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THIODOLF THE ICELANDER.

BY BARON DE LA MOTTE FOUGER. CHAPTER LIV.

The forces of the Greeks and the Northmen again took the field; this time to press forward till the subdued foe should be forced, at length, to conclude a peace which would besecm the dignity of the Emperor, and insure the safety of his subjects.

Summer was far advanced when the troops for the first time rested from their toilsome, though, as yet, always victorious march, in a valley whose approaches on all sides were well watched by horse and foot-soldiers.

What dost thou want, thou madman? asked Thiodolf, in displeasure at having to exchange the name of Isold for the solitary knight, and preparing to lie down again to sleep; but he heard the voice of the old man unbarring, and involuntarily he looked into the uncovered face.

There was no time now to seek after the unearthly visitor; for as Thiodolf looked around, he saw the surrounding hills covered with figures, whose outlines against the clear, starry sky, showed them to be the enemy's troops.

Thiodolf remarked several times, with joy, among the swarms of foot soldiers which constituted almost the whole host of the enemy, a tall horseman, who flew to and fro, directing and calling, and who appeared to lead on the whole attack.

The young Bulgarian chief had long disappeared from his sight, when a loud cry of joy arose from the enemy in another part of the valley. Thiodolf paused, and considered whether he might not now take the troop which he had collected to a more decisive combat elsewhere.

Thou wilt not ask, dear reader, with what haste Thiodolf, so soon as he had learned the place of Helmfried's danger, rushed thither. If thou art a true soldier, or like-minded, thou canst judge of it for thyself.

Thiodolf brought help in the greatest need.—The old hero had planted his spear firm in the ground, and held to it as if to a sure anchor; while Wladimir spurred his horse, and pulled violently at the noose which he had thrown over the fallen man.

However beautiful the field of victory must always appear to the eyes of the combatants, the early sun shone this time on so much that was sad, that the cries of joy were almost smothered.

"A shameful manner of fighting!" muttered Thiodolf to himself, as he rode amongst the dead; I would not deal so with a bear, let alone an honorable warrior; and Wladimir, how canst thou hope to meet thy Wlata in the joy of victory, if thou hast nothing better to relate to her than hateful deeds like these?

In the midst of these thoughts and of arrangements for his troop, a soldier interrupted him with a message; the great Væringier prince lay near to death, and desired to speak to his beloved Thiodolf before he departed.

How hastily did the young hero fly over the field of victory; but starting tears darkened his way. It was only when he saw the chief of the army gathered round the fallen prince that he rode somewhat slower, wiped his tears, and soon, with grave composure, entered the circle.

In the midst lay the great Helmfried, stretched upon his golden shield, which was richly sprinkled with blood from his many wounds. Near him was the spear, driven into the ground, on which he had stayed himself against the swarms of Bulgarians, and which he even now grasped closely with the fever from his wound, or the wandering of mind before death, came upon him; on the other side knelt Philip, himself wounded and exhausted, but forgetting all that he might tend the old hero.

As Thiodolf approached, the Væringier prince raised his weary head, looked strongly around, as if fresh life had been given him, and said at length, fixing his eyes steadfastly on Thiodolf: "Let no man venture to bear the golden shield after me but he who won it back on the linden-hill in Norway. Dost thou hear, mine heir? I depend on thee!" Then he leaned back again in the deep slumber of death, and all stood around in silence.

Again he raised himself, looked at his beloved pupil, and said: "Thiodolf is the new chief of the Væringiers as soon as old Helmfried dies." He laid down once more, as if in a solemn dream. The Væringier captains lowered their arms before their appointed leader.

For the third and last time the dying hero lifted himself up, seized firmly Thiodolf's right hand, and cried out in a loud voice, "I leave my commission, as general of the imperial forces, with unlimited right to make peace or war, in the hands of this young prince and chief." And, sinking back on his golden shield, he drew down Thiodolf with him, and whispered in his ear— "My son, in this very moment the heart of the king's daughter on the sea-coast is breaking— She has long mourned for me in her watch-tower, since for her sake I lost the golden shield; now is ended her sorrow and mine!" A last pang, it seemed to be for the lost shield, contracted his features. Then his mighty limbs relaxed, and the noble corpse of the hero lay peacefully smiling.

Helmfried was buried in the sight of the whole host. It was a solemn and beautiful burial, and many eyes dropped tears. When the dead prince had been lowered into the open grave, Thiodolf went down also, kissed his brow and hand, and said:

"As it is thy will, dear master, I take from thee thy golden shield, and I swear never to cleanse it from thy blood and that of thy foes, until he who so treacherously overpowered thee is in my power either alive or dead."

Then he came back into the light of day, with

the bloody shield in his arm; and the Væringiers greeted their young chief, clashing their weapons. Many of the captains who had heard the last words of Helmfried, joyfully proclaimed him as their leader; and as the Væringiers, after the northern custom, raised him on the golden shield, the whole army shouted and hailed him as their general.

CHAPTER LIV.

Those who had hoped to return to Constantinople at the approach of winter, were obliged to forego their hopes, now that Thiodolf was the leader of the host. Some had attempted, indeed, to speak to him on the subject, saying that the victories they had hitherto gained had been in no way doubtful, and that very much more than half the work was done; but Thiodolf had answered: "Half, or three-fourths, or as you may please to divide it—so long as the whole is not completed, I call it nothing; and the host whom I lead must also call it nothing. If any one wishes to complain to the Emperor, and to receive other orders, let him depart; I give him leave."

But it still less pleased the speakers to retrace alone the woods and plains which lay behind them, and they therefore preferred asserting that they were anxious to fight, and would remain with the main body.

It was easy to learn from the prisoners that the Greek army was drawing nearer and nearer to the lofty wide-extended building of wood, which was there called the Castle of Wladimir; for the Bulgarians still were confident that at this castle irretrievable destruction must fall upon their hated enemy. But not the less did Wladimir evidently strengthen all his defenses, to make vain any attempt upon them; while Thiodolf perceived that from this strong point all the rest of the country could be easily subdued, or, in case of resistance, laid waste. Philip, who was now quite cured of his wounds, brought him, besides, certain information of the immense store of provisions and arms heaped up in this fortress of Wladimir. So, amidst so many combats, the Greeks pressed on ever more daringly.

One day the fight was raging on the bank of a stream, whose passage was to be effected, notwithstanding the desperate resistance of the Bulgarians. It was a battle-field somewhat like that on which, two years before, Helmfried and Thiodolf had fought at the review in the Emperor's presence. Now, as then, Thiodolf remained quietly on a high, looking with his eagle glance on the points of attack, and sending his commands to the troops, now by his silver war-horn, now by Væringier horsemen.

"The troop to the right, led by Michael Androgenes, must go through the woody dell!" said he, at length; and a noble Væringier spurred his horse to fly over the field. But the troop did not move, and its commander himself returned with the messenger.

"How now, Sir Chamberlain?" cried out Thiodolf; "what want you with me? The enemy is yonder! I pray you make your way without delay through the dell; it will decide the fight."

But Michael Androgenes, turning somewhat pale, said that it could not be done. The dell was filled with Bulgarians, with their immense shields and gigantic outstretched lances.

"Sir Chamberlain," said Thiodolf, low, and stooping to Androgenes, "you must thank God for that, and go boldly against them; for you have never as yet had to fight man to man with the foe since the combat when the great Helmfried fell; the Væringiers who were about him whisper not the most favorable things of you."

Michael collected himself, and answered aloud: "Let him who doubts of me say so to my face. For the rest, I am not unaided for any cause to lead the Emperor's troops to sure destruction; and that I should do, did I take them through the dell."

"I will see it with my own eyes," answered Thiodolf; and he flew down the hill, Androgenes following him. Having reached a spot whence the dell could clearly be looked into, Thiodolf, after a pause, said, gently, "It can be done, Sir Chamberlain; you must force your passage as I commanded."

"Not I!" answered Androgenes, with cowardly insolence. "I am unanswerable to the Emperor for my troop."

Then flashed in Thiodolf's eyes a trace of the old Berserker rage. He grasped Michael's hand so tightly that his gauntlet pressed it as between iron clamps, and led him thus, without power of escape, before the troops. Then he said in his ear: "How dost thou speak when, at Constantinople, the women and children weep in the narrow pass? Didst not thou say 'Forwards!' and 'Victory before all!' Now, dost thou, in duty to be before all, and yet thou dost not instantly cry 'Forwards!' Thou miserable chamberlain, I will ride thee down as I did them, and bring all thy own horse-hoofs over thee!"

"Let me alone be leader!" said Androgenes in great agony. "My honor is lost, if, after my

hesitation, you place yourself in my stead, at the head of my troop."

"Spoken like a valiant knight!" said Thiodolf, so loud that the whole troop could hear; then he rode aside, and Michael rushed into the dell."

The Greek riders victoriously cut their way through; and such of the enemy as were on their side of the stream, almost crushed by the onset, hastily repassed the water, and left free two bridges, over which Thiodolf immediately led some fresh squadrons, and carried on the combat upon the opposite bank. Victory was soon decided, and the pursuers already saw the strangely shaped turrets of Wladimir's castle rising above a pine-forest. But in this forest the enemy had taken up its final position. The skirmishing ceased; and it was easy to see that here would take place the last, but also the most desperate and dangerous combat.

Thiodolf had called together the chiefs of the army, in order to decide to whom amongst them belonged the honor of victory. Their opinions quickly agreed; for every one had seen the decisive attack of the chamberlain, Michael Androgenes, and no one had heard the previous parley between him and Thiodolf. Even the Væringiers pressed around him, and sought to atone, by their words of praise and friendship, for the injustice which they had done him by their mistaken opinion. According to the general wish, the chief called the chamberlain to him, and hung around his neck the badge of honor which the Emperor had given for distinguished warriors. As Michael bent to receive the prize, his cheeks glowed deep with shame; but Thiodolf whispered in his ear: "Be not ashamed, Androgenes; thou didst overcome thyself, and put honor before all; the rest is past and gone!" And, with loud voice, he added, "I give thee joy from my heart, my brave companion in arms!"

Philip, who had gone into the wood with some light-armed troops to discover the position of the enemy, now returned and related strange things. He had seen among the Bulgarians—who were striving to render the passage of the wood impracticable by felling trees and digging deep trenches—wonderful figures in the long, flowing garments of priests, but with heavy cuirass-girt about them, and wearing tall helmets on their heads, and such other armor as is represented on the monuments of the old Greeks—"It is," he concluded his relation, "as if our forefathers had in anger risen up against us; or rather, as if a wicked enchanter had called them forth, and conduced them in the hateful-herd of Bulgarians, having to them nothing of their old majesty save their armor."

The prisoners being questioned on the subject, answered: "Ye poor, lost Christians, these are our priests! They bear arms which have been dug out of the magic graves of the old world, and they come not so much to fight in their solemn armor, as to slaughter those already devoted to the gods of darkness, as is this, your hapless host!"

Then they began to jump and dance; but Thiodolf said: "I have never yet found in my poor heart who is the highest God; but thus much I certainly know, that He does not thus reveal Himself. So let us on against these hideous jugglers! When we have destroyed what is false, it may perchance be vouchsafed us to discover what is true."

He commanded the war-trumpets to be sounded, and, in the dewy freshness of an autumn morning, the army advanced towards the fearful shades of the pine-forest. Each division was well instructed what was to do, and what trumpet-signal to heed, that the movements of the whole army might be regulated by the will of the leader. The foot-soldiers had to make a way through the entangled thicket before the horsemen could enter it; there were even places where they were obliged to dismount before they could advance. Then their horses, who had learned obedience to their riders, by careful training and nurture, as in the Væringier troop, followed them well of their own accord; but the others rushed back in fright out of the forest, where arms were clashing, and war-cries resounding, and turned their riders into foot-soldiers. Thiodolf himself had already forced his way over many barricades and entrenchments on foot, at the head of his Væringiers; for here the alternative was to advance or to perish, and the leader's eye had no power to pierce through the deepening labyrinth; it was but from the sounds of the trumpets, and from the voices of the chiefs and captains, that he could understand what was happening in this place or in that, and send his orders accordingly. Philip kept close to his side with the three horses, and the faithful Arab horse leaped after him unwearyingly.

Soon the light falcon-spear had flown from Thiodolf's hand, and overthrown in his blood a Bulgarian soldier, who was evidently hastening with a message to the other wing of his army. The confusion which followed showed plainly

how important his fall had been; and with a cry of victory the Greeks pressed onwards.

Then something like golden armor shone among the leaves; and suddenly, rising out of a hollow, appeared the band of priests in their old Greek armor, singing horrible hymns, and terrifying man and horse. The most fearful of them all drew close to Thiodolf. Beneath his splendid helmet appeared a face distorted with rage, which contrasted so hideously with the graceful shape of his armor, that the young soldier could not but shudder. Then the heathen priest said, as he swung a great sacrificial knife— "Stand quiet, boy, here is the chief-spirit!— Stand quiet—thou art doomed! Have pity on me, for it will not hurt thee!"

And he had almost placed the frightful knife beneath the eyes of his enemy—for in such a word seemed a paralyzing magic power in his words—when Thiodolf at the right moment discovered himself, and springing back, caught the heathen-spear out of Philip's hand, and drove it to the heart of the hideous face. It broke through shield and breast-plate, and the heathen sank to the ground, howling in the agony of death; and howling fled his companions through the wood. Then was it as if the sun shone brighter, and gleamed more joyously through the trees. Thiodolf took the king-spear out of the hand of his armor-bearer, saying, "See, Philip, now I have taken this royal weapon, may it not be that it is intended for Wladimir, to avenge the death of our noble Væringier prince?"

But it happened otherwise than he had thought. For suddenly a wild tumult arose near him in the thicket; some Bulgarians, with loud rejoicings, were dragging away, by the help of many oxen, a rider and his horse, who had both been caught in their noose. Philip cried out, "By the gods, they have taken the old silent knight!" "Not so they even take ghosts!" muttered Thiodolf to himself; but at the same time he raised the king-spear against the leader of the wild band with such force, that the point, passing through his neck, entered the arm of the man nearest to him, and threw them both to the ground. As the rope fell out of their hands, the cunning knot became unfastened, and the dark horse sprang up, stamping furiously; the old knight, indeed, had not power to rise, but his sword was vigorously swung around, and it struck the two nearest foes. At the same time Thiodolf and Philip sprang joyfully to the fight; and hardly had Thiodolf pierced a few times tiller and thigh, when the wild troop were scattered.

This fell raised the old man, dreading lest perchance he was raising the dry bones of a ghostly corpse beneath its noose. Philip, the while, endeavored to draw the king-spear out of the wounds of the two fallen men; but sorrowfully turning to his chief, he said, "Ah, master, the noble weapon is broken by the shock of the fall of these two enemies."

"Oh!" said Thiodolf, sighing, "and the great Helmfried gave it me for the most glorious deed of my warrior life, and Wladimir lives, and is free!"

"Fool!" muttered the old man from behind his visor, while he again mounted his horse—"Fool! and dost thou then know what is the most glorious deed of thy life?"

So saying, he spurred on his horse to a more open part of the wood, suddenly disappearing from the eyes of the astonished chief and his armor-bearer.

"What have we to do now with bowldering thoughts?" cried Thiodolf, and sprang on his horse; for in this place the forest was less overgrown, and a gentle hill appeared to lead up to the castle of Wladimir. He flew up it, sounding his horn. Every one whose horse had followed rushed up after him; and so, at the end of the wood, he quickly drew up in order a troop of horse, stretching out so as to cover the dismounted and the foot soldiers, who in scattered detachments they issued from the wood. Philip, whose faithful chestnut horse had not left him, was sent to hasten the ordering of the troops; for the Bulgarians were lying over the plain, and Thiodolf dared to hope that by a rapid attack of the foot-soldiers the taking of Wladimir's castle might at once be effected.

Caste before him lay the strange building, in the midst of many outworks and entrenchments. Unconquered towers, with oddly-shaped roofs, rose up heaped together on one side like so many adjoining houses; on the other side were none.—With the same caprice, bright colors were streaked over walls and battlements, and colored flags floated now from loop-holes, now from roofs.

"I prefer the house where Uncle Neñoff and I dwell in Iceland," said Thiodolf; "for it looks as if earnest men of one mind had built it, and that they knew what they liked."

A Bulgarian rider sprang forth from a distant part of the wood and galloped towards the castle; but he stopped when he saw the troop of horsemen, and drew near to them, crying out, "Art thou not the great Thiodolf, thou yonder with the golden helmet, and the silver war-trumpet?"