

CHAPTER IX.

"Listen to what Master Lechus says," cried Casimer, taking her hand and very gallantly pressing it to his lips; "I have loved you long and faithfully—ah, say that you will be my wife!"

"He will make thee a good husband, child," said old Steinulf; "which is more than yon rattled fellow would do. I give him my consent."

"And I mine," said Lechus.

"I consent," said Ora, blushing; "but Casimer, only on one condition—you must never fall in love with any one else, and must settle the ten gold crowns on me."

"And will add ten more, dear Ora, out of my own little savings," said Casimer; "when shall the wedding be?"

"Tonight," said old Steinulf; "so may you both have cause to rejoice at the royal election,—Lechus, you shall be bridesman, and dance the first saraband with the bride."

"And steal the first kiss, without the aid of the black shovel—ha, Ora."

"Now don't tease, master Lechus," said Ora; "we must forget our old flirtations. Besides, you know not what may happen before night."

As she ceased speaking, the door was suddenly burst open, and six armed men entered the cabin.

"Thou art a prophetess!" muttered Lechus, snatching up Steinulf's axe, for the old man was a woodman by trade, and both he and Casimer gained their living by supplying the city with wood, from the vast forests by which it was surrounded.

"Whom do you seek here?" cried Lechus, turning fiercely to the intruders.

"We seek you," said Ivan; "deliver yourself up quietly, for, dead or alive, you must go with us."

"Alive I will never go hence, with such a set of scoundrels," said Lechus; "and, if dead, you will find my life a dear bargain."

With a sudden spring, he flung himself among them, cutting to the right and left with his dreadful axe. Ivan was the first man who fell the victim of his fury, and Steinulf and Casimer coming up to his aid, soon freed the intrepid blacksmith from his cowardly assailants.

"Pah! 'tis a bloody piece of business," said Lechus, wiping his brow, and looking down upon the dead; "my life was hardly worth this dreadful sacrifice."

"Doubtless it has been preserved for some great end," said Casimer; "are you wounded?"

"Not that I know of," returned Lechus; "I am only hot, and a little out of breath. Hark! there's the trumpet—the race is about to commence. I shall be too late to expose that man's villainy."

He rushed from the cottage, leaving old Steinulf and Casimer in charge of the dead, and hurried forward to the scene of action.

THE danger to which he had been exposed, and the dark scene of death he left behind, no longer retained a place in the excited mind of the blacksmith. His thoughts were entirely absorbed by one engrossing object, that of exposing the villainy of the Lord of Cracow. Urged on by an impulse almost irresistible, he determined to effect this, or die in the attempt. Covered with dust, hot, and panting for breath, he at length arrived on the scene of action.

The signal for the race had just been given, and the cracking of whips, the cries of the horsemen encouraging their steeds, and the wild shouts of the rabble succeeded in awakening the blacksmith to a painful consciousness of the strange events of the morning.

He cast a hasty glance around him, ere, starting forward, he made one in that eventful race. The vast plain was crowded with spectators. The course alone presenting a vacant space. His eye wandered restlessly over that ocean of human heads, to gather hope and confidence from one face in that vast multitude. Pale, proud, and beautiful, surrounded by her father's vassals, the object of his mad idolatry was there, but so far removed from her humble worshipper, that she could not recognize him among the motley throng. Yet, "marvellously," did one glance of that lovely countenance, though unrecognized by its fair possessor, "shoot strength into his heart." The next moment a thick cloud of dust obscured the plain, and hid her from his sight. The trumpet sounded—away started the candidates for royalty, the earth trembling beneath their horses' hoofs, as each noble steed bounded forward with the speed of an arrow launched from the bow. Anon, from amidst the murky veil that hid the champions from the gaze of the eager multitude, issued fearful cries and imprecations, shrieks and groans, as horse and man came headlong to the earth in the very moment they deemed themselves secure of victory.

One solitary horseman, and a peasant, who ran at his bridle-rein, alone occupied the ground that a moment before had been so fiercely contested. The Lord of Cracow pressed towards the goal with frantic speed. Triumph sat enthroned upon his brow, and he viewed the vast multitude who rushed eagerly forward to proclaim him king, as though he were already their ruler.

But, well has it been said, that "the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong;" the young blacksmith, bent on frustrating his haughty namesake's stratagem, started on foot for the goal, at the moment when the horse-race commenced. Confident that his immense strength could compass the distance—that the foot which had often arrested the wild horse of the desert would not fail him when the interest of his country was at stake, he sprang, he bounded forward, with the strength of a lion, and the swiftness of a roe-buck, and the haughty noble-