the ball, had filled his heart with the purest love, when the trampling of horses' hoofs, which had come nearer and nearer to the house, suddenly ceased, and Biberli, who had gone into the court-yard, came hurrying back, exclaiming in a tone of warning, "The von Montforts!"

At the same moment two men-servants threw back both leaves of the door, torchlight mingled with the moonbeams in the courtyard, and the next instant a goodly number of knights and gentlemen entered the hall.

Biberli was not mistaken. The von Montforts had returned home, instead of spending the night at Kadolzburg, and neither Els nor the Swiss had the time or disposition to seek concealment.

The intruders were preceded by men-servants, whose torches lighted the long, lofty storehouse brilliantly. It seemed to Els as if her heart stopped beating and she felt her cheeks blanch.

Here she beheld Count von Montfort's bronzed face, the countenance of a sportsman and reveller; yonder the frank, handsome features of the young Burgrave, Eitelfritz von Zollern, framed by the hood of the Knights of St. John, drawn up during the night-ride; there the pale, noble visage of the quiet knight Boemund Altrosen, far famed for his prowess with lance and sword; beyond, the scarred, martial countenance of Count Casper Schlick, set in a mass of tangled brown locks; and then the watery, blue eyes of Sir Seitz Siebenburg, the husband of her future sister-in-law Isabella.

They had pressed in, talking eagerly, laughing, and rejoicing that the wild night ride proposed by Cordula von Montfort, which had led over dark forest paths, lighted only by a stray moonbeam, and often across fields and ditches and through streams, had ended without mischance to man or beast.

Now they all crowded around the countess, Seitz Siebenburg bending towards her with such zeal that the ends of his huge mustache brushed the plumes in her cap, and Boemund Altrosen, who had just been gazing into the flushed face of the daring girl with the warm joy of true love, cast a look of menace at him.

Els, too, greatly disliked "the Mustache," as her future brother-in-law was called because the huge ornament on his upper lip made him conspicuous among the beardless knights. She was aware that he returned the feeling, and had left no means untried to incite Wolff Eysvogel's parents to oppose his betrothal. Now he was one of the first to notice her and, after whispering with a malicious smile to the countess and those nearest to him, he looked at her so malevolently that she could easily guess what interpretation he was trying to put upon her nocturnal meeting with the Swiss in the eyes of his companions.

Her cheeks flamed with wrath, and like a flash of lightning came the thought of the pleasure it would afford this wanton company, whose greatest delight was to gloat over the errors of their neighbours, if the knight who had brought her into this suspicious situation, or she herself, should confess that not she, but the devout Eva, had attracted Heinz hither. What a satisfaction it would be to this reckless throng to tell such a tale of a young girl of whom the Burgravine von Zollern had said the evening before to their Uncle Pfinzing, that purity and piety had chosen Eva's lovely face for a mirror!

What if Heinz Schorlin, to save her, Els, from evil report, should confess that she was here only to rebuke his insolent intrusion into a decorous household?

This must be prevented, and Heinz seemed to understand her; for after their eyes had met, his glance of helpless enquiry told her that he would leave her to find an escape from this labyrinth.

The merry party, who now perceived that they had interrupted the nocturnal tryst of lovers, did not instantly know what to do and, as one looked enquiringly at another, an embarrassed silence followed their noisy jollity.

But the hush did not last long, and its interruption at first seemed to Els to bode the worst result; it was a peal of gay, reckless laughter, ringing from the lips of the very Cordula von Montfort, into whose eyes, as the only one of her own sex who was present, Els had just gazed with a look imploring aid.

Had Eva's aversion to the countess been justified, and was she about to take advantage of her unpleasant position to jeer at her?

Had the two quarreled at the ball the night before, and did Cordula now perceive an opportunity to punish the younger sister by the humiliation of the older one?

Yet her laugh sounded by no means spiteful—rather, very gay and natural. The pleasant grey eyes sparkled with the most genuine mirth, and she clapped her little hands so joyously that the falcon's chain on the gauntlet of her riding glove rattled.

And what was this?

No one looks at a person whom one desires to wound with an expression of such cheerful encouragement as the look with which Cordula now gazed at Els and Heinz Schorlin, who stood by her side. True, they were at first extremely perplexed by the words she now shouted to those around her in a tone of loud exultation, as though announcing a victory; but from the beginning they felt that there was no evil purpose in them. Soon they even caught the real meaning of the countess's statement, and Els was ashamed of having feared any injury from the girl whose defender she had always been.

"Won, Sir Knight—cleverly won!" was her first sentence to Heinz.

Then, turning to Els, she asked with no less animation: "And you, my fair maid and very strict housemate, who has won the wager now? Do you still believe it is an inconceivable thought that the modest daughter of a decorous Nuremberg race, entitled to enter the lists of a tourney, would grant a young knight a midnight meeting?" "And addressing her companions, she continued, in an explanatory yet still playful tone: "She was ready to wager the beautiful brown locks which she now hides modestly under a kerchief, and even her betrothed lover's ring. It should be mine if I succeeded in leading her to commit such an abominable deed. But I was content, if I won the wager, with a smaller forfeit; yet now that I have gained it, Jungfrau Ortlieb, you must pay!"

The whole company listened in astonishment to this speech, which no one understood, but the countess, nodding mischievously to her nearest neighbours, went on:

"How bewildered you all look! It might tempt me to satisfy your curiosity less speedily, but, after the delightful entertainment you gave us, my Lord Burgrave, one becomes merciful. So you shall hear how I, as wise as the serpent, craftily forced this haughty knight"—she tapped Heinz Schorlin's arm with her riding whip—"and you, too, Jungfrau Ortlieb, whose pardon I now entreat, to help me win the bet. No offence, noble sirs! But this bet was what compelled me to drag you all from Kadolzburg and its charms so early, and induce you to attend me on the reckless ride through the moonlit night. Now accept the thanks of a lady whose heart is grateful; for your obedience helped me win the wager. Look yonder at my handsome, submissive knight, Sir Heinz Schorlin, so rich in every virtue. I commanded, him, on pain of my anger, to meet me at midnight at the entrance of our quarters—that is, the entry of the Ortlieb mansion; and to this modest and happy betrothed bride (may she pardon the madcap!) I represented how it troubled me and wounded my timid delicacy to enter so late at night, accompanied only by gentlemen, the house which so hospitably sheltered us, and go to my sleeping room, though I should not fear the Sultan and his mamelukes, if with this in my hand"—she motioned to her riding whip—"and my dear father at my side, I stood on my own feet which, though by no means small, are well-shod and resolute. Yet, as we are apt to measure others by our own standard, the timid, decorous girl believed me, and poor Cordula, who indeed brought only her maids and no female guardian, and therefore must dispense with being received on her return by a lady capable of commanding respect, did not appeal in vain to the charitable feelings of her beautiful housemate. She promised faithfully to come down into the entry, when the horses approached, to receive the poor lamb, surrounded by lynxes, wild-cats, foxes, and wolves, and lead it into the safe fold—if one can call this stately house by such a name. Both Sir Heinz Schorlin and Jungfrau Elizabeth Ortlieb kept their word and joined each other here—to their extreme amazement, I should suppose, as to my knowledge they never met before—to receive me, and thus had an interview which, however loudly they may contradict it, I call a nocturnal meeting. But my wager, fair child, is won, and tomorrow you will deliver to me the exquisite carved ivory casket, while I shall keep my bracelet."

Here she paused, paying no heed to the merry threats, exclamations of amazement, and laughter of her companions.

But while her father, striking his broad chest, cried again and again, with rapturous delight, "A paragon of a woman!" and Seitz Siebenburg, in bitter disappointment, whispered, "The fourteen saintly helpers in time of need might learn from you how to draw from the clamps what is not worth rescue and probably despaired of escape," she was trying to give time to recover more composure her young hostess, to whom she was sincerely attached, and who, she felt sure, could have met Heinz Schorlin, who perhaps had come hither on her own account, only by some cruel chance. So she added in a quieter tone: "And now, Jungfrau Ortlieb, in sober earnest I will ask your protection and guidance through the dark house, and meanwhile you shall tell me how Sir Heinz greeted you and what passed between you, either good or bad, during the time of waiting."

Els summoned up her courage and answered loud enough to be heard by all present: "We were speaking of you, Countess Cordula, and the knight said:

"I ventured to remark, Countess," said Heinz, interrupting the new ally, "that though you might understand how to show a poor knight his folly, no kinder heart than yours throbbed under any bodice in Switzerland, Swabia, or France." Cordula struck him lightly on the shoulder with her riding whip, saying with a laugh: "Who permits you to peep under women's bodices through so wide a tract of country, you scamp? Had I been in Jungfrau Ortlieb's place I should have punished your entry into a respectable house:

"Oh, my dear Countess," Heinz interrupted, and his words bore so distinctly the stamp of truth and actual experience that even Sir Seitz Siebenburg was puzzled, "though I am always disposed to be grateful to you, I cannot feel a sense of obligation for this lady's reception of me, even to the most gracious benefactress. For, by my patron saint, she forbade me the house as if I were a thief and a burglar."

"And she was right!" exclaimed the countess. "I would have treated you still more harshly. Only you would have spared yourself many a sharp word had you confessed at once that it was I who summoned you here. I'll talk with you tomorrow, and am I not right, Jungfrau Elsy you won't make him suffer for losing the wager, but exercise your domestic authority after a more gentle fashion?"

While speaking, she looked at Els with a glance so full of meaning that the young girl's cheeks crimsoned, and the longing to put an end to this deceitful game became almost uncontrollable. The thought of Eva alone sealed her lips.

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