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THIODOLF THE ICELANDER.

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CHAPTER XLIII.

As Thiodolf, some days after, came to an early meal in Pietro's house, Malghera said, "Seest thou well, Thiodolf, how no words of the children of men fall to the ground; how none of their dreams vanish into formless air, for the Fates listen sharply. Dost thou remember how thy song at the window, and Mount Hecla's fire, so terrified me? It happened only because I was always dreaming that my father's castle was in ashes through my heedlessness. Now all is come true, though indeed in another sense. But yet I am still the one from whose hand the first spark fell on the mysterious building."

"Then the torch which kindled it flew out of my hand," answered Thiodolf. "Isolde's disappearance caused all the wild confusion. Had I only waited! But I rushed madly on, and brought down on our heads that hall in which we might have sat peaceful and blessed together."

Malghera wept in silence, and Thiodolf said kindly, "Nay, do not look so very mournful, noble lady. The edifice of our happiness is not so altogether overthrown, and I think I shall find light by which to recover some of our buried treasures. I have indeed forsworn that mean—it must be said—unknightly way of seeking. But see you not there in the picture the pale Princess Theodora. I will ask her openly and honorably what she knows of Isolde: that is again—no solemn oath."

And forthwith he turned his steps to the palace, where he was again invited for the noonday meal.

The eyes of the blooming Zoe found him out amid a crowd of chiefs and knights; he felt this, though he saw it not, and he pressed the more rapidly to the elderly Zoe, thus time urged also by the wish of speaking to her sister Theodora. He was about to question the latter, but the pale face looked at him gravely and coldly, almost as if threatening; he could not but think of the Secret Helper, and he remained silent.

After the dinner, he at length found courage to whisper to her, "For the sake of all that is dear to you, noble Princess Theodora, refuse me not an answer to one single question."

Theodora looked at him with a deep, cold sternness, saying, "Impious heathen man, return to thy cares of this world, and leave me. But if thou art so eager and bold to question, go to the ruins of the castle near Mar-eilles, in the night season, when none can disturb thee, and look deep into thine own wild heart. I deem that thou wilt there receive an answer, though purchase a fearful one."

Shuddering, Thiodolf said involuntarily, "Art thou, then, the awful Secret Helper?"

"Helper?" replied Theodora, "truly not thy Helper." And she turned from him and left the hall. Soon after, the whole company separated, and Thiodolf, troubled and bewildered, wandered through the manifold halls of the palace. At length he felt surprised that he did not reach the open air, and then first became aware that he had lost his way. The sentinels, supposing that the chief, honored and favored of the emperor, came on some weighty business, had opened the doors without breaking their reverent silence; so that he suddenly found himself in a part of the palace quite unknown to him.

A sweet sound reached him, now as of gold and silver bells, now as of warbling birds; and when he opened the nearest door, he stood beneath the wide-spread branches of a golden palmtree; golden birds sat amidst its leaves and sang; but at the bottom of the stem lay two large golden lions, who glared strangely with their eyes, and Thiodolf involuntarily laid his hand on his sword.

Then a side-door opened; the fair young Zoe was seen in a chamber filled with rich flowers and shrubs, and smiling kindly on the young Northman, she said, "Ah, how can your brave hand be about to injure those golden figures, the fairest ornament of the palace? But I ought rather to ask you how have you reached my apartments? Without doubt you bring here some important message from the emperor; be that as it may, you are welcome, knightly hero."

"Then," answered Thiodolf, as he bent with all that grace which he had quickly learned from the knights of the court, "lady, you will forgive me if I do not answer exactly as I should. I am not a messenger of the emperor; I have but lost my way in the labyrinths of this palace;—and standing here beneath the golden branches, the golden animals near me, and before me the image of all womanly beauty and loveliness, I cannot but feel as if, having gone astray in some enchanted wood, I was called upon to deliver the fair lady from her lion-guardians."

Zoe smiled at him graciously as she shook her head. "Strange man!" she said. "But now, being here, you shall sing to me the lute."—She beckoned him to come into the room fragrant with flowers.

Then he sat down on some silken cushions

near the lovely and dreaded maiden; and before he had time for thought, she had placed a lute in his arms; his hand wandered dreamily over the strings; and as Zoe commanded him for this time to leave the austere Northern tunes, and to sing in Italian measure, the following song fell from his lips:

"Thro' arched corridors, thro' unknown ways, The knight's enchanted pathway lies; Around him torches dazzling blaze, Showing to his bewildered eyes Fair beckoning forms on either side; He follows a mysterious guide.

"O wanderer, speak! and say how far A wondrous might shall lead thee? Are rest and peace yet very far? Oh! whither dost thou speed thee? Do I myself the mystery know? Nay, hoping, doubting, on I go. My own desires must be repressed, And I must wound my rebel breast.

"Thou came to a chamber green, Where sang the birds in sunshine bright; And golden lions there were seen, Who threw abrupt glances on the knight; And close to these a tower he found, Whence came a lute's melodious sound. Alluring life! here let me rest! He cried, and pleasure filled his breast; But Isolde will not grant him rest!"

"Forgive me, lovely princess," he said, laying the lute at Zoe's feet. "You can hear a thousand better singers than the perplexed and mournful one now before you."

He bent humbly and left the room. He saw well that Zoe covered her eyes with her fair hand, and he listened the quicker through halls and vestibules, and down stairs; and not till he stood beneath the starry sky did he look freely upwards as he went.

He now became aware that a sound which he had taken for the echo of his own footsteps was that of some one following him. Philip, a lively page whom he had often noticed with pleasure among the attendants of the emperor, stood behind him. As Thiodolf, perturbed by many things, turned towards him with some vexation, the youth bowed low to him, and said, "Sir, dear noble Sir, do not look upon me as a spy, or any one the least resembling so unworthy a creature. Knightly and renowned parents have brought me up, and love and honor now draw me after your steps. Oh! grant me the one favor that I may be your shield-bearer when you go forth against the Bulgarians in the coming spring."

"In the name of all the gods, dear boy, so let it be," answered Thiodolf; "it pleases me well. But thou knowest that the emperor's consent is first of all necessary;—and then, thou kind and loving child, we Væringers ride hard, we fling the spear mightily, we pass nobly thro' streams and floods. Thou must therefore water our ranks to learn what thou yet lackest."

Philip smiled, and only answered, "I have then your word, dear master."

And as Thiodolf bent his head in acquiescence, the boy sprang back into the palace, giving a soldier's salute. "There then is another!" said Thiodolf to himself; and looked after the boy as he sorrowfully shook his head. Then he smiled at the sound of his own words, and went on. "Another! what other did I mean? He is a youth! a joyous, hopeful being, to whom all around seems bright as morning's dawn! Am I, then —?"

That feeling of inward grief which often makes youth give place to approaching manhood smote with sudden conclusive strength on Thiodolf's heart as he paused. He pressed both hands firmly on his eyes, and stood as if stunned.

"This is a strange bewildering climate," he said at length, and rattled his weapons, as if to awaken himself, and was about to take quickly the way homewards.

Just then the Church of St. Sephris, with her many bright lights, shone upon him in the growing darkness; soft, holy strains floated over the dark earth from the glorious edifice. A solemn service was there celebrating for the repose of a long-deceased emperor, according to an ancient custom. "If this were morning twilight, instead of evening twilight, that shining church might be likened to the white Christ when he stood by the sea of Tiberias and gently called his disciples to him. He did not indeed, perchance, look so splendid, but much rather mild and full of meaning, like moonlight. Ah! what must it have been to be allowed to gaze on him!" The sweet sadness arose in him which this recollection was wont to awaken; he walked slowly and solemnly towards the church, and softly entered the peaceful building.

The service was just ending; and when it quite ceased, two chairs of state approached the tomb, according to the custom; they sang, without the accompaniment of instruments, the following hymn of questions and responses:

"Who upon Tiberias' sea Stands in raiment white as snow? He whose eyes have moistened been For human sorrow, human woe. "Oar sorrow?"—"Eternal sorrow." "Who destroys eternal woe?" "He who on Tiberias' shore Stands in raiment white as snow."

TOGETHER. "Man, whenever thine eye is wet Thinking of eternal woe, He is gently calling thee From Tiberias' tranquil sea, Clothed in raiment white as snow."

Thiodolf, during this hymn, which so brought home to his heart the most touching image which he knew, had sunk on his knees, weeping bitterly, and all present were edified by his devotion.

When the song had ended, and the lights one after another were extinguished, he was turning to go out; then a noble matron, with much feeling and reverence, held towards him the holy water; but Thiodolf having already seen how it was applied, answered, "Trouble not yourself, too, gracious lady! Alas, I understand but a thousandth part of the white Christ, and I dare not demean myself as one of his peaceful flock."

The lady turned away in surprise; and a man, whom Thiodolf knew to be the chamberlain, Michael Androgenes, said to some bystanders, "I have long thought that he was no Christian—he never seemed to me like one."

But Thiodolf turned and said: "You judged quite right, good Sir; but I wish that you had not let your unpleasant voice be heard in this solemn moment."

CHAPTER XLIV. Some days after, the emperor summoned Thiodolf to his apartment at an unusual hour. The reverend old monarch sat at a table, on which lay a large open Bible.

"What thinkest thou of this book, young man?" he asked. "I knew from the first that thou didst not belong to its firmest believers, but now one of my attendants informs me that thou rejectest the faith entirely and openly."

"Mighty king, the answer is somewhat difficult," replied Thiodolf. "I know not yet what that great, beautiful book, which lies before you, is. But if it speaks of the blessed White Christ, and especially if it tells the story of his appearing on the sea of Tiberias to his faithful disciples —"

"Yes, it is all in this book," answered the emperor; "and, Thiodolf, if its contents are so dear to thee, why dost thou not confess them?"

"Sir," said Thiodolf, "we may very dearly love what we understand but indifferently. So it is with me as regards the White Christ. I look upon him as a good and gentle Spirit; but how he, as man, can be the Son of God, that I understand not. So I keep aloof, lest I should do him wrong either by ignorantly praying to him, or by boldly rejecting him."

"I almost love thee the better for thy manly hesitation," said the emperor, thoughtfully. "And yet on that account must I dismiss thee—at least, I cannot suffer thee to remain so high in my favor and confidence as hitherto."

"That is unlucky, gracious king," said Thiodolf; "but a brave man must keep an untroubled mind in regard to all that cannot be changed; therefore, only command what seems good to you."

"There are in my countless squadrons many soldiers who have not attained to the eternal truths of religion," said the emperor; "yea, even some of the Væringers are in the same condition as thyself. Remain then, if thou wilt, my knightly commander, as before; but to drink wine out of my goblets, to sit at my side amidst the noble ladies of the court, is a privilege which can belong but to a Christian. I must not, and will not invite thee again, Thiodolf, until thou hast received the washing of holy baptism."

"Oh," said the youth, "it is easy for me to take leave of your table, never to see it again; and in spite of the honor and joy which I shall thus lose, it may, perchance, be a very happy thing that thus it should happen to me. For the rest, sire, a little while ago I might have let myself be baptized, for it seemed to me a thing indifferent that water should be poured over me, and a few words spoken. But now I have determined that I will be a steadfast, firm disciple of the blessed and holy White Christ, or not one at all."

"Get instruction, then, in the knowledge of Christianity, my dear son Thiodolf," said the emperor; "I will send two learned bishops to thee."

"In the name of God, my kind and gracious lord!" cried the youth. "And if they teach half as diligently and zealously as I mean to learn, without doubt all will be soon and well done."

The emperor nodded, and dismissed him graciously, as he added, "When thou passest thro' the palace-gardens, Thiodolf, and meetest me or the princesses, thou needest not turn away on that account. We shall be unwilling to lose thee altogether, and an accidental meeting cannot be against my duty or my dignity."

Thiodolf thanked him, and went out with a light heart. It had often before disturbed him, that it should be thought that he belonged to Christ, while he yet stood body and soul in the wilderness, lighted only by the old idol-images and sacrificed victims.

Michael Androgenes, with a shudder, drew closer to the wall when Thiodolf came out of the imperial chamber. The young Væring chief stopped before him and looked at him for some time with a smile. At length he said, "My good chamberlain, you become paler and paler: what does that mean? Ah, now I understand. You are thinking that we are near the gallery over which I once hurled Glykmedon and broke his neck. Be calm; I will do you no harm.—Glykmedon had troubled my life far, far more than you, worthy Sir, will ever be able to do.—On the contrary, good chamberlain, you have done me a great service by your reports; besides, I understand the customs and privileges of the palace life much better than I then did. God be with you, sir chamberlain; you have my best thanks."

Thiodolf went on with a quick, rapid step, and Michael Androgenes continued to make excusing bows, till the laughter of his companions apprised him that the dreaded Northman had long left the apartment.

The religious instructions of Thiodolf took a strange course, and the two bishops who had been appointed to give it were themselves almost perplexed by the wonderful things which occurred while they were so employed. At one time Thiodolf, like a docile child, would agree to all that was said to him, and would listen, with a pleased smile and consenting nods, for hours together. But then, again, at other parts of the instruction, the young hero remained as if rooted to the same spot, like a restive, unmanageable horse, and would take in no explanations. There even came, at times, such violent outbreaks, that Thiodolf would assure his instructors that they were only faint-hearted men, and deserved that he should drive them out of the Væringers' walls; from which he abstained only and solely because he respected the laws of the emperor.

At such hard words, the eldest of his instructors once answered that unless he showed himself more patient and manly they would at once leave him, and he would fall forever into that unholy power which even now exercised such strange influence over him.

Thiodolf looked at them, and shook his head. At length he raised his voice, and said, "Men, if you truly believe what you profess to believe—if you believe it with your whole soul—how can it come into your mind to abandon me for an angry word? They scourged and mocked and slew the blessed White Christ, and yet he came straightway forth from the grave to help poor sinners, even that one who had pierced his side with a spear. Ah, unworthy followers are ye of the White Christ! Surely a very different heart beats beneath your splendid robes that which beats beneath His woollen garment. Look into yourselves; do as he did when he cast the sellers of doves and the money-changers out of the temple; then will it go better both with your hearts and my conversion."

The bishops looked down, and were tempted to believe that he had only been proving them, and that in his heart he was an advanced Christian, very superior to themselves. But then they soon again perceived, by his over bold fanes and his heathenish imprecations, that he was still in his old confused faith, and that it was only at times that the flaming torch of truth gave flashes of light to his noble mind.

Then they labored the more hopefully and persevering at his conversion, because the emperor, who loved the young hero, and all Constantinople, who almost idolized him, looked with deep interest to the result of their endeavors. Yet they gained no step; far from it. Thiodolf became colder and more impatient towards his instructors, and vouchsafed seldom a friendly look. When they complained of this, he would answer, "If you were right all would go the right way, and I should have been eight too, long ago. You want to make a bell sound and you pull vigorously at the rope, but it wants a clapper, and so all your labor is in vain and goes for nothing."

And then he became ever graver and sadder; for the less he could succeed in understanding the White Christ the more deeply did he long after him; and he would often in the evening say, with a disturbed look, to Malghera, "A vain search! those must be the Runic words which the bad sorceress carved on the linden-tree at my birth. How long have I sought after Isolde! and now I am seeking as diligently for the White Christ, and I know not how to find either of the beloved images! Ah, they will not let themselves be found—they play at hiding themselves from me!"

The quickest and surest way of recovering his gladness after such times he found in warlike exercises with Philip. The page had obtained leave from the emperor to go with Thiodolf in the next campaign, and to prepare for it at once by necessary exercises in the Væringers' fortress. Strength and joyous confidence sparkled in the brave boy's eyes, and animated his limbs, especially when horses were brought to him that he might train them to the boldest and most active

movements, or that he might hurl his spears while riding at the wildest speed. The gallant animals seemed to know and love the young esquire; and Thiodolf would often say to him, "It is well that 'Philip' in the Greek tongue means 'lover of horses'; thy parents were quite right to name thee so."

CHAPTER XLV.

Spring had in the mean while arrived, and the sky smiled over the gardens and fountains of the city as if visibly strewing flowers; sweet songs; and the clear music of guitars and flutes were wafted up from the meadows to the bright, sunny blue above.

Thiodolf was better satisfied than he had been for months before. "See," he would often say to Philip, "it is not only that now every day we are nearer to the time for taking the field, but I have been heartily weary of this winter. In my own land, where the lakes freeze and the valleys are filled with snow by the mighty northern blast, and become firm, shining paths for warrior and huntsman—in my land, where so many thousand winter stars sparkle on the fields of ice in the beautiful cold moonlight, till one well nigh forgets the stars of heaven—in my land, where the bears come forth angry with the frost, and walk upright, their skins covered with snow and ice till they glitter like the pieces of an enchanted region—O Philip, I have there often looked upon spring with no friendly face when it came over the sea with its moist clouds of dew! But here your winter is neither hot nor cold, almost like my two bishops, and your spring resembles a blooming, vigorous child. I give praise to the spring in Constantinople!"

In these lovely days the imperial gardens stood open to all comers; only around the part where the sovereign or his family walked were stationed sentinels who, with courteous gravity, warned away the uninvited. Thiodolf, according to the formerly-expressed will of the emperor, often met the royal personages, and was ever kindly welcomed by all, for the pale princess Theodora never took part in these walks.

One beautiful evening, as he wandered by a hedge of orange-trees, he unexpectedly came upon the royal family, who were resting on costly cushions or on soft moss, around the edge of a clear lake, in the midst of which a springing fountain gushed up as if in beautiful sport. A renowned wandering minstrel, Romanus by name, had been commanded to resort hither to delight the fair ladies and the knightly lords with his sweet songs and skilful music. At times he gave out an ingenious riddle, which forthwith every one tried to solve, so as to make the answer, given likewise in rhyme and measure, afford new delight to those who were less quick in discovering the meaning. This had now become a regular amusement, and the blooming Zoe shone in it by her ready grace.

As the young Northman was seen through the flowery hedge in his full armor, with his golden helmet on his head—he had just been at a warlike exercise—all present, the emperor himself not excepted, involuntarily started a little at the knightly figure in his clanking armor. Romanus struck a false chord; two of the strings broke, and made a sound like a mournful cry through the bushes. Thiodolf with noble grace excused himself; and when, at the emperor's command, he had taken the only vacant place, a low bank of moss at the feet of the young Zoe, the terror of the singer soon passed away. He exchanged his instrument for another that was offered to him, touched the strings, and sang the following words, as he fixed his eyes with friendly meaning on Thiodolf:

"A sword so bold, of burnished gold, Prepared to fight for Cesar's might; Dazzling flakes of frozen snow, Drifted lightly, sparkling brightly, To bedeck fair Grecia's brow.

"Fairy bowers, a field of flowers, Lightnings flashing o'er each wreath, Which many a knight hath doomed to death; A cloud that wars on forests wildly, Yet doth shelter infants mildly; A sunbeam from the gloomy North; In the east a ray, To the foe dismay."

All looked with kindly eyes on Thiodolf; the riddle seemed to need no solving. Then the blooming Zoe opened her pretty lips and said, as she looked down with a strange smile on the hero sitting at her feet:

"A wretched thing, Which flees from life, And weaves its death In mournful ring; It might gladly live in saunterer's ray; But yea it says to death—to Life, nay!"

The courtiers looked surprised. "Niece," said the emperor, "I think that you are mistaken; we all deem that the minstrel's riddle means one whom your verses cannot allude to."

"Oh! forgive me, my royal uncle," answered she, with a look half of careless indifference, half of saucy mirth. "I have over-passed the bounds of our game. My verses only relate to themselves, and offer a new riddle. He whom you