

THE PRIVY-COUNCILLOR.

NO. II.

(Continued from last.)

Some time after, there stood before the royal castle of Copenhagen a crowd of respectable people, who waited to see their king, Christian the Fourth, ride out. His beautiful white horse stood already at the gate, held by the brave squire and farrier, Gotthilf; who, since he had cured the noble animal, would give up the care of him to no one. The king rode almost every day at this hour, about ten in the morning; but he was so much beloved that it seldom failed that many persons were assembled, who gladly saw their knightly monarch spring on his horse, and with a kind greeting to his subjects, ride gaily forth to the fresh bracing sea-coast, or to hunt in the dark forests of the valleys.

And now king Christian passed from the castle-door in a simple but rich dress, and laid his hand on the saddle-bow in right knightly fashion. Just then he looked on the face of the brave farrier, and said, "What ails thee to-day, my good Gotthilf? thou seemest to me to be good moved."

Gotthilf answered—"Nought but good has happened to me, my royal master: I have just seen my old father, the woodman Klaus, standing there in the crowd, and I looked not to see him here. What brings him from his Schleswig woods I do not yet know; but, as he is ever in a good path, it can be only good that has brought him here."

"Call him hither," said the king; and, at a sign of his son, Klaus drew near.

Gotthilf hastened to tell his father not to greet him before he had done reverence to the king. But there was no need for his caution; it seemed as if in this moment Klaus saw in the whole world but one man—king Christian the Fourth of Denmark. With uncovered head he approached the king very reverently, and with a look and gesture full of trust and confidence. "God is with me," he said; "as I have been so quickly brought to my king, it will be granted me to speak to him those words which lie nearest my heart. It is very important, that which I have to say, my gracious king."

"Does it concern your brave son?" asked the prince. "One higher than he, sire."

"You, his father?"

"Higher yet, sire."

"Then it must be me, your ruler."

"Truly it does concern you; but yet I must say, one higher still, sire."

"O," said the king, smiling; "but you must know, woodman Klaus, that even if your message concern either the German emperor or the pope, I acknowledge neither of them to be above me."

"And I too acknowledge neither to be above me," answered Klaus; "for I am the subject of none other but your majesty. I am a free peasant; and you hold your kingdom from our Lord God alone. What have we to do with pope or emperor?"

"The king looked well pleased into the woodman's large blue eyes, and asked, "Are you in haste to deliver your message?"

"It may be that on every moment hangs something important for time and for eternity," answered Klaus very earnestly.

"Then said king Christian to the farrier, "Now, brave Gotthilf, take back your grey; truly, without your good aid he would not now be mine; take him back to the grooms. I shall not ride him to-day; your father must be attended to first."

He again saluted the crowd kindly, and then went back into the castle with the woodman at his side; whereas many wondering speeches passed between the attendants.

In his innermost apartment the king took his seat on a gilt arm-chair, whose cushions were covered with purple silk. Klaus stood before him reverently.

"How is this?" said the king; "you need rest far more than I do. I was about to ride out for my pleasure and wholesome exercise, but you have hardly ended a toilsome journey. Draw a seat near here, and sit down."

"Sire," said the woodman, "do not so lead your subject into temptation. It is true I have been brought up in villages and woods, but yet I know so much as this, that it would ill befitt me to sit down near my lord and master, as equal with equal, comrade with comrade. And had I not known it before, I should have learned it from your kindly presence. You are God's anointed, sire; endowed with a marvellous and heavily pressing power."

"Heavily pressing power!" repeated king Christian, as if to himself; "yes, yes, woodman Klaus, often have I felt that in my heart. You use words very full of thought, as is often the case with people who have grown up in healthful solitude. But you will not refuse, I trust, a cup of noble wine? I will have one brought to me likewise." He touched the little bell that lay beside him, and commanded the page who entered to bring two goblets of Rhenish wine for him and for his guest.

"Sire," said the woodman, as the page left the room, "although, truly, my richest drink at home is only of good strong ale, yet I believe a cup of noble Rhenish wine will bring me a blessing; especially when I think of the great honour granted me of drinking it in the presence of my sovereign lord. But, if it seems good to you, let me first speak out my errand, and then we may enjoy the rich drink together. When work is over, it is good to feast."

At this moment the page returned, bearing the richly gilt cup on a silver salver. He offered it to the king on bended knee. "Place it on the table by the window, my child," said king Christian, "and leave us."

As they were both alone again, there arose between them the following solemn discourse:—

"Now, good Klaus, what is thine errand with me?"

"Sire, they say in town and village that you mean to carry war into the country of the brave Ditmarsen, and that you have made your preparations already. My son, too, has written me a letter wherein he states that this is."

"People have spoken truly, and your son has written truly, friend Klaus. Have the Ditmarsen sent you to me?"

"No, sire: I do not know a man amongst them; but I know the Lord my God, and he has sent me with a message to you."

"By means of a vision?"

"Klaus, thy king must not go forth against the Ditmarsen."

"What has it to do with thy conscience, old man, whether I go against the Ditmarsen or not?"

"My conscience would have had much to do with it, had I let you go forth without warning you. Henceforth my conscience has nothing to do with it, since I have warned you, even should you now go against them."

"I see very well the cause of all this, woodman Klaus."

"I think you in no ways see it, sire."

"Hearken if I have not rightly guessed. You would gladly have your son at home again; and you look upon this expedition against the Ditmarsen with an evil eye, because the brave young man has promised me beforehand to follow me in the campaign. But we will make good terms together. Let me go out against the Ditmarsen without disquieting yourself about it; and I will let your son return with you at once to your home, well rewarded and high in my favour. Why do you shake your head? What is there which is not yet right?"

"Nothing is yet right, my honoured king. That may indeed be called making terms together, but not good terms; and on that good just depends every thing for time and for eternity."

"Well, then, propose some other articles of capitulation between us, friend Klaus; and a better one, if you can."

"To say truth, sire, I do not well know what I mean by articles of capitulation. But what I mean in my conscience is this:—It is now almost sixty years ago that many high and precious rights, which had before been granted to them, were by force of arms torn from the Ditmarsen by your royal predecessor. They defended themselves manfully as a free nation; for only on certain conditions had they in former times placed themselves under the protection of Denmark; and many drops of good blood were shed in the contest. And now is it to come to pass again that the few remaining rights you left them are to be violently torn from the Ditmarsen? May this be far from your thoughts, sire!"

"It is very near them—very near indeed, friend Klaus; but do not misunderstand me: I am only about to inflict suffering on the Ditmarsen in order to do them the more good afterwards."

"Sire, that might besem a man who was like the God of heaven. But you, though the anointed of the Lord and appointed to great things, are yet only a man on earth; and the greater your anointing and your power, the greater is your responsibility."

"Friend Klaus, why should the Ditmarsen have greater privileges than the inhabitants of Schleswig and my other subjects?"

"Because they are another people, sire."

"A better people?"

"Another. Every man has his own coat."

"But would it not be better, Klaus, if all coats were after the same pattern? Then in time of need men could help each other, and there would be far less of envious and idle scruples."

"No, sire, with your permission, it would not be better, but worse; for then all men would look as like one another as so many eggs; and, besides the dulness of this, what confusion we should all be in, if Peter was taken for John, and John for Peter! And although it is true that one man could help another to a coat, yet altogether there would not be more help to give than now, when the tall man can gather fruit from a tree for a short one, the swift can run for the slow, the strong support the weak, and so on with all the numberless good offices which may be exchanged between men. The capital of good offices is a very beautiful capital, and—God be praised!—a very large one also, sire. It is therefore that I have prayed and warned at the same time, in the name of the King of kings. Let the Ditmarsen keep to do so. Act so by all of us your subjects; then will things flourish and stand fast in your whole kingdom."

"I want no prophet," said the king in an angry tone. "And yet," answered Klaus, composedly, "the prophets under the old covenant were often unlearned men, with no other merit than that of simple obedience to him who sent them. It is true that I am not gifted, like them, with wonder-working powers; but yet, sire, a good conscience is a precious gift of God; and my conscience is very sad, my beloved king, on account of this expedition against the Ditmarsen."

"You have done your part, woodman Klaus; and your conscience is clear of my deeds."

"Not quite thoroughly, my lord and master. That great, beautiful, polished sword, which shines yonder on the wall with your other arms—is it the same which you wielded in Germany for the defence and protection of the faith?"

"The same, friend Klaus."

"Now, sire, I think that you would do very well if this time you left that noble comrade behind, and chose another good sword out of your armoury to use in this war against the Ditmarsen. For see, now, such a seemingly dead instrument has often as it were a sort of life in it, when a man has won with it something good and beautiful for his fellow-men, as you did with this sword; or even has had good luck with it, as when I, some years ago, killed with my axe a wolf that was close pursuing my little daughter Agnes, as she was bringing me my dinner in the wood. I have never since used that axe but for some particular and good purpose, such as when I wanted to make some changes in my little house which would add to the comfort of me and mine, or when I made a cradle for my little grandson Hans, and such-like joyful works. Leave your good sword at home, sire, for this time."

"You are a very wonderful man, but, since it is not kindly to say often in one breath 'No' to a supplicant, yes, I will leave that sword behind when I go against the Ditmarsen. And your son, too, shall stay behind; and although I shall greatly miss him, you may take him home with you. You have not yet asked me this, so the more willingly I prevent your request with my royal yes."

"Let it not displease you, sire, if I interpose an humble, earnest 'no.' And this 'no' you cannot hinder, sire."

"Woodman, I a king, and cannot hinder! Wherefore not?"

"Because you will not, sire. There lies a strong bar for all God-instructed power on earth. My son is your squire; but, were he only your farrier, he could not so leave you at the beginning of a campaign. When danger draws near, no true man will turn aside, or the fairest fame would be tarnished."

"But, friend Klaus, if I let your son depart richly gifted and in my high favour, who will dare say a word against him?"

"Perhaps no one, sire. But perhaps also evil tongues may wag against him in secret; and that may eat into his fame, as decay eats by degrees into a true oak sound. Alas, alas! not with fire nor with iron can that tree be made again sound. And it gives the solemn warning, 'Beware in time, O man: guard the tree of thy honour against the first speak of decay.' And, even should no man from without say an evil word, something within would say to my son, and to all like him in the same case, 'Farrier, hast thou not left thy master when he went to that war, perchance he would have escaped such or such an overthrow of his horse, if thou hadst had the shoeing of the animal. Squire, hast thou, according to thy duty, remained close at thy master's side when he dashed against the enemy, thy mightiest have turned from him that cut of a sword, or that thrust of a lance, which now thou wilt sorrowfully hear of far away from him.' And he will seem to himself as a cowardly traitor, and nothing in this world will again bring him joy, and hardly will he be able to think with a true joyful faith on the blessed heaven of God. No, no, sire; you never would decree that your and my Gotthilf should come to this sorrowful pass—it would be poor thanks for his faithful services; and therefore you will not dismiss him till the expedition against the Ditmarsen is over. If Gotthilf then lives, send him back to me honourably, sire; if not, there is in blessed heaven, for all true men, a joyful, endless reunion. Is it not true, sire, you will take my Gotthilf to the war with you?"

"And you can ask that so joyfully, Klaus, and yet blame my war as unjust? It is very strange, very strange!"

"Not at all strange, sire. Each one must give up his own reckoning when, at length, before the throne of the King of kings, the word will be either 'Depart from me!' or 'Come!' My Gotthilf, if he falls honourably in your service, will, I confidently hope, hear the 'Come,' and I, too, afterwards; for now I have done my part here, sire, and I go forth from your presence with a quiet conscience."

He bowed with deep reverence, and went towards the door.

The king called to him: "Stop, woodman Klaus! You must first empty that cup of wine in my presence."

Klaus stopped.

"If you command me, sire, truly I must obey. But, if I might ask, do not bid me drink it. Good wine only tastes well after a good work is completed. And we have not so happily finished the business between us."

"Yes, Klaus, we have!" said the king, rising, and stepping quickly and firmly to the table where the

two goblets had been placed; and, taking one up, he brought it to the woodman. "There," said the king, "take it and quaff it down. Peace, and joy, and safety to the brave Ditmarsen, so long as king Christian IV. lives; and yet afterwards, so long as his will has influence with his successor!"

A violent emotion shook the strong frame of the woodman. "My king," he said, "my noble king, my good king—I feel as if I must kneel down to you."

"Now, shame upon you, honoured messenger of God. Do you not know the saying, 'Thou shalt kneel to God, and not to man?'"

Then woodman Klaus knelt down, folded his hands together, and said, "Well, then, I kneel to God—that may be done at all times, even in kings' presence—and I thank thee, O my God, that thou hast given to our king such princely thoughts, and such a fatherly heart. I think thee that he listens to thy word in the mouth even of the meanest of his people. And for that, may he one day hear that most joyful of all words from thy mouth, the blessed 'Enter.' But first leave him with us for a long course of happy years, for we need him much and love him dearly." He rose, and took joyfully the cup out of the king's hand, saying, "You have given me a good toast, sire; and I will give a good toast to you, and I have full assurance that it will be granted: 'Long live our king, Christian the fourth of Denmark!'"

The king and the woodman both emptied their glasses slowly and solemnly, looking the while steadily in one another's face; and each saw that the bright eye of the other was moistened.

"You must take the cup with you, woodman," said the king; and let it go down to son and son's son."

"That will I right readily, sire," answered Klaus; "and, should I drink nothing but beer out of it, it will seem to me to taste like your fragrant Rhenish wine."

"But why not stay with me, friend Klaus, and always have Rhenish wine to drink out of your cup? I would not let it fall you; and I would see to having your whole family carefully brought to you."

"And in what capacity should I stay with you, sire?"

"You should be, . . . yes; you should be one of my privy councillors."

"Not so, sire. You have already a multitude of such lords; and they are a very different sort of men from me. I saw some of them once when I went to the city of Schleswig, and, if I am not mistaken, here too in your royal city. They are very wise, grave lords and masters; some pale and thin from many night-watchings, some round and broad from long sitting at the table—the table where they write, I mean—they talk little and are long silent, and they write heaps of acts. Besides, they are richly dressed; and they are obliged to take great care of their costly clothes. 'No, no, sire'—and the woodman laughed heartily—"old Klaus would never do for a privy councillor."

The king laughed too. But then he said very earnestly, "And yet friend Klaus, you have been my privy councillor. With whom have I ever held such secret council as with you? Whose council ever seemed so mysterious to me at first, and yet unravelled and made clear so many deep secrets, as thine?"

"Sire," answered Klaus, "all that I can readily believe. For what I had to say to you, and the manner in which I ought to say it—all seemed to me dark and mysterious, like a shaft sunk deep in the mountain. I only knew thus much: the conscience of thy king is in danger, and the salvation of thy king likewise is in danger. Then I could find no rest by day or by night. Afterwards I heard in church some texts of God's word, full of warning; the preacher truly spoke them with a very different purpose; but they laid hold on my heart, as telling me one particular thing and nothing else, and pricked my conscience, and drove me here, over mountain and valley and sea-coast. And here I am now, and have spoken—spoken in a way which seemed, and still seems, very mysterious to me—and the council of a poor woodman has reached to your heart, my beloved king. It was the work of God, not of man."

"Klaus, thou who hast been the chosen messenger of God to me, wilt thou henceforth deprive me of so precious an adviser?"

"Sire; a thing done once is not to be done always. And, shoemaker, keep to your last! Your last, sire, is the sceptre together with the sword. My last is the woodman's axe, which will do for a battle-axe when any wild beasts cross my path. Still the last remains a last; and each of us a very different one. But that privy council—we held it both in common, sire; and it would not be at all according to rule that I should turn privy councillor to you, or you to me. The real privy councillor sits with thee, beneath your gold-embroidered purple mantle; and with me, beneath my dark woodman's jacket: he is called conscience by name; and he is a true and faithful friend, that is, when he is often bathed in those waters of eternal life, which flow freely for us all, rich and poor, high and low, out of the holy scriptures."

"Farewell, faithful woodman!" said the king—"You have left me indeed a true councillor in your stead."

Some days afterwards, king and woodman parted with great affection. The woodman took his dear son Gotthilf with him; and there was great joy in the household when they reached home. The king and the woodman lived many years afterwards—the king, alternately in honourable peace and in just wars; the woodman, in the quiet happiness of his home; but neither of them ever forgot that solemn and happy council. On the days of family rejoicing in the woodman's household (and these, by God's blessing, were not few) he was wont to say, "Now reach me down the king's goblet from the shelf: this day deserves to be ended by a draught out of it." And, when purifying trials came upon the king—as they failed not to do, by God's grace—he would, after he had held council with men of worth, shut himself up, with none but himself and his bible, saying, "Now let no one disturb me: now I am going to hold the true council."

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