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THIODOLF THE ICELANDER.

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CHAPTER XXIV.

When after some time the fertile Sicily, with her smoking mountain, arose out of the waves in sight of the voyagers, all the Icelanders stood on the decks of their vessels, and joyfully stretched out their arms towards the beautiful vision.—“Hecla’s brother!” they cried out. “Welcome, Hecla’s brother! Is it not as if we were looking upon our own beloved fire-mountain itself.” And then they broke forth into the following song:

“Deep in the bosom of the earth,
Day and night a furnace rages;
Flames as ancient as the world,
Yet unknown to man for ages.
But when, smoking in her wrath,
Hecla lifts her thousand voices,
And when Etna threatens loud,
Then the soul of man rejoices;
Glorious thoughts his heart inspire,
That the world is girt by fire!”

“I cannot now understand,” said Thiodolf to himself, “how Malgherita could help taking more pleasure in the fiery-red Hecla. Etna here only sends out smoke into the air, and yet how joyfully my heart beats at the sight.”

While they were casting anchor before the fertile island, they heard the song of some fishermen who were rowing about, singing words like the following:

“In the red glow of evening
Came o’er the blue sea
The strong northern hero,
So bold and so free.
That his sword is unsparing
Shall Musselmans find;
But to women he ever
Is gentle and kind.”

“When the battle is ended,
The mazes he’ll trace,
Of the song and the dance
With skill and with grace.
He who boldly meets death,
And who fears not to dare,
He also shall vanquish
The hearts of the fair.”

“Would to the gods that it were so,” said Thiodolf with a sigh. “Then would Isolde not have shown herself so ungracious towards me; for as to meeting death firmly, that I think I could do as well as any other. But I must speak to those good fishermen at any rate.”

He beckoned to them; and as at that time there were many true and brave Normans on the island, their countrymen were received without the smallest distrust. The fishermen rowed gladly to the vessel, and prayed the noble lord to rest awhile in a bower which they had made near the shore, of orange and plain branches interwoven.

“Have you any wine there?” asked Thiodolf. “I will pay you well for it, and I greatly like it.”

“Good wine of Syracuse,” answered the fishermen; and without more ado he went with them and some of his companions to land.

As they now drew near to the orange shade, he whispered to his Icelanders, “Children there is no help for it; this time you must go on and make inquiries about Achmet. It is so very pleasant here under the branches. Besides I see bright flasks glisten; and as it is a land of friends, I can well remain behind. Now make yourselves thoroughly well informed; you will surely find me here when you return, if even you are rather long away.”

The soldiers dispersed, and Thiodolf went with his friendly hosts into the leafy bower.

“Children,” he said, as they sat with their glasses before them, “you were singing just now a beautiful song of a brave and courteous Northman. Of what hero were you then speaking?”

“Of the great knight Helmfrid,” answered a fisherman. “He bore himself so gallantly, that not only castles and ships, but also the hearts of the noblest and fairest women could offer him no resistance. And often indeed has he wooed a lovely lady; but when he was just about to hear the sweet consent from her lips, he colored up as if in anger and shame, turned away, and sought some other path.”

“That was well,” said Thiodolf. “I can easily guess at the reason. But if I only knew where he now is, I would bring him a certain shield, and with it lull to rest his wrathful sorrow.”

“You would come too late, dear sir,” answered the fisherman; “at least too late as far as regards his love adventures. The great knight Helmfrid must now be an old man.”

“They say,” added another, “that he is become the head of the northern guard which the rich Greek Emperor keeps at his court, and which is called the troop of the Væringers. He must be there a very mighty and glorious prince.”

“Then he is what becometh him,” said Thiodolf; “and the people who have made him such have not done a little more than their duty. So help me Odin! what a joy it must be to look only for once into the face of such a warrior.”

While they were thus speaking, a blooming

graceful woman joined them. She belonged to the fishermen, and helped to bring wine and pour it out. At length she said to him who was her husband, “These are other and pleasanter guests than the corsairs who were here of late.”

“Corsairs!” and Thiodolf sprang up. “Could you not tell me whether the Arab prince Achmet was their leader?”

“That he was,” answered the woman. “I know that as well as any one. For when they had tormented us long enough, and were just about to sail away, I was called to the ship in order to dress and plait the hair of a beautiful lady.”

“Indeed!” cried Thiodolf. “O thou dear woman, thou art to me like a guiding star, and one very fair and kindly to look upon. Tell me now how went it with the beautiful lady?”

“I plaited her silky tresses,” answered the woman, smiling; “and the while the Arab prince knelt before her on rich cushions, and spoke tender and loving things to her; but I could not hear much of them, for all around were youths and maidens singing to their Moorish instruments. The lady in the midst of these flattering sounds looked like a very queen, so steadily and brightly did her eye look out upon the green of the sea and the blue of heaven.”

“Oh, I know that!” murmured Thiodolf to himself. “Just so did I see her for the first time: as if she were a sunflower, the proud maiden, and naught but the sun was worthy of her gaze. Did you not hear?” continued he, turning to the woman, “whither they were steering?”

“I think, dear sir,” answered she, “that they were going to Africa. At least much was said in the songs, and also in the speech of the Arab prince, of a castle that stands near the ruins of the old Carthage, or perhaps on part of them, and where the true joy of love was to rise up out of a fallen world.”

“I have it!—thanks be to all the gods!” cried Thiodolf, springing up and seizing his horn. “But quickly turning again to the fishermen, he said kindly, “Be not afraid, children, if I blow somewhat loud. I must do it this once, for I have not a moment of time to lose.” And forthwith the thunder of his mighty horn echoed thro’ the flowery valleys. The Icelanders came hastily running back, and he called out to them in his native tongue:

“Wise warriors scour the land,
Aye for tidings seeking;
Their leader, the while, bright wine is quaffing.
“The best of tidings came,
As the goblet he raised,
The secret is known. We must be sailing!”

Then he put two golden rings into the hand of the pretty fisher-wife, who bowed, full of thanks to the noble hero, and hastening to his companions on board, steered full of joyful hopes to the African coast.

The beams of the sinking sun fell with a strange brightness on the ruins of the overthrown Carthage. High grass and fragrant shrubs, which sprang up out of the clefts of the stones, whispered in the sea-breeze, as if repeating with mysterious sounds the marvellous deeds of the past. The voice of a shepherd-boy sang these words from amongst the mounds, which might have been taken for graves:

“When banished Marius, once a Roman chief,
On Carthage’s ruined fragments sat him down,
He thus poured forth his bosom’s sad complaint:
“O changeful life!” he cried; “say, what art thou?
More than a passing shadow—a more sad? Or
Less than the forerunner of grim death?”

A beautiful woman who passed thus then, leaning on the arm of a Moorish prince, trembled painfully at this song, and he immediately took her back to a splendid castle which rose up not far from the spot.

Soon after, Thiodolf came across the plain.—He had landed some hours before; and had, as he was wont, taken upon himself alone to make inquiries in this land of enemies. His answer to some well-meant remonstrances of his companions had been: “In the first place, it makes less noise when I go alone; and then I can get more honor from all that may befall me. Keep quiet in your posts, and let no man interfere with me.”

They well knew what that meant, and did not venture on another word of opposition; remaining on the shore listening and prepared for combat, that they might run at the first sound of the horn, wherever their young leader should call them.

Now, Thiodolf was striding over the runs, he heard the song of the boy as it gave out these words:

“The brilliant green of summer’s days
Changes to autumn’s mournful brown.”

“There is not much harm in that,” said Thiodolf. “Autumn is a beautiful season; but thou to whom it seems so mournful, come out for a while from thy heap of stones. I have to speak with thee.”

The stripling shepherd drew near to the young hero, greeting him courteously.

“Thou fair boy,” said Thiodolf, “canst thou show me the way to old Haroun’s dwelling?”

“I will do so gladly in the morning, dear sir,” answered the boy; “but this evening it is all too fearful around the old building. Besides, many wild beasts cover there in the night-time; and before we could complete our journey, the moon would be already risen high.”

“Leave the moon to rise if she will, dear child,” answered Thiodolf. “Thou art under the safeguard of a strong Northman. Before a hair of thy head can be touched, I must be lying dead on the ground; and that would not be so easily done.”

“I will believe that, thou great, noble man,” said the boy. “I will go with thee; but I must first collect my flock.”

Thiodolf was content with this. The boy drove his flock into a space surrounded with a half fallen wall, closed the entrance carefully with hurdles, and went his way with his knightly companion. They went over the level coast, only passing at times detached lonely buildings, or low brushwood, breaking the sameness of the way, while the deepening shades of evening more and more overcame the power of the setting sun. Clouds of deepest sorrow and longing came at the same time over Thiodolf’s mind. The friends he had left behind in Iceland, and the proud beauty who had fled from him, came before him as if the past and the future, half severe and half alluring. He was tempted to think that all the joy which he was pursuing was but an unreal cloud. His faithful relations in Iceland he might never see again, and never win the love of that glorious maiden. Some chords which the boy drew forth from the lute sounded mournful likewise, and now and then a heavy tear fell from his large blue eyes, almost like the rain-drops which fall from the clouds when a mighty storm is about to burst forth.

When the moon had been long up, and the sands appeared golden yellow in her light, the wanderers perceived a ruined building which rose upon a gentle hill. All around grew thick bushes of shrubs strange to look upon, some of them spreading wide, others shooting up high; every leaf recalling to a stranger how far off is his beloved home, and in what remote, wild country he is wandering.

“Yonder lives old Haroun,” said the boy, and he pointed with his hand towards the moon-lit building; but he suddenly remained in this position as if spell-bound.

“What is the matter, boy?” asked Thiodolf. “Go onwards, or we shall find old Haroun already asleep.”

“Dost thou not see it?” whispered the child, but without moving. “Yonder is covering a fearful lion, ready to spring on us; if we move he will be upon us.”

“Truly the lion must be a bad beast,” answered Thiodolf. “If only I could see him!” And cautiously looking through the bushes, he said at length, “Look now, there is a beautiful great dog, quite gold-colored; he shall help us in our chase.” But as he was about to call the dog, it sprang fiercely upon him. “Come on,” cried Thiodolf; but at the same moment he felt his round shield almost torn from his arm, and the creature’s teeth in his side. “Dost thou so love to bite, sirrah?” he cried, and let his battle-ax fall on the beautiful head of the beast, dividing it into two bloody halves, so that the wild aggressor fell to the ground with a loud, far-echoing cry, and then stretching out his limbs in death, immediately expired. “Pity for the beautiful, noble dog!” said Thiodolf, compassionately. “I have never seen so large a one. But why was the creature so ill-conditioned?—And now, where shall we find the lion?”

The astonished boy had difficulty in convincing him that there lay the lion, and that it was one of the most fearful that could be met with on the African coasts.

“So, so,” said Thiodolf, bending down to observe the fallen beast. “So that is a lion!—Well, it is a very beautiful and powerful creature; but I can tell thee I had pictured to myself it would be something more.”

An old man, with a venerable beard and high turban, had approached them. “Could you not tell me, my children, who killed here this mighty lion? I know very well that it may have been a thunderbolt. But how came it that I heard nothing of it, and yet that the fearful death-cry of the beast rang through my chambers?”

“Thunderbolt?” answered Thiodolf. “Yes, if you call this a thunderbolt.” He held his battle-ax towards the old man, and added, “But you are mistaken.”

“And yet I might well nigh call it a thunderbolt,” said the old man, now looking at the edge of the ax and now at the animal’s wound; and the boy whispered in Thiodolf’s ear that this was the rich old Haroun, to whom they were going.

“Dear Haroun,” said Thiodolf kindly, “I have to give thee a greeting from thy friend Bertram.”

The old man looked at him, his eyes sparkling

with joy, and said: “Truly, thou valiant youth, thou hast the look of one who may be the friend of my friend, and thou beseekest thyself as such; but yet I must ask for another assurance.”

Then Thiodolf held the seal-ring before his eyes; and forthwith Haroun grasped the hand of his guest with youthful warmth and youthful strength, and led him up into the building, promising at the same time hospitality and a night’s lodging to the shepherd-boy, so that in the morning he could return in safety of day light to his flock.

The two men sat opposite to each other in a great hall, painted with figures of very ancient date, and talked over their business. Between them stood a table covered with rich fruits, and a flask of precious wine shone before Thiodolf, who diligently applied himself to it. Faithful to discharge the commission of his friend, he settled about the transfer of the jewels before he began to ask after Isolde and Achmet.

“The bold prince lately returned home with a wondrously fair woman,” answered Haroun; “—and a succession of feasts has been held in his splendid castle. I will give thee a counsel, dear friend. Go thou to-morrow, towards evening, to the castle as a player on the lute—thou canst strike its strings?”

“Not much worse than I can wield a sword,” answered Thiodolf, nodding confidently.

“That is well,” proceeded the old man;—“then that will be the best way to search out how matters stand there, and then to make plans accordingly.”

“I must say one thing to thee first. If I can go there as I am now, so let it be. But to disguise myself as a Musselman, that I can do neither now nor ever. I will live as a Northman, I will die as a Northman; and no single moment shall come between in which it can be said that I have passed for aught else.”

“Thou art a strange man,” said Haroun, with some displeasure, “and takest too much thought. When the alchemist can change metals for ever, why should a man be scared at putting on another garb for two or three hours?”

“With an Icelander, such tricks are not so lightly played,” answered Thiodolf indignantly.

“Well, well,” said the old man kindly; “it must, then, be done after another fashion. In the castle they much love all that is called song or melody; and the gates would open all the quicker before the wonderful appearance of an Icelandic minstrel.”

“Yes,” said Thiodolf; “that is the way with the doors when Icelanders knock at them; if good words cannot do, good blows can.”

At this moment he perceived a large figure painted on the wall in vivid colors, on which the lamp, as he turned it in order more conveniently to help himself, threw a bright light. “That must be a very old painting,” he asked.

“Truly it must be of the time of Carthage,” was the answer, “for our law forbids us to make such images.”

“That is a strange law,” cried Thiodolf, “which would forbid man to make beautiful images, in which other people will find pleasure for many hundred years afterwards. If I am not mistaken, I would never let myself be so hindered.”

“The prophet,” answered Haroun, “says that all such figures will one day, before the judgment-seat of God, ask of those who made them souls for the pictured bodies.”

“That sounds very serious,” said Thiodolf; “but yet I think, if the pictures are of the right sort, there is nothing to be said against them.—But now, my noble host, declare to me what those figures on the wall may mean—the young knight, who stands before an altar, solemnly stretching out his hands towards heaven, and the old chief near him, who appears as if he were giving him grave warning.”

“There was, in the old Carthaginian times, a very great hero, who had yet a far greater hero for his son. And now, because the city of Carthage had such a strife with the city of Rome that it was easy to see that one of them must be overthrown, the old hero made the young hero, whose glorious and unequalled greatness he well foresaw, take an oath that he would be an enemy to all Romans, and know of no reconciliation with them till death. The young hero joyfully took the oath, and kept it fast through his whole life; so that the great city of Rome was well nigh swept away from the earth before his wrath.”

“I like that well,” said Thiodolf; “and if the people on the wall both look somewhat strange and harsh, and very passionate in their whole appearance, one can yet see that they are of the right good sort. Such an oath, and his weapons first put into his hand—it is very beautiful; and I would fain that something like it could now be found in the world. But not an oath only against the Romans, or against this or that one in particular, but against all that is bad, and for all that is good.”

“The Christians have such a kind of knightly oath amongst them,” said Haroun; “but he who would learn it must first be baptized.”

“That is a pity,” cried Thiodolf; “I would else have taken it.”

At the same time, he was about to offer to his host a parting cup; and he then first remarked that Haroun let no drop of wine pass his lips.

“Why is that now?” asked he. “Your law has not forbidden you that likewise?”

“Yes,” said Haroun, “our law does forbid it; and the great Mahommed has given us an example of obedience. He could lift himself to heaven in his ecstasies without the help of a drop of the intoxicating liquor.”

“Mahommed!” repeated Thiodolf thoughtfully to himself, “that must be the Mahommed of whom Malgherita was asking in the spring. No, all the gods be praised! he belongs not to us.—It was well if he was so full of inspiration in himself; but he should not have forbidden the joyous wine to other brave people!”

“Mock not!” interrupted Haroun, very gravely.

“Nay, truly I am not mocking,” answered Thiodolf, good-humoredly. “I honor greatly the hero who could despise so precious an earthly gift, and yet, as you say, could soar up to heaven. Only I do not understand him well; and also I am not the man to imitate him.” So saying, he emptied a newly brought flask almost at a draught, and wished good night to his host.

When he was on his bed he could hear the sounds of a harp, and Haroun singing from the flat roof of a building below him. The song spoke of the joys of Mahommed’s paradise, and the many lovely maidens who were there to greet the heroes with ever-changing love. But in Thiodolf’s heart was the one Isolde, whom he hoped next day to recover; and he fell asleep, smiling, with her image before his closing eyes.

CHAPTER XXV.

A part of the following day was spent in arranging and putting together Bertram’s jewels, so that Thiodolf could carry them away with him as soon as he had gained his object.

“The only thing to be considered is, that you dwell so far from Achmet’s castle. Perchance I may succeed by sudden unforeseen stroke, and then I shall have to come here again; it may be, to stake my prize on a second throw.”

“Hearken, friend,” said Haroun, after some reflection, “I believe we should do best if you take the whole packet with you. Bertram has chosen your brave arm for the defence of his treasure, and I think you will take it in safety through everything.”

“Assuredly,” answered Thiodolf. “At the same time, Bertram would never wish his jewels to be as fetters to my undertaking. At the worst I will make him tell me what they are worth, and I will somewhere take their full value for him. There are many precious stones in the world. But none shall easily take these from me; give them to me.”

And then, with a lute of the old man’s under his arm, he took again the way that he had passed yesterday, and reached Achmet’s castle in the cool of the evening.

“It seems pleasant here,” said he to himself, and I wish that all things may go peaceably, so that I need not sprinkle the smooth, polished walls with blood.”

But as he was about to go in, it struck him that his faithful companions might be missing him too long, and perhaps at nightfall might come inland to seek for him. So he went up a hillock whence his ships could be seen, and blew on his horn, but in slow, measured tones which spoke of peace and waiting.

At the first sound of the well-known horn, all the Northmen sprang to arms; but understanding the call to rest and stand still, they laid aside their arms again with sighs, and seated themselves in a circle to repeat old legends to each other.

In the meanwhile Thiodolf once more approached the noble building, and was hospitably admitted at his knock and call. He asked for the lord of the castle, and a handsome man in Moorish garb came to him out of one of the beautiful alleys in the garden, and made himself known as such.

Then Thiodolf thought to do as Haroun had advised, and to begin the conversation with a song. He powerfully grasped the strings of the lute, but two strings broke in the rough pull; he pressed the delicate instrument yet bolder, and the wood-work flew asunder. He flung it angrily on the ground, and broke it entirely with his foot; then looked at the lord of the castle with some embarrassment.

“My dear guest,” said the Moor with a hearty laugh, “what dost thou then want with me?”

“What do I want?” answered Thiodolf; “I wanted, indeed, to play before you, but see, that thing under my feet was altogether too tender, and broke in two.”

“That was unfair of the lute when you touched it so delicately,” said the other, still laughing; and he invited his guest, from whom he expected much amusement, to follow him to a joyous evening meal in the palace.