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THIODOLF THE ICELANDER.

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CHAPTER LXIX.

The young chief had asked his friends to go forth with him under the blue sky of the bright spring day; for his heart, full of a thousand feelings, and of new unknown hopes, longed restlessly for the breezes of spring and for the joyous songs of the larks. Malgherita, accustomed, since she arrived there, to the narrow bounds of her little garden, walked timidly through the crowded streets by the side of her mighty friend; Pietro, on the other side of her, looked up with amazement at the heroic form, which appeared to shine in unearthly glory.

Thiodolf understood Malgherita's uneasiness, and led her to a shady walk which stretched along the sea shore and was little frequented, and where he himself could give full vent to his joyousness; for in the city, the low whispers of the multitude, of—"That is he! see the great victor of the Bulgarians, the defence and protection of our empire!" had sounded incessantly around him, and had disturbed the still solemnity of his inward existence. But here, beneath the budding trees, lighted up by sky and sea, words of lofty meaning sounded from his lips, and many northern legends, as was his wont when true joy sprang up in his knightly heart.

A turn of the walk suddenly brought the friends close to a monk, who was kneeling before a beautiful crucifix of marble, which shone under the shade of two tall cypress trees, and praying with such devotion and fervor, that even the chanting of Thiodolf's powerful voice did not seem to reach his ears. Malgherita, on the contrary, remarked the kneeler too well, and started back from him in terror; for he was the old priest Jonas. Pietro, who also recognized him, could not but think of Castel-Franco and Malgherita's sad forebodings. He looked anxiously at his pale wife, and said:

"Take courage, Malgherita; if the dark figure of Jonas appears to us, our friend Thiodolf has risen upon us as a very bright star."
"I am not so frightened as thou thinkest, Pietro," answered Malgherita; "only a sad remembrance of Castel-Franco passed before my mind. But I feel as if the evil forebodings of old Jonas had vanished with that fearful night!"

Thiodolf, in his gay eagerness to repeat legends, hardly attended to these words, and continued to pour forth the adventures of some old hero of the north. Just then Philip met them; his face yet glowed with the morning's promise of happiness, and, bowing low before his chief, he said:

"O noble master! I pray you follow me at once to the great amphitheater, which has stood in our city since the olden times. The renowned poet Romanus will there represent to-day, before the Emperor, a tragedy, after the form and fashion of the ancient Greeks. He has often before delighted the Emperor with like representation, assisted by excellent players. Wonderful things are expected to-day; for he himself is to act, as poets were wont to do in the days of our fathers, and he has worked carefully at this tragedy for a long time. All the people are pouring into the amphitheater, and foremost our Væringers; for the play represents a northern legend, the life of Sigurd the serpent-slayer."

"O, Sigurd, the serpent-slayer!" cried Thiodolf, with kindling joy; and he drew his friends with him towards the amphitheater. In vain Malgherita would have resisted; a glance at the child-like glee in the face of Thiodolf hindered her from any opposition, and, all together, they entered the building, already swarming with thousands of spectators.

The stately amphitheater, with only the bright vault of the sky of southern spring for its roof, its ascending rows of seats all filled with richly dressed eager spectators, resembled a vast half-expanded rose. Over the background of the partly concealed stage was seen the fertile Asiatic shore, on the other side of the Propontis, and a portion of the blue sea itself, filling the soul with lofty thoughts and lovely images. The sun, still high in the heavens, seemed well pleased to pour its rays on the festive crowds.

On all sides place was reverently yielded to Thiodolf and his company, and he reached the foremost row of the amphitheater, close to the orchestra, where the chorus had begun its solemn prelude. There they seated themselves; and the eyes of the young northern hero were fixed with longing upon the brilliant stage, where great Sigurd, the serpent-slayer, whom he recognized amongst his ancestors, would soon appear in the noble play.

Trumpets sounded announcing the arrival of the imperial court. The loud, joyous noise ceased, and all rose from their seats in reverent silence, and all eyes were fixed on the centre of the amphitheater, where at the second blast of the trumpets, appeared the Emperor, his daughter, and the young Zoe, surrounded by courtiers and guards. The Emperor graciously greeted his subject, as on all sides they bent low to him;—

but it could be seen that he purposely abstained from giving one kindly glance to that spot where shone the golden helmet of Thiodolf. The Væring prince remained therefore proud and indifferent, without again bowing; and so soon as, at the third sounding of the trumpets, the imperial family had taken their seats, and every one sat down, he also, seated between Pietro and Malgherita, turned again to the stage, looking for the arrival of Sigurd with as much pleasure and unconcern as if there were no Greek Emperor in the world.

The curtain, which yet concealed the proscenium, rolled down after the old Greek fashion and vanished. A rocky valley was discovered, overshadowed with oaks and overgrown with ferns, with slender blossoming Hawthorn amongst them; and while the men of the south wondered at this strange scenery, and the skill of the painters and designers, the hearts of Thiodolf and all the Væringers beat high at the thoughts of home, and their eyes filled with tears of ecstasy. The prologue of the tragedy began. Two gigantic figures came forth from a rocky fortress which was seen in the background; their buskins raised them to a strange height, and the skillful masks, which entirely covered their heads, gave them, as if by magic, a strange and monstrous reality, while their whole appearance and demeanor accorded with the fearful idea. They were the two brothers Fafner and Reigen, who had slain the wizard father Hreidmar, for the sake of his treasure; and who were now at strife between themselves, chiefly on account of the mysterious ring of Andvar, which the poet seemed at pains to bring forward prominently, as the turning point of the tragedy. Fafner seized the helmet of Reigen, placed it on his head, and brandished the fearful sword Hrotte. Then Reigen retreated in affright, and Fafner spoke:

"Soon shalt thou, by magic arts,
A form more fearful yet behold;
A serpent's shape I take upon me
To protect my precious gold.
Gold! thou chief of earthly treasures!
All is lawful thee to save;
Henceforth man will change his nature,
And become thy very slave!"

He went back into the fortress, and Reigen remained in doubtful thought. Not long after, Fafner returned from the deserted castle, in the form of a dragon spitting fire. The trembling Reigen hid himself behind a rock; but Fafner went about the stage in triumph, and gave scornful words to all who thought to gain from him some of his gold. The man and the dragon formed one wonderful whole, though without any repulsive distortion; the Medusa-like face looked around in fearful beauty, and moved in the most skillful and natural manner. Almost all the spectators shuddered, as now Fafner came down into the orchestra, and vanished through the door which was called "Charonic," before the foremost seats of the amphitheater. But Thiodolf's heart beat with a warrior's longing to try his strength against the dragon; for the thought of stage and acting was fast passing from his mind before the living representation of the well-known northern legend; and now Reigen came forth with these words, which sounded mightily throughout the assembly, by the power skillfully imparted to his voice by the mask through which he spoke:

"Daring fool! and shall it be
That gold become man's gathering sword,
And that he who best preserves it
Shall become his brother's lord?
Then will I against thee bring
A higher force than scaly worm.
Serpent! Sigurd is upon thee!
Reptile! dread the hero-form!"

The concealing curtain was again raised, the prologue was ended. Thiodolf heard nothing that Pietro and Malgherita spoke to him of the skill of the poet, the designers, and the painters. His mind was full of the victory over the golden dragon; and he fixed his ardent eyes on the stage to see whether Sigurd would soon appear, and whether he would be a true and worthy Sigurd, one from whom victory might be expected. At the curtain, he pursued to help him.

Again the curtain rolled away, and left the proscenium free. Sigurd and Reigen were seen coming from afar, on the right; and all the spectators gave a joyful exclamation at the sight of the richly adorned young hero. But Thiodolf muttered doubtfully to himself: "The youth looks fair enough, and he is also tall and slender; but I fear he will have no success. He might wield his arms very much better."

The magic sword was now to be forged and sharpened for the occasion; and, as it glowed in the fire, Reigen kindled in the breast of the young Sigurd a bold desire for the ring of Andvar. At the call of the mysterious smith, the magic forms of Brynhildur and Gudrun, surrounded by other prophetic apparitions, passed through the valley. The young Sigurd was fired—Thiodolf far more so; he lost all consciousness of self, when the noise of the dragon was heard behind the amphitheatre, till most of the spectators trembled at the fearful threatening sounds; Sigurd and Reigen concealed themselves, and Faf-

ner issued forth from the Charonic door, amidst the deep, long-drawn notes of the trumpets. But hardly had he climbed, with a strange motion, the steps from the orchestra to the stage, when Thiodolf sprang after him with a mighty leap, Throng-piercer flashed in his right hand; he reached the monster in the middle of the stage, and struck him so that the Medusa-head broke asunder, cracked and split, and a rapid stream of blood flowed from it. A wonderfully lovely boy rose up out of the broken disguise, with a mein half terrified, half threatening, still partly protected by the sheltering arm of the man whom the powerful blow had struck; and while the noble child spoke his anger and displeasure, and blood streamed over the strange magic figure, and Thiodolf with lowered sword stood near, gradually recovering his recollection, the assembly remained for a long time silent and astonished, as it before a new and beautiful scene, unexpectedly prepared for them by the skill of the minstrel Romanus.

CHAPTER LXX.

But by degrees there arose among the spectators a murmur of discontent. They looked up on all sides to the imperial seats; and when they saw that the Emperor was about to leave the disturbed theatre with angry looks, the general anger was no longer concealed. With loud curses—the Greeks had yet so much of their fathers' blood in them as to look upon the interruption of a tragedy as a sort of a profanation—all the spectators rose from their seats, and pressed into the orchestra to seize upon the daring offender, forgetful of his renown, to which they had just before paid homage, and mindful only of his present offence. Philip and the Væringers commanded quiet, and laid their hands on their swords to defend their chief; but, solitary and dispersed as they stood in the endless crowd of people, they could not stem its force, but only added to the tumult. Women and children shrieked distractedly in the press. Malgherita, protected by Pietro, seemed unmindful of the danger; but from the part of the amphitheatre where she stood, she stretched forth her longing arms towards the child, as if grasping at some vision. Thiodolf had lifted it out of the dragon's skin and taken it in his arms, quieting and caressing it, while the wrathful multitude had poured into the orchestra, and were now pressing towards the steps which led to the stage.

Then for the first time, Thiodolf appeared aware of the tumult. "Hush, my darling," he said to the child, "they shall do thee no harm."
He gave it to the minstrel Romanus, who had now, with a bleeding arm, risen out of the dragon's disguise; then went towards the steps of the orchestra, and cried out, as he waved his flashing sword above his head, "Is there any one here who would speak to me?"

All were for a moment silent, as if spell-bound. But the more distant soon renewed their upbraids and curses, and pressed forward, venturing even to throw knives, and whatever else they had in their hands, upon the stage.

Then with overpowering force rose up in Thiodolf's breast the old dark strength of the Berserker-rage, which had so long slumbered within him. He blew a few threatening notes, which were repeated in many different accents by the Væringers scattered about the theatre, like so many foreboding echoes. A fearful outpouring of blood seemed about to begin, and irreconcilable Discord seemed to brandish her torch over town and country.

Suddenly the crowd gave way before a white figure, who glided round the amphitheatre and came into the orchestra. Wherever she drew near, the noise was hushed, and a low whisper, "See, there is the Secret Helper!" spread more and more on all sides; so that at length silence reigned over the whole theatre, only interrupted by the occasional war-cry of Thiodolf and the Væringers.

The white figure ascended the steps of the orchestra to the stage, took the child from the arms of the bleeding Romanus, and covered him soothingly with her veil; then she approached Thiodolf, in order also to allay his wrath. But, in the mean time, the multitude had broken forth with renewed fury, and Thiodolf, gnashing his teeth, and fearfully rolling his eyes, incited himself to yet wilder wrath by words of scorn.—Then the Secret Helper placed herself between him and the people, raised her hand as if in warning, and exclaimed, "My life for his! I bid you all go back in peace and submission. Whoever dares to touch this consecrated head will be accursed and lost for time and for eternity!"

All bowed in deep reverence to these words of solemn warning. Thiodolf alone still foamed with the old Berserker rage; and would have followed the retreating crowd through the orchestra, but the mysterious lady turned towards him, a little raised her veil, and said, "Thiodolf, hast thou then quite forgotten me?"
In gentle sorrow the northern hero sank upon his knees, breathing, in low accents, "O Isolde, O my heavenly lady Isolde!"

But, as a spectre of the night, there arose suddenly in the crowded orchestra a full armed gigantic knight. He extended one hand towards Pietro and Malgherita, the other towards Thiodolf and Isolde, and said, in a loud voice, "Thy father's curse is taken away! Peace and joy to all my children!"

The Emperor had beheld these strange, almost incredible occurrences, motionless and petrified. He now sent Michael Androgenes and some heralds to bring to him all those who had taken part in what had happened, and to pacify the people more completely. This, however, was unnecessary; for the procession, led on by the Secret Helper, found on its way only bent heads, and a deep reverential silence. In truth, since the holy lady had spoken to them, the multitude had become calm, and grave, and expectant, as if some great festival had been proclaimed. The tall, full armed knight, whom all had seen before recognized as the great baron, clasped, lovingly in his arms Pietro and Malgherita, who had who had well nigh sunk to the ground before him, and led them up to the throne of the Emperor.

There, surrounded by the rest of the royal family, stood the pale Princess, Theodora, who had just appeared amongst them. She spoke these words of reproof to her imperial father: "O, thou who art obeyed by the East, and honored by the West, because so has willed it God's holy counsel, wouldst thou then calmly have seen slaughtered before thine eyes the hero who has given peace to the limits of thine empire, and freed many thousands of thy subjects from miserable ruin and a hard captivity? Father, I know the cause of thy displeasure; I dare not speak it out, for it would bring a blush to other cheeks."

A deep color flushed the pale face of the speaker, called up, as all felt, by another's shame and another's folly.

She paused a moment, then raised again her head, and spoke with solemn earnestness: "It was a great and glorious act of this young Væring chief which called down thy wrath upon him; and therefore have I brought to him the dearest gift of his earthly life, which he had long, with bitter grief, bewailed as lost."

She took Isolde's hand, and led the noble maiden to Thiodolf, saying, "So soon, O Thiodolf, as the Lord has received thee into the number of His disciples, she is thine!"

Then she related the former history of Thiodolf and Isolde, and how her royal sister, the Abbess Eudocia, had directed all from her retreat; training Isolde to humility, and keeping her in concealment, while yet denying her the veil she longed to take, Eudocia's prophetic spirit revealing that in the world was cast the lot of the daughter of the great baron. At length, when Isolde was almost overwhelmed with sorrow by the news of Thiodolf's death, Eudocia had consoled the mourner by admitting her to the noviciate, but ever refused to let her take the vows. "This day," continued Theodora, "as I was with my sister, she suddenly, as if entranced, raised her eyes to the sun, saying, 'It is the hour; all mysteries will soon be solved.—Hasten, both of you: oh! hasten. Pass over to the amphitheater! Hasten, I repeat! the life of a hero is at stake, and yet more.' We did as she commanded, and all has come to pass as ye have seen."

"All mysteries will soon be solved," repeated the baron, solemnly coming forward. "The father's curse is well nigh loosed. Isolde, in presence of the Emperor's court, before army and people, has ventured her life for love of a young hero, and the union of these two noble beings is determined. Now understand I the dark saying of Huldebert, which appeared in the old archives, before the sudden flame had consumed the parchments and the castle. The Provencal castle may lie in ruins! my happy children and grandchildren will rebuild it more more princely than ever; for assuredly, that noble child who lies in Isolde's arms, is the lost Tristan of Pietro and Malgherita."

"O heaven, I had so hoped from the first moment!" cried Malgherita; and she stretched out her arms towards the boy, who, with a sweet smile, held out his to her from Isolde's arms.

The great baron came between them. "Not yet," he said—"not till Isolde is joined in holy marriage to her lover, can the ban be fully taken off."

"Why, then, do we delay?" said the Emperor. "Let us forthwith to St. Sophia's church, and there see the holy sacrament of baptism administered: for assuredly Thiodolf will now, with a joyful heart, fulfill that condition of his marriage."

"For many years have I striven after it, my royal master," answered Thiodolf; "and O, with what a happy heart would I draw near to it if it were granted me to know the blessed White Christ! But I will never dishonor His table by coming to it as a doubting guest—no, not even for Isolde's sake."

A look of the most ardent love fell, as he spoke, upon his beautiful bride, who looked up

in joyful wonder at her knight, whilst the great baron pressed his hand with deep feeling, and the Emperor looked away, somewhat ashamed. His eye fell upon the minstrel Romanus, and he asked him eagerly how he had come by the child, and whether he was really the son of Pietro and Malgherita.

His answer removed all doubts. Allured, as minstrels are wont to be, to the scene of great events, he wandered to the ruins of Castel-Franco the morning after its destruction, and had there found the little Tristan amid the fallen walls, in the same dress in which his mother had last seen him, and in which he yet appeared to her mind's eye. "He smiled so brightly up at me from among the hot stones, and the ruins of tottering arches," continued Romanus, "that I gave him the name of Giocondo; and up to this day I have carried him about with me as a pleasant charge, a blessed mirror of life, which ever reflected as with angel's eyes, the world and destiny. Now must I wander on alone; but I shall often come back to visit my beautiful Tristan Giocondo; and when he is fully grown, we shall hear of one another from afar—I mean by the sounds of my lute, and the deeds of his knightly sword."

Pietro grasped his hand with emotion; while the Emperor who had long stood in deep thought, now clasped the Væring chief to his heart before all the people, in the noble victory of repentance. Thiodolf sank on his knees, kissing the hand of his royal friend; and on all sides resounded the loud rejoicing cry of the quickly-changing people, through whose ranks had spread confused tidings of that which had passed before the imperial throne. The fair Zoe drew near to the northern hero, and, unperceived by all, whispered in his ear, while her cheeks glowed: "So help me God, as I wish my whole heart rejoice in your happiness, dear Thiodolf!"

CHAPTER LXXI.

Wladimir, far removed from all festivities and rejoicings, in gloomy displeasure that Wlasta was not yet found, had heard nothing of the splendid repast which the Emperor that very evening gave in honor of the re-united. The rejoicings extended over the city and the Væringer fortress, and for that reason both city and fortress became hateful to the watchful Bulgarian prince; and without inquiring what was the occasion of the rejoicing, he sprang upon his horse, galloped beyond the gates, then threw himself down on the grass in a luxuriant grove, and gave his horse liberty to range in the pastures around. All the night through he by turns poured forth angry words to the stars, and sang verses from his native love-songs, wetting the flowers with his hot tears. Towards morning a sleep of exhaustion closed his burning eyes, and strange dreams disported themselves before his spirit.

The melody of a little Bulgarian air on a lute mixed more and more distinctly with his dreams. It fell on his ear with all the soft sweetness which seem to belong to Sclaronian songs. He feared to awake fully, lest those beloved sounds of his country should die away in the light of the first rays of the sun; but at length he heard the clang of armor near him, and he sprang up. It was Thiodolf who, as if wandering for pleasure, passed near, and by his side a tall, wondrously lovely maiden, who bore in her arms a smiling child.—He said to his companion, "It is as if Philomel had gained the power of speech, and still retained her pure enchanting melody." Then he gave a kindly smiling glance to Wladimir, and with his companion vanished amongst the trees.

Wladimir, as if spell-bound, gazed around, for the soft tones of the lute yet sounded in Bulgarian measures through the grove; and now his noble horse trotted up to him with a low, glad neighing, and in the dark shake of the boughs bent his knees, as in former happy times he had been taught to bend before Wlasta.

"O merciful heaven!" exclaimed Wladimir, "I must find her now or never. For if again we are carried far apart, to whom could I go but to the fearful divinities of madness?"

But the dreadful words were not yet fully spoken, when Wlasta glided from the thicket, the lute in her hand, and shining in the beams of morning, and of love blessed with happiness. At the same moment Thiodolf and Isolde again appeared, and led their friends trembling with joy to each other; while Tristan Giocondo wore a chain of flowers which he wound with childish grace around the re-united lovers.

Afterwards, in calmer moments, time was found to relate how, by the power which Isolde's calm majesty gave her over Glykomedon, Wlasta had been delivered and freed, and how in all after-trials she refused to part from her dear benefactress until the present moment, which had brought to pass so many reconciliations.

Wladimir looked joyfully in Thiodolf's eyes, saying: "Thou didst once tell me, my noble victor, that it no less concerned thee than me to find Wlasta. Now I think that I understand thee. Is it not true we have both found, and I may say, Joy to thee?"