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IN THE FIRE OF THE FORGE

A ROMANCE OF OLD NUREMBERG

By Georg Ebers

Volume 7.

CHAPTER X.

A few minutes later the sisters left the Town Hall. Their white Rieves were wound so closely about their faces that their features were completely hidden, but the thin material permitted them to see Herr Vorchtel, leaning upon the arm of the young burgomaster, Hans Nutz, leave the Council chamber, where the other Honourables were still deliberating. Pointing to the old man, the city clerk told Els with a significant smile that Ursula Vorchtel was engaged to the talented, attractive young merchant now walking with her father, and that he had promised Herr Vorchtel to aid him and his younger son in the management of his extensive business. This was a great pleasure to the noble old merchant, and when he, the city clerk, met Ursula that morning, spite of her deep mourning, she again looked out upon the world like the happy young creature she was. Her new joy had greatly increased her beauty, and her lover was the very person to maintain it. Herr Schedel thought it would be pleasant news to Els, too. The young girl pressed his hand warmly; for these good tidings put the finishing touch to the glad tidings she had just heard. The reproach which, unjust as it might be, had spoiled many an hour for Wolff and entailed such fatal consequences, was now removed, and to her also "Ursel's" altered

manner had often seemed like a silent accusation. She felt grateful, as if it were a personal joy, for the knowledge that the girl who had believed herself deserted by Wolff, her own lover, was now a happy betrothed bride.

Ursula's engagement removed a burden from Eva's soul, too, only she did not understand how a girl whose heart had once opened to a great love could ever belong to anyone else. Els understood her; nay, in Ursula's place she would have done the same, if it were only to weave a fresh flower in her afflicted father's fading garland of joy.

The city clerk accompanied them to the great entrance door of the Town Hall.

Several jailers and soldiers in the employ of the city were standing there, and whilst their old friend was promising to do his utmost to secure Ernst Ortlieb's liberation and recommending the girls to the protection of one of the watchmen, Eva's cheeks flushed; for a messenger of the Council had just approached the others, and she heard him utter the name of Sir Heinz Schorlin and his follower Walther Biberli. Els listened, too, but whilst her sister in embarrassment pressed her hand upon her heart, she frankly asked the city clerk what had befallen the knight and his squire, who was betrothed to her maid. She heard that at the last meeting of the Council an order had been issued for Biberli's arrest.

His name must have been brought up during the discussions of the slanders which had so infamously pursued the Ortlieb sisters, but she could not enquire how or in what connection, for the sun was already low in the western sky, and if the girls wished to see their father there was no time to lose.

Yet, though Katterle had just said that Countess von Montfort was waiting outside in her great sedan-chair for the young ladies, they were still detained, for they would not leave the Town Hall without thanking the city clerk and saying farewell to him. He was still near, but the captain of the city soldiers had drawn him aside and was telling him something which seemed to permit no delay, and induced the old gentleman to glance at the sisters repeatedly.

Eva did not notice it; for Biberli's arrest, which probably had some connection with Heinz and herself, had awakened a series of anxious thoughts associated with her lover and his faithful follower. Els troubled herself only about the events occurring in her immediate vicinity, and felt perfectly sure that the captain's communications referred not only to the four itinerant workmen and the three women who had just been led across the courtyard to the "Hole," and to whom the speaker pointed several times, but especially to her and her sister.

When the city clerk at last turned to them again, he remarked carelessly that a disagreeable mob in front of the Ortlieb mansion had been dispersed, and then, with urgent cordiality, invited the two girls to spend the night under the protection of his old housekeeper. When they declined, he assured them that measures would be taken to guard them from every insult. He had something to tell their uncle, and the communication appeared to permit no delay, for with a haste very unusual in the deliberate old gentleman he left the two sisters with a brief farewell.

Meanwhile Countess Cordula had become weary of waiting in the sedan-chair. She came striding to meet her new friends, attired in a rustling canary-green silk robe whose train swept the ground, but it was raised so high in front that the brown hunting-boots encasing her well-formed feet were distinctly visible. She was swinging her heavy riding-whip in her hand, and her favourite dogs, two black dachshunds with yellow spots over their eyes, followed at her heels.

As it was against the rules to bring dogs into the Town Hall, the doorkeeper tried to stop her, but without paying the slightest attention to him, she took Els by the hand, beckoned to Eva, and was turning to leave the path leading to the market-place.

In doing so her eyes fell upon the courtyard, where, just after the Ave Maria, a motley throng had gathered. Here, guarded by jailers, stood vagabonds and disreputable men and women, sham blind beggars and cripples, swindlers, and other tatterdemalions, who had been caught in illegal practices or without the beggar's sign. In another spot, dark-robed servants of the Council were discussing official and other matters. Near the "Hole" a little party of soldiers were resting, passing from hand to hand the jug of wine bestowed by the Honourable Council. The "Red Coat"—[Executioner]—was giving orders to his "Life"—[Executioner's assistant ("Lion")]—as they carried across the courtyard a new instrument of torture intended for the room adjoining the Council chamber, where those who refused to make depositions were forced to it. In a shady corner sat old people, poorly clad women, and pale-faced children, the city poor, who at this hour received food from the kitchen of the Town Hall. A few priests and monks were going into the wing of the building which contained the "Hole," with its various cells and the largest chamber of torture, to give the consolations of religion to the prisoners and those

tortured by the rack who had not yet been conveyed to the hospital at Schweinau.

The countess's keen glance wandered from one to another. When they reached the group of paupers they rested upon a woman with deadly pale, hollow cheeks, pressing a pitifully emaciated infant to her dry breast, and her eyes swiftly filled with tears.

"Here," she whispered to old Martsche, taking several gold coins from the pocket that hung at her belt, "give these to the poorest ones. You are sensible. Divide it so that several will have a share and the money will reach the right hands. You can take your time. We need neither you nor Katterle. Go back to the house. I will carry your young mistresses to their father and home again. Where I am you need have no fear that harm will befall them."

Then she turned again towards the "Hole," and seeing the people yelling and shouting while awaiting imprisonment, she pointed to them with her whip, saying, "That's a part of the pack which was set upon you. You shall hear about it presently. But now come."

As she spoke she went before the girls and urged them to step quickly into the large, handsome sedan-chair, around which an unusual number of people had assembled, for she wished to avoid any recognition of the sisters by the curious spectators. The gilded box, borne between two powerful Brabant horses in such a way that it hung between the tail of the first and the head of the second, would have had room for a fourth occupant.

When it moved forward, swaying from side to side, Cordula pointed to the curtained windows, and said: "Shameful, isn't it? But it is better so, children. That arch-rascal Siebenburg robbed the people of the little sense they possessed, and that cat of a candle-dealer, with her mate, the tailor, or rather his followers, poisoned the minds of the rest. How quickly it worked! Goodness, it seems to me, acts more slowly. True, your hot-tempered father spoiled the old rascal's inclination to woo pretty Metz for a while; but his male and female gossips, aunts, cousins, and work-people apparently allowed themselves to be persuaded by his future mother-in-law to the abominable deed, which caused the brawling rabble you saw in the Town Hall court to content themselves with a hard couch in the 'Hole' overnight."

"They have done everything bad concerning us, though I don't know exactly what," cried Els indignantly.

"Wished to do, Miss Wisdom," replied the countess, patting Els's arm soothingly. "We kept our eyes open, and I helped to put a stop to their proceedings. The rabble gathered in front of your house, yelling and shrieking, and when I stepped into your bow-window there was as great an outcry as if they were trying to bring down the walls of Jericho a second time. Some boys even flung at me everything they could find in the mire of the streets. The most delightful articles! There was actually a dead rat! I can see its tail flying now! Our village lads know how to aim better. Before the worst came, by the advice of the equerry and our wise chaplain, whom I consulted, we had done what was necessary, and summoned the guard at the Frauenthor to our assistance. But the soldiers were in no great haste; so when matters were going too far, I stepped into the breach myself, called down to tell them my name, and also showed my crossbow with an arrow on the string. This had an effect. Only a few women still continued to load me with horrible abuse. Then the chaplain came to the window and this restored silence; but, in spite of his earnest words, not a soul stirred from the spot until the patrol arrived, dispersed the rabble, and arrested some of them."

Els, who sat by Cordula's side, drew her towards her and kissed her gratefully; but Eva's eyes had filled with tears of grief at the beginning of the countess's report of this new insult, and the hostility of so many of the townsfolk; yet she succeeded in controlling herself. She would not weep. She had even forced herself to gaze, without the quiver of an eyelash, at the sorrowful and horrible spectacle outside of the "Hole." She must cease being a weak child. How true her dying mother's words had been! To be able to struggle and conquer, she must not withdraw from life and its influences, which, if she did not spare herself, promised to transform her into the resolute woman she desired to become.

She had listened with labouring breath to the speaker's last words, and when Els embraced Cordula, she raised her little clenched hand, exclaiming with passionate emotion: "Oh, if I had only been at home with you! You are brave, Countess, but I, too, would not have shrunk from them. I would voluntarily have made myself the target for their malice, and called to their faces that only miserably deluded people or shameless rascals could throw stones at my Els, who is a thousand times better than any of them!"

"Or at you, you dear, brave child," added Cordula in an agitated tone.

From the day following the burning of the convent the countess had given up her whim of winning Heinz Schorlin. She now knew that all her nobler feelings spoke more loudly in favour of the quiet man

who had borne her out of the flames. Sir Boemund Altrosen's love had proved genuine, and she would reward him for it; but the heart of the pretty creature opposite to her was also filled with deep, true love, and she would do everything in her power for Eva, whom she had loved ever since her affliction had touched her tender heart.

Both sisters were now aware of Cordula's kind intentions, and the warm pleasure she displayed when Els told her what the Council had determined, showed plainly enough that the motherless young countess, who had neither brother nor sister, clung to the daughters of her host like a third sister. Old Herr Vorchtel's treatment of the man who had inflicted so deep a sorrow upon him touched her inmost soul. It was grand, noble; the Saviour himself would have rejoiced over it. "If it would only please the good old man," she exclaimed, "I would rather offer him my lips to kiss than the handsomest young knight."

Though two of Count von Montfort's mounted huntsmen and several constables accompanied the unusually large and handsome sedan-chair, a curious crowd had followed it; but the opinion probably prevailed that the countess's companions were some of her waiting-women. When they alighted in front of the watch-tower, however, an elderly laundry-maid who had worked for the Ortliebs recognised the sisters and pointed them out to the others, protesting that it was hard for a woman of her chaste spirit to have served in a house where such things could have happened. Then a tailor's apprentice, who considered the whole of the guild insulted in the wounded Meister Seubolt, put his fingers to his wide mouth and emitted a long, shrill whistle; but the next instant a blow from a powerful fist silenced him. It was young Ortel, who had come to the watch-tower to seek Herr Ernst and tell him that he and his sister Metz, spite of their mother and guardian, meant to stay in his service. His heart's blood would not have been too dear to guard Eva, whom he instantly recognised, from every insult; but he had no occasion to use his youthful strength a second time, for the soldiers who guarded the tower and the city mercenaries drove back the crowd and kept the square in front of the tower open.

The countess would not be detained long, for the sun had already sunk behind the towers and western wall of the fortress, and the reflection of the sunset was tinging the eastern sky with a roseate hue. The warden really ought to have refused them admittance, for the time during which he was permitted to take visitors to the imprisoned "Honourable" had already passed. But for the daughters of Herr Ernst Ortlieb, to whom he was greatly indebted, he closed his eyes to this fact, and only entreated them to make their stay brief, for the drawbridge leading to the tower must be raised when darkness gathered.

The young girls found their father, absorbed in grief as if utterly crushed, seated at a table on which stood a leaden inkstand with several sheets of paper. He still held the pen in his hand.

He received his daughters with the exclamation, "You poor, poor children!" But when Els tried to tell him what had given her so much pleasure, he interrupted her to accuse himself, with deep sorrow, of having again permitted sudden passion to master him. Probably this was the last time; such experiences would cool even the hottest blood. Then he began to relate what had induced him to raise his hand against the tailor, and as, in doing so, he recalled the insolent hypocrite's spiteful manner, he again flew into so violent a rage that the blow which he dealt the table made the ink splash up and soil both the paper lying beside it and his own dress, still faultlessly neat even in prison. This caused fresh wrath, and he furiously crushed the topmost sheet, already half covered with writing, and hurled it on the floor.

Not until Els stooped to pick it up did he calm himself, saying, with a shrug of the shoulders, "Who can remain unmoved when the whirlwind of despair seizes him? When a swarm of hornets attacks a horse, and it rears, who wonders? And I—What stings and blows has Fate spared me?" Els ventured to speak soothingly to him, and remind him of God, and the saints to whom he had made such generous offerings in building the convent; but this awakened an association, and he asked if it were true that Eva had refused to take the veil.

She made a silent gesture of assent, expecting another outburst of anger; but her father only shook his head sorrowfully, clasped her right hand in both his, and said sadly: "Poor, poor child! But she, she—your mother— would probably—The last words her dear lips bestowed upon us concerned you, child, and I believe their meaning—"

Here the warden interrupted him to remind the girls that it was time to depart; but whilst Els was begging the man for a brief delay, Herr Ernst looked first at the paper and writing materials, then at his daughters, and added with quiet decision: "Before you go, you must hear that, in spite of everything, I did not wholly lose courage, but began to act."

"That is right, dear father," exclaimed Els, and told him briefly and quickly what the Council had decided, how warmly old Berthold Vorchtel had interceded for Wolff, and that the management of the

business was to be confided solely to him.

These tidings swiftly and powerfully revived the fading hopes of the sorely stricken man. He drew up his short figure as if the vigour of youth had returned, declaring that he now felt sure that this first star in the dark night would soon be followed by others. "It will now be your Wolff's opportunity," he exclaimed, "to make amends for much that Fate But I was commencing something else. Give me that bit of crumpled paper. I'll look at it again early to-morrow morning; it is a letter to the Emperor I was composing. Your brother ought not to have given up his young life on the battlefield for the Crown in vain. He owes me compensation for the son, you for the brother. He is certainly a fair-minded man, and therefore will not shut his ears to my complaint. Just wait, children! And you, my devout Eva, pray to your saint that the petition, which concerns you also, may effect what I expect."

"And what is that?" asked Eva anxiously. "That the wrong done you, you poor, deceived child, shall be made good," replied Herr Ernst with imperious decision.

Eva clasped his hand, pleading warmly and tenderly: "By all that you hold dear and sacred, I beseech you, father, not to mention me and Sir Heinz Schorlin in your letter. If he withdrew his love from me, no imperial decree—"

The veins on the Councillor's brow again swelled with wrath, and though he did not burst into a passion, he exclaimed in violent excitement: "A nobleman who declares his love to a chaste Nuremberg maiden of noble birth assumes thereby a duty which, if unfulfilled, imposes a severe punishment upon him. This just punishment, at least, the tempter shall not escape. The Emperor, who proclaimed peace throughout the land and cleared the highways of the bands of robbers, will consider it his first duty—"

Here the warden interrupted him by calling from the threshold of the room that the draw-bridge would be raised and the young ladies must follow him without delay.

Eva again besought her father not to enter an accusation against the knight, and Els warmly supported her sister; but their brief, ardent entreaty produced no effect upon the obstinate man except, after he had pressed a farewell kiss upon the brows of both, to tell them with resolute dignity that the night would bring counsel, and he was quite sure that this time, as usual, he should pursue the right course for the real good of his dear children.

Hitherto Herr Ernst had indeed proved himself a faithful and prudent head of his family, but this time his daughters left him with heavy, anxious hearts.

Fear of her father's intention tortured Eva like a new misfortune, and Els and the countess also hoped that the petition would go without the accusation against Heinz.

Whilst the sedan-chair was bearing the girls home few words were exchanged. Not until they approached the Frauenthor did they enter into a more animated conversation, which referred principally to Biberli and the question whether the Honourable Council would call Katterle to account also, and what could be done to save both from severe punishment. Cordula had drawn aside the curtain on the right and was gazing into the street, apparently from curiosity, but really with great anxiety. But Herr Pfinzing had done his part, and with the exception of several soldiers in the pay of the city there were few people in sight near the Ortlieb mansion.

A horse was being led up and down on the opposite side of the courtyard, and behind the chains stood a sedan-chair with several men, to whom Metz had just brought from the kitchen a coal of fire to light their torches. The pretty girl looked as bright as if she felt small concern for the severe wound of the grey-haired tailor who had chosen her for his wife.

CHAPTER XI.

As the young girls were getting out of their sedan-chair, the Frauenthor, which was closed at nightfall, opened to admit another whose destination also seemed to be the Ortlieb mansion.

Katterle was standing in the lower entry with her apron raised to her face. She had learned that her true and steadfast lover had been carried to the "Hole," and was waiting here for her mistresses and also for Herr Pfinzing and his wife, whom old Martsche had conducted to the sittingroom in the second story. Herr Pfinzing, in her opinion, had as much power as the Emperor, and his wife was famed all

over the city for her charitable and active kindness. When the noble couple came down Katterle meant to throw herself on her knees at their feet and beseech them to have mercy on her betrothed husband. The sisters and Cordula comforted her with the promise that they would commend Biberli's cause to the magistrate; but as they went upstairs they again expressed to one another the fear that Katterle herself would sooner or later follow the man she loved to prison.

They found Herr Pfinzing and his wife in the sitting-room.

Katterle was not wrong in expecting kindly help from this lady, for a more benevolent face than hers could scarcely be imagined, and, more over, Frau Christine certainly did not lack strength to do what she deemed right. Though not quite so broad as her short, extremely corpulent husband, she surpassed him in height by several inches, and time had transformed the pretty, slender, modest girl into a majestic woman. The slight arch of the nose, the lofty brow, the light down on the upper lip, and the deep voice even gave her a somewhat imperious aspect. Had it not been for the kind, faithful eyes, and an extremely pleasant expression about the mouth, one might have wondered how she could succeed in inspiring everyone at the first glance with confidence in her helpful kindness of heart.

Her grey pug had also been brought with her. How could an animal supply the place of beloved human beings? Yet the pug had become necessary to her since her son, like so many other young men who belonged to patrician Nuremberg families, had fallen in the battle of Marchfield, and her daughter had accompanied her husband to his home in Augsburg. The onerous duties of her husband's office compelled him to leave her alone a great deal, and even in her extremely active life there were lonely hours when she needed a living creature that was faithfully devoted to her.

She was often overburdened with work, for every charitable institution sought her as a "fosterer." True, in many cases their request was vain. Whatever she undertook must be faultlessly executed, and the charge of the orphan children in the city, the Beguines, and the hospital at her summer residence occupied her sufficiently. During the winter she lived with her husband at his official quarters in the castle, but as soon as spring came she longed for her little manor at Schweinau, for she had taken into the institution erected there for the widows of noble crusaders, but in which only the last four of these ladies were now supported, a number of Beguines. These were godly girls and women who did not wish to submit to convent rules, or did not possess the favour or the money required for admission.

Without pledging themselves to celibacy or any of the other restrictions imposed upon the nuns, they desired only, in association with others of the same mind, to lead a life pleasing in the sight of God and devoted to Christian charity. Schweinau afforded abundant opportunity for charitable women to aid suffering fellow-mortals, since it was here that the unfortunates who had been mutilated by the hands of the executioner and his assistants, or wounded on the rack, often nearly unto death, were brought to be bandaged, and as far as possible healed. The Beguines occupied themselves in nursing them, but had many a conflict with the spiritual authorities, who preferred the monks and nuns bound by a monastic vow. The order of St. Francis alone regarded them with favour, interceded for them, and watched over them with kindly interest, taking care that they were kept aloof from everything which would expose them to reproach or blame.

Frau Christine, the Abbess Kunigunde's sister, aided her in this effort, and the Beguines, to whom the magistrate's wife in no way belonged, but who had given them a home on her own estate, silently rendered her obedience when she wished to see undesirable conditions in their common life removed.

Els, as well as Eva, had long since told Frau Christine, who was equally dear to both, everything that afforded ground for the shameful calumnies which had now urged their father to a deed for which he was atoning in prison.

When, a few hours before, a messenger from her husband informed her of what had occurred, she had instantly come to the city to see that the right thing was done, and take the girls thus bereft of their father from the desolate Ortlieb mansion to her own house. Herr Pfinzing had warmly approved this plan, and accompanied her to the "Es," as he, too, was fond of calling his nieces.

When she had been told what motives induced Eva not to confide herself just now to the protection of the convent, Frau Christine struck her broad hips, exclaiming, "There's something in blood! The young creature acts as if her old aunt had thought for her."

Her invitation sounded so loving and cordial, her husband pressed it with such winning, jovial urgency, and the pug Amicus, whose attachment to Eva was especially noticeable, supported his mistress's wish with such ardent zeal, that she called the sisters' attention to his intercession.

Meanwhile the girls had already expressed to each other, with the mute language of the eyes, their inclination to accept the invitation so affectionately extended. Els only made the condition that they

were not to go to Schweinau until early the following morning, after their visit to their father; Eva, on the other hand, desired to go as soon as possible, gladly and gratefully confessing to her aunt how much more calmly she would face the future now that she was permitted to be under her protection.

"Just creep under the old hen's wings, my little chicken; she will keep you warm," said the kind-hearted woman, kissing Eva. But, as she began to plan for the removal of the sisters, more visitors were announced— indeed, several at once; first, Albert Ebner, of the Council, and his wife, then Frau Clara Loffelholz, who came without her husband, and the two daughters of the imperial ranger Waldstromer, Els's most intimate friends. They had come in from the forest-house the day before to attend Frau Maria Ortlieb's burial. Now, with their mother's permission, they came to invite the deserted girls to the forest. The others also begged the sisters to come to them, and so did Councillors Schurstab, Behaim, Gross, Holzschuher, and Pirckheimer, who came, some with their wives and some singly, to look after the daughters of their imprisoned colleague.

The great sitting-room was filled with guests, and the stalwart figures and shrewd, resolute faces of the men, the kind, good, and usually pleasing countenances of the women, whose blue eyes beamed with philanthropic benevolence, though they carried their heads high enough, afforded a delightful spectacle, and one well calculated to inspire respect. There could be no doubt that those whose locks were already grey represented distinguished business houses and were accustomed to manage great enterprises. There was not a single one whom the title "Honour of the Family" could not have well befitted; and what cheerful self-possession echoed in the deep voices of the men, what maternal kindness in those of the elder women, most of whom also spoke in sonorous tones!

Els and Eva often cast stolen glances at each other as they greeted the visitors, thanked them, answered questions, gave explanations, accepted apologies, received and courteously declined invitations. They did not comprehend what had produced this sudden change of feeling in so many of their equals in rank, what had brought them in such numbers at so late an hour, as if the slightest delay was an offence, to their quiet house, which that very day had seemed to Frau Vorkler too evil to permit her children to remain in its service.

The old magistrate and his wife, on the contrary, thought that they knew. They had helped the sisters to receive the first callers; but when Frau Barbara Behaim, a cousin of the late Frau Maria, had appeared, they gave up their post to her, and slipped quietly into the next room to escape the throng.

There they retired to the niche formed by the deep walls of the broad central window of the house, and Herr Berthold Pfinzing whispered to his wife: "There was too much philanthropy and kindness for me in there. A great deal of honey at once cloy me. But you, prophetess, foresaw what is now occurring, and I, too, scarcely expected anything different. So long as one still has a doublet left compassion is in no haste, but when the last shirt is stripped from the body charity—thank the saints!—moves faster. We are most ready to help those who, we feel very sure, are suffering more than they deserve. There are many motherless children; but young girls who have lost both parents, exposed to every injustice——"

"Are certainly rare birds," his wife interrupted, "and this will undoubtedly be of service to the children. But if they are now invited to the houses of the same worthy folk who, a few hours ago, thought themselves too good to attend the funeral of their admirable mother, and anxiously kept their own little daughters away from them, they probably owe it especially to the right mediators, noble old Vorchtel and another."

"To-day, if ever, certainly furnished evidence how heavily the testimony and example of a really estimable man weighs on the scale. The First Losunger interceded for the children as if they were his own daughters, attacked the slanderers, and of course I didn't leave him in the lurch."

"Peter Holzschuher declared that you defended them like the Roman Cicero," cried Frau Christine merrily. "But don't be vexed, dear husband; no matter how heavily the influence of the two Bertholds—Vorchtel's and yours—weighed in the balance, nay, had that of a third and a fourth of the best Councillors been added, what is now taking place before our eyes and ears would not have happened, if —"

"Well?" asked the magistrate eagerly.

"If," replied the matron in a tone of the firmest conviction, "they had not all been far from believing, even for a moment, in their inmost souls the shameful calumny which baseness dared to cast upon those two—just look more closely."

"Yet if that was really the case—" her husband began to object, but she eagerly continued: "Many did not utter their better knowledge or faith because the evil heart believes in wickedness rather than

virtue, especially if their own house contains something—we will say a young daughter—whose shining purity is thereby brought into a clearer light. Besides, we ourselves have often been vexed by—let us do honour to the truth!—by the defiant manner in which your devout godchild—yonder 'little saint'—held aloof in her spiritual arrogance from the companions of her own age—"

"And then," the corpulent husband added, "two young girls cannot be called 'the beautiful Es' unpunished in houses which contain a less comely T, S, and H. Just think of the Katerpecks. There—thank the saints!—they are taking leave already."

"Don't say anything about them!" said Frau Christine, shaking her finger threateningly. "They are good, well-behaved children. It was pretty Ermengarde Muffel yonder by the fireplace who, after the dance at the Town Hall, assailed your godchild most spitefully with her sharp tongue. My friend Frau Nutzen heard her."

"Ah, that dance!" said the magistrate, sighing faintly. "But the child was certainly distinguished in no common way. The Emperor Rudolph himself looked after her as if an angel had appeared to him. You yourself heard his sister's opinion of her. Her husband, the old Burgrave, and his son, handsome Eitelfritz—But you know all that. Half would have been enough to stir ill-will in many a heart."

"And to turn her pretty little head completely," added his wife.

"That, by our Lady, Christine," protested the magistrate, "that, at least, did not happen. It ran off from her like water from an oil jar. I noticed it myself, and the abbess—"

"Your sister," interrupted the matron thoughtfully, "she was the very one who led her into the path that is not suited for her."

"No, no," the magistrate eagerly asserted. "God did not create a girl, the mere sight of whom charms so many, to withdraw her from the gaze of the world."

"Husband! husband!" exclaimed Frau Christine, tapping his arm gaily. "But there go the Schurstabs and Ebners. What a noise there is in the street below!"

Her husband looked out of the bow window, pointed down, and asked her to come and stand beside him. When she had risen he passed his arm around the slenderest part of her waist, which, however, he could not quite clasp, and eagerly continued: "Just look! One would think it was a banquet or a dance. The whole street is filled with sedan-chairs, servants, and torch-bearers. A few hours ago the constables had hard work to prevent the deluded people from destroying the house of the profligate Es, and now one half of the distinguished honourable Councillors come to pay their homage. Do you know, dear, what pleases the most in all this?"

"Well?" asked Frau Christine, turning her face towards him with a look of eager enquiry, which showed that she expected to hear something good. But he nodded slightly, and answered:

"We members of patrician families cling to old customs; each wants to keep his individuality, as he would share or exchange his escutcheon with no one. Then, when one surpasses the rest in external things, whatever name they may bear, no one hastens to imitate him. We men are independent, rugged fellows. But if the heart and mind of any one of us are bent upon something really good and which may be said to be pleasing in the sight of God, and he successfully executes it, then, Christine, then—I have noticed it in a hundred instances—then the rest rush after him like sheep after the bellwether."

"And this time you, and the other Berthold, were the leaders," cried Frau Christine, hastily pressing a kiss upon her old husband's cheek behind the curtain.

Then she turned back into the dusky chamber, pointed to the open door of the sitting-room, and said, "just look! If that isn't— There comes Ursula Vorchtel with her betrothed husband, young Hans Nutzen! What a fine-looking man the slender youth has become! Ursel—her visit is probably the greatest pleasure which Els has had during this blessed hour."

The wise woman was right; for when Ursel held out her hands to her former friend, whom she had studiously avoided so long, the eyes of both girls were moist, and Els's cheeks alternately flushed and paled, like the play of light and shadow on the ground upon a sunny morning in a leafy wood when the wind sways the tree tops.

What did they not have to say to each other! As soon as they were unnoticed a moment Ursel kissed her newly regained friend, and whispered, pointing to her lover, with whom Frau Barbara Behaim was talking: "He first taught me to know what true love is, and since then I have realised that it was wrong

and foolish for me to be angry with you, my dear Els, and that Wolff did right to keep his troth, hard as his family made it for him to do so. Had my Hans met me a little sooner, we should not now have to mourn our poor Ulrich. I know—for I have tried often enough to soothe his resentment—how greatly he incensed your lover. Oh, how sad it all is! But your aunt, the abbess, was right when she told us before our confirmation, 'When the cross that is imposed upon us weighs too heavily, an angel often comes, lifts it, and twines it with lovely roses!' That has been my experience, dear Els; and what great injustice I did you when I kept out of your way so meanly! I always felt drawn to you. But when that evil gossip began I turned against them all and bade them be silent in my presence, for it was all false, base lies. I upheld your Eva, too, as well as you, though she had been very ungracious whenever we met."

How joyously Els opened her heart to these confessions! How warmly she interceded for her sister! The girls had passed their arms around each other, as if they had returned to the days of their childhood, and when Ursel's lover glanced at his betrothed bride, who, spite of her well-formed figure and pleasant face, could not be classed amongst the most beautiful of women, he thought she might compare in attractiveness with the loveliest maidens, but no one could equal her in kindness of heart. She saw this in the warm, loving look with which he sought her pleasant grey eyes, as he approached to remind her that it was time to go; but beckoning to him, she begged him to wait just a moment longer, which she employed in whispering to Els: "You should find shelter with us, and no one else, if my father — Don't think he refused to let me invite you on account of poor Ulrich, or because he was angry with you. It's only because— After the session to-day they all praised his noble heart, and I don't know what else, so loudly and with such exaggeration that it was too much to believe. If he interceded for the Eysvogel firm and you poor children, it was only because, as a just man, he could not do otherwise."

"Oh, Ursel!" Els here interrupted, wishing to join in her father's praise; but the latter would not listen and eagerly continued:

"No, no, he really felt so. His modesty made him unwilling to awaken the belief that he asked the betrothed bride of the man—you understand and her sister into his house, to set an example of Christian reconciliation. False praise, he says, weighs more heavily than disgrace. He has already heard more of it than he likes, and therefore, for no other reason, he does not open his house to you, but upon his counsel and his aid, he bids me tell you, you can confidently rely."

Then the friends took leave of each other, and Ursula also embraced Eva, who approached her with expressions of warm gratitude, kissed her, and said, as she went away, "When next we meet, Miss Ungracious, I hope we shall no longer turn our backs on each other."

When Ursel had gone with her lover, and most of the others had followed, Els felt so elated by thankfulness that she did not understand how her heart, burdened with such great and heavy anxieties, could be capable of rising to such rapturous delight.

How gladly she would have hastened to Wolff to give him his share of this feeling! But, even had not new claims constantly pressed upon her, she could on no account have sought his hiding-place at this hour.

When the last guest and the abbess also had retired, Aunt Christine asked Els to pack whatever she and her sister needed for the removal to Schweinau, for Eva was to go there with her at once.

Countess Cordula, who, much as she regretted the necessity of being separated from her companions, saw that they were right to abandon the house from which their father had been torn, wanted to help Els, but just as the two girls were leaving the room a new visitor arrived—Casper Teufel, of the Council, a cousin of Casper Eysvogel, who had leaned on his arm for support when he left the session that afternoon.

Els would not have waited for any other guest, but this one, as his first words revealed, came from the family to which she felt that she belonged, and the troubled face of the greyhaired, childless widower, who was usually one of the most jovial of men, as well as the unusually late hour of his call, indicated so serious a reason for his coming that she stopped, and with anxious urgency asked what news he had brought.

It was not unexpected, yet his brief report fell heavily on the heart of Els, which had just ventured to beat gaily and lightly.

Her uncle and aunt, Eva and the countess, also listened to the story.

He had accompanied Casper Eysvogel to his home and remained with him whilst, overflowing with resentment and vehement, unbridled complaints of the injustice and despotism to which—owing specially to the hostility and self-conceit of old Berthold Vorchtel—he had fallen a victim, he informed Fran Rosalinde and her mother what the Council had determined concerning his own future and that of

his family.

When he finally reported that he himself and the ladies must leave the house and the city, Countess Rotterbach, with a scornful glance at her deeply humiliated son-in-law, exclaimed, "This is what comes of throwing one's self away!" The unfortunate man, already shaken to the inmost depths of his being, sank on his knees.

Conrad Teufel had instantly placed him in bed and sent for the leech; but even after they had bathed his head with cold water and bled him he did not regain consciousness. His left side seemed completely paralysed, and his tongue could barely lisp a few unintelligible words.

At the leech's desire a Sister of Charity had been sent for. Isabella Siebenburg, the sufferer's daughter, had already gone with her twin sons, in obedience to her husband's wish, to Heideck Castle.

She had departed in anger, because she had vainly endeavoured to induce her mother and grandmother, who opposed her, to speak more kindly of her husband. When they disparaged the absent man with cruel harshness, she felt—she had told her cousin so—as if the infants could understand the insult offered to their father, and, to protect the children even more than herself, from her husband's feminine foes, she left the falling house, in spite of the entreaties and burning tears with which, in the hour of parting, her mother strove to detain her.

Ere her departure she gave her jewels and the silver which her grandfather had bequeathed to her to Conrad Teufel, to satisfy the most urgent demands of her husband's creditors. Her father and she had parted kindly, and he made no attempt to oppose her.

No one except the Sister of Charity was now in attendance upon the old gentleman; for his wife wept and wailed without finding strength to do anything, and even reproached her own mother, whom she accused of having plunged them all into misfortune, and caused the stroke of paralysis from which her husband was suffering.

The grey-haired countess, the cousin went on, had passed from one attack of convulsions into another, and when he approached her had shrieked the words "ingratitude" and "base reward" so shrilly at him, in various tones, that they were still ringing in his ears.

Everything in the luckless household was out of gear, and its noble guest, the Duke von Gulich, would feel the consequences, for the servants had lost their wits too. Spite of the countless men and maids, he had been obliged to go himself to the pump to get a glass of water for the sick man, and the fragments of the vase which the grandmother had flung at him with her own noble hand were still lying on the floor. His name was Teufel—[devil]—but even in his home in Hades things could scarcely be worse.

When Herr Teufel at last paused, the magistrate and his wife exchanged a significant glance, while Eva gazed with deep suspense, and Cordula with earnest pity, at Els, who had listened to the story fairly panting for breath.

When she raised her tearful eyes to Herr Pfinzing and Frau Christine, saying mournfully, "I must beg you to excuse me, my dear aunt and uncle; you have heard how much my Wolff's father needs me," all saw their expectations fulfilled.

"Hard, hard!" said the magistrate, patting her on the shoulder. "Yet the lead with which we burden ourselves from kindly intentions becomes wood, or at last even feathers."

But Frau Christine was not content with uttering cheering words; she offered to accompany Els and secure the place to which she was entitled. Frau Rosalinde had formerly often visited the matron to seek counsel, and had shown her, with embarrassing plainness, how willingly she admitted her superior ability. She disliked the old countess—but with whom would not the self-reliant woman, conscious of her good intentions, have dared to cope? Since the daughter of the house had left her relatives, the place beside his father's sick-bed belonged to the son's future wife. Frau Rosalinde was weak, but not the worst of women. "Just wait, child," Aunt Christine concluded, "she will see soon enough what a blessing enters the house and the sick-room with you. We will try to erect a wall against the old woman's spite."

Conrad Teufel confessed that he had come with the hope of inducing Els, who had nursed her own mother so skilfully and patiently, to make so praiseworthy a resolution. In taking leave he promised to keep a sharp lookout for her rights, and, if necessary, to show the old she-devil his own cloven foot.

After he, too, had gone, the preparations for the sisters' departure were commenced. Whilst Cordula was helping Eva to select the articles she wished to take to Schweinau, and her older sister, with Katterle's assistance, was packing the few pieces of clothing she needed as a nurse in the Eysvogel

family, the countess offered to visit Herr Ernst in the watch-tower early the following morning and tell him what detained his daughters. Towards evening Eva could come into the city under the protection of her aunt, who had many claims upon her the next day, and see the prisoner.

This time, to the surprise of her sister, who had always relieved her of such cares, Eva herself did the packing. When she had finished she led the weeping Katterle to her uncle, that she might beg for mercy upon her lover.

The magistrate was thoroughly aware of the course of affairs, and talked to the maid with the gentle manner, pervaded with genuine kindness of heart, which was one of his characteristics. Biberli had already been subjected to an examination by torture; but even on the rack he had not said one word about his betrothed bride, and had resolutely denied everything which could criminate his master. A second trial awaited him on the morrow, but the magistrate promised to do all in his power to obtain the mildest possible sentence for him. At any rate, like all whose blood was shed by a legal sentence, he would be sent to Schweinau to be cured, and as Katterle would accompany Eva there, she could find an opportunity of nursing her betrothed husband herself.

With these words he dismissed the girl, but when again alone with his wife he admitted to her that the poor fellow might easily fare badly—nay, might even lose his tongue—if on the rack, which was one of the instruments of torture to which he must again be subjected, he confessed having forced his way into the house of an "Honourable" at night. True, the fact that in doing so he had only followed his master, would mitigate the offence. He must bind the judges to secrecy, should it prove impossible to avoid the necessity of informing them of Eva's somnambulism. If the sentence were very severe, he might perhaps be able to delay its execution. Sir Heinz Schorlin, who stood high in the Emperor's favour, would then be asked to apply to the sovereign to annul it, or at any rate to impose a lighter punishment.

Here he was interrupted by his nieces and Cordula, and soon after Frau Christine went out with Els to go to the Eysvogels. Herr Pfinzing remained with the others.

A personage of no less distinction than the Duchess Agnes had complained to him of the reckless countess. Only yesterday she had ridden into the forest with her father, and when the young Bohemian princess met her, Cordula's dogs had assailed her skittish Arabian so furiously that it would have been difficult for a less practised rider to keep her seat in the saddle. This time the docile animals had refused to obey their mistress, and the duchess expressed the suspicion that she had not intended to call them off; for, though she had carelessly apologised, she asked, as if the words were a gibe, if there was anything more delightful than to curb a refractory steed. She had an answer ready for Cordula, however, and retorted that the disobedience of her dogs proved that, if she understood how to obtain from horses what she called the greatest delight, she certainly failed in the case of other living creatures. She therefore offered her royal condolence on the subject.

Then she remarked to the magistrate that the incident had occurred in the imperial forest where, as she understood, the unrestricted wandering of strange hunting dogs was prohibited. Therefore, in future, Countess von Montfort might be required to leave hers at home when she rode to the woods.

The magistrate now brought the complaint to the person against whom it was made, adopting a merry jesting tone, in which Cordula gaily joined.

When the old gentleman asked whether she had previously angered the irritable princess, she answered laughing, "The saints have hitherto denied to the wife of the Emperor's son, as well as to other girls of thirteen or fourteen, the blessing of children, so she likes to play with dolls. She chanced to prefer the same one for which she saw me stretch out my hands."

The old magistrate vainly sought to understand this jest; but Eva knew whom the countess meant by the doll, and it grieved her to see two women hostile to each other, seeking to amuse themselves with one who bore so little resemblance to a toy, and to whom she looked up with all the earnestness of a soul kindled by the deepest passion.

While the magistrate and the countess were gaily arguing and jesting together she sat silent, and the others did not disturb her.

After a long time Frau Christine returned. Traces of tears were plainly visible, though she had tried, whilst in the sedan-chair, to efface them. The scenes which Els had experienced at the Eysvogels' had certainly been far worse than she had feared—nay, the old countess's attack upon her was so insulting, Frau Rosalinde's helpless grief and Herr Casper's condition were so pitiable, that she had thought seriously of bringing the poor girl back with her, and removing her from these people who, she was sure, would make Els's life a torment as soon as she herself had gone.

The grandmother's enquiry whether Jungfrau Ortlieb expected to find her Swiss gallant there, and similar insolent remarks, seemed fairly steeped with rancour.

What a repulsive spectacle the old woman, utterly bereft of dignity, presented as with solemn mockery she courtesied to Els again and again, as if announcing herself her most humble servant; but the poor child kept silence until Frau Christine herself spoke, and assigned her niece to the place beside Herr Casper's sick-bed, which no one else could fill so well.

Stillness reigned in this chamber, and Els scarcely had occasion to dread much disturbance, for the countess had been strictly forbidden to enter the sufferer's room. Frau Rosalinde seemed to fear the sight of the helpless man, and the Sister of Charity was a strong, resolute woman, who welcomed Els with sincere cordiality, and promised Frau Christine to let no evil befall her.

The sedan-chairs were already waiting outside, and the lady would have gladly deferred her account of these sorrowful events until later, but Cordula so affectionately desired to learn how her friend had fared in her lover's home, that she hurriedly and swiftly gratified her wish. Speaking of the matter relieved her heart, and in a somewhat calmer mood she was carried to Schweinau.

CHAPTER XII.

The little Pfinzing castle in Schweinau was neither spacious nor splendid, but it was Fran Christine's favourite place of abode.

The heat of summer found no entrance through the walls—three feet in thickness—of the ancient building. Early in the morning and at evening it was pleasant to stay in the arbour, a room open in the front, extending the whole length of the edifice, where one could breathe the fresh air even during rainy weather. It overlooked the herb garden, which was specially dear to its mistress, for it contained roses, lilies, pinks, and other flowers; and part of the beds, after being dug by the gardener, who had charge of the kitchen garden in the rear, were planted and tended by her own hand.

The hour between sunrise and mass was devoted to this work, in which Eva was to help her, and it would afford her much information; for her aunt raised many plants which possessed healing power. Some of the seeds or bulbs had been brought from foreign lands, but she was perfectly familiar with the virtues of all. Schweinau afforded abundant opportunity to use them, and the nurses in the city hospital, and the leech Otto, and other physicians, as well as many noble dames in the neighbourhood who took the place of a physician among their peasants and dependents, applied to Fran Christine when they needed certain roots, leaves, berries, and seeds for their sick. Nor did the monks and nuns, far and near, ever come to her for such things in vain.

True, the life at Castle Schweinau was by no means so quiet as the one which Eva had hitherto loved.

When she accepted the invitation she knew that, if she shared all her aunt's occupations, she would not have even a single half hour of her own; but this was not her first visit here, and she had learned that Frau Christine allowed her entire liberty, and required nothing which she did not offer of her own free will.

When she saw the matron, after the mass and the early repast which her husband shared with her before going to the city, visit the aged widows of the crusaders in the little institution behind the kitchen garden and inspect and regulate the work of the Beguines, she often wondered where this woman, whose age was nearer seventy than sixty, found strength for all this, as well as the duties which followed. First there were orders to give in the kitchen that the principal meal, after the vesper bells had rung, should always win from the master of the house the "Couldn't be better," which his wife heard with the same pleasure as ever. Then, after visiting the wash-house, the bleachery, the linen presses, the cellar, the garret, and even the beehives to see that everything was in order, and emerging from the hands of the maid as a well-dressed noblewoman, she received visit after visit. Members of the patrician families of Nuremberg arrived; monks and nuns on various errands for their cloisters and their poor; gentlemen and ladies from ecclesiastical and secular circles, in both city and country, among them frequently the most aristocratic attendants of the Reichstag; for she numbered the Burgrave and his wife among her friends, and when questioned about the Nuremberg women, the Burgrave Frederick mentioned her as second to none in ability, shrewdness, and kindness of heart.

Both he and his worthy wife sometimes sought her in the sphere of occupation which consumed the

lion's share of her time and strength—the superintendence of the Schweinau hospital. True, she often let days elapse without entering it; but if anything went wrong and her assistance was desirable or necessary in serious cases, she remained there until late at night, or even until the following morning.

At such times even the most distinguished visitors were sent home with the message that Frau Christine could not leave the sick.

The Burgrave and his wife were the only persons permitted to follow her into the hospital, and they had probably gained the privilege of speaking to her there because they were among its most liberal supporters, and three of their sons wore the cross of the Knights Hospitaller, and often spent weeks there, as the rule of the order prescribed, in nursing the sufferers.

Women also had the right to enter the hospital to be cured of the wounds inflicted by the scourge or the iron of the executioner.

Each sufferer was to be nursed there only three days, but Frau Christine took care that no one to whom such treatment might be harmful should be put out. The Honourable Council was obliged, willing or unwilling, to defray the necessary expense. The magistrate had many a battle to fight for these encroachments, but he always found a goodly majority on the side of the hospital and his wife. If the number of those who required longer nursing increased too rapidly they did not spare their own fine residence.

The hospital and the hope of being allowed to help within its walls had brought Eva to Schweinau. The experiences of the past few days had swept through the peace of her young soul like a tempest, overthrowing firmly built structures and fanning glimmering sparks to flames. Since her quiet self-examination in the room of the city clerk, she had known what she lacked and what duty required her to become. The bond which united her to her saint and the Saviour still remained, but she knew what was commanded by him from whom St. Clare's mission also came, what Francis of Assisi had enjoined upon his followers whose experiences had been like hers.

They were to strive to restore peace to their perturbed souls by faithful toil for their brothers and sisters; and what toil better suited a feeble girl like herself than the alleviation of her unhappy neighbour's suffering? The harder the duties imposed upon her in the service of love, the better. She would set to work in the hope of making herself the true, resolute woman which her mother, with the eyes of the soul, had seen her fragile child become; but she could imagine nothing more difficult than the tasks to be fulfilled here. This was the real fierce heat of the forge fire to which the dead woman had wished to entrust her purification and transformation. She would not shun, but hasten to it. While her lover was wielding the sword she, too, had a battle to fight. She had heard from Biberli that Heinz wished to undergo the most severe trials. This was noble, and her enthusiastic nature, aspiring to the loftiest goal, was filled with the same desire. Eager to learn how they would bear the test, she scanned her young shoulders and gazed at the burden which she intended to lay upon them.

When, the year before, her aunt took her to the hospital for the first time, she had returned home completely unnerved. She had not even had the slightest suspicion that there was such suffering on earth, such pain amongst those near her, such depravity amongst those of her own sex. What comparison was there between what Els had done for her gentle, patient mother, or what she would do for old Herr Casper, who lay in a soft bed—it had been shown to her as something of rare beauty, of ebony and ivory—and the task of nursing these infamous gallows-birds bleeding from severe wounds, and these depraved sick women? But if God's own Son gave up His life amidst the most cruel suffering for sinful humanity, how dared she, the weak, erring, slandered girl, who had no goodness save her passionate desire to do what was right, shrink from helping the most pitiable of her neighbours? Here in the hospital at Schweinau lay the heavy burden which she wished to take upon herself.

She desired it also in order to maintain the bond which had united her to the Saviour. She would be constantly reminded here of his own words, "Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me." To become a bride of Jesus Christ and, closely united to Him in her inmost soul, await the hour when He would open His divine arms to her, had seemed the fairest lot in life. Now she had pledged herself in the world to another, and yet she did not wish to give up her Saviour. She desired to show Him that though she neither could nor would resign her earthly lover, her heart still throbbed for the divine One as tenderly as of yore. And could He who was Love incarnate condemn her, when He saw how, without even being permitted to hope that her lover would find his way back to her, she clung with inviolable steadfastness to her troth, though no one save He and His heavenly Father had witnessed her silent vow?

She belonged to Heinz, and he—she knew it—to her. Even though later, after all the world had acknowledged her innocence, the walls of convent and monastery divided them, their souls would remain indissolubly united. If there should be no meeting for them here below, in the other world the

Saviour would lead them to each other the more surely, the more obediently they strove to fulfil His divine command. As Heinz desired to take up the cross in imitation of Christ she, too, would bear it. It was to be found beside the straw pallets of the wounded criminals. The fulfilment of every hard duty which she voluntarily performed seemed like a step that brought her nearer to the Saviour, and at the same time to the union with her lover, even though in another world.

The first request she made to her aunt on the way to mass, early in the morning of the first day of her stay in Schweinau, was an entreaty for permission to work in the hospital. It was granted, but not until the eyes of the experienced woman, ever prompt in decision, had rested with anxious hesitation upon the beautiful face and exquisite lithe young figure. The thought that it would be a pity for such lovely, pure, stainless girlish charms to be used in the service of these outcasts had almost determined her to utter a resolute "No"; but she did not do it; nay, a flush of shame crimsoned her face as her eyes rested on the image of the crucified Redeemer which stood beside the road leading to the little village church; for whom had He, the Most High, summoned to His service and deemed specially worthy of the kingdom of heaven? The simple-hearted, the children, the adulterers, the sinners and publicans, the despised, and the poor! No, no, it would not degrade the lovely child to help the miserable creatures yonder, any more than it did the rarest plant which she raised in her herb garden when she used it to heal the hurts of some abandoned wretch.

And besides, with what deep loathing she herself had gone to the hospital at first, and how fully conscious of her own infinite superiority she had returned from amongst these depraved beings to the outdoor air.

Yet how this feeling, which had stirred within her heart, gradually changed!

During her closer acquaintance with the poor and the despised, the nature and work of Christ first became perfectly intelligible to her; for how many traits of simple, self-sacrificing readiness to help, what touching contentment and grateful joy in the veriest trifle, what childlike piety and humble resignation even amidst intolerable suffering, these unfortunates had shown! Nay, when she had become familiar with the lives of many of her proteges and learned how they had fallen into the hands of the executioner and reached Schweinau, she had asked herself whether, under similar circumstances, the majority of those who belonged to her own sphere in life would not have found the way there far more speedily, and whether they would have endured the punishment inflicted half so patiently or with so much freedom from bitterness and rebellion against the decrees of the Most High. She had discovered salutary sap in many a human plant that had at first seemed absolutely poisonous; where she had shrunk from touching such impurity, violets and lilies had bloomed amidst the mire. Instead of holding her head haughtily erect, she had often left the hospital with a sense of shame, and it was long since she had ceased to use the proud privilege of her rank to despise people of lower degree. If sometimes tempted to exercise it, the impulse was roused far more frequently by those of her own station, who were base in mind and heart, than by the sufferers in the hospital.

She had become very modest in regard to herself, why should she wake to new life the arrogance now hushed in Eva's breast?

Much secret distress of mind and anguish of soul had been endured by the poor child, who yesterday had opened her whole heart to her, when she went to rest in her chamber. How lowly she felt, how humble was the little saint who recently had elevated herself above others only too quickly and willingly! It would do her good to descend to the lowest ranks and measure her own better fate by their misery. She who felt bereaved could always be the giver in the hospital, and she felt with subtle sympathy what attracted Eva to her sufferers.

The magistrate's wife was a religious matron, devoted to her Church, but in her youth she had been by no means fanatical. The Abbess Kunigunde, her younger sister, however, had fought before her eyes the conflict of the soul, which had finally sent the beautiful, much-admired girl within convent walls. No one except her quiet, silent sister Christine had been permitted to witness the mental struggle, and the latter now saw repeated in her young niece what Kunigunde had experienced so many years before. Difficult as it had then been for her to understand the future abbess, now, after watching many a similar contest in others, it was easy to follow every emotion in Eva's soul.

During a long and happy married life, in which year by year mutual respect had increased, the magistrate and his wife had finally attained the point of holding the same opinions on important questions; but when Herr Berthold returned from the city, and finding Eva already at the hospital, told his wife, at the meal which she shared with him, that from his point of view she ought to have strenuously opposed her niece's desire, and he only hoped that her compliance might entail no disastrous consequences upon the excitable, sensitive child, the remarkable thing happened that Frau Christine, without as usual being influenced by him, insisted upon her own conviction.

So it happened that this time the magistrate was robbed of the little nap which usually followed the meal, and yet, in spite of the best will to yield, he could not do his wife the favour of allowing himself to be convinced. Still, he did not ask her to retract the consent which she had once given, so Eva was permitted to continue to visit the hospital.

The nurse, a woman of estimable character and strong will, would faithfully protect her whatever might happen. Frau Christine had placed the girl under her special charge, and the Beguine Hildegard, a woman of noble birth and the widow of a knight who had yielded his life in Italy for the Emperor Frederick, received her with special warmth because she had a daughter whom, just at Eva's age, death had snatched from her.

Yet the magistrate would not be soothed. Not until he saw from the arbour, whilst the dessert still remained on the table; Cordula riding up on horseback did he cease recapitulating his numerous objections and go to meet the countess.

To his straightforward mind and calm feelings the most incomprehensible thing had been Frau Christine's description of the soul-life of her sister and her niece. He knew the terrible impressions which even a man could not escape amongst the rabble in the hospital, and had used the comparison that what awaited Eva there was like giving a weak child pepper.

As Countess Cordula, aided by the old man's hand, swung herself from the saddle of her spirited dappled steed, he thought: "If it were she who wanted to tend our sick rascals instead of the delicate Eva, I wouldn't object. She'd manage Satan himself whilst my little godchild was holding intercourse with her angels in heaven."

In the arbour Cordula explained why she had not come before; but her account told the elderly couple nothing new.

When she went to see Ernst Ortlieb in the watch-tower that morning he had already been taken to the Town Hall. No special proceedings were required, since he was his own accuser, and many trustworthy witnesses deposed that he had been most grossly irritated—nay, as his advocate represented, had wounded the tailor in self-defence. Yet Ernst Ortlieb could not be dismissed from imprisonment at once, because the tailor's representative demanded a much larger amount of blood-money than the court was willing to grant. The wound was not dangerous to life, but still prevented his leaving his bed and appearing in person before his judges. The candle-dealer was nursing him in his own house and instigating him to make demands whose extravagance roused the judges' mirth. As after a tedious discussion Meister Seubolt still insisted upon them, the magistrates from the Council and the Chief of Police, who composed the court, advised Herr Ernst to have the sentence deferred and recognise the tailor's claim that his case belonged to the criminal court. Out of consideration for the citizens and the excited state of the whole guild of tailors, it seemed advisable to avoid any appearance of partiality, yet in that case the self-accuser must submit to imprisonment until the sentence was pronounced. This delay, however, was of trivial importance; for Herr Pfinzing had promised his brother-in-law that his cause should be considered and settled on the following day.

Herr Berthold had told his wife all this soon after his return, and added, with much admiration of the valiant fellow's steadfastness, that Biberli, Sir Heinz Schorlin's servant, had again been subjected to an examination by torture and was racked far more severely than justice could approve.

The countess reported that after her friend's father had been taken back to the watch-tower a few hours before, she had found him in excellent spirits.

True, the Burgrave von Zollern had not come to visit him in person, like many "Honourables" and gentlemen, but he had sent his son Eitelfritz to enquire how he fared, and the prisoner was occupied with the petition which he wished to send the sovereign the next day through Meister Gottlieb von Passau, the Emperor Rudolph's protonotary. He had told Cordula, with a resolute air, that it contained the charge that Sir Heinz Schorlin had found his way into his house at night, and would not even suffer her to finish her entreaty to omit the accusation. "And now," the countess added mournfully, "I urge you, to whom the young girl is dear, to consider the pitiable manner in which, by her own father's folly, Eva's name will be on the tongues of the whole court, and what the gossips throughout the city will say about the poor child in connection with such an accusation."

Frau Pfinzing sighed heavily, and rose, but her husband, who perceived her intention, stopped her with the remark that it would be useless to go that day, for the sun was already setting and the watchtower was closed at nightfall.

This induced the matron to return to her seat; but she had scarcely touched the easy-chair ere she again rose and told the servant to saddle the big bay. She would ride to the city on horseback this time;

the bearers moved too slowly. Then turning to her husband, she said gaily:

"I thank you for the excuse you have made for me, but I cannot use it in this case. My foolish brother must on no account make the charge which will expose his daughter; it would be a serious misfortune were I to arrive too late. What is the use of being the wife of the imperial magistrate, if a Nuremberg drawbridge cannot be raised for me even after sunset? If the petition has already gone, I must see Meister Gottlieb. True, it was not to be sent until to-morrow, but there is nothing of which we are more glad to rid ourselves than the disagreeable transactions from which we shrink. Give me a pass for the warder, Pfinzing; and you, Countess, excuse me; it is you who send me away."

Whilst the maid brought her headkerchief and her cloak, and the magistrate in a low tone told her servant to have his horse ready, too, Frau Christine asked Cordula to bring Eva from the hospital, if she felt no disgust at the sight of common people suffering from wounds.

"The huts of our wood-cutters, labourers, and fishermen look cleaner, it is true, than the hovels of the charcoal burners and quarrymen in the Montfort forests and mountains; yet none of them are perfumed with sandal-wood and attar of roses, and the blow of the axe which gashes one of our wood-cutter's flesh presents a similar spectacle to the wounds which your criminals bring with them to Schweinau. And let me tell you, I am the leech in Montfort, and unless death is near, and the chaplain accompanies me bearing the sacrament, I often go alone with the manservant, the maid, or the pages who carry my medicines. Since I grew up I have attended to our sick, and I cannot tell you how many fractures, wounds, hurts, and fevers I have cured or seen progress to a fatal end. I stand godmother to nearly all the newborn infants in our villages and hamlets. The mothers whom I nurse insist upon it. There are almost as many Cordulas as girls on the Montfort estates, and in many a hut there are two or three of them. Michel the fisherman has a Cordula, a Cordel, and a Dulla. Therefore it follows that I am accustomed to severe wounds, though my heart often aches at the sight of them. I know how to bandage as well as a barber, and, if necessary, can even use the knife."

"I thought so," cried the magistrate, much comforted. "Set my delicate little Eva an example if her courage fails; or, what would be still better, if you see that the horrible business goes too much against the grain, persuade her to give up work which requires stronger hands and a less sensitive nature. But there are the horses already. I want to go to the city, too, Christel, and it's lucky that I don't have to go alone at night."

"So said the man who jumped in to save somebody from drowning," replied Frau Christine laughing: "It's lucky it happened, because I was just going to take a bath!" But it pleased her to have her husband's companionship, and she did not approach her horse until he had examined the saddle-girth and the bridle with the utmost care.

Before putting her foot in the stirrup, she told the old housekeeper to take Countess von Montfort to the hospital and commend her to the special care of Sister Hildegard. She would call for Cordula and Eva on her return from the city; but they must not wait for her should the strength of either fail. She had ordered a sedan-chair to be kept ready for her niece at the hospital. A second one would be at the countess's disposal.

"That's what I call foresight!" cried the magistrate laughing. "Only, my dear countess, see that our little saint doesn't attempt anything too hard. Her pious heart would run her little head against the wall if matters came to that and, like the noble Moorish steeds, she would drop dead in her tracks rather than stop. Such a delicate creature is like a lute. When the key is raised higher and higher the string snaps, and we want to avoid that. With you, my young heroine——"

"There is no danger of that kind," Cordula gaily protested. "This instrument is provided with metal strings; the tone is neither sweet nor musical, but they are durable."

"Good, firm material, such as I like," the magistrate declared. Then he helped his wife mount her horse, placed the bridle in her left hand, looked at the saddle-girth again, and, in spite of his corpulence, swung himself nimbly enough on his strong steed. Then, with Frau Christine, he trotted after the torch-bearers towards the city.

CHAPTER XIII.

The drawbridge before the watch-tower was promptly lowered for the imperial magistrate and his wife.

He would have dissuaded Frau Chris from the ride and come alone, had not experience taught him that Ernst Ortlieb was more ready to listen to her than to him. But they came too late; just before sunset Herr Ernst had availed himself of the visit of the imperial forester, Waldstromer, to give him the petition to convey to the protonotary, by whom it was to reach the Emperor. Nor did he regret this decision, but insisted that his duty as a father and a Nuremberg "Honourable" would not permit the wrong done to his child and his household by a foreign knight to pass unpunished.

True, Fran Christine exerted all her powers of persuasion to change his opinion, and her husband valiantly supported her, but they accomplished nothing except to gain the prisoner's consent that if the paper had not yet reached the Emperor the protonotary might defer its presentation until he was asked for it.

Herr Ernst had made this concession after the magistrate's representation that Sir Heinz Schorlin had been subjected to an experience which had stirred the inmost depths of his soul, and soon after had been unexpectedly sent in pursuit of the Siebenburgs. Hence he had found no time to speak to the father. If he persisted in his intention of entering a monastery, the petition would be purposeless. If it proved that he was merely trifling with Eva, there would be time enough to call upon the Emperor to punish him. Besides, he knew from Maier of Silenen that the knight had firmly resolved to renounce the world.

But the magistrate and his wife did not take their nocturnal ride in vain, for after leaving the watch-tower they met the protonotary at St. Sebald's. He had received the petition, but had not yet delivered it to his royal master, and promised to withhold it for a time.

Rejoicing over this success, Herr Pfinzing accompanied Fran Christine, who wanted to visit Els, to the Eysvogel residence.

The din of many voices and loud laughter greeted them from the spacious entry. Three mendicant friars, with overflowing pouches, pressed past them, and two others were still standing with the men and the maidservants assembled in the light of the lanterns. They had filled the barefooted monks' bags, for the salvation of their own souls, with the provisions of the house, and were talking garrulously, already half intoxicated by the jugs of wine which the butler willingly filled to earn a sweet reward from the young maids, who eagerly sought the favour of the rotund bachelor whose hair was just beginning to turn grey.

The magistrate's entrance startled them, and the butler vainly strove to hide a large jar whose shape betrayed that it came from Sicily and contained the noble vintage of Syracuse. Two of the maids slid under their aprons the big hams and pieces of roast meat with which they had already begun to regale themselves.

Herr Berthold, smiling sadly, watched the conduct of the masterless servants; then raising his cap, bowed with the utmost respect to the disconcerted revellers, and said courteously, "I hope it will agree with you all."

The startled group looked sheepishly at one another. The butler was the only person who quickly regained his composure, came forward to the magistrate cap in hand, and said obsequiously that he and his fellow-servants were in evil case. The house had no master. No one knew from whom he or she was to receive orders. Most of them had been discharged by the Honourable Councillor, but no one knew when he was to leave or whom to ask for his wages.

The magistrate then informed them that Herr Wolff Eysvogel had the right to give orders, and during his absence his betrothed bride, Jungfrau Els Ortlieb. The next morning a member of the Council would examine the claims of each, pay the wages, and with Frau Rosalinde and Jungfrau Els determine the other matters.

The butler had imbibed a goodly share of the noble wine. His fat cheeks glowed, and at the magistrate's last remark he laughed softly: "If we wait for the folk upstairs to agree we shall stay here till the Pegnitz flows up the valley. Just listen to their state of harmony, sir!"

In fact the shrill, angry accents of a woman's loud voice, with which mingled deeper tones that were very familiar to Herr Berthold, echoed down into the entry. It certainly looked ill for the concord of the women of the house; yet the magistrate could not permit the unprincipled servant's insolence to pass unpunished, so he answered quietly:

"You are right, fellow. One can put a stop to this shameful conduct more quickly than several, and by virtue of my office I will therefore be the one to command here. You will leave this house and service to-morrow."

But when the angry butler, with the hoarse tones of a drunkard, declared that in Nuremberg none save rascals were turned out of doors directly after a discharge, the magistrate, with grave dignity, cut him short by remarking that he would do better not to bring before the magistrates the question of what beseeemed the servant who wasted the valuable property entrusted to his care, as had been done here.

With these words he pointed to the spot where the jug of wine which he had plainly seen was only half concealed, and the threat silenced the man, whose conscience reproached him far more than Herr Pfinzing could imagine.

Meanwhile quiet had not been restored upstairs. Frau Christine had released Els from a store-room in which the old countess, after persuading her daughter to this spiteful and childish trick, had locked her. A serious discussion amongst the women followed, which was closed only by the interposition of the magistrate. Perhaps this might have been accomplished less quickly had not the leech Otto appeared as a welcome aid.

Frau Rosalinde penitently besought forgiveness, her mother was again forbidden to come to the lower story, and threatened, if she approached the sick-room, with immediate removal from the house.

This strictness was necessary to render it possible for Els to maintain her difficult position.

The day had been filled with painful incidents and shameful humiliations. The old countess had summoned two relatives, both elderly canonesses, to aid her in her assault upon the intruder, and perhaps they were the persons who advised locking up Sir Casper's nurse, to whom they denied the right of still calling herself the bride of the young master of the house.

Frau Christine had arrived at the right time. Els was beginning to lose courage. She had found nothing which could aid her to sustain it.

Since Biberli had been deprived of his liberty she had rarely heard from Wolff, and his invalid father, for whose sake she remained in the house, seemed to view her with dislike. At first he had tried neither to speak to nor look at her, but that morning, while raising a refreshing cup to his parched lips, he had cast at her from the one eye whose lid still moved a glance whose enmity still haunted her.

Even the priest who visited him several times was by no means kindly disposed towards her. He belonged to the Dominican order, and was the confessor of the old countess and Frau Rosalinde. They must have slandered her sorely to him; and as the order of St. Francis, to which the Sisters of St. Clare belonged, was a thorn in his flesh, he bore her a grudge because, as the Abbess Kunigunde's niece, she stood by her and her convent, and threatened to win the Eysvogel household over to the Franciscans.

Before the magistrate and his wife left their niece, Herr Berthold ordered the men and maidservants to stand in separate rows, then, in the physician's presence, introduced Els to them as the mistress whom they were to obey, and requested her to choose those whose services she wished to retain. The rest would be compensated at the Town Hall the next day for their abrupt dismissal.

Els had never found it harder to say good-by to her relatives; but the leech Otto remained with her some time, and was soon joined by Conrad Teufel, thereby rendering it a little easier for her to persist in the performance of her difficult duty. On the way home to Schweinau the magistrate and his wife talked together as eagerly as if they had just met after a long separation. They had gone back to the query how nursing the wounded criminals would affect Eva, and both hoped that Cordula's presence and encouragement would strengthen her power of resistance.

But what did this mean?

As they approached the little castle they saw from the road in the arbour, which was lighted with links, the figure of the countess. She was sitting in Frau Christine's easy chair, but Eva was nowhere in view. Had her strength failed, and was Cordula awaiting their return after putting her more delicate friend to bed? And Boemund Altrosen, who stood opposite to her, leaning against one of the pillars which supported the arched ceiling of the room, how came he here? The Pfinzings had known him from early childhood, for his father had been a dear friend and brother in arms of the magistrate; and—whilst Boemund, as a boy, was enjoying the instruction of the Benedictines in the monastery of St. Aegidius, he had been a favourite comrade of Frau Christine's son, who had fallen in battle, and always found a cordial reception in his parents' house.

With what tender anxiety the knight gazed into Cordula's pale face! Something must have befallen the blooming, vigorous huntress and daring horsewoman, and both Herr Berthold and his wife feared that it concerned Eva.

The young couple now perceived their approach, and Cordula, rising, waved her handkerchief to them. Yet how slowly she rose, how feebly the vivacious girl moved her hand.

Herr Berthold helped his wife from the saddle as quickly as possible, and both hurried anxiously towards the arbour. Frau Christine did not remain in the winding path, but though usually she strictly insisted that no one should tread on the turf, hastily crossed it to reach her goal more quickly. But ere she could put the question she longed to ask, Cordula sorrowfully exclaimed: "Don't judge me too severely. 'He who exalts himself shall be humbled,' says the Bible, and also that the first shall be last, and the last first; but I have been forced to sit upon the ground whilst Eva occupies the throne. I belong at the end of the last rank, whilst she leads the foremost."

"Please explain the riddle at once," pleaded Frau Christine.

Sir Boemund Altrosen came forward, held out his hand to his old friend, and spoke for Cordula "The horror and loathsomeness were too much for her, whilst Jungfrau Ortlieb endured them."

"Eva remained at the hospital," the countess added dejectedly, "because a dying woman would not let her go; whilst I—the knight is right—could bear it no longer."

Frau Christine glanced triumphantly at her husband, but when she saw Cordula's pale cheeks she exclaimed: "Poor child! And there was no one here to—— One moment, Countess!"

Throwing down her riding-whip and gloves as she spoke, she was hurrying towards the sideboard on which stood the medicine-case, to prepare a strengthening drink; but Cordula stopped her, saying: "The housekeeper has already supplied the necessary stimulant. I will only ask to have my horse brought to the door, or my father will be anxious. I was obliged to await your return, because—— Well, my flight from the hospital certainly was not praiseworthy, and it affords me no special pleasure to confess it. But you must not think me even more pitiful than I proved myself, so I stayed to tell you myself——"

That it is one thing," interrupted Sir Boemund, "to nurse worthy wood-cutters, gamekeepers, fishermen, and charcoal-burners, who, when wounded and ill, look up to their gracious mistress as if she were an angel of deliverance, and quite a different matter to mingle with the miserable rabble yonder. The bloody stripes which the executioner's lash cuts in the criminal's back do not render him more gentle; the mutilation which he curses, and the disgrace with which an abandoned woman——"

"Stop!" interrupted Cordula, whose lips and cheeks had again grown colourless. "Do not mention those scenes which have poisoned my soul. It was too hideous, too terrible! And how the woman with the red band around her neck, the mark of the rope by which she carried the stone, rushed at the other whose eye had been put out! how they fought on the floor, scratching, biting, tearing each other's hair——"

Here the tender-hearted girl, covering her convulsed face with her hands, sobbed aloud.

Frau Christine drew her compassionately to her heart, pressed the motherless child's head to her bosom, and let her weep her fill there, whilst the magistrate said to Sir Boemund: "And Eva Ortlieb also witnessed this hideous scene, yet the delicate young creature endured it?"

Altrosen nodded assent, adding eagerly, as if some memory rose vividly before him: "She often looked distressed by these horrors, but usually— how shall I express it?—usually calm and content."

"Content," repeated the magistrate thoughtfully. Then, suddenly straightening his short, broad figure, he thrust his little fat hand into a fold of the knight's doublet, exclaiming: "Boemund, do you want to know the most difficult riddle that the Lord gives to us men to solve? It is —take heed—a woman's soul."

"Yes," replied Altrosen curtly; the word sounded like a sigh.

While speaking, his dark eye was bent on Cordula, whose head still rested on Frau Christine's breast.

Then, adjusting the bandage which since the fire had been wound around his forehead and his dark hair, he continued in a tone of explanation: "Count von Montfort sent me, when it grew dark, to accompany his daughter home. From your little castle I was directed to the hospital, where I found her amongst the horrible women. She had struggled faithfully against her loathing and disgust, but when I arrived her power of resistance was already beginning to fail. Fortunately the sedan-chair was there, for she felt that her feet would scarcely carry her back. I ordered one to be prepared for Jungfrau Ortlieb, though I remembered the dying woman who kept her. As if the matter were some easy task, she begged the countess to excuse her, and remained beside the wretched straw pallet."

The deeply agitated girl had just released herself from the matron's embrace, and begged the knight

to have her Roland saddled; but Frau Christine stopped him, and entreated Cordula, for her sake, to use her sedan-chair instead of the horse.

"If it will gratify you," replied the countess smiling; "but I should reach home safely on the piebald."

"Who doubts it?" asked the matron. "Give her your arm, husband. The bearers are ready, and you will soon overtake them on your horse, Boemund."

"The walk through the warm June night will do me good," the latter protested.

Soon after the sedan-chair which conveyed Cordula, lighted by several torch-bearers on foot and on horseback, began to move towards the city.

At St. Linhard, Boemund Altrosen, who walked beside it, asked the question, "Then I may hope, Countess? I really may?"

She nodded affectionately, and answered under her breath: "You may; but we must first try whether the flower of love which blossomed for you out of my weakness is the real one. I believe it will be."

He joyously raised her hand to his lips, but a torch-bearer's shout—"Count von Montfort and his train!"—urged him back from the sedan chair. A few seconds after Cordula welcomed her father, who had anxiously ridden forth to meet his jewel.

CHAPTER XIV.

"I can hardly do more, and yet I must," groaned Frau Christine, as she gazed after the torch-bearers who preceded Cordula. Her husband, however, tried to detain her, offering to go to their young guest in her place.

But the effort was vain. The motherless child, whom the captive father probably believed to be in safety with her sensible sister, was at a post of danger, and only a woman's eye could judge whether it would do to yield to Eva's wish, which the housekeeper had just told her mistress, and allow her—it was already past midnight—to remain longer at the hospital.

She would not have hesitated to require her niece's return home had not maternal solicitude urged her to deprive her of nothing which could aid her troubled soul to regain its poise. If possible at all, it would be through devotion to an arduous work of charity that she would understand her own nature, and find an answer to the question whether, when the slanderers were silenced, she would take the veil or cling firmly to the hopeless love which had mastered her young heart.

If she succeeded in remaining steadfast here and, in spite of the glad consciousness of having conquered by the sign of the cross, was still loyal to her worldly love, then the latter was genuine and strong, and Eva did not belong to the convent; then her sister, the abbess, was mistaken in the girl whose soul she had guided from early childhood.

Frau Christine, who usually formed an opinion quickly and resolutely, had not dared to give Eva a positive answer the previous evening.

With sympathising emotion the matron had heard her confess that during her nocturnal wanderings a new feeling, which she could no longer still, had awakened in her breast. When she also told her the image of true love which she had formed, she could not bring herself to undeceive her.

The abbess had made a somewhat similar confession to her, the older sister, when her young heart—how long ago it seemed!—had also been mastered by love. The object of its ardent passion was no less a personage than the Burgrave von Zollern.

Frau Christine had seen his marriage with the Hapsburg princess awaken her sister's desire to renounce the world. Kunigunde was then a maiden of rare, majestic beauty, and only the Burgrave's exalted station had prevented his wedding "Eva," as she was called before she took the veil.

As a husband and father, he had found deep happiness in the love of the Countess Elizabeth, the future Emperor Rudolph's sister, yet he had remained a warm friend of the abbess; and when he treated Eva with such marked distinction at the dance, she owed it not only to her own charms but also

to the circumstance that, like the girl whom he had loved in his youth, she bore the name of "Eva Ortlieb," and the expression of her eyes vividly recalled the happiest time in his life.

The abbess, after a still more severe renunciation, had attained even greater happiness in the convent. Her sister could not blame her for wishing the same lot for the devout young niece, whose fate seemed to bear a closer and closer resemblance to her own; but yesterday she had argued with her, for Kunigunde had insisted firmly that if the girl did not voluntarily knock at the convent door she should be forced to enter, not only for her own sake but also Sir Heinz Schorlin's. Nothing could rouse the ire of every true Christian more than the thought that a noble knight, for whose conversion Heaven had wrought a miracle, could turn a deaf ear to the summons for the sake of a girl scarcely beyond childhood. To place convent walls between the pair would therefore be a work pleasing in the sight of God-nay, necessary for the example.

This statement sounded so resolute and imperative that Frau Christine, who knew her sister's gentle nature, had been convinced that she was obeying the mandate of a superior. Soon afterward she learned that Kunigunde had followed the dictates of the zealous prior of the Dominicans, who was regarded as the supreme judge in religious affairs. At a chance meeting she had imprudently asked this man, who had never been friendly to her or her order, to give his opinion concerning this matter, which gave her no rest.

Frau Christine had eagerly opposed her. The case of Heinz Schorlin was different from that of the Burgrave Frederick, who could never be permitted to wed the daughter of a Nuremberg merchant. If the Swiss renounced his intention of entering the monastery, there was nothing to prevent his wooing Eva. It should by no means be as the prior of the Dominicans had said: "They must both renounce the world," but, "They must test themselves, and if the world holds them firmly, and the Emperor, who is a fatherly friend to Heinz, makes no objection, it would be a duty to unite the pair."

The decisive hour for Eva was now at hand, and Frau Christine, eager to learn in what condition she should find her niece, had herself carried to the hospital.

Her husband and several men-servants accompanied her, for at this late hour the neighbourhood, where so many criminals were nursed for a short time, was by no means safe. Companions, friends, and relatives of the criminals were often attracted thither by sympathy, curiosity, or business affairs. Whoever had occasion to shun appearing by daylight in a place which never lacked bailiffs and city soldiers, slunk to the hospital at night.

As a heavy rain had just begun to fall, the short distance to be traversed by the magistrate and his wife was empty. Ample provision also seemed to have been made to guard the place of healing, for several armed troopers belonging to the city guard were pacing up and down before the board fence which surrounded it, and the approach of the late visitors was heralded by the deep baying of large hounds.

The magistrate was well known here, and the doorkeeper, roused from his sleep, hastened to light the way for him and his wife with a lantern. In spite of the planks which had been placed in the courtyard, the task of crossing it was by no means easy; for the night was intensely dark, and the foot passed beyond the boards, it plunged into the mire, on which they floated rather than lay.

At first the barking of the dogs had drowned every other sound, but as they approached the house thatched with straw, where the wounded men were nursed, harsh voices, interrupted at times by the angry oaths of some patient roused from sleep, or the watchman's command to keep quiet, reached them in a loud uproar.

A narrow passage dimly lighted by a lantern led to the women's quarters, where Eva had remained. The magistrate entered the men's dormitory to make an inspection, while his wife, needing no guidance, passed on to the women, meeting no one on her way except a Sister of Charity and two men-servants who, under the guidance of a sleepy Dominican monk, were bearing out the corpse of some one who had just passed away.

Sister Hildegard, who was sitting at the door of the dormitory, half asleep, started up as Frau Christine crossed the threshold.

The knight's widow, a vigorous matron, whose hair had long been grey, pointed with the rosary in her hand to the end of the long, dimly lighted apartment, and said in a low tone: "The sick woman seems to be asleep now. The prior sent the old Dominican to whom Eva is talking. He is said to be the most learned and eloquent member of the order. If I am right, he came here to appeal to your niece's conscience. At least his first question was for her, and you see how eagerly he is speaking. When yonder sick woman seemed to be drawing near her end she asked for the sacrament, which was

administered by the Dominican. It was a sorrowful farewell on account of her children, but the barber thinks we may perhaps save her yet. Father Benedictus, the old Minorite, who was found on the road and brought to us, seems, on the other hand, to be dying. We will gladly keep him in the Beguines home until the angel summons him. Unfortunately, yonder poor woman's third day will end tomorrow. We are not permitted to shelter her here any longer, and if we turn her out—"

"What is the matter with the woman?" interrupted Frau Christine, but the other gazed into her face with warm sympathising affection and such tender entreaty that the magistrate's wife, before she began her reply, exclaimed: "So it is the old, pitiful story! But let her stay! Yes, even though, instead of every pound of farthings, she cost us ten times as much in gold! But we will spare what is necessary for her. I see by your face that it will not be wasted."

"Certainly not," replied Sister Hildegard gratefully. "Oh, how she came here! Now, it is true, she has more than she needs. Your dear niece— she is an angel of charity—sent her Katterle out to get what was wanted. But where is the girl?" She gazed around the spacious chamber as she spoke, but could not find Katterle.

True, a dim light pervaded the whole apartment, and Sister Hildegard, referring to it, added "The light keeps many of the patients awake, and we have a better use for the pennies which the oil and chips cost. When there are brilliant entertainments to be given, or works of mercy done which the whole world sees, the Honourables let their gold flow freely enough, but who beholds the abodes of horror? We look best in the dark, and no one will miss what we save in light."

Certainly no one present incurred any danger of seeing at this hour the pitiable spectacles visible by day; for what was occurring at the opposite end of the room could not be perceived from the door. So when it closed Eva could not distinguish who had entered.

But this was agreeable to Frau Christine; for before going to her niece she wished to inquire about the woman by whom she had been detained.

Like the others, she was lying upon the board platform which surrounded the four walls of the room, interrupted only by the door through which she had just passed. It rose in a slanting direction towards the wall, that the sufferers' heads might be higher than their feet. Instead of cushions, it was covered with a thick layer of straw, the beds of the patients who were nursed here. It seemed to be changed very rarely, for especially near the door at which the two women were still standing a damp, unpleasant odour emanated from the straw. It belonged here, however, as feathers are a part of birds, and the people who were nursed within its walls were accustomed to nothing better. When, fifteen years before, the oversight of the hospital was entrusted to Frau Christine, she had found the condition of affairs still worse, and the idea of procuring beds for the injured persons to be cured here was as far from her thoughts, or those of the rest of the world, as cushioning the stable.

That was the way things were at Schweinau. Straw of all sorts might be expected to be found here, not only on the wooden platform but on the floor, in the yard, and everywhere else, as surely as leaves upon the ground of a wood in the autumn. To leave the house without taking stalks in the hair and garments was as impossible as for any person accustomed to better conditions, who did not wish to faint from discomfort, to do without a scent bottle.

Formerly Frau Christine had endeavoured to obtain better air, but even her kind-hearted husband had laughed at the foolish idea, because such things would benefit only herself and some of the nurses. In the taverns usually frequented by the inmates of the hospital they learned to endure a different atmosphere, which was stifling to him.

After contagious diseases certain precautions were always taken. On Sunday morning it was even fumigated with juniper-berries on hot tin and boiling vinegar.

Frau Christine had introduced this disinfectant herself by the advice of Otto the leech, when all who had been brought hither with open wounds, among them vigorous young men, had died like flies. At that time the distinguished physician had even succeeded in getting the Honourable Council to defray the cost of having the walls newly white washed and fresh clay stamped on the floor. He had also directed that the old straw should be replaced by clean every Sunday morning, and now matters were better still, for the rule was that every sick person should have a fresh layer. True, it was not always fulfilled, and many a person was forced to be content with his predecessor's couch.

In the women's room, however, the change of straw was more rigidly required. The nurse herself attended to it, and Sister Hildegard gave her energetic assistance.

In difficult cases the influence of the leech Otto was called to her aid, but he had grown old and no longer came to Schweinau. Two barbers now cared for the bandaging and healing of the wounds, and if

they were at a loss the younger city physician was summoned.

Sister Hildegard now pointed to the couch beside which the Dominican was talking to Eva, and said: "She is the widow of a carrier and the child of worthy people; her father was the sexton of St. Sebald's. True, he died long ago, at the same time as her mother. It was twelve years since, during the plague.

"Reicklein, yonder, had no other relatives here—her parents were from Bamberg—but she was well off, and her husband, Veit, earned enough by his travels through the country. But on St. Blaise's day, early in the month of February, during a trip to Vogtland, it was at Hof, he was overtaken by a snowstorm, and the worthy man was found frozen under a drift, with his staff and pouch. The sad news reached her just after the birth of a little boy, and there were two other mouths to feed besides. Her savings went quickly enough, and she fell into dire poverty, for she had not yet recovered her strength, and could not do housework. During Passion Week she sold her bed to pay what she had borrowed and to feed the children. It was cold, she had not a copper, nor any possibility of earning anything. Then the rest went, too, and there was no way of getting food enough for the children and herself.

"But as her father had been in the employ of the city and was an honest man, by the advice of the provost of St. Sebald's, who had been her confessor from childhood, she applied to the Honourable Council, and received the answer that old Hans Schab was by no means forgotten, and therefore, to relieve her need, she was referred to the beadle, who would give her the permit which enabled her to ask alms from those who went to St. Sebald's Church, and had already afforded many a person ample support.

"For her children's sake she crushed the pride which rebelled against it, and stood at the church door, not once, but again and again. The other mendicants, however, treated her so roughly, and the cruel enmity with which they tried to crowd her out of her place seemed so unbearable, that she could not hold out. Once, when they insulted her too much, and again thrust her back so spitefully that not even one of the many churchgoers noticed her, she, fled to her children in the little room, determined to stop this horrible begging. This happened the Saturday before Whitsuntide, and as she had gone out hoping this time to bring something back, she had promised the children food enough to satisfy their hunger. They should have some Whitsuntide cakes, too, as they did years ago. When she reached the house and little Walpurga—you'll see her presently, a pretty child six years old—ran to meet her, asking for the cakes and the bread to satisfy her hunger, while Annelein, who is somewhat older, but less bright and active, did the same, she felt as if she should die, and carrying the baby, which she had held in her arms while begging at the church door, back into the room, she told Walpurga to watch it, as she had long been in the habit of doing, until she came back with the bread.

"For the children's sake she would try begging once more, but she could not go to St. Sebald's.

"So she went from house to house, asking alms; but she was a well-formed woman, who did not show her serious illness. She kept herself tidy, too, and looked better in her poor rags than many who were better off. Had she carried her nursing infant, perhaps she might have succeeded better, but even the most compassionate housewives either turned her from their doors or offered her work at the wash-tub, or in cleaning or gardening. The weakness from which she had suffered since the birth of her child made stooping so painful that she could not do what they required.

"When she was at last obliged to turn homeward, because the baby had probably been screaming for her a long time, she had only one small copper coin, with which she went to the baker Kilian's, in the Stopfelgasse, to ask for a penny's worth of bread. The baker's wife was not there, and her spinster sister-in-law, an elderly, ill-natured woman, was serving the customers in her place.

"As she turned to cut the bit of bread, and all sorts of nice sweet cakes lay on the shining counters before poor Riecklein, the children seemed to stand before her, headed by Walpurga, asking for the cakes and the bread she had promised them to eat their fill; and as no one was passing in the quiet street, Satan stirred within her for the first time, and a sweet jumble slid into the little basket on her arm. Had she stopped there she might have escaped unpunished; but there were two hungry little beaks agape in the nest, and she saw a pretty lamb with a little red flag on its back. If Walpurga could only have it! And with the clumsiness due to her inexperience in such matters she seized that, too, and put it with the other.

"Meanwhile the sister-in-law had turned, and instead of enquiring at a time so near the holy feast what had induced her to commit such a crime, she shrieked, "Stop thief!" and similar cries.

"So the widow was taken to the Hole, and as she had hitherto borne an unsullied reputation and was the child of a good man, justice allowed itself to be satisfied with having her scourged with rods privately instead of in public. So she came here. But as her poor body was too fragile to withstand all the trouble which had come upon her, she had a violent attack of fever, and a few hours ago death

stretched its hand towards her."

"And the children?" asked Frau Christine, deeply moved.

"She was allowed to have the baby," answered Sister Hildegard, "but she told us about the others and their desolate condition. In the delirium of fever she saw them stealing and the constable seizing them. Then your Eva encouraged me to send for them by promising to provide their food. So they came here. The worker on cloth from whom she rented her little room had helped them, and it was from her that Sister Pauline, whom I sent there, first learned that Walpurga, for whose sake she had so sadly forgotten her duty, was not even her own child, but an adopted one whom her late husband, on one of his trips, had found abandoned on the highroad at Vierzehnheiligen, beside an image of the Virgin, and brought home with him."

Here Sister Hildegard paused, and Frau Christine also remained silent a long time.

Yet, it was horrible here, and the air was impure; but had Countess Cordula looked more closely she would probably have seen one of the beautiful flowers which often bloomed amidst all the weeds, the poisonous and parasitic vegetation.

Eva was right to pity this woman, and if her life could be saved she herself would relieve her necessities and secure her children's future. She silently made this resolve whilst the Sister led the way to the couch of the scourged thief. The unfortunate woman should learn that God often compels us to traverse the roughest and stoniest paths in the wilderness ere he leads us into the Promised Land.

Eva was so deeply absorbed in her conversation with the Dominican that she did not see her aunt until she stood before her.

They greeted each other with a silent nod, and a smile of satisfaction flitted over the girl's face as she motioned to the sleeper whose slumber she was watching.

The young mother's pretty face still glowed with the flush of fever. One arm clasped the baby, which lay amidst the white linen Katterle had just brought. He was a pretty child, who showed no traces of the poverty in which he had been reared. Beside the widow were two little girls about six years old. The one at the left was sound asleep, with her head resting on her little fat arm. The other, at the sick woman's right, pressed her fair head upon her breast. Her slumber was very light, and she often opened her large, blue eyes and gazed with touching anxiety at the sick woman. This was the adopted child, Walpurga, and never had the matron beheld amongst the poor and suffering so lovely a human flower as this little six-year-old child, struggling with sleep in her affectionate desire to render aid. The other little girl's free hand also touched her mother, and thus these four, united in poverty and sorrow, but also in love, seemed to form a single whole. What a peaceful, charming picture!

Frau Christine gazed with earnest sympathy at each member of this group. How well-formed was every one! how pure and innocent the features of the children looked! how kind and loving those of the suffering mother, who was a thief, and whose tender back had felt the scourge of the executioner!

The thought made her shudder. But when little Walpurga, half asleep, raised her tiny hand and lovingly stroked the wounded shoulder of her adopted mother, the matron, as usual when anything pleasant moved her heart, longed to have her husband at her side. How easily, since he was so near, she could afford him a sight of this touching picture! It should prove that she had been right to let Eva remain here.

Faithful to her custom of permitting no delay in the execution of a good resolution, she wanted to send Katterle to call her husband, but the girl could not be found.

Then Frau Christine went herself, beckoning to Eva to follow; but they had scarcely reached the centre of the room when a peal of shrill laughter greeted them from a couch on the left.

The person from whom it came was the barber's widow, whose attack had alarmed Eva so terribly the day before in front of the pillory. It pealed loudly and shrilly through the stillness of the night, and when the matron turned angrily to reprove the person who so inconsiderately disturbed the rest of the others, the woman clapped her hands and instantly a chorus of sharp, screaming voices rose around her. The barber's widow, who knew everybody who lived in Nuremberg, had recognised the magistrate's wife at her entrance, and secretly incited her neighbours to follow her example and, as soon as she gave the signal, demand better fare and make Frau Christine, the patroness of the hospital, feel what they thought of the cruelty of her husband, who had delivered them to the executioner.

The female thieves and swindlers—in short, all the reprobate women around Frau Ratzer, whose feet had just been tied on account of her unruly behaviour in the Countess von Montfort's presence—obeyed

her signal, and the fierce voices raised in demand and invective woke those who were sleeping farther away. Weeping, wailing, and screaming they started up, clamouring to know what danger threatened them, whilst Frau Ratzer and her fellow-conspirators shrieked for beer or wine instead of water, for meat with the black bread and wretched broth and, yelling and howling, bade the patroness tell her husband that they thought him a brute and a bloodhound.

There was a hideous, confused, ear-splitting din, which threatened serious consequences, for some of the women, leaving their straw beds, hastened towards the door or surrounded Frau Christine and Eva with uplifted fists and threatening nails.

The warning voices of the matrons, to whose aid the Beguines had hastened, were drowned by the uproar, but the danger which specially threatened Eva, whom the barber's widow pointed out to her neighbour who had stolen a child to train it to beg, was soon ended, for the wild cries had reached the men's building, from which Herr Berthold Pfinzing came hurrying in, accompanied by the superintendent, his assistants, and several monks.

If the women reproached the magistrate, who in reality was a lenient judge, with being a cruel tyrant, they were now to learn that he certainly did not lack uncompromising energy. The unpleasant position in which he found his wife and his beloved godchild did not incline him to gentleness. He would have liked to have tied the hands of all these women, most of whom had forfeited the consideration due their sex. This was really done to the most unruly, while the barber's widow was carried to the prison-chamber, which the hospital did not lack.

After quiet was at last restored and Frau Christine had told her husband that she had been attacked while on her way to show him a delightful scene in the midst of all this terrible misery, he angrily exclaimed: "A magnificent picture! Balm for the eyes and ears of your own brother's virginal daughter! The saints be praised that you both escaped so easily. Can there be in the worst hell anything more horrible than what has just been witnessed here? Really, where a Countess Cordula cannot endure——"

Here Frau Christine soothingly interrupted her irate husband, and so great was her influence over him, that his tone sounded like friendly encouragement as he added: "You wanted to show me something special, but I was detained over there. Though it was late, I wanted to see the worthy fellow again. What a man he is! I mean Sir Heinz Schorlin's squire."

"Poor Biberli?" asked Eva eagerly; and there was a faint tone of reproach in her voice as she continued, "You promised to look after him."

"So I did, child," the magistrate protested. "But justice must take its course, and the rack is part of the examination by torture. He might easily have lost his tongue, and if his master doesn't return soon and another accuser should appear, who knows what will happen!"

"But that must not, shall not be!" cried Eva, the old defiance echoing imperiously in her voice. "Heinz Schorlin—you said so yourself—would not plead in vain for mercy to the Emperor; and before I will see the faithful fellow——"

"Gently, child," whispered Frau Christine to her niece, laying her hand on her arm, but the magistrate, shaking his finger at her, answered soothingly: "Jungfrau Ortlieb would rather thrust her own little feet into the Spanish boot. Be comforted! The three pairs we have are all too large to squeeze them."

Eva lowered her eyes in embarrassment, and exclaimed in a modest, beseeching tone: "But, uncle, do not you, too, feel that it would be cruel and unjust to make this honest fellow a cripple in return for his faithful services?"

"I do feel it," answered Herr Berthold, his face assuming an expression of regret; "and for that very reason I ventured to take a girl over whom I have no authority out of her service."

"Katterle?" asked Eva anxiously.

Her uncle nodded assent, adding: "First hear what interested me so quickly in the strange fellow. At the first charge, which merely accused him of having carried a message of love from his master to Jungfrau Ortlieb, I interceded for him, and yesterday the other magistrates, to whom I had explained the case, joined me. So he escaped with a sentence of exile from the city for five years. I hoped it would not be necessary to present the second accusation, for it was signed by no name, but merely bore three crosses, and for a long time most of the magistrates, following my example, have considered such things as treacherous attacks made by cowards who shun the light of day; but it was impossible to suppress it entirely, because the law commands me to withhold no complaint made to the court. So it was read aloud, and Hans Teufel's motion to let it drop without any action met with no approval,

warmly as I supported it.

"We must not blame the gentlemen. They all wish to act for your benefit, and desire nothing except a clear understanding of this vexatious business. But in that indictment Biberli was charged with having forced his way into an Honourable's house at night to obtain admittance for his master. In collusion with a maid-servant he was also said to have maintained the love correspondence between Herr Ernst Ortlieb's two daughters, a Swiss knight, and Boemund Altrosen."

"Infamous!" cried Eva. "What, in the name of all the saints, have we to do with Altrosen? "You certainly have very little," replied Frau Christine, "but the Ortlieb mansion has all the more. To-night he will again be seen before its door, and if still later he appears with his lute under Countess Cordula's windows and is heard singing to her, it wouldn't surprise me."

"And people," exclaimed Eva with increasing indignation, "will add another link to the chain of slander. If a Vorkler and her companions repeat the calumny, who can wonder? But that the magistrates should believe such shameful things about the brothers of their own fellow-member——"

"It was precisely because they do not believe it and wish to keep you away from the court," her uncle interrupted, "that they insisted upon the examination. They desired to show the people by their verdict and the severity of the procedures how thoroughly in earnest they were. But whilst I was compelled to absent myself an hour because the Emperor wished to inspect the new towers on the city wall, and I had to attend him in the character of showman, they sentenced the poor fellow, since his loose tongue had brought the whole rout and rabble against him, to torture so severe that I shuddered when told of it."

"And Biberli?" asked Eva, trembling with suspense.

"All honour is due the man!" cried Herr Berthold, raising his cap. "The rods scourged his fettered limbs, his thumbs were pressed in the screws, bound to the ladder, he was dragged over the larded hare——"

"Oh, hush!" cried Frau Christine with uplifted hands, and her husband nodded understandingly. Then, with a faint sigh, he added:

"Why should I torture you with these horrors? Nothing was spared him. Yet the worthy fellow stuck to his statement that he had accompanied his master to your house in the full moonlight to take a somnambulist who had wandered out of the open door back to her friends. Sir Heinz Schorlin had met Jungfrau Ortlieb only once—at the dance in the Town Hall. Though he had sometimes appeared before her father's house, it was not on account of Herr Ernst's daughters, but—and this was an allusion to Cordula von Montfort—for the sake of another lady.

"After the lightning had killed his master's horse under him he had avoided every woman, because he wished to enter a monastery. He could prove all these statements by many witnesses. Yesterday he named them, and Count Gleichen and his retainers appeared with several others. The Minorite Benedictus was vainly sought at the Franciscans."

"He is here in the house of the Beguines," replied Frau Christine, "and weak as he is, he will have strength enough to make a deposition in the knight's favour."

The magistrate said that this might be necessary if a new charge were brought against the servitor, Katterle, and perhaps even Sir Heinz Schorlin himself. Rarely had he seen a bad cause maintained with so much obstinacy. The complainants had witnesses who testified under oath what they had heard in taverns and tap-rooms from Sir Seitz Siebenburg and those who repeated his tales. Their examination had lasted a long time, and what they alleged was as absurd as possible, yet for that very reason difficult to refute. These depositions had aided the cause of the accused, but in consequence of such numerous charges many questions of course were put to Biberli, and thus the torture had been cruelly increased and prolonged.

Here Eva interrupted the speaker with another outburst of indignation, but he only shrugged his shoulders pityingly, saying: "Gently, child! A shoemaker who recently upbraided the 'Honourables' for something similar was publicly scourged, and if cruelties have been practised here it is the fault of the law, not of the judges. But worse yet may come, if the pack is not silenced by a higher will."

"The Emperor?" asked the girl with quivering lips.

"Yes, child," was the reply, "and your old godfather had thought of bringing this evil cause before our royal master. He gladly exercises mercy, but only after carefully investigating the pros and cons. In this case there is but one person in whom he has full confidence, and who is also in a position to tell him the

exact truth."

"Heinz Schorlin!" cried Eva. "He must be informed at once, without delay."

"Certainly," replied Herr Pfinzing quietly. "And since, as the uncle and godfather of Jungfrau Eva, who would have gladly undertaken the ride, I could not order her horse to be saddled, I sent some one else whose heart also will point out the way."

"Uncle!" Eva eagerly interrupted, raising her clasped hands in gratitude. "But whom can you——"

Here she hesitated, then suddenly exclaimed as if sure of her point: "Oh, I know the messenger, Countess von Montfort——"

"You've aimed too high," replied Herr Berthold smiling, "yet I think the choice was no worse. Your maid, child, the poor fellow's sweetheart."

Frau Christine and Eva, in the same breath, uttered an exclamation of surprise and assent, and both asked how the magistrate had chanced to select her.

A waggon from Schwabach, which happened opportunely to be on its way to Siebenburg, had brought Biberli to Schweinau on its homeward trip, just before the magistrate and his wife reached the hospital.

Katterle had been present when the tortured man was brought out and laid upon his couch of straw.

She did not recognise him until, with pathetic reproach, he called her by name and, horrified by the spectacle he presented, she fell upon her knees. But the couch at her side had already been prepared for him, and she did not need to rise again in order to stroke him, comfort him, and promise not to desert him, even if he should be a miserable cripple for life.

When the magistrate approached the couple, to offer Biberli his friendly aid, the latter faltered that he had only one desire—to see his beloved master once more. Besides, his case was hopeless unless the knight obtained a pardon for him from the Emperor Rudolph, for his persecutors would not cease their pursuit of him, and he could not endure the torture a second time.

Here the magistrate paused in his narrative, for he thought of an incident which he was reluctant to mention in the presence of the Dominican who had administered the sacrament to the suffering widow and now joined the group of listeners. This was, that a member of the latter's order had approached Biberli and exhorted him not to fear another examination by torture, for the Lord gave the innocent strength to maintain the truth even under the keenest suffering. A peculiar smile hovered around the lips of the poor tortured fellow, which Herr Berthold fully understood; for the brave servitor had by no means stuck to the truth during the pangs inflicted upon him.

"Oh, my dear ones," Herr Pfinzing continued, "a harder heart than mine would have been touched by what I saw and heard beside that couch of straw when I was left alone with poor Biberli and his sweetheart. If you could have seen how Katterle threw herself upon her lover after I had told her that even the most agonizing torture could not force him to confirm the charge which had been brought against her! Rarely does one mortal pour forth such a flood of ardent gratitude upon another; and when Biberli repeated that his dear master's help would be necessary to protect her and him from another examination, she offered to go in search of him at once, notwithstanding the rain and the darkness.

"Then I thought that no messenger could be found who was more familiar with the course of affairs, and at the same time inspired with more loving zeal. So, as the waggon in which Biberli had come was still waiting outside, I spoke to the carter, who had brought a load of wheat to Nuremberg, and now, on his way home, had ample room under the tilt. I knew the man, and we soon came to an agreement. From Schwabach, his brother, who knows every foot of the road, will take her to the imperial troops who are fighting with the Siebenburgs. I undertook to arrange with you for her absence. She is now rolling along in the old carter Apel's waggon towards Schwabach and Sir Heinz Schorlin."

Hitherto the magistrate had maintained his composure, but now his deep voice lost its firmness, and it was neither the loving words of appreciation whispered by his wife nor the gratitude which Eva tenderly displayed that checked his speech, but the remembrance of the parting between the man so cruelly tortured and his sweetheart.

Biberli had hoped that she would nurse him; the sight of her would have cheered his eyes and heart, yet he sent her out into darkness and danger. Gratitude and love, the consciousness that just now she could be of infinite importance to him and do much for him, bound her to his couch like so many fetters, yet she had gone, and had even assumed the appearance of doing so willingly and being confident of

success.

How their faces had brightened when the magistrate told them that his wife and Eva would take charge of him, and he himself would see that he had a better bed!

Biberli murmured sadly: "Straw and I have been used to each other in many a tavern, but now a somewhat softer couch might be of service, for wherever my racked body was touched I believe there would be something out of joint."

Herr Berthold had no reason to be ashamed of his emotion, for he had learned from the barber that the poor fellow had by no means exaggerated, and, as a witness of part of the torture, he knew that even the most cruel anguish had not conquered the faithful Biberli's firm resolve to bring neither his master nor his sweetheart before the judge.

In recalling this noble act of the lowly servitor he grew eloquent, and described minutely what the poor fellow had suffered, and how, after Katterle had left him, he lay motionless, with his thin, pale face irradiated by a grateful smile.

The women, too, and the monk Aegidius, an old Minorite, who had been watching beside the aged Brother of his order, Benedictus, and had just joined them, shed tears at his story; but Eva, from the very depths of her soul, exclaimed aloud, "Happy is he who is permitted to endure such tortures for love's sake!"

The others gazed in surprise at the young girl who, with her clasped hands pressed upon her heaving bosom, and her large eyes uplifted, looked as if she beheld heaven opening before her.

The old Minorite's heart swelled at this confession and the sight of the maiden. Thus, though far less richly endowed with the divine gift of beauty, he had seen St. Clare absorbed in prayer. The words uttered by the fresh lips of this favoured girl, whom he beheld for the first time, expressed a feeling which might guide her into the path of the Holy Martyrs and, filled with pious enthusiasm, he approached, drew her clasped hands away from her breast, pressed them in his own and, remembering what the Abbess Kunigunde had told him yesterday beside the couch of Benedictus concerning her severe conflict, exclaimed:

"Whoever said that, knows the words of Holy Writ which promise the crown of eternal life to those who are faithful unto death. Obey the voice, my child, which unites you to those who are called. St. Clare herself summons you to her heavenly home."

The others listened to the old monk in silence. Eva slightly shook her head. But when the disappointed Minorite released her hands she clasped his thin one, saying modestly: "How could I be worthy of so sublime a promise? The poor servant on his straw bed, with his T and St embroidered on cap and cloak, of whom my uncle told us, has a tenfold greater claim, I think, to the crown of life, for which, as yet, I have been permitted to do so little. But I hope to win it, and the saint who calls everything that breathes and lives brothers and sisters, as children of the same exalted Father, cannot teach that the fidelity shown in the world deserves less reward than that of the chosen ones in the convent."

"That is a foolish and sacrilegious opinion," answered the Dominican sternly. "We will take care, my dear daughter, to guide your soul from pathless wandering into the right path which Holy Church has marked out for you."

He turned his back upon the group as he spoke, but the grey-haired Minorite, smiling sadly, turned to Eva, saying: "I cannot contradict him. Fidelity to those whom we love, my child, is far less meritorious than that which we show to Heaven. To you, daughter, its doors have already opened. How strong must be the pleasure felt by the children of the world in this brief earthly happiness, since they are so ready to sacrifice for it the certainty of eternal bliss! Your error will grieve the abbess and Father Benedictus."

With these words he, too, took his leave, but Frau Christine whispered to her niece: "These monks are not the Holy Church to which we both belong as obedient daughters. To my poor mind and heart it seems as if the Saviour would deem you right."

"Amen," added the magistrate, who had heard his wife's murmured words.

ETEXT EDITOR'S BOOKMARKS:

False praise, he says, weighs more heavily than disgrace

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK IN THE FIRE OF THE FORGE: A ROMANCE OF OLD NUREMBERG — VOLUME 07 ***

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