THE BANNER SERIES OF SELECTED SHORT STORIES

The Heart of the Princess Osra

The Happiness of Stephen the Smith

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I.

"STEPHEN! Stephen! Stephen!"

The impatient cry was heard all through the narrow, gloomy street, where the old, richly carved house fronts bowed to meet one another, and left for the eye's comfort only a bare glimpse of blue. It was, men said, the oldest street in Strelsau, even as the sign of the Silver Ship was the oldest sign known to exist in the city. For when Aaron Lazarus, the Jew, came there, seventy years before, he had been the tenth man in unbroken line that took up the business. And now Stephen Nados, his apprentice and successor, was the eleventh. Old Lazarus had made a great business of it, and had spent his savings in buying up the better part of the street; but since Jews might then hold no property in Strelsau, he had taken all the deeds in the name of Stephen Nados, and when he came to die, having no kindred, and caring not a straw for any man or woman alive, save Stephen, he bade Stephen let the deeds be, and, with a last curse against the Christians (of whom Stephen was one, and a devout one), he kissed the young man, and turned his face to the wall and died. Therefore, Stephen was a rich man, and had no need to carry on the business—though it never entered his mind to do anything else.

"Stephen, Stephen!" cried Prince Henry, impatiently hammering on the closed door with his whip. "Plague take the man! Is he dead?"

The men in the quarter went on with their work; the women moved idly to the doors; the girls came out into the street, and clustered here and there, looking at the prince. For although he was not so handsome as that scamp Rudolf, his brother (who had just come back from his travels with half a dozen wild stories spurring after him), yet Henry was a comely youth, as he sat on his chestnut mare, with his blue eyes full of impatience and his chestnut curls fringing his shoulders.

Presently Stephen came, unbolting his door with much deliberation, and greeting Prince Henry with a restrained courtesy. He was not very well pleased to see his guest, for it was a ticklish moment with the nose of St. Peter, and Stephen would have liked to finish the job uninterrupted. Still, the prince was a prince, a gentleman and a friend, and Stephen would not be uncivil to him.

"You ride early today, sir," he observed, patting the chestnut mare.

"I have a good reason," answered Henry. "The Lion rages today."

"What has vexed the king?" he asked, for he knew that Prince Henry spoke of his father, Henry, surnamed the Lion, now an old man, yet as fierce as when he had been young. "Is it your brother again?"

"For a marvel, no. It is myself, Stephen. And he is more furious with me than he has ever been with Rudolf—ay, even more than he was at all the stories that followed my brother home."

"And what is the cause of it all, sir, and how is it in my power to help?"

"That you will find out very soon," said the prince, with a bitter laugh. "You will be sent for to the palace in an hour, Stephen."

"If it is about the king's ring, the ring is not finished," said Stephen.

"It is not about the ring. Yet, indeed, it is, in a way, about a ring. For you are to be married, Stephen. This very day you are to be married."

"I think not, sir," said Stephen, mildly. "For it is a thing that a man himself hears about, if it be true."

"But the king thinks so, Stephen. Have you remarked among my sister Osra's ladies a certain dark lady with black hair, and eyes—I cannot describe her eyes?"

"But you can tell me her name, sir," suggested Stephen, who was a practical man.

"Her name? Oh, her name is Hilda. Hilda von Laugram."

"Ay, I know the Countess Hilda. I have made a bracelet for her."

"She is the most beautiful creature alive!" cried Prince Henry in a sudden rapture, and so loudly (being carried away by his passion) that the girls heard him, and wondered of whom he spoke with so great an enthusiasm.

"To those to whom she seems such," observed Stephen. "But, pray, how am I concerned in all this, sir?"

The prince's smile grew more bitter as he answered: "Why, you are to marry her. It was an idle suggestion of Osra's made in jest; my father pleased to approve of it in earnest." Then he bent in his saddle, and went on in a hurried, urgent whisper, "I love her better than my life, Stephen; better than heaven; and my faith and word are pledged to her, and last night I was to have fled with her—for I knew better than to face the old Lion—but Osra found her making preparations, and we were discovered. Then Osra was scornful, and the king mad, and Rudolf laughed; and, when they talked of what was to be done to her, Osra came in with her laughing suggestion. It caught the king's angry fancy, and he swore that it should be so; and, since the archbishop is away, he has bidden the Bishop of Modenstein be at the palace at 12 today, and you will be brought there also, and you will be married to her. And, by heavens, I'll have your blood if you are!" And with this sudden outbreak of fury the prince ended. Yet a moment later he put out his hand to the smith, saying, "It's not your fault, man."

"That is true enough," said the smith, "for I have no desire to marry her. And it is not fitting that a lady of her birth should mate with a smith; for she is of a great house, and she would hate and despise me."

Prince Henry was about to assent, when his eye chanced to fall on Stephen, the smith. Now, the smith was a very handsome man, handsomer, many said, than Prince Rudolf himself, whom no lady could look at without admiration; he stood 6 feet and 2 inches in his flat working shoes; he was very broad, and could leap higher and hurl a stone farther than any man in Strelsau. Moreover, he looked kind and gentle, yet was known to grow angry at times, and then to be very dangerous. Therefore, Prince Henry, knowing (or thinking that he knew) the caprices of women, and how they are caught by this and that, was suddenly seized with a terrible fear that the Countess Hilda might not despise Stephen the smith. Yet he did not express his fear, but said that it was an impossible thing that a lady of the countess' birth (for the House of Lauengram was very noble) should wed a silversmith, even though he were as fine a fellow as his good friend Stephen; to which gracious speech Stephen made no reply, but stood very thoughtful, with his hand on the neck of the chestnut mare. But at last he said:

"In any case it cannot be, for I am bound already."

"A wife? Have you a wife?" cried the prince, eagerly.

"No; but my heart is bound," said Stephen the smith.

"The king will make little of that. Yet, who is she? Is she any of these girls who stand looking at us?"

"No, she is none of these," answered Stephen, smiling as though such an idea were very ludicrous.

"And are you pledged to her?"

"I to her, but not she to me."

"But does she love you?"

"I think it most unlikely," said Stephen the smith.

"The Lion will care nothing for this," groaned the prince, despondingly. "They will send for you in half an hour. For heaven's sake, spare her, Stephen!"

"Spare her, sir?"

"Do not consent to marry her, however urgently the king may command you."

The smith shook his head, smiling still. Prince Henry rode sorrowfully away, spending not a glance on the bevy of girls who watched him go.

Now, sure enough, when the clock on the cathedral wanted a quarter of an hour of noon, two of the king's guard came and bade Stephen follow them with all haste to the palace; and, since they were very urgent and no time was to be lost, he followed them as he was, in his apron, without washing his hands or getting rid of the dust that hung about him from his work.

The Lion sat in his great chair. He was a very thin old man, with a face haggard and deeply lined; his eyes, set far back in his head, glowed and glowered, and his fingers pulled his sparse white beard. On his right, Prince Rudolf lolled on a low seat, smiling at the play; on his left sat that wonderfully fair lady, the Princess Osra, then in the first bloom of her young beauty, and she was smiling scornfully. Prince Henry stood before his father, and some yards from him was the Countess Hilda, trembling and tearful, supported by one of her companions; and, finally, since the archbishop was gone to Rome to get himself a scarlet hat, the Bishop of Modenstein, a young man of noble family, was there, most richly arrayed in choicest lace and handsomest vestments, ready to perform the ceremony.

The king's fury had had a night and a morning to grow cool in, and it had now settled into a cold, ironical mood, that argued no less resolution than his first fierce wrath. There was a grim smile on his face as he addressed the smith, who, having bowed to the company, was standing between the countess and Prince Henry.

"The House of Elphberg," said the king, with mocking graciousness, "will recognizes your worth, Stephen, my friend. We are indebted to you——"

"It's a thousand crowns or more from Prince Rudolf alone, sir," interrupted Stephen, with a bow to the prince he named.

"For much faithful service," pursued the king, while Rudolf laughed again. "I have therefore determined to reward you with the hand of a lady who is, it may be, above your station, but in no way above your worth. Behold her! Is she not handsome? On my word, I envy you, smith. She is beautiful, young, high born. You are lucky, smith. Nay, no thanks. It is but what you deserve—and no more than she deserves. Take her, and be happy," and he ended with a snarling laugh.

The Bishop of Modenstein—he was of the House of Hentzau, many of which have been famous in history—lifted up his hands in horror at Rudolf's last whispered jest, and then, advancing, with a bow to the king, asked if he were now to perform his sacred duties.

"Ay, get on with it," growled the Lion, not heeding the countess' sobs or the contrary in his son's face. And the Princess Osra sat unmoved, the scornful smile still on her lips; it seemed as though she had no pity for a brother who could stoop, or for a girl who had dared to soar too high.

"Wait, wait," said Stephen the smith. "Does this lady love me, sire?"

"Ay, she loves you enough for the purpose, smith," grinned the king. "Do not be uneasy."

"May I ask her if she loves me, sire?"

"Why, no, smith. Your king's word must be enough for you."

"And your Majesty says that she loves me?"

"I do say so, smith."

"Then," said Stephen, "I am very sorry for her; for, as there's a heaven above us, sire, I do not love her."

Prince Rudolf laughed; Osra's smile broadened in greater scorn; the countess hid her face in her companion's bosom; the old king roared out a gruff burst. "Good, good!" he chuckled. "But it will come with marriage, smith; for with marriage love either comes or goes—eh, son Rudolf?—and since in this case it cannot go, you must not doubt, friend Stephen, that it will come."

"That might well be, sire," admitted Stephen, "were it not that I most passionately love another."

"Our affections," said the king, "are unruly things, smith, and must be kept in repression; is it not so, son Rudolf?"

"It should be so, sire," answered the merry prince.

But the Princess Osra, whose eyes had been scanning Stephen's figure, here broke suddenly into the conversation.

"And are you pledged to her whom you love so passionately?" she asked.

"I have not ventured to tell her of my love, madame," answered he, bowing low.

"Then there is no harm done," observed Prince Rudolf. "The harm lies in the telling, not in the loving."

"Tell us something about her," commanded the princess; and the king, who loved sport most when it hurt others, chimed in, "Ay, let's hear about her whom you prefer to this lady. In what shop does she work, smith? Or does she sell flowers? Or is she a serving girl? Come, listen, countess, and hear about your rival."

Prince Henry took one step forward in uncontrolled anger; but he could not meet the savage mirth in the old man's eyes, and, sinking into a chair, spread his hand across his face. But Stephen, regarding the king with placid good humor, began to speak of her whom he loved so passionately. And his voice was soft as he spoke.

"She works in no shop, sire," said he, "nor does she sell flowers, nor is she a serving girl; though I would not care if she were. But one day, when the clouds hung dark over our street, she came riding down it, and another girl with her. The two stopped before my door; and, seeing them, I came out——"

"It is more than you do for me," remarked Prince Rudolf.

Stephen smiled, but continued his story. "I came out, and she whom I love gave me a bracelet to mend. And I, looking at her rather than at the bracelet, said, 'But already it is perfect.' But she did not hear; for, when she had given me the bracelet, she rode on again and took no more notice of me than of the flies that were crawling up my wall. And that was the first, and is the last, time that I have spoken to her until this day. But she was so beautiful that there and then I swore that until I had found means and courage to tell her my love, and until she had thrice refused it, I would marry no other maiden nor speak a word of love."

"It seems to me," said Prince Rudolf, "that the oath has some prudence in it; for, if she proves obdurate, friend Stephen, you will then be able to go elsewhere. Many lovers swear more intemperately."

"But they do not keep their oaths," said Stephen, with a shrewd look at the prince.

"You had best let him alone, my son," said the old king. "He knows what the country knows of its future king."

"Then he may go and hang with all the country," said the prince, peevishly.

But the Princess Osra leant a little forward toward Stephen, and the Countess Hilda also looked covertly out from the folds of her friend's dress at Stephen. And the princess said:

"Was she, then, so beautiful, this girl?"

"As the sun in heaven, madame," said the smith.

"As beautiful as my pretty sister?" asked Rudolf, in careless joke.

"Yes, as beautiful, sir," answered Stephen.

"Then," said the cruel old king, "very much more beautiful than this countess."

"Of that you must ask your son Henry, sire," said Stephen, discreetly.

"Nevertheless," said the king, "you must put up with the countess. We cannot all have what we want in this world, can we, son Henry?" And he chuckled again, most maliciously.

"Not, sire, till my lady has thrice refused me," the smith reminded the king.

"Then she must be quick about it. For we all, and my lord bishop here, are waiting. Send for her, Stephen. By heaven, I have a curiosity to see her!"

"And, by heaven, so have I!" added Prince Rudolf, with a merry smile. "And poor Henry here may be cured by the sight."

And the Princess Osra leant a little farther forward and said gently:

"Tell us her name, and we will send for her. Indeed, I also would like to see her."

"But if she refuses, I shall be worse off than I am now. And if she says yes, still I must marry the countess," objected the smith.

"Nay," said the king; "if she does not refuse you three times, you shall not marry the countess, but shall be free to try your fortune with the girl." For the smith had put the old Lion in better temper, and he thought he was to witness more sport.

"Since your Majesty is so good, I must tell her name," said Stephen; "though I had rather have declared my love to herself alone."

"It is the pleasantest way," said Prince Rudolf; "but the thing can be done in the presence of others also."

"You must tell us her name that we may send for her," said the princess, her eyes wandering from the countess to the smith, and back to the countess again.

"Well, then," said Stephen, sturdily, "the lady who came riding down the street and took away my heart with her was called Osra, and her father is named Henry."

A moment or two passed before they understood what the smith had said. Then the old king fell into a fit of laughter, half choked by coughing. Prince Rudolf clapped his hands in merry mockery, and a deep flush spread over the face of the princess.

The old king, having recovered from his fit of laughing, looked round on the smith with infinite amusement, and, turning to his daughter, he said, "Come, Osra, you have heard the declaration. It remains only for you to satisfy our good friend's conscience by refusing him three times, for then he will be free to do our pleasure and make the Countess Hilda happy."

The heart of woman is, as it would seem, a strange thing; for the Princess Osra, hearing what the smith had said, and learning that he had fallen passionately in love with her on the mere sight of her beauty, suddenly felt a tenderness for him, and a greater admiration than she had entertained before; and, although she harbored no absurd idea of listening to his madness, or of doing anything in the world but laugh at it as it deserved, yet she suddenly experienced a curious dislike of the project that she had herself, in sport, suggested. Accordingly, when the king spoke to her, she said fretfully:

"Am I to be put to refuse the hand of such a fellow as this? Why, to refuse him is a stain on my dignity!"

"Yet you must grant him so much, because of his oath," said the king.

"Well, then, I refuse him," said she, tartly.

"That is once," said Stephen the smith calmly, and he fixed his eyes on the princess' face. She felt his gaze, her eyes were drawn back to his, and she exclaimed angrily:

"Yes, I refuse him!" and again she looked away. But he looked still more intently at her, waiting for the third refusal.

"It is as easy to say no three times as twice," said the king.

"For a man, sire," murmured Prince Rudolf, for he was very learned in the perilous knowledge of a woman's whims, and maybe read something of what was passing in his sister's heart. Certainly he looked at her and laughed; and said to the king:

"Sire, I think this smith is a clever man. For what he really desires is to wed the countess and to do it without disobliging my brother. Therefore he professes this ridiculous passion, knowing well that Osra will refuse him, and that he will enjoy the great good fortune of marrying the countess against his will.

"There is no craft, sir," said Stephen. "I have told nothing but the truth."

But the king swore a loud oath, crying, "Ay, that there is! Rudolf has hit the mark. Yet I do not grudge him his good luck. Refuse him, Osra, and make him happy."

But the dark flush came again on the princess' face, for now she did not know whether the smith really loved her or whether he had been making a jest of her, in order to save himself in the eyes of her brother Henry. So that her mind was very greatly disturbed, and she was devoured with interest to know the reality of the smith's feelings toward her. For, although he was only a smith, yet he was a wonderfully handsome man. Thus she was reluctant to refuse him a third time, when the Bishop of Modenstein stood there, waiting only for her word to marry him to the countess. And she rose suddenly from her seat and walked toward the door of the room; and when she had almost reached the door, she turned her head over her shoulder, and cast one smile at Stephen the smith. As she glanced, the blush again mounted on her face, making her so lovely that even her father wondered; and she said in arch softness, "I'll refuse him the third time some other day; two denials are enough for one day."

"But the marriage can't go on," cried Rudolf.

"Let it rest for today," said the king, whose anger was passed. "Let it rest. The countess shall be guarded; and, since this young fool (and he pointed to his son Henry) will not wander while she is caged, let him go where he will. Then as soon as Osra has refused the smith a third time, we will send again for the bishop."

"And what am I to do, sire?" asked Stephen the smith.

"Why, my son-in-law that would be," chuckled the king, "you may go back to where you came from till I send for you again."

So Stephen, having thanked the king, went back home, and, sitting down to the chasing of a cup, became very thoughtful. For it seemed to him that the countess had been hardly treated, and that the prince deserved happiness, and that the princess was yet more lovely than she had seemed to him before. Thus in his work and his meditations the afternoon wore away fast.

The King Thrust the Smith Through the Chest

II.

The Princess Osra walked restlessly up and down the length of her bedchamber. Dinner was done, and it was 8 o'clock, and, the season being late October, it had grown dark. She had come hither to be alone; yet, now that she was alone, she could not rest. He was an absurd fellow, that smith. Yes, she thought him fully as handsome as her brother Rudolf. But what did Henry find to love in the black-brown Hilda? She could not understand a man caring for such a color; a blackamoor would serve as well. And what had that silly smith meant? It must have been a trick, as Rudolf said. Yet, when he first spoke of her riding down the street, there was a look in his eyes that a man can hardly put there of his own will. Did the silly fellow then really—?

"I can't rest till I know!" she cried, as she came to a stand before a long mirror let into the panel of the wall, and saw herself at full length in it. As she looked, a smile came parting her lips, and she threw her head back as she said: "I will go and ask the smith what he meant." And she smiled again at her own face in triumphant daring.

Stephen the smith sat alone in his house; his apprentices were gone, and he himself neither worked nor supped, but sat still and idle by his hearth. The street was silent also, for it rained, and nobody was about. Then suddenly came a light, timid rap at the door; so light was it that the smith doubted if he had really heard, but it came again, and he rose leisurely and opened the door. Even as he did so, a slight, tall figure slipped by him, an arm pulled him back, the door was pushed close again, and he was alone inside the house with a lady wrapped in a long riding cloak, and so veiled that nothing of her face could be seen.

"Welcome, madame," said Stephen the smith; and he drew a chair forward and bowed to his visitor. He was not wearing his apron now, but was dressed in a well-cut suit of brown cloth, and had put on a pair of silk stockings.

"Do you know who I am?" asked the veiled lady.

"Since I was a baby, madame," answered the smith, "I have known the sun when I saw it, even though clouds dimmed its face."

A corner of the veil was drawn down, and one eye gleamed in frightened mirth.

"Nobody knows I have come," said Osra. "And you do not know why I have come."

"Is it to answer me for the third time?" asked he, drawing a step nearer, yet observing great deference in his manner.

"It is not to answer at all, but to ask. But I am very silly to have come. What is it to me what you meant?"

"I cannot conceive that it could be anything, madame," said Stephen, smiling.

"Yet some think her beautiful—my brother Henry, for example."

"We must respect the opinions of princes," observed the smith.

"Must we share them?" she asked, drawing the veil yet a little more aside.

"We can share nothing—we humble folk—with princes or princesses, madame."

"Yet we can make free with their names, though humbler ones would serve as well."

"No other would have served at all, madame."

"Then you meant it?" she cried in sudden, half-serious eagerness.

"Nay, but what, madame?"

"I don't care whether you meant it or not."

"Alas! I know that so well that I marvel that you have come to tell it me."

The princess rose and began to walk up and down as she had done in her own chamber. Stephen stood regarding her as though God had made his eyes for that one purpose.

"The thing is nothing," she declared, petulantly, "but I have a fancy to ask it. Stephen, was it a trick, or—or was it really so? Come, answer me! I can't spend much time on it."

"It is not worth a thought to you. If you say no a third time, all will be well."

"You will marry the countess?"

"Can I disobey the king, madame?"

"I am very sorry for her," said the princess. "A lady of her rank should not be forced to marry a silversmith."

"Indeed, I thought so all along. Therefore——"

"You played the trick?" she cried, in unmistakable anger.

Stephen made no answer for a time; then he said softly:

"If she loves the prince, and he her, why should they not marry?"

"Because his birth is above hers."

"I am glad, then, that I am of no birth, for I can marry whom I will."

"Are you so happy and so free, Stephen?" sighed the princess; and there was no more of the veil left than served to frame the picture of her face.

"So soon as you have refused me the third time, madame," bowed the smith.

"Will you not answer me?" cried the princess; and she smiled no more, but was as eager as though she were asking some important question.

"Bring the countess here tomorrow at this time," said Stephen, "and I will answer."

"You wish, perhaps, to compare us?" she asked, haughtily.

"I cannot be compelled to answer, except on my own terms," said the smith. "Yet if you will refuse me once again, the thing will be finished."

"I will refuse you," she cried, "when I please."

"And you will bring the countess, madame?"

"I am very sorry for her. I have behaved ill to her, Stephen, though I meant only to jest."

"There is room for amends, madame," said he.

The princess looked long and curiously in his face; but he met her glance with a quiet smile.

"It grows late," said he, "and you should not be longer here, madame. Shall I escort you to the palace?"

"And have every one asking with whom Stephen the smith walks? No, I will go as I came. You have not answered me, Stephen."

"And you have not refused me, madame."

"Will you answer me tomorrow, when I come with the countess?"

"Yes, I will answer then."

The princess had drawn near to the door, and now Stephen opened it for her to pass out; and as she crossed the threshold she said:

"And I will refuse you then—perhaps," with which she darted swiftly down the dark, silent, shining street and was gone; and Stephen, having closed the door, passed his hand twice over his brow, sighed thrice, smiled once, and set about the preparation of his supper.

Now, the next night, as the cathedral clock struck 9, there arose a sudden tumult and commotion in the palace. King Henry the Lion was in such a rage as no man had ever seen him in before; even Rudolf his son did not dare to laugh at him; courtiers, guards, attendants, lackeys, ran wildly to and fro in immense fear and trepidation. A little later, and a large company of the king's guard filed out, and, under the command of various officers, scattered themselves through the whole of Strelsau, while five mounted men rode at a gallop to each of the five gates of the city, bearing commands that the gates should be closed, and no man, woman or child be allowed to pass out without an order under the hand of the king's marshal. And the king swore by heaven, and by much else, that he would lay them—that is to say, the persons whose disappearance caused all this hubbub—by the heels, and that they should know that there was life in the Lion yet. And the reason of the whole thing was no other than this, that the room of the Princess Osra was empty, and the room of the Countess Hilda was also empty, and nobody had set eyes on Henry, the king's son, for the last two hours or more.

Through all the city went the guards. They ransacked every crevice and cranny of every house, and displayed the utmost zeal imaginable. And thus having traversed nearly all the city, and set the whole place in tumult and commotion, they came at last to the street where Stephen lived, and to the sign of the Silver Ship.

"Rat, tat, tat!" came thundering on the door from the swordhilt of the sergeant in command of the party.

There was no answer; no light shone from the house, for the window was closely shuttered. Again the sergeant hammered on the door.

"This pestilent smith is gone to bed!" he cried in vexation. "But we must leave no house unsearched. Come, we must break in the door!" and he began to examine the door, and found that it was a fine, solid door, of good oak, and clamped with iron.

"Phew! we shall have a job with this door," he sighed. "Why, in the devil's name, doesn't the fellow answer? Stephen! Stephen! Ho there, Stephen!"

Yet no answer came from the inside of the house.

But at this moment another sound came smiting on the ear of the sergeant and his men. It was the sound of flames crackling. From the house next to Stephen's (which belonged to him, but was inhabited by a fruit seller) there welled out smoke in volumes from every window, and the fruit seller and his family appeared at the windows, calling for aid. Seeing this, the sergeant blew very loudly the whistle that he carried, and cried "Fire!" and bade his men run and procure a ladder; for plainly the fruit seller's house was on fire, and it was a more urgent matter to rescue men and women from burning than to find the countess and the prince. Presently the ladder came, and a great crowd of people, roused by the whistle and the cries of fire, came also; and then the door of Stephen's house was opened, and Stephen himself, looking out, asked what was the matter. Being told that the next house was on fire, he looked very grave—for the house was his—and waited for a moment to watch the fruit seller and his family being brought down the ladder, which task was safely and prosperously accomplished. But the sergeant said to him:

"The fire may well spread, and if there is any one in your house, it would be prudent to get them out."

Then three lads—one being very tall—came out of Stephen's house, clad in their leather breeches, their aprons and the close-fitting caps that apprentices wore, and for a moment they stood watching the fire at the fruit seller's. Then seeing that the fire was burning down—which it did very quickly—they did not stay till the attention of the sergeant was released from it, but, accompanied by Stephen, turned down the street, and, going along at a brisk rate, turned the corner and came into the open space in front of the cathedral.

"The gates will be shut, I fear," said the tallest apprentice. "How came the fire, Stephen?"

"It was three or four trusses of hay, sir, and a few crowns to repair his scorched paint. Shall we go to the gate?"

"Yes, we must try the gate," said Prince Henry, gathering the hand of the countess into his; and the third apprentice walked silently by Stephen's side. Yet once, as she went, she said softly:

"So it was no trick, Stephen?"

"No trick, but the truth, madame," said Stephen.

"I do not know," said Osra, "how I am to return to the palace in these clothes."

"Let us get your brother and the countess away first," counseled the smith.

Now, when they came to the nearest gate, it was shut; but at the moment a troop of mounted men rode up, having been sent by the king to scour the country round, in case the fugitives should have already escaped from the city; and the commandant of the company bore an order from the king's marshal for the opening of the gate. Seeing this, Stephen the smith went up to him and began to talk to him, the three apprentices standing close by. The commandant knew Stephen well, and was pleased to talk with him while the gates were opened and the troopers filed through. Stephen kept close by him till the troopers were all through. Then he turned and spoke to the apprentices, and they nodded assent. The commandant checked his horse for an instant, when he was half way through the gate, and bent down and took Stephen's hand to shake in farewell. And Stephen took his hand with marvelous friendliness, and held it, and would not let him go; and the apprentices edged cautiously nearer and nearer to the gate.

"Enough, man, enough!" laughed the commandant. "We are not parting forever."

"I trust not, sir; I trust not," said Stephen earnestly, still holding his hand.

"Come, let me go. See, the gatekeeper wants to shut the gate."

"True," said Stephen. "Good-bye, then, sir. Hallo, hallo! Stop! stop! Oh, the young rascals!"

For, even as Stephen spoke, two of the apprentices had darted through the half-closed gate and run swiftly forward into the gloom of the night. And Stephen swore an oath.

"The rogues!" he cried. "They were to have worked all night to finish an image of Our Lady. And now I shall see no more of them till tomorrow. They shall pay for their prank then, by heaven, they shall!" But the commandant laughed.

"I am sorry I can't catch them for you, friend Stephen," said he, "but I have other fish to fry. Well, boys will be boys. Don't be too hard on them when they return."

"They must answer for what they do," said Stephen; and the commandant rode on, and the gates were shut.

Then the Princess Osra said:

"Will they escape, Stephen?"

"They have money in their purses, love in their hearts, and an angry king behind them. I should travel quickly, madame, if I were so placed."

The princess looked through the grating of the gate.

"Yes," she said, "they have all those. How happy they must be, Stephen! But what am I to do?"

Stephen made no answer, and they walked back in silence to his house. It may be that they were wondering whether Prince Henry and the countess would escape. Yet it may be that they thought of something else. When they reached the house, Stephen bade the princess go into the inner room and resume her own dress, that she might return to the palace; and when she, still strangely silent, went in as he bade her, he took his great staff in his hand, and stood on the threshold of the house.

Now, when he had stood there a little while, the same sergeant of the guard, recollecting (now that the fire at the fruit seller's was out) that he had never searched the house of the smith, came again with his four men, and told Stephen to stand aside and allow him to enter the house.

"Those whom you seek are not here," said Stephen.

"That I must see for myself," answered the sergeant. "Come, smith, stand aside."

When the princess heard the voices outside, she put her head round the door of the inner room, and cried in great alarm to Stephen:

"They must not come in, Stephen. At any cost, they must not come in!"

"Do not be afraid, madame; they will not come in," said he.

"I heard a voice in the house," cried the sergeant.

"It is nothing uncommon to hear in a house," said Stephen, and he grasped more firmly his great staff.

"Will you make way for us?" demanded the sergeant.

"For the last time, will you make way?"

"Over my dead body you can come in."

Then the sergeant drew his sword, and his men set their halberds in rest, and the sergeant crying, "In the king's name!" came at Stephen with drawn sword and struck fiercely at him. But Stephen let the great staff drop on the sergeant's shoulder, and the sergeant's arm fell powerless by his side. Thereupon the guards cried aloud, and people began to come out of their houses. And Stephen's eyes gleamed; and when the guards thrust at him, he struck at them, and two of them he stretched senseless on the ground, for his height and reach were such that he struck them before they could come near enough to touch him; and, having no firearms, they could not bring him down. And the princess, now fully dressed in her own garments, came out into the outer room and stood there, looking at Stephen. Her bosom rose and fell, and her eyes grew dim as she looked; and growing very eager, and being very much moved, she kept murmuring to herself:

"I have not said no thrice, not thrice!"

And it seemed to her a brave thing to have such a man to fight for her, and to offer his life to hide her shame.

Now, old King Henry was not a patient man, and when he had waited two hours without news of son, daughter or countess, he flew into a mighty passion, and sent one for his horse and another for Rudolf's horse and a third for Rudolf himself; and he drank a draught of wine, and called to Rudolf to accompany him, that they might see for themselves what the lazy hounds of guards were doing that they had not yet come up with the quarry. Thus they traversed the city, riding swiftly, the old king furiously upbraiding every officer and soldier whom he met; and then they rode to the gate, and all the gatekeepers said that nobody had gone out, save that one gatekeeper admitted that two apprentices of Stephen the silversmith had contrived to slip out when the gates were open to let the troopers pass. But the king made nothing of it, and, turning with his son, rode up the street where Stephen lived. And here they came suddenly into the midst of a crowd that filled all the roadway, and would hardly let the horses move even at a foot's pace. The king cried out angrily: "What is this tumult?" Then the people knew him; and, since common folk are always anxious to serve and commend themselves to the great, a score began all at once to tell him what had happened; and the king could not make head or tail of the babel of voices. And Prince Rudolf dropped his reins and sat on his horse laughing. But the king, his patience being clean gone, drew his sword and cried fiercely, "Make way!" and set spurs to his horse, not recking whether he hurt any man in life or limb. Thus he gained a passage through the crowd and came near to Stephen's house, Prince Rudolf following in his wake, still greatly amused at all that was happening.

But the sight they saw arrested even Prince Rudolf's smiles, and he raised himself in his stirrups with a sudden cry of wonder. For four more of the guard had come, and there were now six standing round the doorway, and three lay stretched on the ground; and Stephen the smith still stood on the threshold with his staff in his hand. Blood flowed from a wound in his head, but he twirled his staff to and fro, and was not weary, and none of the guard dared to rush in and close with him.

But when the king heard that Stephen the smith resisted the officers, would not suffer his house to be searched, he fell into a great rage; and he roared out on them all, calling them onward, and, before his son or any one else could stop him, he drew his sword and dug his spurs into his horse. The horse bounded forward and knocked down one of the guards who stood round Stephen. Then the king, neither challenging Stephen to yield nor giving him time to stand aside, being carried away by passion, raised his sword and rode full at him. And the Princess, from within, caught sight of his face, and she fell on her knees with a moan and hid her face. Then Stephen saw that it was the king, and none other, who rode against him. He had no time for thought, for the king was on him in the space of a second, and he could do nothing but drop the staff that he held and stand defenseless in the doorway; for he would neither strike the king nor yield the passage. But the king, not heeding in his fury that Stephen had dropped his staff, drew back his arm and lunged with his sword, and thrust the smith through the chest, and Stephen reeled and fell on one knee, and his blood flowed out on the stone of the doorstep. Then the king reined in his horse, and sat looking down on Stephen; but Rudolf leaped to the ground, and came and caught hold of Stephen, supporting him, and asking, "What does it mean, man? What does it mean?"

Then Stephen, being very faint with his wound, said with difficulty:

"Come in alone—you and the king alone."

Prince Rudolf looked at the king, who sheathed his sword and dismounted from his horse; and the prince supported Stephen inside the house, and the king followed them, and shut the door on all the people outside.

Then King Henry the Lion saw his daughter crouching down in the middle of the room, her face hidden in her hands. Surprise and wonder banished his rage, and he could do no more than gasp her name, while the prince, who knelt, supporting Stephen, cried to her, asking how she came there; but she answered nothing. She took her hands from her face and looked at Stephen, and when she saw that he was hurt and bleeding, she fell to sobbing, and hid her face again. And she did not know whether she would have him live or die; for, if he lived, he could not be hers, and if he died, her heart would ache sorely for him. Then Stephen, being supported by the arms of Prince Rudolf, made shift to speak, and he told the king how, at his persuasion, the princess had brought the countess thither; how he himself had contrived the presence of the prince at the same time; how, again, the princess had been prevailed upon to aid the lovers.

And when Stephen had said his say, he fell back very faint in the arms of the prince; and the prince tore a scarf from his waist, and tried to stanch the blood from Stephen's wound. But the old king, who was a hard man, smiled grimly.

"Indeed, he has tricked us finely, this smith, and he is a clever fellow," said he. "But, unless he would rather hang than bleed to death, let his wound be, Rudolf. For, by heaven, if you cure him, I will hang him!"

"Do not be afraid, sire," said Stephen, "the prince cannot cure me. You still strike straight, though you are hard on 70."

"Straight enough for a rascal like you," said the king, well pleased. And he added, "Hold the fellow easily, Rudolf; I would not have him suffer." And this was, they say, the only time in all his life that Henry the Lion showed a sign of pity to any man.

But Stephen was now very faint, and he cast his eyes toward the princess, and Rudolf followed his eyes. Now, Rudolf had an affection for Stephen, and he loved his sister, and was a man of soft heart; and he cried gently to Osra, "Come, sister, and help me with him." And she rose and came and sat down by the wall, and gathered Stephen's head into her lap; and there he lay, looking up at her with a smile on his lips. But still he bled, and his blood stained the white cloak that she wore over her robe, and her tears dropped on his face. But Rudolf took his father by the arm and led him a little way off, saying:

"What matter, sire? The girl is young, and the man is dying. Let them be."

And the old king, grumbling, let himself be led away. Then Stephen, looking up at Osra, said:

"Do not weep, madame. They will escape now, and they will be happy."

"I was not weeping for them," said the princess.

Stephen was silent for a little while, and then he said: "Do you weep, madame, because I am dying?"

"Yes, I weep for that."

"Would you have me live, madame?" he asked.

"No, I would not—No—But I do not know," she said.

Then Stephen the smith smiled, and his smile was happy.

"Yet," said he, "it would make small difference to the Princess Osra whether Stephen the smith lived or died."

At this, although he lay there a dying man, yet a sudden flush of red spread all over her cheeks, and she turned her eyes away from him, and she would not meet his glance; and she made him no answer, and he said again:

"What can it concern the princess whether I live or die?"

Still the blush burnt on her cheek, and still she had no answer to give to Stephen as he lay dying with his head on her lap. And a bright gleam came into his eyes, and he tried to move a hand toward her hand; and she, seeing his effort, put out her hand and held his; and he whispered very low, for he could hardly speak:

"You have not yet refused me three times, madame."

At that her eyes came back to his, and their eyes dwelt long on one another. And for a moment it seemed to them that all things became possible, life and joy and love. Yet since all could not be, they were content that none should be. And the princess bent low over his head, and she whispered to him:

"No, I have not refused you thrice, Stephen."

His lips just moved once again, and, being very near him, she heard:

"And you will not?" he said.

"No," said she, and she kissed his lips; and he smiled, and turned on his side, and he nestled his head, as if he were really on her lap, and he said no more.

Thus died Stephen the silversmith of Strelsau, happy in his death because Osra the princess had not refused him thrice. And she laid him gently on the ground, and rose, and went across to where the king sat with Rudolf. And she said:

"Sire, he is dead."

"It is well," said the king. And he bade Rudolf go and cause all the people to leave the street and return to their houses. And when all the streets were cleared, the princess veiled herself, and her brother mounted her on his horse, and thus she rode back to the palace; and none knew that she had been in the house of Stephen the silversmith.

And after many months, Prince Henry, who had made good his escape and married the lady whom he loved, was reconciled to his father and returned to the city of Strelsau. And when he heard how Stephen had died, he raised a stately monument over him, and had carved on it his name and the day and the year on which he had died; and underneath he caused to be engraved the words: "From a Friend to a Friend." And when this monument had stood three days in its place, there came thither a lady closely veiled, and she prayed on her knees by the monument for a long while, and then rose and stood regarding it; and her eyes rested on the last words that Prince Henry had written on the stone. And she came near and kissed the words, and, when she had kissed them, she whispered softly, "From a Lover to a Lover."