



CATHOLIC CHRONICLE.

VOL. IX.

MONTREAL, FRIDAY, JUNE 17, 1859.

No. 45.

THIODOLF THE ICELANDER.

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CHAPTER LXVI.

The return into Greece was slowly effected, partly because the new possessions needed to be secured by the force of the Greek army, partly because the ever-increasing severity of the winter obliged them frequently to encamp. In the mean while, mournful thoughts passed through Thiodolf's mind. He had in vain inquired after the silent knight, who had not been seen since the last combat. That he was no ghost, but the yet living father of Isolde and Malgherita, Thiodolf knew since the day when he had delivered him, and he then understood the whole circumstance. But the strange aversion of the old knight pressed sorely on him, and made him think that there would be no joyful fulfilling to all the hopes of his life. At first, indeed, he had rejoiced at meeting with Jonas, in the hope that he would help him to the right knowledge of the White Christ. But notwithstanding all the love and renewed longing with which he returned to the high lore, and all the hearty trust with which he threw himself into the arms of his reverend teacher, the true insight into the Divine Nature of the Saviour remained closed to him, and his faith in it uncertain and doubtful.

Wladimir, on the contrary, quickly and readily took in the instruction of the holy man. "My new faith," he would say, "leads me to my new-recovered happiness, my sweet Wlasta in Constantinople; and who would not serve gladly for many a sad year for so glorious a pledge?"

But Thiodolf, at such speeches, would often say: "My unseen love! Ah, heavens! it fills my whole heart with longing. Could I only first find the White Christ, I feel as if Isolde would come of her own accord."

Thus it was that Wladimir was baptised during the march home, while Thiodolf rode on and on in heavy unmitigated grief. Winter passed, spring came, and all was as of old with the sad young leader, who now drew near to Constantinople at the head of his victorious troops, amidst the rejoicings of the people, receiving him in every town and village with tokens of honor and gladness.

The chamberlain, Mr. Androgenes, had spurred on at the command of Thiodolf, to announce to the Emperor all that had occurred; and he now returned with thanks and greetings in rich abundance, and with the order that the army should advance to a country palace, where the court was now enjoying the lovely spring; the Emperor would there review the troops, and afterwards feast them with splendid hospitality.

The clear blue of heaven was brightly reflected back from the Propontis, on whose shore the palace was situated; in the meadows, lofty triumphal arches sprang up from the light, green, flowery grass, formed of branches and rich waving wreaths of roses, myrtles, and laurel leaves. Chorus of youths and maidens, in the strangely beautiful dress of the old inhabitants of Greece, sang on all sides to the notes of flutes and citers, and the name of "Thiodolf" sounded in all the songs, as some brilliant star. But the object of all this praise said to himself: "How far more joyous was I in Iceland, where, instead of these gales of spring the winter storms howled, and instead of these solemn songs of praise, Uncle Nefolf and Aunt Gunhilda would by turn scold. Yet I feel, in the midst of this bitter sorrow of the south, a noble fruit is ripening within; and all will soon go better with me, much better than I had ever dreamed of."

The Emperor rode forth to meet them in all his pomp. As Thiodolf sprang towards him, and then, bending low, confirmed the news of victory and of peace, the Emperor hung round him a rich chain, whose links were partly sparkling diamonds, and partly Roman eagles of gold. Then Thiodolf made a sign to Prince Wladimir, and presented him to the Emperor, who, after a gracious reception, desired him to ride at his left hand; the right was chosen to be Thiodolf's place.

They thus passed through many squadrons of the host, and the Emperor spoke words of encouragement and gratitude, now to the soldiers, and now to their leader. Among other things he said to Thiodolf: "Know you, my dear leader and chief of the Væringers, that about a year ago we mourned you as dead? Report is a strange, daring thing, which willingly makes sport of the fate of heroes. Therefore its discordant sounds spoke of you; and the eyes of many fair women were moist at the tidings."

"The Valkyrias passed me then," said Thiodolf, gravely; "and called my master, Helmfrið."

"The Valkyrias!" exclaimed the Emperor. "What, Thiodolf, art thou then not yet such as thou shouldst be? Thou hast brought us home a noble convert, and thou, the noble victor—? But enough for this time. Lead the squadrons east the chariots yonder, where noble ladies are awaiting us."

The solemn march began. As formerly, at

the mock combat, Thiodolf passed before the starlike eyes of the blooming Zoe; but the fair, blushing maiden greeted him with far more tenderness than then. And when he returned and took his place by the chariots, and the elder Zoe greeted him kindly, and even the grave, pale Theodora roushated him a gracious word, such a soft alluring whisper first escaped the lips of the young Zoe, that his heart beat with emotion, and sweet undefined longing.

The troops held a splendid feast in the fields without the walls. Thiodolf, and with him Philip, Wladimir, and the principal captains, were invited by the chamberlain, Michael Androgenes, into the imperial gardens. The tables were prepared beneath bright, flowery bowers. The notes of many instruments floated through the branches, and united to form the sweetest harmony. As evening darkened, the light of lamps glittered between the leaves, the guests left the tables, and began to wander through the high-arched avenues, or to sail in delicate boats on the many lakes and canals of the gardens. Thiodolf trembled as if in a strange dream, and words of love and sorrow, before unspoken, hovered on his lips, above to take a form; for almost ever at his side was the blooming Zoe.

Then suddenly through a deep opening, was seen the Propontis, shining with all the majesty of the rising moon, and Thiodolf, with quick dexterity, disappearing in the crowd of knights and ladies, hastened, with inexpressible longing, to the element which was so dear to him. He reached the beautiful shore, but a thick hedge formed a wall between him and the sea which had allured him; he knelt down, stretched out his arms lovingly, and called out to the sparkling ocean:

"O ye waves, who gird the earth and surround her with a thousand embraces, ye who live in eternal joyous friendship with those who scour the woody lights of Iceland, and with those who wander on Africa's golden coasts—I fly to you! Ye shall bear me witness that I have ever been a true and renowned warrior; I shall bring me tidings of my stern home, of that pure beauty whom I have sought through many a year, heavy and weary from my inward sorrow. Ye shall cool my breast, burning with the glowing, scorching beams of the south; ye shall call up for me the shade of my glorious father. O father Asmundur! thy grave is far off, in our dear island of heroes: but lift up thyself from thy rocky bed, and float over the waves which, in thy lifetime, thou so often didst cross as a victor, float over them hither and help thy son. He calls not upon thee for help against foes which sword and lance may subdue—thou knowest it, against such he can help himself—he calls on thee for help against that which darkly and confusedly is raging in his heart, which he would fain not look at, and yet must see. Help, father Asmundur! bring me tidings of the gods of Walhalla; or, ah! if it might be, bring me tidings of the blessed White Christ. Thou seest how all that I love conceals itself from me in a dark cloudy veil, and will not that I should discover it.—Father Asmundur, help, help, thou mighty, holy sea!"

No shadow swept over the sea, no voice arose from its glittering waves, but a calming weariness came upon the suffering hero; more exhausted than ever after the hottest fight, he sank back on the soft grass, and a gentle sleep soothed him.

CHAPTER LXVII.

Streams of morning red were already coloring the eastern sky, when Thiodolf was awakened by the sweet sounds of a lute, which seemed wafted by the sea, softly whispering in the early gale. On looking up he saw a bark sail by, in which sat a man, whom he at once knew to be the singer Romanus. He held on his lap a boy of rare beauty, and played on the lute, and he sang the following words:

"Sweetly the beams, fair child Giocondo play,
And light thine infant features with their ray;
Now downwards vanish night's sad phantoms pale,
No tanning vision dures my child assail.
The wave it rocks the bard, the bard rocks thee
In tender arms. The spirits of the sea
With many costly gifts our bark pursue,
And quickly cheer us 'neath withdrawn from view."

The bark swept on, and vanished behind a woody promontory, after Romanus had lovingly greeted the young hero, who stood looking on in amazement.

Thiodolf thought awhile whether this was more than a shadow of a fleeting dream, or whether he had really gazed on the pleasant sight; he remained in uncertainty, and at length plunged into the cool waves of the Propontis to refresh himself beneath the brightness of the blue heavens. Then he swam gaily back to shore, dried and polished his arms, and took joyfully the road to Constantinople, to visit Pietro and Malgherita.

In the court of the little dwelling he met a pale elderly man, whom, as he approached, he with difficulty recognized as Pietro. Much affected, they embraced each other. After a moment, Pietro stood up, looked at his friend, and said:

"Thou art also changed, my glorious Thiodolf; but truly in another way than I."

"Ye gods!" exclaimed Thiodolf, "Malgherita yet lives?"

"Yes," answered Pietro, "as much as I do; we bear the burden alike—only her unspeakable loveliness yet draws an enchanted circle round her fading form." He firmly grasped his friend's hand, and looked earnestly and steadfastly up to heaven. At length he said: "How sportively and joyously did our love begin; and how heavily and sadly has it again and again been broken up. But so it is. Man is a perverse, deluded child, who thinks that he can play with the high mysterious powers which influence his life. He pulls and drags at their dark garments, and suddenly they fall away from the giant forms, and Medusa-faces stare round at him, till all his young blood curdles in his veins at the immovable phantom. Malgherita is yet sleeping, brother; come here another time, and do not make her now, for sleep is truly the best of all the dark web which we here call life."

Thiodolf parted from his unhappy friend in deep sorrow. He had not the heart to inquire after Isolde.

"Ah, were the glorious vision found," sighed he, "so much that is mournful could not have remained in her presence."

As he was returning to the Væringers' fortress, he unexpectedly met a man, who looked at him with such bright, wise eyes, that light, as of morning, seemed suddenly to arise in his darkened heart. He recognized his beloved Bertram.

As the two men gladly shook hands, the merchant said, with a smile: "It is a good thing that you no longer almost dislocate your friends' arms from your warm-heartedness, as you used to do at Marseilles; and yet the old Northman strength can still be felt well in the grasp of your hand. It seems to me so in all respects, you conquering chief, you are as strong as ever, but the noble light has taken a milder form in this southern glow."

"It may be so, my very dear friend," answered Thiodolf; but that glow makes sad, and almost burns away the marrow of our life. Wise and noble Bertram, almost my whole hope rests upon you. Do you bring me tidings of Isolde?"

A soft cloud seemed to pass over the bright face of the merchant. "I would that I had something better to say to you," answered he; "but it cannot be. Isolde seems to have vanished from the earth. Not only here, but in Marseilles, where I twice went during your campaign, have I sought for her with zeal and care—in vain. There, the black burned ruins of the baron's castle rise up like grave-stones, touched by no sound, scarcely by any recollection of life;—here, at times, traces of Isolde are discerned, but they vanish like the track of a ship on the waters. That she is the being whom the people here still honor under the name of the Secret Helper, I can hardly doubt. But whether she appears at the side of sick beds, or appearing mortal strifes, or even by her sudden appearance dispersing and calming tumults, she ever vanishes again as promptly; and I know not if I have had to do with a supernatural being, or one raised above the powers of earth. She is lost to you for this world."

"Neither can I find the blessed White Christ," said Thiodolf, and bent his head in deep sadness.

At that moment the trumpets of the Væringers' troop sounded from the fortress, for the sentinels had perceived from afar the approach of their noblest chief, and he was now received with this warlike salute. Joyfully as an awakened eagle the younger leader looked around; and as they entered, by a high arched door, the largest court of the building, where the squadrons stood drawn up in their full splendid armor, clashing their shields and lowering their spears, Bertram said softly to Thiodolf, "Is it not true that there is a glorious consolation in this, and what is more, a glorious promise?"

"Yes," answered the young Væringers' chief, with kindling eyes; "yes, friend; renown is a divine gift of the Almighty father; and the man whom she crowns with her inspiring curls will win, if he but remain true and upright, all that is highest and most blessed both on this side of the Hænen-stone and beyond it."

Thiodolf was yet standing in the midst of his assembled troops, when Michael Androgenes came as a messenger from the emperor, and desired to speak alone with the chief. They went up together to Thiodolf's apartment, the same which old Helmfrið had inhabited. As they now entered the four gray walls from which, instead of other ornament, old armor looked down, Thiodolf hung up the gold shield on the same nail where he had so often seen the old hero hang it. A sorrowful longing awoke in the young leader's breast, but he commanded himself in the presence of the chamberlain so as to shed no tears, as he would else fain have done at such a moment.—Feeling his dignity as successor to the old Helmfrið, he sat down, made a sign to the messenger to take a seat opposite to him, and said:

"Pray heaven, Sir Chamberlain, that you bring me some great and glorious message. At this moment my mind is full of solemn thoughts."

"Yes, my noble lord," answered Androgenes, "the message I bring is indeed great; it is the greatest that can be sent to any hero in the land of Greece from the emperor. I offer you, in his name, the succession to the throne, and the hand of the Princess Zoe."

Thiodolf's armor rattled as he sprang up, and immediately sank back again in his seat like one who, starting from the pain of a sudden wound, forthwith feels the exhaustion of death.

"Let me speak on," said Michael. "It is natural that your arms should involuntarily stretch forth with fiery impatience to reach such a prize, as if you could already seize it; but various conditions interpose. The emperor, since he came to the throne, has cherished the thought of choosing a successor in the husband of the Princess Zoe, had the lady's inclination honored one of the brave and thoughtful men who have shown themselves in the capital. I am permitted to inform you that you are the first happy man on whom those illustrious eyes have rested—perhaps even before the last expedition. And now your mighty renown in war, and the ever more courtly manners which show themselves in your whole demeanor, have removed whatever obstacles might have opposed themselves; and the emperor merely desires that, to gratify the people, you should change your name into one of Greek sound."

"As Thiodolf I have conquered for this people," interrupted the Væringers' leader, "as Thiodolf I will live and die."

"Your name," continued Androgenes, "bears in Icelandic tongue the meaning of 'helper of the people.' You shall be called in Greek 'Laomedon,' which is but a translation. At the same time, it may, perhaps, be allowed you to retain with it your northern name."

"Ah, that indeed is not the greatest difficulty," said Thiodolf, with a sigh.

"Certainly not," replied the chamberlain.—"The emperor naturally requires, before all things, that you enter the pale of the holy Catholic Church. And then the noble Icelandic Laomedon becomes the bridegroom of Zoe, and the declared heir of the Greek empire."

"Father of all!" cried Thiodolf, "is any new attraction needed to take me to the White Christ?—I have so long sought him with a longing heart, and could well nigh weep at not finding him."

"That is what our great emperor well understands," said Androgenes. "He knows also, that he whom you call the White Christ calls to him every one who, like you, seeks him with the whole heart. Therefore, only pledge your word that you will at all times be true and faithful to the emperor, and a loving husband to the princess Zoe, and hereafter a benevolent ruler of this realm, and I greet you at once, in the emperor's name, as Laomedon, the heir of the throne; and this very evening you shall be presented to the princess Zoe as her bridegroom. The public declaration shall take place as soon as the rays of the true religion have sufficiently enlightened you to make you meet for holy baptism."

Plunged in deep thought, without sound or motion, Thiodolf remained in old Helmfrið's seat. Only at times some rings of armor shook, bearing witness to the mighty conflict which the young hero was inwardly waging. Strange images passed before him. His father Asmundur, and with him all the ancestors of his race, together with the beckoning, misty figure of their forefather Odin, all came by; and it was as if their quenched eyes sparkled with youthful brightness in the reflection of the Greek crown which was suspended over the brow of their great descendant. Then, blooming in all her endless loveliness, the young Zoe arose from a bed of roses, and the cloudy train of the old heroes caught a gleam of this earthly light; she held in her fair hands, with bashful grace, a floating wreath of flowers, which she waved to and fro as if in sport, then wove it in the imperial crown that was descending on his brows, and stretched out flowers chaplets towards the young hero. Then there sounded from afar a voice of mourning: "Isolde is lost for thee—lost for this life irretrievably! Deluded hero, why dost thou yet hesitate!—Wreaths of love and crowns are sweeping past here!"

Thiodolf pressed tightly his mailed hands upon his bosom, that none of the links of his breast-plate might burst asunder. He turned his eyes, and suddenly the golden shield sparkled before him, and it was as if old Helmfrið's image looked down from it, as when he spoke, even in death, of the Norwegian king's daughter; and Thiodolf saw, too, the old fortress on the sea shore, where the weary maiden sang to the moon, and where her heart broke in the same instant that her gray-haired love bled to death from the wounds of the Bulgarian lances.

"That is the right northern love," exclaimed Thiodolf aloud; "and he who would tempt me

by other visions must be he whom Christians call the devil. May he be now and ever rejected by me. Good, Sir Chamberlain," he continued, turning to Michael, with a calm, firm voice, "I lay myself at the emperor's feet with all that I am and all that I possess. He has offered me far more of honor and splendor than I ever can deserve. But I dare not reach out my hand to it, for in my heart I am a betrothed man."

"It is an emperor's daughter, the heiress of a throne, who will vouchsafe you her hand. All other engagements must give way to this."

"I have learned much in your land of Greece," said Thiodolf gently, "but not so much as that, nor shall I ever learn it. Have the goodness to give my answer to the emperor. The business is ended."

Michael turned to the door with a proud, solemn bow; but there he stopped, looked back earnestly with a suddenly awakened emotion, and said at length, "O my glorious chief! whom I have to thank for the preservation of my honor—and for more, even for my courage itself—for since you forced me into the combat, I have become another, a bolder, and a better man—O my heroic prince! trust to me, and let me carry to the emperor a different message, or your message in different words; these would be your destruction."

"I rejoice over you, dear Androgenes," said Thiodolf. "You are become, I feel it truly, a worthy knight. But your accustomed clear-sightedness, I think, has now forsaken you.—Why should this message be my destruction?"

"The emperor lives in his daughters," answered the Chamberlain. "When they are concerned, that moderation and gentle justice which you well know belong to him, vanish. And when at length a bright star seems to rise on a fading, joyless existence, such as the princess Zoe's, and then dives again into the distant sea, as if in scornful sport—"

"What are you saying?" asked Thiodolf, with surprise. "A fading, joyless existence!—she, the hardly unfolded rose-bud, the blooming Zoe?"

"Who speaks of her?" answered Michael.—"The daughter of the emperor, the elder Zoe."

"So?" said Thiodolf, and leaned quickly back in his seat. "Much noise about nothing! Why did you not say that to me at once? Friend Michael, you must learn that the 'no' would have come a good deal sooner and more readily from my lips. But I am grateful for the honor done me by the noble lady, and, of course, my answer remains the same. It would be so for the women in the world except one only, and that only one—I need not speak of it further.—God be with you, Sir Chamberlain; do my bidding properly."

"Let me only say," answered Michael, "that you are still too far from Christianity, or?"

"Not a syllable that is untrue," interrupted Thiodolf sternly. "I have you good morning, Androgenes. As I said, I have to-day much rejoiced over you, and I think that on the whole you may be satisfied with me."

At the same time he courteously accompanied him to the gate of the Væringers' fortress, and then ordered his wild young horse to be brought to him, and joyously made him caracole hither and thither, as he exercised him in the riding-school of the castle.

CHAPTER LXVIII.

The horse was foaming and smoking; Thiodolf had it led away, then stretched himself at his ease beneath a tree, and said to Philip, who just then passed by, "Now, dear lover of horses," for thus he generally called him in his happiest and brightest hours—"do as if thou wert still my armor-bearer, thou renowned comrade. Take a lute and sing to me. I feel so exceedingly happy, and my heart is longing for the sounds of music."

Philip bowed with friendly earnestness, took up his beautiful lute, and sitting down in the shade by Thiodolf, sang somewhat as follows:

"Now joyful to the temple's gate,
With all the gorgeous pomp of state,
Achilles leads his lovely bride,
Loud the festal songs resound,
Graceful maidens whisper round,
And who is this? they say aside;
The far-famed Phrygian boy?
Or Achilles, scourge of Troy?
Where then the fear we had of late?"

"Saw we not Achilles fighting
In the distant battle-field?
The hero bold in death delighting,
Made the stoutest foes to yield;
Anger sparkled in his eye,
Death was e'er his company.
Now a softer glance
In his eye can dance,
And a gentler victory
Our hero doth achieve."

"Softly may other tongues declare
How in his soul fear first arose;
Fair Polyxena's gentle love
The hero's vanquished heart can move.
Sweet pride of maidens! blushes now
Light thy bright cheeks. But streamlets flow
From stripping's eyes bedewed with tears.
Mightier yet the prince appears:
Conquests must e'er his steps attend,
And we as conquered ever bend."