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THE WILD KNIGHT;
OR,
THE UNKNOWN CRUSADER.

A TALE OF GERMANY IN THE DAYS OF THE EMPIRE.

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CHAPTER I.

THE UNKNOWN AND HIS COMPANIONS.

At the time of which we write the German empire was in anything but a tranquil state. Rudolf of Hapsburg had been elected emperor solely because he was a brave un scrupulous man. He had accepted the imperial post with the pledge that he would be the blind, unswerving tool of the church. The Hanse Towns, or cities, were leagued together for mutual interest and protection, forming so many almost independent governments. The princes were in many instances reduced in power, holding the peasants in vassalage; while over all, and carrying terror even to the stout cities, were those wild, robber knights, whose castles, like the eyries of the eagles, were perched away upon mountains and rocks, from whence their reckless lords looked down in disdain upon all who dwelt beneath. In the East the crusades were drawing to a close. Baldwin II. had been driven from the throne of Byzantium; Jerusalem was in the hands of the sons of Islam; Antioch had been taken with the slaughter of seventeen thousand Christians, while a hundred thousand more were dragged away into slavery; Armenia had been overrun and conquered; a large portion of the army of Louis of France had either died of disease or by the hand of the Saracen, and the remainder had returned to their western homes. Yet there were many Christians in the Holy Land, and Gregory tried hard to send out more; but he did not succeed. Even his pliant tool, the Emperor Rudolf Von Hapsburg, refused to obey him in this.

It was an afternoon in the spring of 1274. Since noon the heavens had been mantled with clouds, and now, when the sun had some four hours more to run, the wind had sprung up, and the signs were that rain was near at hand.

Upon the dubious road from Bibenheim to Dormen, just in the northeastern confines of the Black Forest, rode four armed men. He who rode in advance—for the path was so narrow here among the huge rocks that two could not ride abreast—was a noble looking knight, tall and powerfully built, clothed in complete armor, with his heavy battle axe slung in its becket by his side, his lance at rest, and his helm suspended from a knob at the saddle bow. The armor was black as night—all save the gorget, which was of burnished gold set with precious stones. Even the casque was of the white hue, though the three brilliant ostrich feathers which floated from the top relieved the sombre effect. Upon his head he wore a light cap of purple velvet, with no other ornament than a rich brooch of gold and emeralds which secured the crimson ostrich plume in its place. His face was one of rare and startling beauty—one of those faces which awaken envy in the breast of beaux and quick love in the souls of the gentler sex. His brow was high and full, and about it and the fair neck floated glossy masses of light sunny hair. His eyes were of a deep blue; his nose straight and finely carved; his lips fairly proportioned and wreathed with a half-waking smile, and his cheeks full, and flushed with the ruddy glow of health and vigor. His surcoat, which hung across the saddle, bore upon the breast the red cross of the crusaders. His shield bore a strange device. It was a child killing an eagle, with this inscription:—"Quod Deus bene vertat," which may be render d—May God bring it to a good result. The child was upon its knees, with one hand clasped about the eagle's throat while the other held a raised dagger. The knight sound not have been over thirty years of age, though he had surely seen much of life.

And now what is this bold knight's name? In Palestine he was known as "The Knight of the Eagle, and finally, to shorten the name, he was called "The Black Eagle." Since he had left the Holy Land he had received one more cognomen:—"The Unknown Crusader." And yet, with all these, he still remains without a Christian name. Even when all Palestine and half of Europe were filled with the song and story of his wondrous prowess, they could not tell his name, whence he came, nor where he belonged. Upon that point he had reserved a stern silence; and the most that the Emperor Baldwin could gain from him when he bestowed the honor of knighthood was a simple declaration to this effect:—

"Upon my name there rests no stain—in my soul there is no wrong. I can look up to our God and implore his protection feeling that I am worthy of it; and into the face of any honest knight of Christendom, I can look without a blush. Call me Sir Knight of the Eagle, and the name shall not be dishonored."

Baldwin had asked no more. With the memory of the youth's feats of noble daring fresh upon him he gave him the magic stroke of the imperial sword, and with his own hands did he buckle on the golden spurs.

Behind the Unknown rode a second knight of nearly the same age with the former. He was not quite so tall but full as broad shouldered, and possessed a goodly share of manly beauty. In fact he was a noble, handsome looking knight, and such a one one as no mistress would have cared upon but with gratitude and pride. His armor was of the same pattern as his companion's but not of the same color. The casque was of burnished steel; the gorget of the same, and the rest of the suit—the cuirass, the tasses, the brassets and the cuishes—of green and gold in color, though of good, well tried steel in substance. He also wore a visor up upon his head, and carried across his saddle the surcoat of the Crusader. His name was Engelbert von Marburg, and he was known throughout the Holy Land as one of the bravest knights that ever couched a lance against the infidel Saracen. His weapons were the same he once carried by the Unknown, save that they were not quite so heavy.

Behind Sir Engelbert rode the two esquires. They were also well armed, and wore the brassets and cuishes in addition to the cuirass. Robert von Swingenhoffen was forty years of age, short and heavily framed, with great bones and sinews almost like an ox; a red face and red hair, and possessed of much ready wit. He had served under Baldwin as an esquire, and during said service had performed many valorous deeds. One day, at the taking of a fortified town, he became surrounded by half a dozen stout Moslems, and had given himself up as lost, and said his prayers, when the Knight of the Eagle burst in upon him, slew his enemies and bore him away in safety. Baldwin saw the deed, and from that hour he gave Robert von Swingenhoffen to the Black Eagle to serve him as best he could. And he had been faithful. He lived his valiant master, and was ready at any moment to lay down his life for the good of him who had once saved it.

The fourth person in the party was Bernard von Schaffenhausen, a man much younger than Robert, and a half and rather slim for such height. Yet he was strong and overrunning with fun and good nature. That he was a valiant and brave esquire Sir Engelbert well knew, for he had served the noble knight several years.

The road by which the party thus travelled was one of the wildest in the country. The giant trees stood thickly about where the surface was not of rock and upon all hands the rugged mountains arose in the sentinels of the empire.

At times the path was through a dense wood—then over a rugged cliff—then along a deep ravine. Ask—then upon the narrow pass that girded some perpendicular wall of rock. At length they reached a wide wood, through which the road was level and broad, and here Sir Engelbert rode up to his companion's side, and said,

"Do you not remember, once in Constantinople, you told me when we reached Germany I might know your name, and who you were?"

"Yes," returned the Black Knight, "I do remember it; but the time is not yet come. I must first see how the wind blows. If I mistake not, the Rudolf Von Hapsburg, whom the Pope has made Emperor, is a—a—mere puppet."

"I think so too," added Marburg. "And so you still mean to remain the Unknown?"

"For the present I must."

"It's curious. Here we have been companions in arms for six long years—slept beneath the same tent—eaten from the same bucket when we had no plates—fought together side by side, through a hundred bloody battles—nursed each other in sickness—and cheered each other in health—and yet, when I am asked—Who is your friend? I can only say 'The Unknown.'"

"And the thousand Mussulmen, when they pass Al Sirat, and are asked by the recording angel who sent them thither, must give the same answer," returned he of the Eagle with a smile.

"Aye—more than a thousand."

"Hop good Marburg. By my faith, I take no pleasure in thinking how many of the poor fellows I have slain."

"Yes, Sir Unknown, the wondrous deeds of your arm have given you a name which you cannot hide so long as you wear the device upon your shield. I have been thinking of the last Moslem you slew. It does not trouble you to think of that?"

"Ah, no," the Black Knight uttered, with a glowing eye, while his hand instinctively sank to his sword hilt with a nervous clutch. "It was at Carthage, where I struck down the three stout emirs who had surrounded Prince Philip of France. And see—here is his royal father's gift in token of his gratitude." And as he spoke he placed his hand upon the richly jeweled gorget that hung upon his neck.

"Ho!" cried Sir Engelbert, just as the other ceased speaking, "look there."

The Unknown looked in the direction pointed out and saw the turrets of a massive structure looming up against the darkened sky.

"What is it?" he asked.

"It is our good convent of Saint Fulvia."

"A female establishment?"

"Yes, in part. There are some Benedictines there, I believe, who perform the outdoor labor. By my faith, we are just in time, for see, the rain is already falling on the mountains."

The party spurred up and reached the convent gates just as the great drops of rain began to fall.

CHAPTER II.

AGNES OF LUXEMBURG.

The convent of St. Fulvia was situated within the precincts of Malbroun, though some miles from any other habitation. It was upon a small piece of table land, where there were a few acres fit for cultivation; and this limited piece the Benedictines cultivated to so good a purpose that the inhabitants of the building seldom had to go to any other market for the fruits of the earth.

Within the large antercom of the convent sat a middle aged woman, whose garb bespoke her to be the abbess or lady superior of the place. She was not far from fifty, stout and rugged, and were upon her face a look of deep piety and goodness of heart.

By the side of the abbess sat a maiden who could not have seen more than nineteen years of life. She was of medium height, full and plump in form, with a skin of almost dazzling purity; her long, floating ringlets, of a deep, golden hue, and her eyes a mild liquid blue. Her dress was far from being gaudy or showy, but yet it plainly bespoke her as one of gentle blood and of noble family. Such was Agnes von Luxemburg, an orphan, and sole heiress to the broad estates of the late Count, her father, who was an own brother of the Abbess. And she was accosted the fairest maiden in Swabia, as she might well be, for surely no being of human mould could be more beautiful. It was not so much the faultless carving of her features, nor yet the voluptuous symmetry of her form, for the first was exceeded by the pure and joyous essence of her smiles, while the latter was over balanced by the almost here of stern and holy virtue that surrounded her like a halo. Few men had ever seen Agnes of Luxemburg without loving her, and at her feet had been laid half the estates of Swabia. But she had not yet looked with favor upon any of the aspirants, though that may be accounted for upon the fact that ere her father died he had expressed his wish that she should marry with the Count of Baden.

"Ah—there it comes," spoke the Abbess, as the great drops of rain began to drive against the casements. "I knew it was near at hand; and our guests will not be out of place."

"No," returned Agnes, "for it is already cold and cheerless without. I wonder if there are travellers among the mountains?"

"Very likely there may be. I suppose you are wondering if the Count of Baden will come for you?"

"No, no," quickly uttered the maiden with a shudder.

"Ah, Agnes! I have your secret—you love another."

"No, my mother, you are mistaken there." This was spoken in a tone which left no room for doubt—at least in the mind of one who knew the speaker.

"But you do not love the Count Rudolf?"

Agnes hung down her head, and for a moment there was a tremulousness upon her. At length she raised her eyes to her companion's face, and in a tone of affectionate frankness she said—

"You have spoken the truth, lady. I cannot love him."

"Nor could I," rejoined the abbess, emphatically. "Not only is the seal of repulsiveness set upon his face, but he is a bad man."

"You are right again, lady."

"Then, of course, you will not become his wife?"

"Oh, I know not what to do," the maiden cried, resting her head upon her companion's shoulder, and throwing her arms about her neck.

"Then let me advise you," said the abbess, drawing the beautiful girl more closely to her bosom, and speaking in gentle tones:—"You are young and handsome. Your father's wish is left upon record that you should marry with Rudolf Von Baden—when you are ready to wed. I can appreciate your feelings in turning away the scores of noble knights that have knelt at your feet."

"I did not love them, mother—indeed I did not."

"But among them all I may there not have been one whom you would have loved, had you not been bound by this plan of your father's?"

"I will not deny it."

"Then come and wed with our sisterhood."

The maiden started as though something had frightened her. The abbess saw the movement, and she quickly comprehended its meaning.

"Does it make you tremble?" she asked.

"Oh! I am not prepared to answer now. I am not fit for communion with your holy sisterhood."

"Then are there none on earth fit. Ah, Agnes, I fear your life's promised that speech."

"My pride!"

"Say my child: for you must know that you are among the purest of our daughters."

"Well, well—let it pass now, I am not ready to answer such a question."

"And yet you know your father bade me to watch over you."

"Because you were his own sister, and he knew you loved me."

"Aye" added the abbess imprinting a warm kiss upon the girl's fair brow as she spoke, "and he knew I should always love you. But—Bark! What sound is that?"

In a few moments more the old porter appeared, and announced that two knights of the Cross and their esquires asked for shelter from the storm.

"Crusaders—are they?"

"They are."

"And did ye leave them at the gate?"

"I did."

"Out, thick head, and lead them in quickly! Leave two knights of the Holy Cross in the storm with a shelter under their very eyes? Away—and lead them hither at once! and then see that their horses are cared for."

The porter retired, and then the abbess turned to Agnes.

"You will stay, my sweet child, and help me enter ain the noble knights?"

"Certainly I will. Agnes of Luxemburg holds not her hands nor purse from the brave soldiers of the Cross." The maiden's eyes burned with a generous glow as she awoke, and upon her cheeks arose a rich flush of grateful emotion. Her father had made one crusade and from his lips she had learned the fearful story of the dangers and privations which the devoted knights of the Cross had to suffer.

"Welcome, noble sirs, and God's blessing be upon you!" spoke the abbess, as she arose to greet the strangers.

"We thank thee, lady; and will pray Heaven to bless this house!" responded the Black Knight.

"And your esquireess—where are they?"

"With the groom, lady. They will find welcome with the porter, I think."

"As you will. If they choose the porter's lodge, so be it."

Ere Agnes was introduced, the abbess conducted her guests to an adjoining apartment, where they might lay aside their armor. When they had done this their noble forms were shown to better advantage. The Unknown was habited in a garb of black velvet throughout, which though it possessed a sombre look, yet gave to his form and feature a lofty dignity and grandeur. Sir Engelbert's garb was of a less grave character, though far from rich or gaudy. When they returned to the large sitting room, even the abbess was startled by the strange beauty of her guests but more particularly did she fasten her eyes upon the face of the Unknown, and it was not until he of Marburg spoke that she recollected herself.

"Your good convent was placed in the proper spot for us on this particular occasion," he said.

"So I hope it may ever be for the good of noble knights like you. This is the Convent of St. Fulvia, and I am its abbess."

"And I am called Engelbert of Marburg. And," the Crusader added with a smile, "my companion you can only know as you see him. He is the Knight of the Eagle."

"How!" cried the abbess, while Agnes started with mingled surprise and wonder, "The noble Knight of the Eagle! He of whom we have heard so much? The savior of Baldwin, of Louis, of Brandenburg, and even of whole cities!"

"The same, lady."

"Hold," spoke the Unknown, with a faint smile. "Let me rest easy. I pray thee. Lay no more flattery upon me."

"If I do," replied the abbess quickly, "I'll beg thy pardon, beforehand. But let me introduce my niece, Agnes of Luxemburg."

Sir Engelbert took the maiden's hand, and she smiled sweetly upon him as he greeted her. Then the Black Knight approached, and his hand trembled as he extended it. Agnes gazed into his face, and the smile faded from her lips, and a tremor shook her frame. For the life of her, she could not tell where came the quick emotion; only she felt the slight trembling of the knight's hand, as her own rested within it, and she saw the sudden light that beamed in his deep blue eyes.

Supper was soon prepared, and, after the meal was over, the party returned to the large room. The Unknown was the last one to be seated, and if he would sit near the cheerful fire, he must take the only empty stool, and that was close by Agnes. He took it and ere long the Knights were recounting their adventures to the willing listeners.

As the evening advanced the Unknown turned his attention more particularly to Agnes, and with eager, generous looks, she listened to him. At her own request, he told her of his adventures, while his companion was conversing with the abbess.

"And now," said the maiden, after the knight had told her of his last exploit in Carthage, "you must be cheered by the thought that you are sent to return to your friends."

"Friends!" repeated he, in a low, sad tone. "Ah—my friends are—. But I won't say that. This reception tells me that I have friends. I will not believe that your generous hospitality is extended without some spark of friendship."

"Indeed sir knight," uttered Agnes, speaking from her ardent impulse, and without thought, "you may be sure of that. My own poor life would be nobly given if 'twere to save and succor thee."

The Unknown started as these sweet words fell upon his ear, and for the moment the rich blood all left his face and his heart seemed to have stopped its beating. But very soon the flood came crushing back, and the first bound of the heart gave a tremulousness to his whole frame.

"I—I—mean, sir—"

"Hold, lady," he said as the fair girl attempted to modify what she saw she had spoken quickly and from the heart, "do not take back those words. They shall never leave me while life and reason last. They will be my balm to cheer and console me, and to give nerve to my arm and strength to my heart. As true as God reigns, they are the sweetest words that have dropped upon my soul since my dying mother placed her thin hands upon my child's head and blessed me. Do not unsay them—unless, indeed, they only came from a hope too phase. But if they came from the heart then let them be mine."

"I will be frank, sir knight," the fair girl returned, with a beaming, generous look. "Had they not sprung from the heart you would never have heard them. The heart set them free ere the cooler judgment had weighed them."

"Thank you, lady; and henceforth you may rest assured that there is one knight who will protect the honor of your name with his life. And though for the present, circumstances prevent me from revealing my name, yet you will believe me when I say that no stain rests upon me."

Agnes bowed her head, and her whole frame trembled; but soon she recovered her composure, and once more her conversation was free and frank.

It was quite late when the party separated, and an old monk conducted the knights to their chamber.

CHAPTER III.

THE ROBBER KNIGHTS.

The two knights were aroused in the morning by a loud knocking at the door, and upon their opening it they found the same monk there who had shown them up on the night before.

"Noble sirs," the old man cried, "a party of the robber knights have come to rob the convent!"

"How!" uttered the Unknown. "Rob a nunnery! Rob the home of defenceless women!"

"Yes, noble sir. They are now at the gate, and demand admittance."

"How many of them?"

"Full a score."

"Then has en down and tell the good lady abbess that we will be quickly with her."

Ere long the two crusaders descended to the apartment where they had sat the evening before and there they found with the abbess and Agnes—but several other women who had not yet taken the full vow.

"How is this?" asked he of the Eagle, as he entered the room.

"Do you hear that noise at our gates, sir?" the abbess returned. "That wicked knight, Otto von Metzinger, at the head of his companions, demands admittance here."

"I think he does not surely mean to rob you?"

"Yes, sir. Ah—you know not the deep wickedness of these men. Yet there are few who would do this thing. That most bold and reckless man of them all—the Wild Knight of Wurtemberg—would never attack the home of women. He robs cities and wealthy monasteries. But this man stops at nothing. His vaults are already filled with gold, and yet he would rob us for more."

"Then you have valuables here?"

"Yes, sir; shrines of gold and silver, besides a large amount of money which we have collected."

"And have you any here who can bear arms?"

"Yes—a dozen or more, but they could do nothing against the well armed knights."

"Let them be armed as best they can, and trust the rest to us." Thus speaking the mystic knight passed over to where Agnes stood, and, taking her hand, he said in a low deep tone—

"Fear not, lady. Whilst I have life thou art safe."

Could he mistake the look she gave him then? Could that quick, joyful expression have come from a heart that held no deep love? No. But mark that blanche spot that followed—that sudden show of fear. Why does she lay her fair, dimpled hand so nervously upon the stout knight's arm? Ah—

"But you—you, sir. Oh! you will not expose yourself. There are many—you are only two."

"Many in the wrong—and two in the right. God is with us. But be not alarmed for me. He who will rob a woman can hold no terror for me."

"Yet you will be careful."

"Oh—thy love plants the strength of a thousand souls in my breast."

As the knight thus spoke he raised the small white hand to his lips, and as he imprinted his first kiss thereon, Agnes of Luxemburg smiled.

Those were days when true men and maidens spent not long hours in careless flirtation, worried to conceal the generous emotions of the heart. If the thought was given, it was spoken. So from that hour the Knight of the Eagle knew that he was welcomed by the only maiden who had ever won his heart. The emotion was a strange one, and under its influence his heart grew light and joyous and his arm a ranger.

As soon as possible the two crusaders put on their armor, and then went out into the court where they found Robert and Bernard with the horses all caparisoned; and from the porter they learned that Von Metzinger was waiting an answer from him. But just as the porter spoke the voice of the robber knight was heard in loud and angry tones.—

"Hallo! Within there, thou creeping porter. What is the answer of thy mistress? Will she give up the golden calves, or must we take them?"

"Oh, noble sirs," spoke the old porter, trembling from head to foot, "only last week Sir Otto and his crew robbed the Convent of St. Mary, of Harbronn, carried off all the gold and silver, and killed four armed peasants who had come up to help to defend the place."

"Say ye so? Then, if faith we'll send them off bowling now. Where is there a loophole through which I can count the villains?"

The porter led the way to the small wicket in which there was a square piece of chain netting. Through this the Black Knight could count the robbers. There were two knights and fourteen men at arms, the latter on foot, and armed with cross bows and swords, and wearing the usual armor of the knights of the old period; round steel caps of iron, with deep capes behind; cuirasses of boiled leather, with a joint at the neck, thus supplying the place of a gorget, but no brassets or cuishes. They were stout looking fellows, and from what our hero could see of their faces he would have judged them to be just fit for some such work. Sir Otto was a stout powerful man, and as he now wore his visor up, the crusader could see that he had a bold, bad look. The other knight, the porter said was Sir John Von Mainhardt, and the knight our crusaders knew had been placed under the ban of the empire for his evil deeds but particularly for having robbed the Archbishop of Mayence.

"Call out your men," said the Unknown, "and have them arranged in the court here to be ready for any who may chance to dodge in. Now, Sir Engelbert, we will out upon them, while Robert and Bernard follow to scatter the hirelings."

Thus speaking the Black Knight closed his visor and having loosened his axe and couched his lance, he called upon the porter to throw back the gate. As the way was thus opened, six of the men-at-arms were seen bringing up a heavy log with which they meant to batter down the wicket. The movement of Sir Otto and his companion, when they beheld this unexpected presence was one of astonishment; but ere they could betray much emotion our hero spoke:—

"How now, Sir Knights—what would ye here?"

"Who are you that dares question Otto of Metzinger?" the robber retorted. "Just stand where you are and I'll ride thee down as I would a praying nun."

As Sir Otto spoke he gathered up his rein and put spurs to his horse, and with his impious battle cry of—"The spoils to the mighty!" he dashed on.

"God and St. Fulvia!" shouted the Unknown, as he braced himself for the shock. He did not move from the place where he stood. He only bent a keen eye upon the robber, and set his lance for the guard. He felt the power of a giant in his good right arm, and full well he knew that the oncoming knight only rushed upon defeat. He had received too many charges to mistake his mark now, and even his horse had been so thoroughly trained that a single word was sufficient for his guidance.

With a firm hand the Black Eagle held his lance, and as the robber came dashing upon him a quickly spoken word caused his horse to leap upon one side, and at the same moment his lance, with a movement almost imperceptible, turned the point of the robber's weapon over the right shoulder, while the steel head of his own spear caught Sir Otto's helm just below the visor, and rolled him from his horse upon the ground. Almost at the same moment Sir John Von Mainhardt fell beneath the stroke of Engelbert.

The Unknown leaped from his saddle, and placed his sword at the throat of the fallen knight.

"Now yield thee, recreant knight!"

"To whom?" asked Otto, in struggling tones.

"To the Black Eagle of Palestine!" shouted our hero.

"Mercy!" gasped the vanquished man. "Why didn't you tell me sooner?"

"But do you yield?"

"Yes."

"And if I spare thee, wilt thou give me thine oath that thou will not trouble this place again?"

"The terms are hard."

"But is not life valuable? Remember—I would kill thee as quickly as I would any other robber!"

"Spare me! I promise."

"Then down upon knees and take the oath. That is the ordeal."

Sir Otto hesitated a while, but at length he got upon his knees, and with the cross of the crusader's sword before him, he took the prescribed oath.

"Well done! Sir Otto von Metzinger. Now call thy robber crew off, and go in search of some more legitimate game."

In the meantime the two esquires had been doing heavy work among the men at arms. Robert of Swingenhoffen was like a wild bull among them while Bernard walked about like a stork among frogs. Their long experience against the Saracens had given them notions of combat of which their huddling adversaries knew nothing. Three of the robber retainers were slain outright, while most of the others were either senseless upon the ground or crawling away with cracked and aching heads.

Sir John von Mainhardt, as soon as he knew who his captor was readily took the same oath that his companion had taken, and then they were allowed to depart; though ere they did so the latter poured out his enmity and threats profusely.

"By the holy host, Sir Crusaders, you have ventured into a nest of hornets as you shall find to your cost. If you get out of these mountains with a whole skin you'll be fortunate!"

With this threat upon his lips the robber knight turned to where his men at arms were searching for their senses, and ere long the whole party rode off—all save the the three dead ones, their bodies being left for the monks to dispose of.

Blessings deep and sincere were showered upon the two crusaders when they returned to the convent; and when they heard of the oath they had made the marauders take the abbess could not speak her gratitude.

A hearty breakfast was eaten, and after this the two knights signified their intention of departing. The storm of the previous evening had passed away, and the air of the spring morning was fresh and fragrant.

"Do you go near Stuttgart?" the abbess asked.

"Directly thither," the Black Knight answered.

"Then you will easily reach it before dark if your horses are strong."

"Certainly."

"I have a favor to ask of thee," the abbess resumed, addressing him of the Eagle. "The Lady Agnes had been for several days watching for some friends who had promised to come and conduct her to Stuttgart, where she would go to see her cousins, Constance of Baden, and Blanche of Wurtemburg. They may not come for a long while and if you will accept the charge, I shall give her into thy keeping for safe delivery at the castle of Everhard von Wurtemberg."

"Everhard von Wurtemburg!" repeated the Black Eagle, "The Wild Knight of Swabia!"

"Yes, Sir Crusader. He is surely the wildest knight in all Christendom; and the most jealous of restraint. Even the Emperor he sets at defiance and claims all mankind for his foes. He is a strange being and a cousin of mine to boot. Few stand at the head of the robber knights of the empire; but yet he is a brave man and would scorn a mean action. He would lie down and die of starvation ere he would rob a woman; and his breast he would bare to the sword ere he would strike a foul blow. Be sure he will give thee a hearty welcome if you cross not his purpose. But wilt thou accept the charge?"

"Does the fair lady wish it?"

"She does."

"Then I accept the trust, and you may feel that you hold my life in pledge for her safety."

"I understand," returned the abbess, with a smile, and thus speaking she turned away.

Ere long Agnes Von Luxemburg entered the keeping room all prepared for her journey, and both the knights started as they received her strange beauty when thus arrayed. Her riding robe of purple velvet was bordered with gold, and the jaunty velvet cap, with its drooping ostrich plumes, cast a warm glow upon her face that was like a halo. She wore a small dagger in her girdle, and in her hand she carried a light whip. Her horse a noble bark, with a mixture of the Arabian in its veins, manifested the utmost delight when he saw his mistress approach, and when she had been assisted to her saddle the pleased animal capered about with unmistakable manifestations of joy.

"Now, mind you," said the abbess, once more addressing the Black Knight, "until you reach the castle of Everhard the Lady Agnes is my charge to you."

"Then the Wild Knight has some control over her" the Black Eagle said, in a tone so low that the maiden could not hear it.

A dark shade rested upon the face of the abbess, and a slight shudder passed through her frame as she replied—

"Yes, he is her guardian—made so by my brother in his last will; but I have authority now."

Once more our hero promised to watch well his charge, and then the abbess turned to her neice. There were a few sincere blessings, a kiss, a cheerful farewell—and then the party rode away.

After the lapse of several hours, as a short silence ensued, the Crusader gazed upon his fair companion with an earnest, prayerful look. She looked up and met his gaze, and a warm glow suffused her face. She knew that he was looking upon her, or she would not have gazed upon them; for her eyes were beaming with the tale of love, and she knew it. And a less interested person than herself, and one with less perception, could not have failed to see that the knight's gaze was one of pure, devoted affection.

It was a moment of strange emotions; each had detected the other in the act of pouring out the silent language of love. The knight was the first to speak.

"Gentle lady," he said, in a tone made rich and musical by the deep feeling that sustained it, "why should two honorable people, whom fate has thrown together, hide the deepest, holiest emotions of their souls? I will not hide mine; you shall not say I could look what I dared not speak. Agnes of Luxemburg, I love thee with the whole strength of my heart, and with the unlocked power of my heart's first love. Thou art the first maiden who ever awoke the sweet whisper in my soul, and to thee I give my poor heart, with all its hopes, its aspirations and its joys. I trust I have not offended."

For some moments the fair girl gazed down upon the arching neck of her steed without speaking, she trembled violently, for there was a mighty struggle in her soul.

"Alas!" she at length utered, raising her moistened eyes to her companion's face, "would that my love and duty were united."

"How, lady? Speak plainly, I beseech thee."

"Knowest thou not that my father willed that I should wed with the Count of Baden?"

"I knew he had so wished. Did he lay the command upon thee?"

"He never commanded me, sir. His wish was always my law. When he expressed to me his desire he knew that if it were in my power to do it, his desire would be accomplished."

"But thy love, lady?"

"Thou art the first man who ever won my young heart. See—I am frank because thou hast been."

"Bless thee gentle Agnes—bless thee forever. Thou dost love me then?"

"With all my heart."

"Then see! We still have ground for hope. If the Lord of Baden be an honorable man he will not surely hold thee to a union from which love is most over be absent. He would not have such a wife if he could."

"Ah—you know him not!" said Agnes, with a slight shake of the head. "Nor do you know the man whom my father placed over me as my guardian. Alas! they have no hearts of love or sympathy."

The knight gazed upon his companion as she spoke, and when she ceased speaking he bowed his head. There was a cloud upon his brow and his lips were compressed yet he seemed more worked upon by some firm purpose of his own than by any fears of the powers of others. When he again raised his head his bright eye beamed with more than ordinary meaning.

"Gentle Agnes" he said, "love me—love me well—love me as I love thee, and leave the rest to me. In this universe of good there must be power enough to overcome all evil. If it could not be properly applied; and so why may we not hope that right and justice shall triumph here?"

"My love I cannot control," the maiden answered. "Were I never to see thee again, from this hour my heart could never give up thine image; my soul could never forget thee, its first holy love. As true as I live, I speak frankly and truthfully now. Were the painful chasse removed—could the barrier be broken down, honorably so—I would place my hand within thine own and be thine forever."

The noble knight raised his hand to his cheek and brushed away a tear, and when he spoke his voice was low and sweet.

"Among the blessings of God, and standing second only to the pure faith of the tried Christian, is bright, sunny hope. Let us cling to it."

Half the afternoon had passed away, and the travellers had just entered upon a broad table of level land, when Engelbert's horse, which was at end, suddenly stopped and placed his nose to the ground; and in a moment more he raised his head and gave a wild, startling snort.

"Ah—that means that we are to meet somebody," said the Black Knight, as Agnes gazed inquiringly towards him.

For a moment an expression of fear dwelt upon the maiden's face, but it quickly passed away.

"We have nothing to fear, surely," the Knight resumed. "If they be robbers we have nothing to lose, and if they be not robbers they must be friends. Yet I'll don my casque and take my shield, for war sometimes comes when we least expect it."

As he thus spoke he exchanged his velvet cap for the black steel helm with its triple plume, and then calling to his esquire, he took his shield. Just as Engelbert had made the same arrangement a party of three knights appeared upon the opposite side of the plain, which was nearly half a mile distant. As the distance became less an exclamation of fear dropped from Agnes' lips, and when her companion looked upon her, he found her pale and trembling.

"What is it?" he asked eagerly.

"The Count of Baden!" she uttered.

"The Count! Which one?"

"He that rides upon the right hand—the shortest one."

"And do you know who are those other two?"

Agnes looked a few moments and then she replied:—

"Aye—they are two of the most villanous knights that ever broke knightly vows. There is Sir Frederick von Bondorf, who came from Bohemia to save his head from the law; and Sir Marco Montani, a crafty, bloody and unscrupulous Italian. They are the Count's tools, and do his bidding for hire."

"They look like stout knights," said the Eagle, half to himself.

"And so they are," responded Agnes.

"But you tremble, dearest."

"Yes—the Count may be on his way to Saint Fulvia."

"Ha! for ever! Now I see. And why should he have come? Think you Everhard sent him?"

The maiden pondered a few moments ere she replied, and during her hesitation the Knight stopped.

"I will tell these all in a few words," she at length said, "and thus save the questions. My guardian will do much for the Count of Baden. He would not for worlds directly do a deed to harm me; yet he looks upon my marriage with the Count as a fixed fact, and he will help it on. Thrice have I refused to go to Baden's stout castle of Heidelberg, and Rudolf has sworn that he would take me to his dwelling by force if I would do of otherwise. The last time I saw my guardian he told me, in a laughing mood—he laughed because the thought coyness of the Count is only the result of whim; he does not know that I desolate him—he told me to beware of Rudolf of Baden, for that he meant to kidnap me on the first opportunity. Yes I think he has come now for that purpose."

The party of three were now within a few rods, and as the Count of Baden recognized Agnes, he put spurs to his horse. As he did so the Unknown cropped his visor and secretly loosened the strapping of his heavy battle axe. He of Baden was in full armor, only he wore his visor up.

"Ha—my little truant!" the Count cried, as he drew up a few yards off. "I have found thee most opportunely. I was afar thee, sweet one."

With a powerful effort Agnes overcame the tumultuous emotions that shook her frame, and then in a respectful manner she replied—

"I am on my way to Stuttgart. I am going to the castle of my guardian."

"So you meant when you started. I saw the noble Count, thy guardian, this morning, and he bade me come and take thee. And so you see I have come. Sir Knight, I will relieve thee of thy charge."

"Were I anxious to give up my charge I might thank thee for thy kindness," returned our hero, calmly and modestly. "But as I assumed the charge for a specified purpose, I must do my pledge. Still, you will allow me to thank you all the same."

The young Count was at first puzzled by this. He was young for the place of power he occupied, being not yet thirty; but he had had much experience, and was accounted one of the best and surest lances in Baden.

Before he could answer, however, their attention was called in another direction, where two more knights had appeared upon the field. Agnes of Luxemburg drew a long, painful breath, and her cheek once more blanched with fear, for in the two horsemen who had thus made their appearance she recognized Sir Otto of Metzinger and John of Mainhardt! She knew that their souls were full of revenge against her noble lover; and is it a wonder that she trembled with the thought of her two faithful friends meeting therein full armed knights. Her heart sank within her as the conviction came that she must now go with the hated Count von Baden!

But will the renowned Knight of the Eagle tamely yield her up, while the fire of his young first love is so fearly burning in his valorous heart? "Will he fight against such fearful odds?" ask agnes of her trembling heart, and—"What if he should be overhelmed and slain at my feet?" Yes—he will fight! The reader his determination in his flashing eye, and imperial bearing. Short is the angry parley. The visors are drawn down, the lances are couched, and the opposing battle cries ring out upon the startled air! Agnes can only pray God to speed the right.

The above is all of this beautiful and highly interesting story that will be published in our columns. We give this as a sample. The continuation of it can be found only in the New York Ledger, the great family weekly paper, for which the most popular writers in the country contribute, which can be found at all the stores throughout the city and country where papers are sold. Remember to ask for the New York Ledger of April 18, and in it you will get a continuation of the story from where it leaves off here. If you cannot get a copy at any news office, the publisher of the Ledger will mail you a copy on the receipt of five cents. Fanny Fern writes only for the New York Ledger; Sylvanus Cobb, Jr., writes only for it; Emerson Bennett writes only for it; and nearly all the popular writers in the country, such as Mrs. Sigourney, Mrs. Emma D. E. N. Southworth and Alice Carey, contribute regularly to its columns. Mrs. Southworth will soon commence a new story in the New York Ledger; hereafter she will write for no other paper. It is mailed to subscribers at $2 a year, or two copies for $3. It is the handsomest and best family paper in the country, elegantly illustrated, and is characterized by a high moral tone.

LITERATURE.

THE NEW YORK LEDGER, THE QUEEN OF THE WEEKLIES, is now ready.

THE WEATHER.

BY MRS. L. H. SIGOURNEY.

[From the New York Ledger.]

What a convenient thing the weather is,
For paucity of thought. How it helps out
All social intercourse. What would become
Of the fast talkers, when the daily news
Grows stale and stagnant, were it not for this?
——But most of all it is the life and breath
Of enemonious calls: "'Tis very cold!"
And every one asserts. "How warm it is!"
Then straightway every hearer wipes his brow,
Feeling the heat still more. 'Tis something tho'
To find a subject on which all agree,
And hush the antagonistic spirit down
In sweet consent.
One from the country comes
To the great Empire City. He would fain
Call on a dame of fashion, whom he knew
In other times. Donning his best, he mounts
The lofty steps, and rings the silver bell
With a good courage. Rustling silks are heard;
Oh! what on earth is he to say to her,
Who, in these halls of marble, paint and gold,
Dwels like a queen? A happy thought unbinds
His wrinkling brow.
"Ma'm, 'tis exceeding cold."
To this great truth she gracefully subscribes:
——"They say there's never been such weather known
Since one cold Friday, fifty years ago,
When everything froze up. You can, perhaps,
Remember it."
"I've not that honor, sir—
My memory don't extend to what took place
Ere I was born."
There was a thought too much
About the weather, friend. But back he comes,
New horsed, and blundering to the charge again.
——"I was hot last summer, ma'am—uncommon hot
Even in the country. I should think that here
Among these tall brick houses it would seem
Some like an air tight stove. May be you like
Warm weather, ma'am."
"We spend the summer months
At some cool watering place."
"A solid cause!
What's to be done?
"Do you ride out much ma'am,
In pleasant weather?"
"No. Broadway's so block'd
With piles of snow! my husband will not let
The coachman drive there; and 'tis very dull
In the back streets."
"I guess I see a storm,
Not far ahead. For such a day as this
Will prove a weather breeder. I must be
A getting home, before another rain
Of blinding snow to clog the railroads up.
Excuse so short a call. Good morning, ma'am."
And forth he rushes to the clear, cold air,
Blessing the weather that had help'd him out
Of his dilemma in Fifth avenue.
——But as for us, who do not need such help,
Methinks this hackney'd theme predominates
More than is fitting and we might as well
Make ourselves weather cocks, and perch our thoughts
On some sharp steeple's point. The rain, the hail,
The snow, the vapor and the roaring wind,
Absorb their interourse, who might purchance,
From this great habitable globe sift out
Some speech of knowledge or its Maker's skill.
Let