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THIODOLF THE ICELANDER.

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CHAPTER XXIII.

In the blooming land of Tuscany, one beautiful evening, there sat several shepherds together under some shady trees; while the sea, in the golden light of evening, glittered before them. The eldest of them touched a guitar, to whose tones another sang the following song:

"The Lady Laura's castle gray
Stands lonely on the steep;
Owl, bat, and swallow, flap their wings
Around the towers, while reptile things
Along the pavement creep.

Once belted knights, with gallant grace,
Here held the gay tourney;
And couched the lance in mimic strife;
How did all pleasure and all life
So quickly pass away?

The bold Moors came, well armed and fierce,
In ships that court the breeze;
Warder and watch before them fell.
Oh, say! who caught the infidel
The fairest prize to seize?

The sweetest flower is pluck'd away
From out our summer crown;
Put hand to lance, and beel to spur—
Knights, ride forth and rescue her,
For Tuscany's renown."

"And so was it done!" said a third. "Truly our knights rode from here—but one went to Florence, another to Sienna, a third to Pisa;—and while our nobility there showed their prowess, and took their pleasure with their own and the burgher's blood, our coasts remained open to the sea-robbers. See how many beautiful castles shine all around on our heights, and all stand empty as the castle of the ravished Countess Laura!"

"Were but the Marquis Pietro of Castel-Franco here!" said the one who had sung.—"He was always the mirror of our chivalry; he would never have suffered the outrage, more especially because the Countess Laura was the wife of his late cousin."

"It is still to be proved," answered the other, "whether he could have done anything in the matter. Thou must remember how the Count Paolo died. The unknown knight in Moorish garb, who pierced him mortally with a lance in the tourney held in his own castle-court, appeared to all the guests mysterious, and almost like a wizard; and the fair Countess herself was not free from all suspicion. It is said that it was in displeasure against her that Marquis Pietro went forth on his voyages."

"He may have had what motive he pleased," said the old shepherd; "evil enough has his absence brought to us. Ah! how mournfully Castel-Franco looks down upon the mountains! It seems far more like a ruin than a castle, although all the stones are firm knit together; for the soul has departed from the castle with its lords. Let it but for a short time longer remain desolate and shut up, and brambles will shoot forth from the stones, and branches wave from the towers instead of banners. Yes, it appears as if already rampart, gate, and wall, had fallen down together, and I was seeing curious travelers wandering among the ruin."

All were silent in melancholy thought, when suddenly one of the circle started up in terror—"May all the saints have mercy!" he cried out. A Norman pirate-ship comes towards us with swelling sails."

They all looked, and saw the threatening appearance; and while one called for arms, another urged to send for help, and a third proposed to drive the flocks farther inland, the old shepherd said, "Be not too hasty, children, with your needless terrors. You may see that the ship bears a flag of peace. Only go to meet her as friends, and all will be well."

Some still were doubtful, and thought that the flag of peace was only to draw them on to their destruction. But the old shepherd reproved this with solemn words, reminding them that the vessel bore nothing of a Musselman appearance, but a Norman; and the Normans, it was well known, played no tricks with their flags and banners.

Then all did after the old man's advice; and they did well, for the strangers had been sent on before by Thiodolf, to spread through castle and village the news of the approach of Pietro and Malgherita.

A joyful stir was forthwith seen on all the coast. The maidens came forth with wreaths of flowers; the wives with choice fruits, and bright veils floating in the air; their fathers and husbands, whether husbandmen, shepherds, or hunters, with their sharp polished scythes, and crooks, and weapons. The soldiers who were still in the neighborhood, having been wont to fight under the banner of the ancient race of Castel-Franco, likewise gathered together, and went down to the coast to give a joyful welcome. The bells of the villages around rang out, and the sound of many guitars joined to them like the joyful notes of spring birds. But only those who bear already in their minds the sweet summer sounds of

the south, can imagine the delicious songs of the women and girls, now sportive, now touching.

The travelers landed; and while Pietro by his courteous knightly bearing, and Malgherita by her beauty and gentle grace, won all hearts, Thiodolf walked beside them as in a waking dream. Now his look was fixed on the deep-green tops of the trees, which looked so fair against the bright sky with their reddening fruits; then he strode on over the rich grass carpet;—and then again paused at some graceful villa and dazzling garden. With a happy smile and a sigh, he said to himself, "Truly, Uncle Nefiof told no falsehood when he spoke of this glorious land of the South; but he described it rather stiffly and coldly, the poor man!"

"And is it only here that you first find all that you fancied?" said Malgherita smiling.—"You will make me angry if you put my sweet native Provence so far below Tuscany."

But he answered kindly: "In Provence, dear Malgherita, I thought but of thee, and—let all the gods bear the blame—much, far too much, of Isolde, so evil-minded, but ah! so wondrously fair."

As they thus spoke, they reached the castle, where already the traces of neglect and desolation had almost disappeared before the joyful activity of all. Sunshine lay on every face; only a momentary but very deep shade passed over the features of the noble knight when he was reminded of the fair widow of his cousin, the Countess Laura, who had been carried away by pirates from Barbary. Thiodolf thought that his sadness was caused by this outrage, and was about to promise his help to deliver her, when the Marquis said: "Trouble not thyself about the cast-away. May my eyes never see her again!"

"Well," answered Thiodolf, "that wish may very easily be fulfilled; and if it please thee, it pleases me likewise."

Therewith he sat down, laughing, beside Pietro and Malgherita, at the sumptuous table, covered with noble wines and beautiful fruits; and contrary to his custom, he threw away his clattering sword Throng-piercer, saying that all here was much too bright and joyous for any to dare talk of cold steel.

With almost childlike joy Thiodolf ate of the golden fruits of the south, and let the sparkling wine flow into the polished glass, and then trickle in slow drops on his tongue. "Sing, Malgherita, sing then," he prayed the while, "a little song to thy mandoline; and, dear people, open the window, that the balmy air may pour in from without, and the rays of the golden moon. My children, your land is unmistakably glorious. I will win for myself a castle or two in the neighborhood, so that we may always dwell together."

But in the midst of all this bright feasting and enjoyment he arose gravely from his seat, looked out at the stars, buckled on his clanking sword, and said: "It is time, I must, before all, get Isolde out of the Provencal castle; and so, ye dear joyous friends, good night."

All endeavors to withhold him from the voyage were in vain. He blew his war-horn at the open window till the singing birds were silenced by it as by a thunder-clap; and forthwith the Icelanders were seen in busy tumult hastening over the moonlit meadows down to the sea, preparing their ships for departure, and pouring forth strange songs never before heard in Tuscany. The dwellers in the land, men, women, and children, went after them in astonishment, but lovingly and confidently.

In the meanwhile Pietro had made a sign to the company to leave the hall; and when alone with Thiodolf and Malgherita, he said, "Since thou wilt leave us so quickly, brother-in-arms, I am bound to give thee an account of what has passed with respect to the widow of my cousin, the fair Laura, who has been carried away; so that thou mayest not deem that any unknighthly feeling has hindered me from hastening after the ravisher."

"Many foolish thoughts go, indeed, through my head," answered Thiodolf; "but never one so foolish as that, I hope."

"Distance is a bad pleader," said Pietro, "and it seems to me as if we shall not meet again for a long time."

"That may well happen," said Thiodolf; "for I should not willingly return to you without Isolde, and it may be that it will be somewhat hard to win her. But for what thou sayest about distance, I understand it not; it sounds to me very mistaken. Thou knowest how dear to my heart Uncle Nefiof and Aunt Gunhilda have become since they have been so far away from me. Thou knowest, perchance, that they were not very beautiful to look upon. Ah! beloved Pietro, distance has done no injury to the proud, lovely Isolde. But if thou hast somewhat to relate to me, say on, in the name of all the gods; I love to hear stories."

And Pietro spoke as follows: "As the choicest of the Tuscan chivalry strove to win the hand of the beautiful Laura, many wondered when the

fair prize fell to the share of my noble and rich, but somewhat aged, cousin Paolo. I myself could the less understand it, because I knew that Laura lived wholly in the bygone world of the Greeks and Romans, collecting around her their statues, parchments and other remains, of which the good Count Paolo had never thought in his whole life. Be it as it may, Count Paolo led the fair lady to the altar, and both lived together for some time in great joy and much festivity. There came at length a young minstrel to the castle; he bore on his arm a lyre, such as the old Greeks used to strike; he sang very deliciously, and greatly pleased the Lady Laura in his flowing Moorish dress, though people in general held him for an unbaptized Moor."

"Unbaptized!" interrupted Thiodolf; "she might have loved him for all that. I myself am unbaptized. But a Moor! Shame upon her! The creatures are as black as night to look upon."

Pietro told him, smiling, that many noble Arabs dwelt on the Spanish and African coasts who were of no darker complexion than Italians, and who were only called Moors because they had come from the ancient land of Mauritania.

This satisfied Thiodolf, and Pietro continued: "But the minstrel did not at all please Count Paolo, and he once drove him from the castle in a stormy night. The exact circumstances are not known; only this is known for certain; that the Lady Laura behaved as if nothing important had happened, and showed herself so sweet and loving to the old Lord that she won him to give a splendid tournament in his castle court on her birthday, at which he himself appeared in the lists most richly attired, and bearing himself right manfully. But our gay sport soon turned into sorrowful earnest. An unknown knight, in strange attire, who tilted after an unwonted fashion, struck the noble host with such wonderful dexterity through the vizor, that Paolo at once fell lifeless on the sand; while the veil of the lady, waving in sign of peace, forbade to us combatants any outbreak of our quickly kindled wrath. Afterwards, when we would have summoned the murderous stranger to justice and judgment, he had vanished in an incomprehensible manner.—And for many months our intercourse with the widow remained doubtful, and unsatisfactory, and uncertain. Neither was vengeance to be taken, nor friendship and confidence kept up. Then I took my resolution and went forth, forsaking castle, and native land, and kindred, seeking for myself an untroubled happiness in foreign countries, and a more joyous life. Gracious Heaven has granted me this in Malgherita's arms; and the unworthy beauty has been carried beyond our reach by a fortunate storm."

"It will not end well with that woman," said Thiodolf. "An old proverb of our country says, 'Cast away from thee guilt and curse, or thou wilt never draw down to thee the falcon, happiness, from the clouds.'"

Then he stretched out his hand lovingly to his friends to take leave, and went out of the hall bidding them not to follow. "For," said he, "we are all three, I feel it, somewhat sad; and we should but drive the sting of parting as many times into our hearts as there are steps from here to the sea-shore. The knife had better go in sharp once for all, and quickly come out again, and then the wound will heal soon and healthfully. Good night, children; I love you from my very soul."

He was out of the hall, and Malgherita and Pietro looked at each other pale and sorrowful. But on Malgherita's face lay a far other pale-ness than that which the sadness of parting brings. Pietro marked it, but dared not ask the cause, for a like mysterious feeling stirred within himself.

"Didst thou hear the saying with which Thiodolf parted from us?" said Malgherita after a time, gravely and solemnly; "Cast away guilt and curse, or thou canst never draw down to thee the falcon, happiness, from the clouds."—Pietro we shall never draw him down to us—at least not so without trouble, as we had boldly thought."

Pietro would have answered her with soothing words, but his tongue seemed powerless. At length he brought himself to ask whether they had not had enough of trouble and hardship in their shipwreck, and their winter in Iceland, and many other things that they had suffered; but Malgherita answered, "Deceive not thyself. No portion of our hearts has yet been touched, and that must come assuredly. Hitherto fate has but mocked us, and sounded her trumpet to prepare us for a fearful dance. But our undutifulness and the wound of my father call for more. Thou knowest, Pietro, that I bear a child in my bosom; and does not the thunder of that mysterious father's curse roll in thy ears also?"

"Let us, then, but suffer together!" answered Pietro; and clasping each other, they sank down in prayer, weeping hot tears.

The while was heard from the coast the joyful song of the Icelanders, who were now gaily setting sail in the bright moonlight.

After some days of prosperous voyage Thiodolf cast anchor before the coast of Provence. He had found out a shady creek, where he was the more secure, as hardly any but bold Icelanders would have chosen this difficult spot for landing. With the choicest of his troops he ascended a neighboring hill, whence they could see almost into the streets of the fair city of Marseilles, and also have in sight the rather more distant castle of the great baron. Thiodolf seemed to be forming a plan of attack for the castle;—but at length he said: "We must know first how matters stand. Therefore will I go and make inquiries in the city, which, besides, I shall be glad to see nearer."

Some of the soldiers put before him the danger in which he would place himself after all that he had just before attempted on this shore, and begged that he would rather send one of them. But of this he would hear nothing, saying that it had never been the way of his race to keep back from any kind of danger. And when two of the Icelanders pleaded their age and experience against him, he cried out, with kindling eyes: "You are come with me to help me, not to direct me!" whereat they all remained humbly silent. Then he became gentle again, and said, soothing them kindly: "The people yonder will not eat me. But if I perish there, and you hear that they have overcome me by numbers, then do not let the city escape; overthrow it till what is lowest becomes highest; and take heed that a mighty grave for Thiodolf be raised, which may be seen far out at sea, like a high mountain."

Then he gave them a friendly greeting, and walked gaily towards the brilliant city. But before he reached it, a path which wound through flowery fields, and which he followed, marvelling at its trimness and evenness, led him to a fair meadow where a joyous drinking party sat under shady branches, and music sounded merrily in the sunny air, while beautiful maidens and youths were dancing on the smooth sward. This much pleased the good-humored Thiodolf, and he would gladly have joined them, but he knew not how to set about it. He often thought of taking part with either the drinking or the dancing party, but he feared that he should frighten them; and he would on no account have troubled this pleasant company. A few, indeed, looked wondering at the stalwart gigantic form, and at his strange head-gear; but those who dwell in the rich merchant city were too much accustomed to strangers from all the known parts of the world to dwell long upon any one; and so Thiodolf stood solitary and thoughtful in the midst of the gay rout, leaning upon his spear.

At length his eyes fell upon a pretty building, before whose door was hung a garland; and many people were hastening in with empty flasks, and coming out with full ones. "Aha!" said he to himself, "yonder must be the source of all these good things; and we must try how we too can get a drink of it."

He walked towards it, and asked a smiling maiden, who was giving out food and drink to many passers-by, whether he might dare to join the guests.

"Wherefore not, good Sir Giant?" answered she, playfully; "if you have but money enough."

"Money?" asked Thiodolf; "what has that to do with giving hospitality?"

"Very much," answered the maiden, laughing: "the host gives his gifts for money; and if you have no money, his gifts are not for you."

"I would not be such a host," said Thiodolf, shaking his head. "But I can get over the difficulty. I have truly no money with me; but yet—can I have for this two flasks of wine, and of the right kind—fiery, sparkling, and bright?"

He broke a gold clasp from his cloak, and held it towards the maiden.

"Ten flasks, if so please you, and more," answered she, bending low, and quickly seizing the clasp. "Will it please you to drink within, or under a bower?"

"Under a bower, if it may be," said Thiodolf. "And as for ten flasks—say, bring at first only five, but let them be somewhat large; we can then see about more."

He was very speedily served. And he said, letting himself sink down in the fragrant bower, "It is truly somewhat foolish to be a guest after this fashion; but I should lie if I said it was unpleasant."

He had already almost emptied one flask when he first noticed that he was not alone in the bower. A little good-natured-looking man, in very respectable attire, was sitting opposite to him, and looking at him with keen eyes; but there was so much kindness about his friendly mouth, that it always seemed ready to explain or excuse what the sharp eyes might discover.—Thiodolf, who willingly allowed himself to be looked through, because all within him was pure and bright as a mirror, looked on his part at the stranger with a smile, nodded at him, and said, "It is very pleasant here!"

"Yes, truly," answered the friendly man; "and I am very glad that you feel that so strongly."

"Let us drink together," said Thiodolf, and the stranger accepted; but he brought out two flasks of a far more costly wine.

It was soon made known, in their confidential talk, that Thiodolf's companion was a merchant of Marseilles, who, during great part of the year, was forced by his business to live in foreign and often inhospitable lands; but then that only made his repose afterwards the sweeter and fuller.

"To our good brotherhood!" cried Thiodolf, making their glasses touch; "for, in fact, dear sir, we are both of the same trade; only that you commonly give money for the goods of foreign lands, and I thrusts of spears, and blows of swords, and blood."

"Well," said the merchant smiling, "there may still be some little difference; for men freely give up their wares to us, and according to a settled agreement. But, on the other hand, you often repay with kindly help, or a joyful victory; and that is so noble a coin, that none other on earth may be compared to it. I, and my like, may gladly agree to the brotherhood you speak of."

"And arms!" said Thiodolf. "You use arms on your voyages?"

"Never without necessity," said the merchant; "but never without courage."

"That is right!" cried Thiodolf, and he seized his companion's hand in his powerful grasp.—"Dear, brave man, it is easy to see that you may be spoken to without thoughtful reserve. Boldly out with our words as becomen valiant men. Tell me, in the name of all the gods, how goes it now in the castle of the great baron?"

"One of your countrymen has but lately made sad havoc there," answered the merchant, and he shook his head and looked keenly in the eyes of the questioner.

"So! has he?" replied Thiodolf, rather hurt. "But tell me now what has come of it?"

"What well nigh must come of it," said the merchant. "The proud and lofty mind of the baron has become bewildered by his wrathful sorrow. Neither by day nor by night will he come out of the vaulted passage which leads to the castle from the park, and which was always looked upon by him and most of his household as a mysterious and ill-fated spot. There he wanders about with an old heavy banner, and strikes against the painted walls to find the hollow place where the prophecy of his ancestor, Huldibert, lies concealed. That prophecy he thinks will throw light upon the fearful destiny which has robbed him of both his daughters."

"Both his daughters! Both?" asked the astonished Thiodolf. "Isolde but left her home for half an hour, and has long ago returned to it."

"You are misinformed," answered the merchant. "Isolde has been forcibly carried off by that Northman; probably at the desire of Malgherita, who but just before had sprung up again like an apparition."

"Yes," said Thiodolf, striking the table till flasks and glasses clattered together, "that I know well. But she made her escape from him, and is long since with her father."

"Dear sir," answered the merchant smiling, "you are in error, however strong assertion your list may make on the table. A wild Northman, who had been both seen and felt at the castle-gate—for a porter is now lying in bed half dead from a blow of his fist—"

"He must have been a proper fool of a porter!" interrupted Thiodolf. "A little bit of a blow."

"Be it as it may with him," continued the merchant; "but this Northman had afterwards a fight with the baron's troops on the shore, and escaped back to his two vessels, to which he had undoubtedly before contrived to convey Isolde."

"Nay, sir, that he had not contrived," cried Thiodolf with a displeased laugh; "and more the pity."

"You contradict strangely," said the merchant.

"Oh, sir," answered Thiodolf, "he who contradicts strangely is yourself. None can know the story so well as I; for I am that wild fellow of whom it pleases you to speak."

"Is it so? that makes indeed a difference," said the merchant, laughing heartily; but soon falling into grave thought, he looked down silently for a while, and asked at length, "In heaven's name, have you then no knowledge where Isolde may now be?"

"It was that which I would ask you," cried Thiodolf. "And you may give me the information with a very safe conscience; for I have no other thought than that of the reconciliation of the whole house; and therefore it was that I wished to carry off Isolde, and even to marry her."

"Ah, good friend," said the merchant, smiling, "that last many men have already heartily wished."

"But not so honorably and so honestly as I," said Thiodolf; "I would wager that."

"And I too," answered the merchant; "tho' perchance you would set about it somewhat strangely. Thus much is certain: you alone can