BARLASCH
OF THE GUARD
By Henry Seton Merriman

CHAPTER XXIV.—(Continued.)

"The Grafin has arranged to quit Dantzig to-morrow," she said. "I am going to ask her to take me with her."

Desiree nodded, and made no comment. Mathilde went to the door, but paused there. Without looking round, she stood thinking deeply. They had grown from childhood together—motherless—with a father whom neither understood. Together they had faced the difficulties of life; the hundred petty difficulties attending a woman's life in a strange land, among neighbors who bear the sleepless grudge of unsatisfied curiosity. They had worked together for their daily bread. And now the full stream of life had swept them together from the safe moorings of childhood.

"Will you come too?" asked Mathilde. "All that he says about Dantzig is true."

"No, thank you," answered Desiree, gently enough. "I will wait here. I must wait in Dantzig."

"I cannot," said Mathilde, half-excusing herself. "I must go. I cannot help it. You understand?"

"Yes," said Desiree, and nothing more.

Had Mathilde asked her the question six months ago, she would have said "No." But she understood now, not that Mathilde could love de Casimir—that was beyond her individual comprehension—but that there was no alternative now.

So after Mathilde had gone, Barlasch returned.

"If Mademoiselle Mathilde is going, she will have to go to-morrow," he said. "Those that are coming in at the gates now are the rear-guard of the Heudelet Division which was driven out of Elbing by the Cossacks three days ago."

He sat mumbling to himself by the fire, and only turned to the supper which Desiree had placed in readiness for him when she quitted the room and went upstairs. It was he who opened the door for Mathilde, who returned in half an hour. She thanked him absent-mindedly, and went upstairs. He could hear the sisters talking together in a low voice in the drawing-room, which he had never seen, at the top of the stairs.

Then Desiree came down, and he helped her to find, in the shed in the yard, one of those travelling trunks which he had recognized as being of French manufacture. He took off his boots and carried it upstairs for her.

It was ten o'clock before Sebastian came in. He nodded his thanks to Barlasch and watched him bolt the door. He made no inquiry as to Mathilde, but extinguished the lamp and went to his room. He never mentioned her name again.

Early the next morning, the girls were astir. But Barlasch was before them, and when Desiree came down she found the kitchen fire alight. Barlasch was cleaning a knife, and nodded a silent good-morning. Desiree's eyes were red, and Barlasch must have noted this sign of grief, for he gave a contemptuous laugh, and continued his occupation.

It was barely daylight when the Grafin's heavy, old-fashioned carriage drew up in front of the house. Mathilde came down, thickly veiled and in her travelling furs. She did not seem to see Barlasch, and omitted to thank him for carrying her travelling trunk to the carriage.

He stood on the terrace beside Desiree until the carriage had turned the corner into the Pfaffengasse.

"Bah!" he said, "let her go. There is no stopping them when they are like that. It is the curse—of the Garden of Eden."

CHAPTER XXV.

A Despatch.

In counsel it is good to see dangers; and in execution not to see them unless they be very great.

Mathilde had told Desiree that Colonel de Casimir made no mention of Charles in his letter to her. Barlasch was able to supply but little further information on the matter.

"It was given to me by the Captain Louis d'Arragon at Thorn," he said. "He handled it as if it were not too clean. And he had nothing to say about it. You know his way, for the rest. He says little; but he knows the look of things. It seemed that he had promised to deliver the letter—for some reason, who knows what? and he kept his promise. The man was not dying by any chance—that de Casimir?"

And his little sharp eyes, reddened by the smoke of camp-fires, inflamed by the glare of sun on snow, searched her face. He was thinking of the treasure.

"Oh, no!"

"Was he ill at all?"

"He was in bed," answered Desiree, doubtfully.

Barlasch stretched his head without ceremony, and fell into a long train of thought.

"Do you know what I think?" he said, at length. "I think that de Casimir was not in it at all—any more than I am; I, Barlasch. Not so ill perhaps, as I am, for I have an indigestion. It is always there at the summit of the stomach. It is hoarse without salt."

He paused and rubbed his chest tenderly.

"Never eat horse without salt," he put in, parenthetically.

"I never hope to eat it at all," answered Desiree. "What about Colonel de Casimir?"

He waved her aside as a babbler who broke in upon his thoughts. These seemed to be lodged in his mouth, for when reflecting, he chewed and mumbled with his lips.

"Listen," he said at length. "This is de Casimir: He goes to bed and lets his beard grow—half an inch of beard will keep any man in the hospital. You nod your head. Yes; I thought so. He knows that the viceroy, with the last of the army, is at Thorn. He keeps quiet. He waits in the roadside inn until the last of the army has gone. He waits until the Russians come, and to them he hands over the Emperor's possessions—all the papers, the maps, the despatches. For that, he will be rewarded by the Emperor Alexander, who has already promised pardon to all Poles who have taken arms against Russia and now submit. De Casimir will be allowed to retain his own baggage. He has not loot taken at Moscow—oh, no! Only his own baggage. Ah—that man! See, I spit him out."

And it's painful to record that he here resorted to graphic illustration.

"Ah!" he went on, triumphantly, "I know. I can see right into the mind of such a man. I will tell you why. It is because I am that sort of man myself."

"You do not seem to have been so successful—since you are poor," said Desiree, with a laugh.

He frowned at her, apparently in speechless anger, seeking an answer. But for a moment he could think of none, so he turned to the knives again, which he was cleaning on a board on the kitchen table. At length, he paused and glanced at Desiree.

"And your husband," he said, slowly. "Remember that he is a partner with this de Casimir. They hunt together. I know it; for I was in Moscow. Ah! that makes you stand stiffly and push your chin out."

He went on cleaning the knives, and without looking at her, seemed to be speaking his own thoughts aloud.

"Yes! He is a traitor. And he is worse than the other; for he is no Pole, but a Frenchman. And if he returns to France, the Emperor will say: Where are my despatches, my maps, my papers, which were given into your care?"

He finished the thought with three gestures, which seemed to illustrate the placing of a man against a wall and shooting him. His meaning could not be mistaken.

"And that is what the patron means when he says that Monsieur Charles Darragon will not return to Dantzig. I knew that he meant that last night when he was so angry—on the mat."

"And why did you not tell me?"

Barlasch looked at her thoughtfully for a moment, before replying, slowly and impressively:

"Because, if I had told you, you might have decided to quit Dantzig with Mademoiselle Mathilde, and go hunting your husband in a country overrun by desperate fugitives and untamed Cossacks. And I did not want that. I want you here—in Dantzig; in the Frauengasse; in this kitchen; under my hand—so that I can take care of you till the war is over. I—who speak to you—Papa Barlasch, at your service. And there is not another man in the world who will do it so well. No; not one."

And his eyes flashed as he threw the knives into a drawer.

"But why should you do all this for me?" asked Desiree. "You could have gone home to France—quite easily—and have left us to our fate here in Dantzig. Why did you not go home?"

Barlasch looked at her with surprise, not unmixed with a sudden dumb disappointment. He was preparing to go out, according to his wont, immediately after breakfast; for Lisa had unconsciously hit the mark when she compared him to a cat. He had the regular and self-contained habits of that unobstrusive friend. He buttoned his rough coat slowly, and looked around the kitchen with eyes dimly wistful. He was very old and ragged and homeless.

"Is it not enough," he said, "that we are friends?"

He went toward the door, but came back and warned her, by the familiar upheld finger, not to let her attention wander from his words.

"You will be glad yet that I have stayed. It is because I can speak a little plainly of your husband that you wish me gone. Bah! What does it matter? All men are alike. We are only men—not angels. And you can go on loving him just the same. You are not particular, you women. You can love anything—even a man like that."

And he went out muttering anathemas on the hearts of all women.

"It seems," he said, "that a woman can love anything."

Which is true; and a very good thing for some of us. For without that heaven-sent capacity the world could not go on at all.

It was later in the day when Barlasch made his way into the low and smoke-grimed Bier Halle of the Weissen Ross'l. He must have known Sebastian's habits, for he went straight to that corner of the great room where the violin-player usually sat. The stout waitress—a country girl of no intelligence—smiled broadly at the sight of such a customer, and she followed him down the length of the sawdust-strewn floor.

Sebastian's face showed no surprise when he looked up and recognized the new-comer. The surrounding tables were empty. It was too early in the evening for the regular customers, whose numbers, moreover, had been sadly thinned during the last few months. For the peaceful Dantzigers, remembering the seige of seven years ago, had mostly fled at the first mention of the word again.

Sebastian nodded in answer to Barlasch's somewhat ceremonious bow, and by a gesture invited him to be seated on the chair upon which he already laid his hand. The atmosphere of the room was warm, and Barlasch laid aside his sheepskin coat, as he had seen the great and the rich divest themselves of their sables. He turned sharply, and caught the waitress with an amused smile on her face. He drew her attention to a little pool of beer on the table and stood still until she had made good this lapse in her duty. Then he pointed to Sebastian's mug of beer and dismissed her, giggling, to get one for him of the same size and contents.

Making sure that there was no one within earshot, he waited until Sebastian's dreamy eye met his, and then said:

"It is time we understood each other."

A light of surprise, passing and half-indifferent, flashed into Sebastian's eyes and vanished again at once when he saw Barlasch had meant nothing—made no sign or countersign with his hand.

"By all means, my friend," he answered.

"I delivered your letters," said Barlasch, "at Thorn and at other places."

"I know; I have already had answers. You would be wise to forget the incident."

Barlasch shrugged his shoulders.

"You were paid," said Sebastian, jumping to a natural conclusion.

"A little," admitted Barlasch, "a small little—but it was not that. I always get paid in advance when I can. Except by the Emperor. He owes me some—it was another question. In the house I am friends with all—with Lisa, who has gone—with Mademoiselle Mathilde who has gonee—with Mademoiselle Desiree, so-called Madame Darragon, who remains. With all except you. Why should we not be friends?"

"But we are friends," protested Sebastian, with a bow. As if in confirmation of the statement, he held out his beer-mug, and Barlasch touched it with the rim of his own before drinking. Sebastian's attitude, his bow, his manner of drinking, were those of the court; Barlasch was distinctly of the camp. But these were strange days, and all society had been turned topsy-turvy by one man.

"Then," said Barlasch, licking his lips, "let us understand each other. You say there will be no siege; I say you are wrong. You think that the Dantzigers will rise in answer to the Emperor Alexander's proclamations and turn the French out; I say the Dantzigers' stomachs are too big. I say that Rapp will hold Dantzig, and that the Russians will not take it by storm, because they are too weak. There will be a siege, and a long one. Are you and mademoiselle and I going to sit it out in the Frauengasse together?"

"We shall be honored to have you as our guest," answered Sebastian, with that levity which went before the Revolution, and was never understood of the people.

Barlasch did not understand it. He glanced doubtfully at his companion, and sipped his beer.

"Then I will begin to-night."

"Begin what, my friend?"

Barlasch waved aside all petty detail.

"My preparations. I go out about ten o'clock—after you are in. I will take the key of the front door, and let myself in when I come back. I shall make two journeys. Under the kitchen floor is a large hollow space; I fill that with bags of corn."

"But where will you get the corn, my friend?"

"I know where to get it—corn, and other things. Salt I have already—enough for a year. Other things I can get for three months."

"But we have no money to pay for them."

"Bah!"

"You mean you will steal them," suggested Sebastian, and without a ring of contempt in his mincing voice.

"A soldier never steals," answered Barlasch, carelessly announcing a great truth.

Sebastian laughed. It was obvious that his mind, absorbed in great thought, heeded small things not at all. His companion pushed his fur cap to the back of his head and ruffled his hair forward.

"That is not all," he said, at length. He looked round the vast room, which was almost deserted. The stout waitress was polishing pewter mugs at the bar. "You say you have already had answers to those letters. It is a great organization—your secret society—whatever it is called. It delivers letters all over Prussia—eh? and Poland, perhaps—or farther still."

Sebastian shrugged one shoulder, and made no answer for some time.

"I have already told you," he said, impatiently, at length, "to forget the incident; you were paid."

By way of reply, the old soldier laboriously emptied his pockets, searching the most remote of them for small copper coins. He counted slowly and carefully until he had made up a thaler.

"But it is not my turn to be paid this time. It is I who pay."

He held out his hand, with a pound weight of metal in it, but Sebastian refused the money, with a sudden assumption of his cold and scornful manner oddly out of keeping with his humble surroundings.

"As between friends—" suggested Barlasch, and on receiving a more decided negative, returned the coins to his pocket, not without satisfaction.

"I want your friends to pass on a letter for me—I am willing to pay," he said, in a whisper. "A letter to Captain Louis d'Arragon—it concerns the happiness of Mademoiselle Desiree. Do not shake your head. Think before you refuse. The letter will be an open one—six words or so—telling the captain that his cousin, mademoiselle's husband, is not in Dantzig, and cannot now return here, since the last of the rear-guard entered the city this morning."

Sebastian seemed to be considering the matter, and Barlasch was quick to combat possible objections.

"The captain went to Konigsberg, He is there now. Your friends can easily find him and give him the letter. It is of great importance to mademoiselle. The captain is not looking for Monsieur Charles Darragon, because he thinks that he is here in Dantzig. Colonel de Casimir assured him that mademoiselle would find him here. Where is he—that Monsieur Charles—I wonder? It is of great importance to mademoiselle. The captain would perhaps continue his search."

"Where is your letter?" asked Sebastian.

By way of reply, Barlasch laid on the table a sheet of paper.

"You must write it," he said. "My hand is injured. I write not badly, you understand. But this evening I do not feel that my hand is well enough."

So, with the sticky, thick ink of the Weissen Ross'l, Sebastian wrote the letter, and Barlasch, forgetting his scholarly acquirements, took the pen and made a mark beneath his own name written at the foot of it.

Then he went out and left Sebastian to pay for the beer.

CHAPTER XXVI.

On the Bridge.

They that are above
Have ends in everything.

A lame man was standing on the bridge that crosses the Neuer Pregel from Kant Strasse—which is the centre of the city of Konigsberg—to the island known as the Kneiphof. This bridge is called the Kramer Brucke, and may be described as the heart of the town. From it on either hand diverge the narrow streets that run along the river-bank, busy with commerce, crowded with the narrow sleighs that carry wood from the Pregel up into the town.

The wider streets—such as the Kant Strasse, running down-hill from the royal castle to the river, and the Kneiphof'sche Langgasse, leading southward to the Brandenburg gate and the great world—must needs make use of the Kramer Brucke. Here, it may be said, every man in the town must sooner or later pass in the execution of his daily business, whether he go about it on foot or in a sleigh with a pair of horses. Here the idler and those grave professors of the university, which was still mourning the death of the aged Kant, nearly always passed in their thoughtful and conscientious promenades.

Here this lame man, a cobbler by trade, plying his quiet calling in a house in the Neuer Markt, where the linden trees grow close to the upper windows, had patiently kept watch for three days. He was, like many lame men, of an abnormal width and weight. He had a large, square, dogged face, which seemed to promise that he would wait there till the crack of doom rather than abandon a quest.

It was very cold—mid-winter within a few miles of the frozen Baltic on the verge of Russia, at that point where old Europe stretches a long arm out into the unknown. The cobbler was wrapped in a sheepskin coat, which stood out all round him with the stiffness of wood, so that he seemed to be living inside a box. To keep himself warm he occasionally limped across from end to end of the bridge, but never went farther. At times he leaned his arms on the stone wall at the Kant Strasse end of the bridge, and looked down into the Lower Fish Market, where women from Pillau and the Baltic shores—mere bundles of clothes—stood over their baskets of fish frozen hard like sticks. It was a silent market. You cannot haggle long when a minute's exposure to the air will give a frost-bite to the end of the nose. The would-be purchaser can scarcely make an effective bargain through a fringe of icicles that rattle against his lips if he open them.

The Pregel had been frozen for three months, with only the one temporary thaw in November which cost Napoleon so many thousands at his broken bridge across the Beresina. Though no water had flowed beneath this bridge, many strange feet had passed across it.

It had vibrated beneath Napoleon's heavy carriage, under the lumbering guns that Macdonald took northward to blockade Riga. Within the last few weeks it had given passage to the last of the retreating army, a mere handful of heart-sick fugitives. Macdonald with his staff had been ignominiously driven across it by the Cossacks who followed hard after them, the great marshal still wild with rage at the defection of Yorck and the Prussian contingent.

And now the Cossacks on their spare and ill-tempered horses passed to and fro, wild men under a untamed leader whose heart was hardened to stone by bereavement. The cobbler looked at them with a countenance of wood. It was hard to say whether he preferred them to the French, or was indifferent to one as to the other. He contemplated their boots with professional disdain. For all men must look at the world from their own standpoint, and consider mankind in the light of their own interests. Thus those who live on the greed or the vanity, or fatten on the charity of their neighbor, learn to watch the lips.

The cobbler, by reason of looking at the lower end of men, attracted little attention from the passer-by. He who has his eye on the ground passes unheeded; for the surest way of awakening interest is to appear interested. It would seem that this cobbler was waiting for a pair of boots not made in Konigsberg; and in the third day his expressionless black eyes lighted on feet not shod in Poland, or France, or Germany, nor yet in square-toed Russia.

The owner of these far-travelled boots was a lightly built, dark-faced man, with eyes quietly ubiquitous. He caught the interested glance of the cobbler and turned to look at him again with the uneasiness that is bred of war. The cobbler instantly hobbled toward him.

"Will you help a poor man?" he said.

"Why should I?" was the answer, with one hand already half out of its thick glove. "You are not hungry; you have never been starved in your life."

The German was quick enough, but it was not quite the Prussian German.

The cobbler looked at the speaker slowly.

"An Englishman?" he asked.

And the other nodded.

"Come this way."

The cobbler hobbled toward the Kneiphof, where the streets are quiet, and the Englishman followed. At the corner of the Kohl Markt he turned and looked, not at the man, but at his boots.

"You are a sailor?" he said.

"Yes."

"I was told to look for an English sailor—Louis d'Arragon."

"Then you have found me," was the reply.

Still the cobbler hesitated.

"How am I to know it?" he asked, suspiciously.

"Can you read?" asked d'Arragon. "I can prove who I am—if I want to. But I am not sure that I want to."

"Oh! it is only a letter—of no importance. Some private business of your own. It comes from Dantzig — written by one whose name begins with 'B.'"

"Barlasch," suggested d'Arragon, quietly, as he took from his pocket a paper, which he unfolded and held beneath the eyes of the cobbler. It was a passport written in three languages. If the man could read he was not anxious to boast of an accomplishment so far above his station; but he glanced at the paper, not without a practised skill, to seize the essential parts of it.

"Yes, that is the name," he said, searching in his pockets. "The letter is an open one. Here it is."

In passing the letter, the man made a scarcely perceptible movement of the hand which might have been a signal.

"No," said d'Arragon, "I don't belong to the Tugendbund or to any other secret society. We have need of no such associations in my country."

The cobbler laughed, not without embarrassment.

"You have a quick eye," he said. "It is a great country, England. I have seen the river full of English ships before Napoleon chased you off the seas."

D'Arragon smiled as he unfolded the letter.

"He has not done it yet," he said, with that spirit which enables mariners of the Anglo-Saxon race to be amused when there is a talk of supremacy on the high seas. He read the letter carefully, and his face hardened.

"I was instructed," said the cobbler, "to give you the letter, and at the same time to inform you that any assistance or facilities you may require will be forthcoming; besides——" he broke off, and pointed with his thick, leather-stained finger, "that writing is not the writing of him who signs."

"He who signs cannot write at all."

"That writing," went on the cobbler, "is a passport in any German state. He who carries a letter written in that hand can live and travel free anywhere from here to the Rhine or the Danube."

"Then I am lucky in possessing a powerful friend," said d'Arragon, "for I know who wrote this letter. I think I may say he is a friend of mine."

"I am sure of it: I have already been told so," said the cobbler. "Have you a lodging in Konigsberg? No. Then you can lodge in my house."

Without awaiting a reply, which he seemed to consider a foregone conclusion, he limped down the Kohl Markt toward the steps leading to the river, which in winter is a thoroughfare.

"I live in the Neuer Markt," he said, breathlessly, as he labored onward. "I have waited for you three days on that bridge. Where have you been all this time?"

"Avoiding the French," replied d'Arragon, curtly. Respecting his own affairs he was reticient, as commanders and other lonely men must always be. They walked side by side on the dusty and trodden ice without further speech. At the steps from the river to Neuer Markt, d'Arragon gave the lame man his hand, and glanced a second time at the fingers which clasped his own. They had not been born to toil, but had had it thrust upon them.

They crossed the Neuer Markt together, and went into that house where the linden grows so close as to obscure the windows. And the lodgings offered to Louis was the room in which Charles Darragon had slept in his wet clothes six months earlier. So small is the world in which we live and so narrow are the circles drawn by fate around human existence and endeavor.

The cobbler having shown his visitor the room and pointed out its advantages, was turning to go when d'Arragon, who was laying aside his fur coat, seemed to catch his attention, and he paused on the threshold.

"There is French blood in your veins," he said, abruptly.

"Yes—a little."

"So. I thought there must be. You reminded me—it was odd, the way you laid aside your coat—reminded me of a Frenchman who lodged here for one night. He was like you, too, in build and face. He was a spy, if you please—one of the French Emperor's secret police. I was new at the work then, but still I suspected there was something wrong about him. I took his boots—a pretext of mending them. I locked him in. He got out of that window, if you please, without his boots. He followed me and learned much that he was not meant to know. I have since heard it from others. He did the Emperor a great service—htat man. He saved his life, I think, from assassination in Dantzig. And he did me an ill turn—but it was my own carelessness. I thought to make a thaler by lodging him, and he was tricking me all the while."

"What was his name?" asked d'Arragon.

"Oh—I forgot the name he gave. It was a false one. He was disguised as a common soldier—and he was in reality an officer of the staff. But I know the name of the officer to whom he wrote his report of his night's lodging here—his colleague in the secret police, it would seem."

"Ah!" said d'Arragon, busying himself with his haversack.

"It was de Casimir—a Polish name. And in the last two days I have heard of him. He has married a beautiful woman, and is living like a prince at Cracow. All that since the siege of Dantzig began. In time of war, there is no time to lose, eh?"

"And the other? He who slept in this room—has he passed through Konigsberg again?"

"No, that he has not. If he had, I should have seen him. You can believe me, I wanted to see him. I was at my place on the bridge all the time—while the French occupied Konigsberg—when the last of them hurried away a month ago with the Cossacks close behind. No. I should have seen him and known him. He is not on this side of the Niemen, that fine young gentleman. Now what can I do to help you to-morrow?"

"You can help me on the way to Vilna," answered d'Arragon.

"You will never get there."

"I will try," said the sailor.

CHAPTER XXVII.

A Flash of Memory.

Nothing can cover his high frame but Heaven
No pyramids set off his memories,
But the eternal substance of his greatness
To which I leave him.

"Why I will not let you go out into the streets?" said Barlasch, one February morning, stamping the snow from his boots. "Why I will not let you go into the streets?"

He turned and followed Desiree toward the kitchen, after having carefully bolted the heavy oaken door, which had been strengthened as if to resist a siege. Desiree's face had that clear pallor which marks an indoor life; but Barlasch, weather-beaten, scorched, and wrinkled, showed no sign of having endured a month's siege in an overcrowded city.

"I will tell you why I will not let you go into the streets. Because they are not fit for any woman to go into—because if you walked from here to the Rathhaus, you would see sights that would come back to you in your sleep and wake you from it when you are an old woman. Do you know what they do with their dead? They throw them outside their doors—with nothing to cover their starved nakedness—as Lisa put her ashes in the street every morning. And the cart goes round, as the dustman's cart used to go, in times of peace, and like the dustman's cart, it drops part of its load, and the dust that blows round it is the infection of typhus. That is why you cannot go into the streets."

He unbuttoned his fur coat and displayed a smart new uniform; for Rapp had put his miserable army into new clothes, with which many of the Dantzig warehouses had been filled by Napoleon's order at the beginning of the war.

"There," he said, laying a small parcel on the table, "there is my daily ration. Two ounces of horse, one ounce of salt beef, the same as yesterday. One does not know how long we shall be treated so generously. Let us keep the beef—we may come to want some day."

And giving a hoarse laugh, he lifted a board in the floor, beneath which he hoarded his stores.

"Will you cook your dejeuner yourself?" asked Desiree. "I have something else for my father."

"And what have you?" asked Barlasch, curtly; "you are not keeping anything hidden from me?"

"No," answered Desiree, with a laugh at the sternness of his face. "I will give him a piece of the ham which was left over from last night."

"Left over?" echoed Barlasch, going close to her and looking up into her face, for she was two inches taller than he. "Left over? Then you did not eat your supper last night?"

"Neither did you eat yours, for it is there under the floor."

Barlasch turned away with a gesture of despair. He sat down in the high arm-chair that stood on the hearth, and tapped on the floor with one foot, in pessimistic thought.

"Ah! the women, the women," he muttered, looking into the smouldering fire. "Lies—all lies. You said that your supper was very nice," he shouted at her, over his shoulder.

"So it was," answered she, gaily, "so it is still."

Barlasch did not rise to her lighter humor. He sat in reflection for some minutes. Then his thoughts took their usual form of a muttered aside.

"It is a case of compromise. Always like that. The good God had to compromise with the first woman He created almost at once. And men have done it ever since—and have never had the best of it. See here," he said, aloud turning to Desiree, "I will make a bargain with you. I will eat my last night's supper, here at this table, now, if you will eat yours."

"Agreed."

"Are you hungry?" asked Barlasch, when the scanty meal was set out before him.

"Yes."

"So am I."

He laughed quite gaily now, and the meal was not without a certain air of festivity, though it consisted of nothing better than two ounces of horse and half an ounce of ham, eaten in company of that rye-bread made with one-third part of straw which Rapp allowed the citizens to buy.

For Rapp had first tamed his army, and was now taming the Dantzigers. He had effected discipline in his own camp by getting his regiments into shape, by establishing hospitals—which were immediately filled—and by protecting the citizens from the depredations of the starving fugitives who had poured pell-mell into the town.

Then he turned his attention to the Dantzigers, who were openly or secretly opposed to him. He seized their churches and turned them into stores; their schools he used for hospitals, their monasteries for barracks. He broke into their cellars and took the wine for the sick. The store-houses he placed under the strictest guard, and no man could claim possession of his own goods.

"We are," he said in effect, with that grim Alsatian humor which the Prussians were slow to understand, "we are one united family in a narrow house, and it is I who keep the store-room key."

Barlasch had proved to be no false prophet. His secret store escaped the vigilance of the picket whom he himself conducted to the cellars in the Frauengasse. Although he was sparing enough, he could always provide Desiree with anything for which she expressed a wish, and even forestalled those which she left unspoken. In return, he looked for absolute obedience, and, after their frugal breakfast, he took her to task for depriving herself of such food as they could afford.

"See you," he said, "a siege is a question of the stomach. It is not the Russians who have to fight; for they will not fight. They sit outside and wait for us to die of cold, of starvation, of typhus. And we are obliging them at the rate of two hundred a day. Yes, each day Rapp is relieved of the responsibility of two hundred mouths, that drop open and require nothing more. Be greedy—eat all you have and hope for release to-morrow, and you die. Be sparing—starve yourself for parsimony, or for the love of someone who will eat your share and forget to thank you, and you will die of typhus. Be careful, and patient, and selfish—eat a little, take what exercise you can, cook your food carefully with salt, and you will live. I was in a siege thirty years before you were born, and I am alive yet after many others. Obey me, and we will get through the siege of Dantzig, which is only just beginning."

Then suddenly he gave way to anger, and banged his hand down on the table.

"But, sacred name of thunder, do not make me believe you have eaten when you have not," he shouted. "Never do that."

Carried away by the inspiration of this question, he said many things which cannot be set before the eyes of a generation sensitive to plainness of speech and only tolerant of it in suggestions of impropriety.

"And the patron," he ended, abruptly, "how is he?"

"He is not very well," answered Desiree. Which answer did not satisfy Barlasch, who insisted on taking off his boots and going upstairs to see Sebastian.

It was a mere nothing, the invalid said. Such food did not suit him.

"You have been accustomed to it, well all your life," answered Barlasch, looking at him with the puzzled light of a baffled memory in his eye, which always came when he looked at Desiree's father. "One must see what can be done."

And he went out forthwith, to return after an hour and more with a chicken freshly killed. Desiree did not ask him where he had procured it. She had given up such inquiries, for Barlasch always confessed quite bluntly to theft, and she did not know whether to believe him or not.

But the change of diet had no beneficial effect, and the next day Desiree sent Barlasch to the house of the doctor whose practice lay in the Frauengasse. He came and shook his head bluntly. For even an old doctor may be hardened at the end of his life by an orgy, as it were, of death.

"I could cure him," he said, "if there were no Russians outside the walls; if I could give him fresh milk and good brandy and strong soup."

But even Barlasch could not find milk in Dantzig. The brandy was forthcoming, and the fresh meat; the soup Desiree made with her own hands. Sebastian had not been the same man since the closing of the roads and the gradual death of his hopes that the Dantzigers would rise against the soldiers that thronged the streets. At one time it would have been easy to carry out such a movement and to throw themselves and their city upon the mercy of the Russians. But Dantzig awoke to this possibility too late, when Rapp's iron hand had closed in upon it. He knew his own strength so well that he treated with a contemptuous leniency such citizens as were convicted of communicating with the enemy.

Sebastian's friends seemed to have deserted him. Perhaps it was not discreet to be seen in the company of one who had come under Napoleon's displeasure. Some had quitted the city after hurriedly concealing their valuables in their gardens, behind the chimneys, beneath the floors, where it is supposed they still lie hidden.. Others were among the weekly thousand or twelve hundred who were carted out by the Oliya Gate to be thrown into huge trenches, while the waiting Russians watched from their lines on the heights of Langfuhr.

It was true that news continued the filter in, and never quite ceased all through the terrible twelve months that were to follow. More especially did news that was unfavorable to the French find its way into the belaguered city. But it was not authentic news, and Sebastian gathered little comfort from the fact—not unknown to the whispering citizens—that Rapp himself had heard nothing from the outer world since the Elbing mail-cart had been turned back by the first of the Cossacks on the night of the seventh of January.

Perhaps Sebastian had that most fatal of maladies—to which nearly all men come at last—weariness of life.

"Why don't you fortify yourself and laugh at fortune?" asked Barlasch, twenty years his senior, as he stood sturdily in his stocking feet at the sick man's bedside.

"I take what my daughter gives me," protested Sebastian, half-peevishly.

"But that does not suffice," answered the materialist. "It does not suffice to swallow evil fortune—one must digest it."

Sebastian made no answer. He was a quiet patient, and lay all day with wide-open, dreaming eyes. He seemed to be waiting for something. This, indeed, was his mental attitude as presented to his neighbors, and perhaps to the few friends he possessed in Dantzig. He had waited through the years during which Desiree had grown to womanhood. He waited on doggedly through the first month of the siege, without enthusiasm, without comment—without hope, perhaps. He seemed to be waiting now to get better.

"He had made little or no progress," said the doctor, who could only give a passing glance at his patients, for he was working day and night. He had not time to beat about the bush, as his kind heart would have liked, for he had known Desiree all her life.

It was Shrove Tuesday, and the streets were full of revellers. The Neapolitans and other southerners had made great preptarations for the carnival, and the governor had not denied them their annual license. They had built a high car in one of the entrance yards to the Marienkirche; and finding that the ancient arch would not allow the erection to pass out into the street, they had pulled down the pious handiwork of a bygone generation.

The shouts of these merry-makers could be dimly heard through the double windows, but Sebastian made inquiry as to the meaning of the cry. A sort of lassitude—the result of confinement within doors, of insufficient food, of waning hope——had come over Desiree. She listened heedlessly to the sounds in the streets through which the dead were passing to the Oliva Gate, while the living danced by in their hideous travesty of rejoicing.

It was dusk when Barlasch came in.

"The streets," he said, "are full of fools, dressed as such." Receiving no answer, he crossed the room to where Desiree, treading noiselessly, and stood in front of her, trying to see her averted face. He stooped down and peered at her until she could no longer hide her tear-stained eyes.

He made a wry face and a little clicking noise with his tongue, such as the women of his race make when they drop and break some household utensil. Then he went back toward the bed. Hitherto he had always observed a certain ceremoniousness of manner in the sick-chamber. He laid this aside this evening and sat down on a chair that stood near.

Thus they remained in a silence which seemed to increase with the darkness. At length the illness became so marked that Barlasch slowly turned his head toward the bed. The same instinct had come to Desiree at the same moment.

(To be Contined).

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