

CHAPTER V.—KING HILDEBERT'S HOSTAGES.

"The Franks are coming!" A party of men and women, Gallo-Roman artisans chiefly, came hurrying into the cloistered court with the tidings. "Sporus saw their armor glinting through the forest!"

"Are the town gates closed?" asked Tetricus, who was the nearest at hand.

"They are being closed," cried many voices; "and the Tribune Marcius is gone down to command."

"He must take heed," said Tetricus. "If they come from King Hildebert we cannot exclude them; if from his enemies we must."

Tetricus went in search of his father, whom he met coming from the little chamber that served as his study.

Gregory was the chief authority, civil as well as ecclesiastical, in Langres. The sons of Clovis had divided his territory between them in a strange manner—each taking different towns, with the country round, not all in one continuous territory, but all mixed up together, and each holding a share of Paris. In fact, the right to a town really meant the having a place to put to tribute, if not to pillage. There had been four brothers, Theuderic, Hildebert, Hlodimir, and Hlothar; but Hlodimir was dead, and his children, except Chlodoald (or Cloud), who had been made a monk, had been murdered by their uncles, and there had been fierce fighting over the new division. Langres belonged to Hildebert; and Gregory, in the name of the inhabitants, had made oath to pay him a yearly tribute, and to exclude the other kings. The old Roman walls were kept in repair, and were sufficient to protect against sudden inroads of the Franks, who had no means of besieging a fortified place. The actual government belonged to the Senator, with a few magistrates, known by old Roman titles, under him. Gregory, well knowing that the Franks felt the impression of dignity, and were awed by it into fair behavior, lost no time in having the hall arranged for an interview, while Tetricus went out to the gates to add judgment to the action of the Tribune.

Between twenty and thirty armed Franks, mostly carrying the axe which took its name from them, and the chiefs wearing spiked helmets, rode up to the gate, and the foremost demanded entrance. "Open the gate, ye Gallic slaves, or it shall be the worse for you!"

"In whose name?" asked Tetricus.

"What matters that to thee, thou priest?" shouted the leader.

"It matters little to me, but to thee it matters; since if thou comest not with authority, the gates remain shut," answered Tetricus, who had measured the numbers with his eye, and saw that if this were a mere raid of their own they would not be able to effect an entrance.

"In the name of Hildebert, King of the Western Franks," thundered the leader, "who commands his Roman tributaries to give his free men entrance."

With a sigh that the great name of Roman had fallen so low, Tetricus still refused to admit more than the leader, Wolfram, and three of his followers; and as the gates were strong, and guarded within and without with heavy brass, he was able to carry this out, letting the four favored ones in one by one, and at the same time sending out skins and jars of wine and of cider, which were to be followed by all the food that could be hastily got together, to regale the rest of the warriors and keep them from turning their attention to mischief.

The tall figure of Wolfram stalked along in shining pointed helmet, leathern coat guarded with brass plates, leathern buskins, kite-shaped shield rudely painted with the semblance of a wild boar, sword beside him, an ax over his shoulder—a contrast to the slender, black-robed Tetricus, whom, however, he regarded with a certain contemptuous awe, as a witch might be looked on. It was easy to see that he was only so far a Christian as the axe of Clovis had compelled him to baptism, but that he had a mysterious dread of the priesthood as well as of Roman civilization.

Fully aware of this, Gregory had been preparing an imposing spectacle in the hall. He had robed himself so as to show at once that he was Bishop and Senator. Over his long white woolen garment he wore his toga, which had dwindled to a white scarf edged with purple, and over that again a rich crimson, gold-bordered mantle. His mitre was on his head, his pastoral staff—fashioned like a sheep-hook—was held in one hand, the ivory staff of a senator in the other, and he sat on the ivory inlaid curule chair at the arched circular end of the hall of justice, an embodiment of dignity, with all his train of priests, deacons, subdeacons, and readers drawn up behind him, as well as a few civil officers of the town.

Wolfram was evidently half disconcerted at the first moment at the sight of the Bishop in the great arched basilica, but he put a bold face upon it, and tramped on, while Gregory, though he would not meet his invader at the entrance as he had met his friend Garfried, touched the silver cup of greeting with his lips, and sent it by the hand of his chief attendant to be served to the Frank.

Wolfram stood still. "I drink not till I have performed my king's commands," he said.

Gregory expected some terrible exaction as he said, "Speak on."

"The King of the Western Franks, King Hildebert, son of Clovis, sends his commands to his tributary, Bishop Gregory, and does him to wit that the war with his nephew Theudibert, King of the Eastern Franks and Burgunds,