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THIODOLF THE ICELANDER.

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CHAPTER LI.

The noble band of riders passed in silence through the burnt ruins of desolated villages, till they reached a barren hilly ridge skirting a foaming stream, whose noise broke the stillness of the night, and, like a good ally, drowned the sound of horses' hoofs and of armor. As Thiodolf rode on in darkness, it bethought him how his whole life was not unlike this adventure—a going forth in darkness on unknown ways, after concealed objects which strove to escape his jealous search.

"The enemy here," he said softly to himself, "I may truly now grasp; but those holy, longed-for images, the White Christ and Isolde, I may never reach them."

Deep, heavy grief came over him, such as oftentimes filled his whole heart, and drops fell from his eyes, as formerly on the African shore, just before his combat with the lion.

An unexpected circumstance now broke in upon these thoughts. An armed knight came riding down a neighboring hillock so rapidly that the horse slipped and fell on its knees close beside Thiodolf; but the rider silently raised it again by his great strength and dexterity, and then rode on quietly near the chief, as if he belonged to the troop. His whole armor proved that he was a soldier of the emperor's; but how he came to join this expedition, Thiodolf knew not. He was yet more surprised at the stranger, as they rode together, appearing almost as lofty of stature as himself, for he seldom met with any so tall, especially in these southern regions.

He was about to question him, when Philip rode up on the other side, and whispered in his ear, "That is the strange horseman, dear master, from whose dreamy words I planned this expedition. He often rides about the country by night on his dark horse; and it may be that his wonderful gift of divining has made known our march to him. But I pray you, speak not to him; let him go on undisturbed with his vizor down; you might else scare him away, and then we should lose a brave and powerful arm out of our band."

Thiodolf did as the youth desired; at times he felt as if a spirit were riding near him, so strange was the awe that seemed to come over him from the gloomy iron-clad figure beside him.

It might have been about midnight when, on reaching the summit of a hill, the Væringers suddenly perceived on the plain below the almost endless watch-fires of the Bulgarians. The Christian troops had surrounded them, the rocky valley lay behind, and all that now remained was to choose the most favorable and decisive spot for assault. But this was difficult in the dark, cloudy night, which made the watch-fires on the plain appear like a confused labyrinth of lights. Thiodolf paused at the head of his troops to reflect; the silent stranger was beside him, but a noble pride withheld him from asking the unknown what he would fain have heard from him; for he would as little owe his victory to one who used unlawful arts as to one of an overweening pride.

He had almost decided to press on towards the fires where they were the thickest, feeling sure that the confusion of the surprise would be most fearful in the very midst of the countless multitudes; then shone out over the dark woods the blood-red disc of the moon, and Thiodolf greeted her with out-stretched hands. How often in Iceland had his young heart burned with hopes of future joy at the sight of this heavenly shield, and now it shone upon him at the right moment, as a solemn messenger of victory.

The glorious disc rose and rose, and the whole plain soon shone bright in her clear radiance.—Then Thiodolf seized with his quick glance the right place for the attack; and his Arab steed neighed loudly, rejoicing at the level path and the approaching victory. The echoes caught up the sound and carried it like the tones of many trumpets, over the sleeping Bulgarians; many of their soldiers started up at it, and saw by the moonlight the tall forms of the knights on the near hill.

"Forward, brothers!" cried Thiodolf,—"Thanks be to the gods, the enemy has awakened, and offers us thus a more glorious fight. Forward!"

The troops rushed down the hill, giving out the newly-learned war-cry, "Zoe!" How did the fiery Philip rejoice as he almost out-stripped his captain. But at the words, "Gently, my shield-bearer; we are not riding a race, but dashing with all the strength of our horses against the enemy," he at once checked the course of his war-horse. It was only when Thiodolf first let fly the falcon-lance against the approaching enemy, and then, spurring on his horse, and swinging Throng-piercer high above his head, flew with full speed against the Bulgarians, protected by their gigantic shields, that the Væringers rushed on like lightning, and Philip dared to take in the full joy of war which glowed in his brave young heart.

The war-cry of the barbarians sounded wildly forth from all parts of their camp, and the awakened troops pressed on all sides to the fight.—They deemed that their assailants were a party who had lost their way, and meant now in despair to force a passage; and they doubted not soon to overwhelm them by numbers. At every onset of the riders they placed their immense shields on the ground, knelt down behind them, and let fly a thick shower of arrows at the Væringers. When these had made their way through the darts, they found opposed to them a row of clubs hardened by fire and pointed, which the Bulgarians had rapidly and with great dexterity and regularity planted in the ground; and then they had to beat down long pikes which they had never seen used in former encounters, before they could get into the ranks of the enemy. The worst of all was, that the noble horses were scared by the howling, and whistling, and shrieking, which the Bulgarians kept up with a horrible facility, and also by the hideous forms which often suddenly started up behind the shields, and as suddenly dived down again with a hoarse laugh. But still the courage and military skill of the Væringers gained more and more the advantage, and more and more joyfully resounded the cry-cry of "Zoe!" far over the dark battle-field.

The Bulgarian troops began in many places to give way; attempting again their usual fashion of fighting, as they now plainly saw that they had to do not with bewildered stragglers, but with well-armed and well-disciplined soldiers. But what they themselves had prepared as means of defence, immense barricades, deep and straight-drawn trenches and dykes, all now turned to their own destruction; for as the front of their camp was thus defended, and the Væringers had attacked the rear, they were hemmed in, and could not disperse themselves in endless swarms after their usual wild fashion of making-war.—So, against their will, the combat continued to be of man to man. A hillock, which shone in the moonlight, offered a clear view over all the field, and Thiodolf sprang up it, that he might observe the combat the keener and the more readily learn how to decide it. But when he stood on high in his brightness and majesty, several of the Bulgarian chiefs observed him; and feeling sure that if he were overthrown, the best strength of their enemy would fall with him, they led troops up the hill from three different sides. Thiodolf, gazing at the distance, did not notice the secret attack that was about to be made, when suddenly all around him appeared the points of mighty spears, and he was surrounded by a wall of immense shields. In joyful anger he rushed upon the foe; but the circle closed more thickly around him; his noble Arab horse, touched by several spears, reared up wildly, and a blow on his breast-plate threw him, together with his rider, heavily to the ground. Thiodolf seemed lost, for his horse had entangled itself in its fall with stirrup leathers and bridle, and it could not rise up again. Still the Bulgarians hesitated to make themselves masters of him; none dared to approach the noble, struggling horse, and the mighty sword Throng-piercer (which the hero's arm, in his golden armor, still brandished) glanced in the moonlight. All at once three heavy blows were heard, and thrice a soldier, mortally wounded, groaned as he fell in his blood. The Bulgarians looked round in surprise. Then appeared alone, without giving battle-cry, the tall old knight, dealing blows around from his black horse, and wherever he struck a death-rattle was heard. The terrified Bulgarians gave way before him, crying out that the spirit of his race had come in ghostly form to succor the young hero. The old knight, without giving farther heed to them, helped up the Væringier chief, and as the noble Arab was only slightly wounded, both riders were soon again on their horses.—Thiodolf stretched out his hand to his deliverer, and said some kindly words to him; but he raised his right hand towards heaven with a threatening gesture, turned away, and went forthwith, as if in deep displeasure, out of the battle-field. His aid, indeed, was no longer wanted. Already the Bulgarians gave way on all sides; and when Thiodolf again appeared at the head of his troops, a few rapid, joyous assaults drove the shrieking enemy to irrecoverable flight.

The fight was fought; by the light of the rising sun a gentler, softer duty began, that of seeking out and freeing the prisoners whom the Bulgarians had taken, and whom, hitherto, they had carried on with them whenever they retreated. But this time it was impossible; for the few who escaped had with difficulty forced a way for themselves between morasses and trenches, and barricades on one side, and on the other the Greeks now approaching under Helmfrid's command. When Thiodolf had dispatched his fiery Philip as a messenger of victory to the Væringier prince, he went diligently through the camp to console and refresh the liberated prisoners.—As he approached a large tent, he heard from it the sweet sounds of a lute, which, in some un-

placable manner, reminded him of the past. The soft strains in the midst of the wild field of battle attracted him with double force, and throwing back the hangings of the tent, he perceived a man clothed, indeed, after the Bulgarian fashion, but in a very choice and delicate garment. Before him, on costly silken cushions, lay a child which he seemed anxious to lull to sleep by his lute. He looked up at the entrance of the warrior; and Thiodolf forthwith recognized the minstrel Romanus, whose songs had once so strangely moved him in the palace-gardens of Constantinople.

"Welcome, my noble northern hero," said Romanus kindly. "I knew well that you were amongst the troops who stormed this camp, yea, even that you were leading them on; but you had never thought to find me in the midst of the Bulgarians?"

"No, truly," answered Thiodolf; "least of all in this luxury and splendor, and tending a child. Is it a Bulgarian child?"

"No, noble Sir," said Romanus; "I may almost call the boy my own child, so wonderfully has Heaven given him to me. But let me put the little screecher to rest; it is now more than a year since I have carried him about with me, and he is accustomed to be lulled to sleep by the sounds of my lute. Allow me afterwards to go on conversing with music, then he will not disturb us. But enough of that."

He drew from the lute soft, touching notes, till it almost seemed that a nightingale trilled, while he sang as follows:

"Where'er the minstrel wanders,
Where'er his path is found,
The privilege of genius
Doth compass him around;
At the banquet of the monarch
He is seated at the board,
He is sheltered from the tempest,
He is shielded from the sword.

So when these lawless plunderers
Poured down upon the land,
And captive made our freemen,
I was taken by their hand;
But my harp was on my shoulder,
The hand they did not raise,
And instead of captive fetters,
They loaded me with praise.

Amid those wild wild barbarians,
I learned a gentle song
Which, though rude strife encompassed it,
Rose sweet that strife among;
Sir Knight, affection's precious links
Are fast about these words—
Then will thy heart the reader open
To a tale of faithful love.

Beyond the Ister's azure stream,
In that fair, fertile land
Where Nature pours her riches forth
Unwooded by tiller's hand,
A gentle pair were seen to stray;
Gathering the rich, wild fruit;
Prince Vladimir, the young and brave,
And Wlasta, fair, but mute.

Yet though no accents from her lips
The lover's ears could reach,
Her silent gestures spoke a tongue
More eloquent than speech.
Her eye was language—born from its ray
The wicked fled with fear;
'Twas said that had she spoken, too,
Earth had not known her peer.

Now so it happened on a time,
That from the southern east
A pestilential blast arose,
That slew both man and beast,
Ill-omened birds obscured the air,
And hovered o'er the sea;
And from the temple spake the priest,
This terrible decree:

'Naught can appease the angry gods,
Naught for your sins atone,
Till Wlasta be recalled from earth—
Their lovely, silent loan,
She must be consecrate to heaven:
At your approaching feast,
Become a priestess of the gods,
And marry our high priest.

She yielded to be sacrificed,
But marriage would she none;
With chaplets crowned, the hand of priests
Wait near the bloody stone;
The sacrificial knife was raised—
When, through the idol-grove,
Bold Vladimir with all his troops,
Rushed to preserve his love.

The priests and their attendants fall,
Drowned in a purple flood;
The war-cry sounds, bright weapons clash—
The altar swims in blood.
'Bear her away,' the prince exclaims,
'Till this wild strife be o'er;
And quickly borne to sunny fields,
Safety is hers once more.

But soon she signs to those around
To stay their hasty flight;
She weeps because her own beloved
Still lingers in the fight.
And unperceived, she steals away
And backward tracks her path,
'To yield her up, and save her love
From his wild people's wrath.

Whether she strayed was never known;
They waited all in vain;
They sought her, but they could not find;
She ne'er came back again.
Prince Vladimir all bleeding rode
To seek his castle hall;
No Wlasta to the castle came;
Its courts were empty.

The priests and people said the gods
Had taken her from earth;
But Vladimir sat down in wrath
Before his silent heart.
In vain they summoned to the field
The champion of the land;
He will not hear, but sits and mourns,
His head upon his hand.

And, hero, when I call his form
Before thy mental eye,
Dost thou not feel what pierced his heart,
And made the mourner sigh?
'Zoe!' thy warriors shouted forth—
We heard the well-known cry;
Then knew I Thiodolf led the van,
And led to victory!"

Thiodolf arose in displeasure, and was about to call the minstrel to account for the bold ending of his song. But Philip sprang into the tent with Helmfrid's good wishes to the victor, and with the information that a war-council was now assembling to deliberate on the advantage to be taken of the victory, and that Thiodolf must at once join it. Romanus wrapped the child in some rich coverings, and went out with a farewell smile. Thiodolf sprang on his horse, and urged it like lightning to the appointed spot.

CHAPTER LII.

The chiefs were assembled to take counsel in the midst of many tokens of victory—hideous idols fastened to long lances to form standards, uncouth arms, and splendid coverings and robes of the skins of strange beasts, and instruments for their heathen sacrifices. As Thiodolf rode into the circle, all involuntarily bowed before him, and the great Helmfrid gave his hand to him as to a brother. But Thiodolf made a sign to Philip to draw near, and related how he had taken the first idea of the victory from the dreaming words of the brave, but to all appearance crazed, old knight; and then had worked it out so wisely and clearly, that the execution of it had been nothing more than the ordinary action of a chief. Helmfrid embraced the brave young shield-bearer, and in the emperor's name hung round him a golden chain; but he knew why Philip still held back from the gift spurs, and he silently honored his noble self-denial.

The deliberations, which had been interrupted by the arrival of Thiodolf, now went on. Many of the leaders were of opinion that nothing better could be done, now that the season was far advanced, than to take the way back to Constantinople. The enemy, by this defeat, were now for many months as good as destroyed, dread of the imperial arms had again been roused, and tokens of victory were not wanting to enhance the greatness of the sovereign on their return to the city, and to afford to the people rejoicing and comfort in rich abundance. The principal speaker in favor of this proposal was Michael Androgene, who, by his courage and skillful behaviour during the short combat of the main body of the army, had won the attention and respect of many of the chiefs.

Helmfrid, the great Væringier prince, and commander of the whole army, had listened silently to the speeches for and against. It was easy to see that his warlike spirit was not by any means satisfied with what had been achieved in this expedition, and yet many of the reasons of those who wished to return seemed to weigh much with him.

Then Thiodolf opened his lips with the following speech: "Now wherefore did we go forth under this noble prince, ye brave Greeks and Northmen! Was it to gain peace to the city for two or three months, at most for a year?—And shall the townspeople and the peasants, who, confiding in our victory, have returned to their dwellings—shall they, after a short truce, again be plundered by a fresh inroad of barbarians, or be snatched away to an eternal slavery? Ye lords, assuredly our great emperor did not send forth this mighty host for so poor a purpose.—Bethink you well what ye are doing. If the Bulgarians again fall on this land, the curse of many a poor oppressed and ruined man will rise up to heaven, and thence come down heavily on your head—yea, perchance on a higher head—and all through your guilt. No, let it not be so. Rather let us boldly go forward, following the enemy into forests, over streams, and up his barren hills; and there, seizing the evil by its roots, tear it out, as beseeems brave defenders of their country. I tell you, that merely to keep foes from the frontiers is difficult and almost impossible, unless where the sea guards them round protectively, as our dear Iceland. Else when bad neighbors dwell on the other side, we must vigorously follow them till they are glad if we will give them rest; for so long as we must ask whether they will accept it, your peace is a miserable thing. Onwards then, dear brothers, and turn not back when old Winter draws near, for he is never so unkind as he seems at first sight. I know him by good and steady experience."

"The young hero has spoken well," said Helmfrid, and the eyes of the vigorous old man sparkled as the glow of Hecla. "In God's name, my comrades, let us face winter and the wastes!" They who return afterwards shall have as victors

a triumphant entry into Constantinople; they whose bodies lie yonder shall have a victor's entry into heaven."

He looked around, as if to ask if any one had aught to reply; many eyes flashed like his own, and where a sad heart kept down the noble fire, shame and sense of honor at least prevented all opposition. The chiefs and captains rode rapidly back to their troops with orders to advance.

The daring march began. How it was conducted without heed to the lateness of the season, and often in spite of it, and how at length the astonished enemy was driven far beyond the Ister deep into his own deserts, after many victorious combats more or less severe, all this the writer of our tale need not describe. For the his thoughts ever willingly dwell on warlike deeds, and he endeavors to increase the number of the few combats in which he has shared by seeking out and examining others, yet that which he here has to relate takes him quickly over the details of the war, and obliges him to speak only of what concerns our northern hero and those dear to him.

Thiodolf's skill as commander, which manifested itself ever more boldly and more brightly during this last expedition, had drawn upon him the eyes of the whole army. Next to Helmfrid he was the most brilliant star amongst the leaders, and the great Væringier prince seemed himself again to grow young in the beams of this light, so precious to him. A joyous youthful spirit streamed forth over all the troops, and perhaps there was but one man who remained uncheered by it, and went on his troubled way cold as the ice-lakes of the Ister; it was the old knight with his vizor always down, and who now was hardly ever heard to speak, even in his dreams. When Helmfrid would have thanked him for the surprise of the enemy and the deliverance of Thiodolf, nothing followeth but the usual threatening gesture, and the strange old man immediately saddled his horse and left the army for several days. But in the next combat he appeared once more valiantly fighting; so that henceforth no man ventured again to scare him away by addressing him.

For many weeks the army had encamped in huts, some of them the forsaken dwellings of the Bulgarians, and others made of the trees of the wide-spreading and untouched forests; the troops had thus rest during the severest cold, and time was gained to spy out the line of march they were about to take, for it was intended shortly to strike a decisive blow. The leisure of this pause allowed Philip to become the eager and zealous teacher of Thiodolf in polished language and manners. Whenever Thiodolf in the slightest degree went against the Greek fashion, either in words or gestures, his trusty shield-bearer made him observe his fault with the most courteous delicacy, so that the chief took pleasure in the correction, and would often make faults a purpose to provoke the youth's reprimand. Such teaching had also the best effect on Thiodolf's manners, especially as Philip did not give up the right he had once assumed, and used it without fearing reproach so long as the expedition lasted. And when Thiodolf would sometimes ask him, with a smile, "Tell me, boy, why dost thou think to mold me to a well-spoken, courtly knight?" Philip would answer with a half-jesting, half-sorrowful smile, "Ah! master, when we return victorious to Constantinople, it will become to you, without the need of a poor boy like me to open his mouth about it. Shall not the foremost, who is destined to win the highest prize, be the foremost in all things? O! I would fain adorn you like some consecrated image in the holiest and most beautiful festival!"

But as bright tears often stood in Philip's eyes after similar speeches, Thiodolf, after a time, gave up all such questionings.

Before this camp was broken up, it was noticed with general astonishment that the hitherto timid Bulgarians suddenly made attacks with a boldness and a confidence such as neither Helmfrid nor any other Greek warrior could remember to have seen before in them. They daily swarmed round the camp, and often pressed in compact bodies about the cabins, giving forth cries which sounded like shouts of victory and of contempt for an enemy now hopelessly lost. The less brave in the Greek camp began to lose their relish for the war, and even the more courageous looked anxiously after ambushes which might, perchance, render the retreat into the Greek dominions impossible. Helmfrid, Thiodolf, and others like them, answered with a smile to these fears: "At the very worst, we shall fight our way through; but these hordes shall not escape a further inroad into their country.—We have not yet got at the root of the evil!"

Notwithstanding, pale faces became more common in the camp. At length Philip said, "The riddle can soon be read; I will take prisoner one of their chiefs, and he will quickly confess."—Therewith he sprang forth on his light chestnut horse, a few chosen youths with him.