

Crockett Samuel Rutherford

Joan of the Sword Hand



Samuel Crockett

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Joan of the Sword Hand

CHAPTER I THE HALL OF THE GUARD

Loud rang the laughter in the hall of the men-at-arms at Castle Kernsberg. There had come an embassy from the hereditary Princess of Plassenburg, recently established upon the throne of her ancestors, to the Duchess Joan of Hohenstein, ruler of that cluster of hill statelets which is called collectively Masurenland, and which includes, besides Hohenstein the original Eagle's Eyrie, Kernsberg also, and Marienfield.

Above, in the hall of audience, the ambassador, one Leopold von Dessauer, a great lord and most learned councillor of state, sat alone with the young Duchess. They were eating of the baked meats and drinking the good Rhenish up there. But, after all, it was much merrier down below with Werner von Orseln, Alt Pikker, Peter Balta, and John of Thorn, though what they ate was mostly but plain ox-flesh, and their drink the strong ale native to the hill lands, which is called Wendish mead.

"Get you down, Captains Jorian and Boris," the young Duchess had commanded, looking very handsome and haughty in the pride of her twenty years, her eight strong castles, and her two thousand men ready to rise at her word; "down to the hall of guard, where my officers send round the wassail. If they do not treat you well, e'en come up and tell it to me."

"Good!" responded the two soldiers of the Princess of Plassenburg, turning them about as if they had been hinged on the same stick, and starting forward with precisely the same stiff hitch from the halt, they made for the door.

"But stay," Joan of Hohenstein had said, ere they reached it, "here are a couple of rings. My father left me one or two such. Fit them upon your fingers, and when you return give them to the maidens of your choice. Is there by chance such an one, Captain Jorian, left behind you at Plassenburg?"

"Aye, madam," said Jorian, directing his left eye, as he stood at attention, a little slantwise in the direction of his companion.

"What is her name?"

"Gretchen is her name," quoth the soldier.

"And yours, Captain Boris?"

The second automaton, a little slower of tongue than his companion, hesitated a moment.

"Speak up," said his comrade, in an undergrowl; "say 'Katrin.'"

"Katrin!" thundered Captain Boris, with bluff apparent honesty.

"It is well," said the Duchess Joan; "I think no less of a sturdy soldier for being somewhat shamefaced as to the name of his sweetheart. Here is a ring apiece which will not shame your maidens in far Plassenburg, as you walk with them under the lime-trees, or buy ribbons for them in the booths that cluster about the Minster walls."

The donor looked at the rings again. She espied the letters of a posy upon them.

"Ha!" she cried, "Captain Boris, what said you was the name of your betrothed?"

"Good Lord!" muttered Boris lowly to himself, "did I not tell the woman even now? – Gretchen!"

"Hut, you fool!" Jorian's undergrowl came to his ear, "Katrin – not Gretchen; Gretchen is mine."

"I mean Katrin, my Lady Duchess," said Boris, putting a bold face on the mistake.

The young mistress of the castle smiled. "Thou art a strange lover," she said, "thus to forget the name of thy mistress. But here is a ring with a K writ large upon it, which will serve for thy Katherina. And here, Captain Jorian, is one with a G scrolled in Gothic, which thou wilt doubtless place with pride upon the finger of Mistress Gretchen among the rose gardens of Plassenburg."

"Good!" said Jorian and Boris, making their bows together; "we thank your most gracious highness."

"Back out, you hulking brute!" the undertone came again from Jorian; "she will be asking us for their surnames if we bide a moment longer. Now then, we are safe through the door; right about, Boris, and thank Heaven she had not time for another question, or we were men undone!"

And with their rings upon their little fingers the two burly captains went down the narrow stair of Castle Kernsberg, nudging each other jovially in the dark places as if they had again been men-at-arms and no captains, as in the old days before the death of Karl the Usurper and the coming back of the legitimate Princess Helene into her rights.

Being arrived at the hall beneath they soon found themselves the centre of a hospitable circle. Gruff, bearded Wendish men were these officers of the young Duchess; not a butterfly youngling or a courtly carpet knight among them, but men tanned like shipmen of the Baltic, soldiers mostly who had served under her father Henry, foraging upon occasion as far as the Mark in one direction and into Bor-Russia in the other, men grounded and compacted after the hearts of Jorian and Boris.

It was small wonder that amid such congenial society the ex-men-at-arms found themselves presently very much at home. Scarcely were they seated when Jorian began to brag of the gift the Duchess had given him for the maiden of his troth.

"And Boris here, that hulking cobold, that Hans Klapper upon the housetops, had well-nigh spoiled the jest; for when her ladyship asked him a second time in her sweet voice for the name of his 'betrothed,' he must needs lay his tongue to 'Gretchen,' instead of 'Katrin,' as he had done at the first!"

Then all suddenly the bearded, burly officers of the Duchess Joan looked at each other with a little scared expression on their faces, through which gradually glimmered up a certain grim amusement. Werner von Orseln, the eldest and gravest of all, glanced round the full circle of his mess. Then he looked back at the two captains of the embassy guard of Plassenburg with a pitying glance.

"And you lied about your sweethearts to the Duchess Joan?" he said.

"Ha, ha! Yes! I trow yes," quoth Jorian jovially. "Wine may be dear, but this ring will pay the sweets of many a night!"

"Ha, ha! It will, will it?" said Werner, the chief captain, grimly.

"Aye, truly," echoed Boris, the mead beginning to work nuttily under his steel cap, "when we melt this – ha, ha! – Katrin's jewel, we'll quaff many a beaker. The Rhenish shall flow-ow-ow! And Peg and Moll and Elisabet shall be there – yes, and many a good fellow-ow-ow –"

"Shut the door!" quoth Werner, the chief captain, at this point. "Sit down, gentlemen!"

But Jorian and Boris were not to be so easily turned aside.

"Call in the ale-drawer – the tapster, the pottler, the over-cellarer, whatever you call him. For we would have more of his vintage. Why, is this a night of jewels, and shall we not melt them? We may chance to get another for a second mouthful of lies to-morrow morning. A good duchess as ever was – a soft princess, a princess most gullible is this of yours, gentlemen of the Eagle's Nest, kerns of Kernsberg!"

"Sit down," said Werner yet more gravely. "Captains Jorian and Boris, you do not seem to know that you are no longer in Plassenburg. The broom bush does not keep the cow betwixt Kernsberg and Hohenstein. Here are no Tables of Karl the Miller's Son to hamper our liege mistress. Do you know that you have lied to her and made a jest of it?"

"Aye," cried Jorian, holding his ring high; "a sweet, easy maid, this of yours, as ever was cozened. An easy service yours must be. Lord! I could feather my nest well inside a year – one short year with such a mistress would do the business. Why, she will believe anything!"

"So," said Werner von Orseln grimly, "you think so, do you, Captains Boris and Jorian, of the embassy staff? Well, listen!"

He spoke very slowly, leaning towards them and punctuating his meaning upon the palm of his left hand with the fingers of his right. "If I, Werner of Orseln, were now to walk upstairs, and in so many words tell my lady, 'the sweet, easy princess,' as you name her, Joan of the Sword Hand, as we are proud – "

"Joan of the Sword Hand! Hoch!"

The men-at-arms at the lower table, the bearded captains at the high board, the very page boys lounging and scuffling in the niches, rose to their feet at the name, pronounced in a voice of thunder-pride by Chief Captain Werner.

"Joan of the Sword Hand! *Hoch!* Hent yourselves up, Wends! Up, Plassenburg! Joan of the Sword Hand! Our Lady Joan! *Hoch!* And three times *hoch!*"

The hurrahs ran round the oak-panelled hall. Jorian and Boris looked at each other with surprise, but they were stout fellows, and took matters, even when most serious, pretty much as they came.

"I thank you, gentlemen, on behalf of my lady, in whose name I command here," said Werner, bowing ceremoniously to all around, while the others settled themselves to listen. "Now, worthy soldiers of Plassenburg," he went on, "be it known to you that if (to suppose a case which will not happen) I were to tell our Lady Joan what you have confessed to us here and boasted of – that you lied and double lied to her – I lay my life and the lives of these good fellows that the pair of you would be aswing from the corner gallery of the Lion's Tower in something under five minutes."

"Aye, and a good deed it were, too!" chorussed the round table of the guard hall. "Heaven send it, the jackanapes! To rail at our Duchess!"

Jorian rose to his feet. "Up, Boris!" he cried; "no Bor-Russian, no kern of Hohenstein that ever lived, shall overcrowd a captain of the armies of Plassenburg and a soldier of the Princess Helene – Heaven bless her! Take your ring in your hand, Boris, for we will go up straightway, you and I. And we will tell the Lady Duchess Joan that, having no sweetheart of legal standing, and no desire for any, we choused her into the belief that we would bestow her rings upon our betrothed in the rose-gardens of Plassenburg. Then will we see if indeed we shall be aswing in five minutes. Ready, Boris?"

"Aye, thrice ready, Jorian!"

"About, then! Quick march!"

A great noise of clapping rose all round the hall as the two stout soldiers set themselves to march up the staircase by which they had just descended.

"Stand to the doors!" cried Werner, the chief captain; "do not let them pass. Up and drink a deep cup to them, rather! To Captains Jorian and Boris of Plassenburg, brave fellows both! Charge your tankards. The mead of Wendishland shall not run dry. Fill them to the brim. A caraway seed in each for health's sake. There! Now to the honour and long lives of our guests. Jorian and Boris —*hoch!*"

"Jorian and Boris – hoch!"

The toast was drunk amid multitudinous shoutings and handshakings. The two men had stopped, perforce, for the doors were in the hands of the soldiers of the guard, and the pike points clustered thick in their path. They turned now in the direction of the high table from which they had risen.

"Deal you so with your guests who come on embassy?" said Jorian, smiling. "First you threaten them with hanging, and then you would make them drunk with mead as long in the head as the devil of Trier that deceived the Archbishop-Elector and gat the holy coat for a foot-warmer!"

"Sit down, gentlemen, and I also will sit. Now, hearken well," said Werner; "these honest fellows of mine will bear me out that I lie not. You have done bravely and spoken up like good men taken in a fault. But we will not permit you to go to your deaths. For our Lady Joan – God bless her! – would not take a false word from any – no, not if it were on Twelfth Night or after a Christmas merry-making. She would not forgive it from your old Longbeard upstairs, whose business it is – that is, if she found it out. 'To the gallows!' she would say, and we – why then we should sorrow for having to hasten the stretching of two good men. But what would you, gentlemen? We are her servants and we should be obliged to do her will. Keep your rings, lads, and keep also your wits about you when the Duchess questions you again. Nay, when you return to Plassenburg, be wise, seek out a Gretchen and a Katrin and bestow the rings upon them – that is, if ever you mean again to stand within the danger of Joan of the Sword Hand in this her castle of Kernsberg."

"Gretchens are none so scarce in Plassenburg," muttered Jorian. "I think we can satisfy a pair of them – but at a cheaper price than a ring of rubies set in gold!"

CHAPTER II

THE BAITING OF THE SPARHAWK

"Bring in the Danish Sparhawk, and we will bait him!" said Werner. "We have shown our guests but a poor entertainment. Bring in the Sparhawk, I say!"

At this there ensued unyoked merriment. Each stout lad, from one end of the hall to the other, undid his belt as before a nobler course and nudged his fellow.

"Ware, I say, stand clear! Here comes the Wild Boar of the Ardennes, the Wolf of Thuringia, the Bear from the Forests of Bor-Russia! Stand clear – stand clear!" cried Werner von Orseln, laughing and pretending to draw a dagger to provide for his own safety.

The inner door which led from the hall of the men-at-arms to the dungeons of the castle was opened, and all looked towards it with an air of great amusement and expectation.

"Now we shall have some rare sport," each man said to his neighbour, and nodded.

"The baiting of the Sparhawk! The Sparhawk comes!"

Jorian and Boris looked with interest in the direction of the door through which such a remarkable bird was to arrive. They could not understand what all the pother could be about.

"What the devil – ?" said Jorian.

And, not to be behindhand, "What the devil – ?" echoed Boris. For mostly these two ran neck and neck from drop of flag to winning-post.

Through the black oblong of the dungeon doorway there came a lad of seventeen or eighteen, tall, slim, dark-browed, limber. He walked between a pair of men-at-arms, who held his wrists firmly at either side. His hands were chained together, and from between them dangled a spiked ball that clanked heavily on the floor as he stumbled forward rather than walked into the room. He had black hair that waved from his forehead in a backward sweep, a nose of slightly Roman shape, which, together with his bold eagle's eyes, had obtained him the name of the Spar or Sparrowhawk. And on his face, handsome enough though pale, there was a look of haughty disdain and fierce indignation such as one may see in the demeanour of a newly prisoned bird of prey, which hath not yet had time to forget the blue empyrean spaces and the stoop with half-closed wings upon the quarry trembling in the vale.

"Ha, Sparhawk!" cried Werner, "how goes it, Sparhawk? Any less bold and peremptory than when last we met? Your servant, Count Maurice von Lynar! We pray you dance for us the Danish dance of shuffle-board, Count Maurice, if so your Excellency pleases!"

The lad looked up the table and down with haughty eyes that deigned no answer.

Werner von Orseln turned to his guests and said, "This Sparhawk is a little Dane we took on our last excursion to the north. It is only in that direction we can lead the foray, since you have grown so law-abiding and strong in Plassenburg and the Mark. His uncles and kinsfolk were all killed in the defence of Castle Lynar, on the Northern Haff. We know not which of these had also the claim of fatherhood upon him. At all events, his grandad had a manor there, and came from the Jutland sand-dunes to build a castle upon the Baltic shores. But he had better have stayed at home, for he would not pay the Peace Geld to our Henry. So the Lion roared, and we went to Castle Lynar and made an end – save of this spitting Sparhawk, whom our master would not let us kill, and whom now we keep with clipped wings for our sport."

The lad listened with erected head and haughty eyes to the tale, but answered not a word.

"Now," cried Werner, with his cup in his hand and his brows bent upon the youth, "dance for us as you used to do upon the Baltic, when the maids came in fresh from their tiring and the newest kirtles were donned. Dance, I say! Foot it for your life!"

The lad Maurice von Lynar stood with his bold eyes upon his tormentors. "Curs of Bor-Russia," he said at last, in speech that trembled with anger, "you may vex the soul of a Danish gentleman with your aspersions, you may wound his body, but you will never be able to stand up to him in battle. You will never be worthy to eat or drink with him, to take his hand in comradeship, or to ride a tilt with him. Pigs of the sty you are, man by man of you – Wends and boors, and no king's gentlemen."

"Bravo!" said Boris, under his breath, "that is none so dustily said for a junker!"

"Silence with that tongue of yours!" muttered his mate. "Dost want to be yawing out of that window presently, with the wind spinning you about and about like a capon on a jack-spit? They are uncanny folk, these of the woman's castle – not to trust to. One knows not what they may do, nor where their jest may end."

"Hans Trenck, lift this springald's pretty wrist-bauble!" said Werner.

A laughing man-at-arms went up, his partisan still over his shoulder, and laying his hand upon the chain which depended between the manacled wrists of the boy Maurice, he strove to lift the spiked ball.

"What!" cried Werner, "canst thou, pap-backed babe, not lift that which the noble Count Maurice of Lynar has perforce to carry about with him all day long? Down with your weapon, man, and to it like an apothecary compounding some blister for stale fly-blown rogues!"

At the word the man laid down his partisan and lifted the ball high between his two hands.

"Now dance!" commanded Werner von Orseln, "dance the Danish milkmaid's coranto, or I will bid him drop it on your toes. Dost want them jellied, man?"

"Drop, and be damned in your low-born souls!" cried the lad fiercely. "Untruss my hands and let me loose with a sword, and ten yards clear on the floor, and, by Saint Magnus of the Isles, I will disembowel any three of you!"

"You will not dance?" said Werner, nodding at him.

"I will see you fry in hell fire first!"

"Down with the ball, Hans Trenck!" cried Werner. "He that will not dance at Castle Kernsberg must learn at least to jump."

The man-at-arms, still grinning, lifted the ball a little higher, balancing it in one hand to give it more force. He prepared to plump it heavily upon the undefended feet of young Maurice.

"Ware toes, Sparhawk!" cried the soldiers in chorus, but at that moment, suddenly kicking out as far as his chains allowed, the boy took the stooping lout on the face, and incontinently widened the superficial area of his mouth. He went over on his back amid the uproarious laughter of his fellows.

"Ha! Hans Trenck, the Sparhawk hath spurred you, indeed! A brave Sparhawk! Down went poor Hans Trenck like a barndoor fowl!"

The fellow rose, spluttering angrily.

"Hold his legs, some one," he said, "I'll mark his pretty feet for him. He shall not kick so free another time."

A couple of his companions took hold of the boy on either side, so that he could not move his limbs, and Hans again lifted high the ball.

"Shall we stand this? They call this sport!" said Boris; "shall I pink the brutes?"

"Sit down and shut your eyes. Our Prince Hugo will harry this nest of thieves anon. For the present we must bear their devilry if we want to escape hanging!"

"Now then, for marrow and mashed trotters!" cried Hans, spitting the blood from the split corners of his mouth.

"Halt!"

CHAPTER III

JOAN DRAWS FIRST BLOOD

The word of command came full and strong from the open doorway of the hall.

Hans Trenck came instantly to the salute with the ball in his hand. He had no difficulty in lifting it now. In fact, he did not seem able to let it down. Every man in the hall except the two captains of Plassenburg had risen to his feet and stood as if carved in marble.

For there in the doorway, her slim figure erect and exceedingly commanding, and her beautiful eyes shining with indignation, stood the Duchess Joan of Hohenstein.

"Joan of the Sword Hand!" said Jorian, enraptured. "Gott, what a wench!"

In stern silence she advanced into the hall, every man standing fixed at attention.

"Good discipline!" said Boris.

"Shut your mouth!" responded Jorian.

"Keep your hand so, Hans Trenck," said their mistress; "give me your sword, Werner! You shall see whether I am called Joan of the Sword Hand for naught. You would torture prisoners, would you, after what I have said? Hold up, I say, Hans Trenck!"

And so, no man saying her nay, the girl took the shining blade and, with a preliminary swish through the air and a balancing shake to feel the elastic return, she looked at the poor knave fixed before her in the centre of the hall with his wrist strained to hold the prisoner's ball aloft at the stretch of his arm. What wonder if it wavered like a branch in an uncertain wind?

"Steady there!" said Joan.

And she drew back her arm for the stroke.

The young Dane, who, since her entrance, had looked at nothing save the radiant beauty of the figure before him, now cried out, "For Heaven's sake, lady, do not soil the skirts of your dress with his villain blood. He but obeyed his orders. Let me be set free, and I will fight him or any man in the castle. And if I am beaten, let them torture me till I am carrion fit only to be thrown into the castle ditch."

The Duchess paused and leaned on the sword, holding it point to the floor.

"By whose orders was this thing done?" she demanded.

The lad was silent. He disdained to tell tales even on his enemies. Was he not a gentleman and a Dane?

"By mine, my lady!" said Werner von Orseln, a deep flush upon his manly brow.

The girl looked severely at him. She seemed to waver. "Good, then!" she said, "the Dane shall fight Werner for his life. Loose him and chafe his wrists. Ho! there – bring a dozen swords from the armoury!"

The flush was now rising to the boy's cheek.

"I thank you, Duchess," he said. "I ask no more than this."

"Faith, the Sparhawk is not tamed yet," said Boris; "we shall see better sport ere all be done!"

"Hold thy peace," growled Jorian, "and look."

"Out into the light!" cried the young Duchess Joan, pointing the way with Werner's sword, which she still held in her hand. And going first she went forth from the hall of the soldiery, down the broad stairs, and soon through a low-arched door with a sculptured coat-of-arms over it, out into the quadrangle of the courtyard.

"And now we will see this prisoner of ours, this cock of the Danish marches, make good his words. That, surely, is better sport than to drop caltrops upon the toes of manacled men."

Werner followed unwillingly and with deep flush of shame upon his brow.

"My lady," he said, going up to his mistress, "I do not need to prove my courage after I have served Kernsberg and Hohenstein for thirty-eight years – or well-nigh twice the years you have lived – fought for you and your father and shed my blood in a score of pitched battles, to say nothing of forays. Of course I will fight, but surely this young cockerel might be satisfied to have his comb cut by younger hands."

"Was yours the order concerning the dropping of the ball?" asked the Duchess Joan.

The grey-headed soldier nodded grimly.

"I gave the order," he said briefly.

"Then by St. Ursula and her boneyard, you must stand to it!" cried this fiery young woman. "Else will I drub you with the flat of your own sword!"

Werner bowed with a slightly ironic smile on his grizzled face.

"As your ladyship wills," he said; "I do not give you half obedience. If you say that I am to get down on my knees and play cat's cradle with the Kernsberg bairns, I will do it!"

Joan of the Sword here looked calmly at him with a certain austerity in her glance.

"Why, of course you would!" she said simply.

Meanwhile the lad had been freed from his bonds and stood with a sword in his hand suppling himself for the work before him with quick little guards and feints and attacks. There was a proud look in his eyes, and as his glance left the Duchess and roved round the circle of his foes, it flashed full, bold, and defiant.

Werner turned to a palish lean Bohemian who stood a little apart.

"Peter Balta," he said, "will you be my second? Agreed! And who will care for my honourable opponent?"

"Do not trouble yourself – that will arrange itself!" said Joan to her chief captain.

With that she flashed lightfoot into one of the low doors which led into the flanking turrets of the quadrangle, and in a tierce of seconds she was out again, in a forester's dress of green doublet and broad pleated kirtle that came to her knee.

"I myself," she said, challenging them with her eyes, "will be this young man's second, in this place where he has so many enemies and no friends."

As the forester in green and the prisoner stood up together, the guards murmured in astonishment at the likeness between them.

"Had this Dane and our Joan been brother and sister, they could not have favoured each other more," they said.

A deep blush rose to the youth's swarthy face.

"I am not worthy," he said, and kept his eyes upon the lithe figure of the girl in its array of well-fitting velvet. "I cannot thank you!" he said again.

"Tut," she answered, "worthy – unworthy – thank – unthank – what avail these upon the mountains of Kernsberg and in the Castle of Joan of the Sword Hand? A good heart, a merry fight, a quick death! These are more to the purpose than many thanks and compliments. Peter Balta, are you seconding Werner? Come hither. Let us try the swords, you and I. Will not these two serve? Guard! Well smitten! There, enough. What, you are touched on the sword arm? Faith, man, for the moment I forgot that it was not you and I who were to drum. This tickling of steel goes to my head like wine and I am bound to forget. I am sorry – but, after all, a day or two in a sling will put your arm to rights again, Peter. These are good swords. Now then, Maurice von Lynar – Werner. At the salute! Ready! Fall to!"

The burly figure of the Captain Werner von Orseln and the slim arrowy swiftness of Maurice the Dane were opposed in the clear shadow of the quadrangle, where neither had any advantage of light, and the swords of their seconds kept them at proper distance according to the fighting rules of the time.

"I give the Sparhawk five minutes," said Boris to Jorian, after the first parry. It was little more than formal and gave no token of what was to follow. Yet for full twenty minutes Werner von Orseln, the oldest sworder of all the north, from the marshes of Wilna to the hills of Silesia, could do nothing but stand on the defensive, so fierce and incessant were the attacks of the young Dane.

But Werner did not give back. He stood his ground, warily, steadfastly, with a half smile on his face, a wall of quick steel in front of him, and the point of his adversary's blade ever missing him an inch at this side, and coming an inch short upon that other. The Dane kept as steadily to the attack, and made his points as much by his remarkable nimbleness upon his feet as by the lightning rapidity of his sword-play.

"The Kernsberger is playing with him!" said Boris, under his breath.

Jorian nodded. He had no breath to waste.

"But he is not going to kill him. He has not the Death in his eye!" Boris spoke with judgment, for so it proved. Werner lifted an eyebrow for the fraction of a second towards his mistress. And then at the end of the next rally his sword just touched his young adversary on the shoulder and the blood answered the thrust, staining the white underdoublet of the Dane.

Then Werner threw down his sword and held out his hand.

"A well-fought rally," he said; "let us be friends. We need lads of such metal to ride the forays from the hills of Kernsberg. I am sorry I baited you, Sparhawk!"

"A good fight clears all scores!" replied the youth, smiling in his turn.

"Bring a bandage for his shoulder, Peter Balta!" cried Joan. "Mine was the cleaner stroke which went so near your great muscle, but Werner's is somewhat the deeper. You can keep each other company at the dice-box these next days. And, as I warrant neither of you has a Lübeck guilden to bless yourself with, you can e'en play for love till you wear out the pips with throwing."

"Then I am not to go back to the dungeon?" said the lad, one reason of whose wounding had been that he also lifted his eyes for a moment to those of his second.

"To prison – no," said Joan; "you are one of us now. We have blooded you. Do you take service with me?"

"I have no choice – your father left me none!" the lad replied, quickly altering his phrase. "Castle Lynar is no more. My grandfather, my father, and my uncles are all dead, and there is small service in going back to Denmark, where there are more than enough of hungry gentlemen with no wealth but their swords and no living but their gentility. If you will let me serve in the ranks, Duchess Joan, I shall be well content!"

"I also," said Joan heartily. "We are all free in Kernsberg, even if we are not all equal. We will try you in the ranks first. Go to the men's quarters. George the Hussite, I deliver him to you. See that he does not get into any more quarrels till his arm is better, and curb my rascals' tongues as far as you can. Remember who meddles with the principal must reckon with the second."

CHAPTER IV

THE COZENING OF THE AMBASSADOR

The next moment Joan had disappeared, and when she was seen again she had assumed the skirt she had previously worn over her dress of forester, and was again the sedate lady of the castle, ready to lead the dance, grace the banquet, or entertain the High State's Councillor of Plassenburg, Leopold von Dessauer.

But when she went upstairs she met on the middle flight a grey-bearded man with a skull cap of black velvet upon his head. His dress also was of black, of a distinguishing plain richness and dignity.

"Whither away, Ambassador?" she cried gaily at the sight of him.

"To see to your principal's wound and that of the other whom your sword countered in the trial bout!"

"What? You saw?" said the Duchess, with a quick flush.

"I am indeed privileged not to be blind," said Dessauer; "and never did I see a sight that contented me more."

"And you stood at the window saying in your heart (nay, do not deny it) 'unwomanly – bold – not like my lady the Princess of Plassenburg. She would not thus ruffle in the courtyard with the men-at-arms!'"

"I said no such thing," said the High Councillor. "I am an old man and have seen many fair women, many sweet princesses, each perfect to their lovers, some of them even perfect to their lords. But I have never before seen a Duchess Joan of Hohenstein."

"Ambassador," cried the girl, "if you speak thus and with that flash of the eye, I shall have to bethink me whether you come not as an ambassador for your own cause."

"I would that I were forty years younger and a prince in my own right, instead of a penniless old baron. Why, then, I would not come on any man's errand – no, nor take a refusal even from your fair lips!"

"I declare," said the Duchess Joan impetuously, "you should have no refusal from me. You are the only man I have ever met who can speak of love and yet be tolerable. It is a pity that my father left me the evil heritage that I must wed the Prince of Courtland or lose my dominions!"

At the sound of the name of her predestined husband a sudden flashing thought seemed to wake in the girl's breast.

"My lord," she said, "is it true that you go to Courtland after leaving our poor eagle's nest up here on the cliffs of the Kernsberg?"

Von Dessauer bowed, smiling at her. He was not too old to love beauty and frankness in women. "It is true that I have a mission from my Prince and Princess to the Prince of Courtland and Wilna. But – "

Joan of the Sword clasped her hands and drew a long breath.

"I would not ask it of any man in the world but yourself," she said, "but will you let me go with you?"

"My dear lady," said Dessauer, with swift deprecation, "to go with the ambassador of another power to the court and palace of the man you are to marry – that were a tale indeed, salt enough even for the Princes of Ritterdom. As it is – "

The Duchess looked across at Dessauer with great haughtiness. "As it is, they talk more than enough about me already," she said. "Well – I know, and care not. I am no puling maid that waits till she is authorised by a conclave of the empire before she dares wipe her nose when she hath

a cold in the head. Joan of the Sword Hand cares not what any prince may say – from yours of Plassenburg, him of the Red Axe, to the fat Margraf George."

"Oh, our Prince, he says naught, but does much," said Dessauer. "He hath been a rough blade in his time, but Karl the Miller's son mellowed him, and by now his own Princess hath fairly civilised him."

"Well," said Joan of the Sword, with determination, "then it is settled. I am coming with you to Courtland."

A shade of anxiety passed over Dessauer's countenance. "My lady," he answered, "you let me use many freedoms of speech with you. It is the privilege of age and frailty. But let me tell you that the thing is plainly foolish. Hardly under the escort of the Empress herself would it be possible for you to visit, without scandal, the court of the Prince of Courtland and Wilna. But in the train of an envoy of Plassenburg, even if that ambassador be poor old Leopold von Dessauer, the thing, I must tell you, is frankly impossible."

"Well, I am coming, at any rate!" said Joan, as usual rejecting argument and falling back upon assertion. "Make your count with that, friend of mine, whether you are shocked or no. It is the penalty a respectable diplomatist has to pay for cultivating the friendship of lone females like Joan of Hohenstein."

Von Dessauer held up his hands in horror that was more than half affected.

"My girl," he said, "I might be your grandfather, it is true, but do not remind me of it too often. But if I were your great-great-grandfather the thing you propose is still impossible. Think of what the Margraf George and his chattering train would say!"

"Think of what every fathead princeling and beer-swilling ritter from here to Basel would say!" cried Joan, with her pretty nose in the air. "Let them say! They will not say anything that I care the snap of my finger for. And in their hearts they will envy you the experience – shall we say the privilege?"

"Nay, I thought not of myself, my lady," said Dessauer, "for an old man, a mere anatomy of bones and parchment, I take strange pleasure in your society – more than I ought, I tell you frankly. You are to me more than a daughter, though I am but a poor baron of Plassenburg and the faithful servant of the Princess Helene. It is for your own sake that I say you cannot come to Wilna with me. Shall the future Princess of Courtland and Wilna ride in the train of an ambassador of Plassenburg to the palace in which she is soon to reign as queen?"

"I said not that I would go as the Duchess," Joan replied, speaking low. "You say that you saw me at the fight in the courtyard out there. If you will not have the Duchess Joan von Hohenstein, what say you to the Sparhawk's second, Johann the Squire?"

Dessauer started.

"You dare not," he said; "why, there is not a lady in the German land, from Bohemia to the Baltic, that dares do as much."

"Ladies," flashed Joan – "I am sick for ever of hearing that a lady must not do this or that, go here or there, because of her so fragile reputation. She may do needlework or embroider altar-cloths, but she must not shoot with a pistolet or play with a sword. Well, I am a lady; let him counter it who durst. And I cannot broider altar-cloths and I will not try – but I can shoot with any man at the flying mark. She must have a care for her honour, which (poor, feckless wretch!) will be smirched if she speaks to any as a man speaks to his fellows. Faith! For me I would rather die than have such an egg-shell reputation. I can care for mine own. I need none to take up my quarrel. If any have a word to say upon the repute of Joan of the Sword Hand – why, let him say it at the point of her rapier."

The girl stood up, tall and straight, her head thrown back as it were at the world, with an exact and striking counterpart of the defiance of the young Dane in the presence of his enemies an hour before. Dessauer stood wavering. With quick tact she altered her tone, and with a soft accent and

in a melting voice she added, "Ah, let me come. I will make such a creditable squire all in a suit of blue and silver, with just a touch of nutty juice upon my face that my old nurse knows the secret of."

Still Dessauer stood silent, weighing difficulties and chances.

"I tell you what," she cried, pursuing her advantage, "I will see the man I am to marry as men see him, without trappings and furbelows. And if you will not take me, by my faith! I will send Werner there, whom you saw fight the Dane, as my own envoy, and go with him as a page. On the honour of Henry the Lion, my father, I will do it!"

Von Dessauer capitulated. "A wilful woman" – he smiled – "a wilful, wilful woman. Well, I am not responsible for aught of this, save for my own weakness in permitting it. It is a madcap freak, and no good will come of it."

"But you will like it!" she said. "Oh, yes, you will like it very much. For, you see, you are fond of madcaps."

CHAPTER V

JOHANN THE SECRETARY

Ten miles outside the boundary of the little hill state of Kernsberg, the embassy of Plassenburg was met by another cavalcade bearing additional instructions from the Princess Helene. The leader was a slender youth of middle height, the accuracy of whose form gave evidence of much agility. He was dark-skinned, of an olive complexion, and with closely cropped black hair which curled crisply about his small head. His eyes were dark and fine, looking straightly and boldly out upon all comers.

With him, as chiefs of his escort, were those two silent men Jorian and Boris, who had, as it was reported, ridden to Plassenburg for instructions. None of those who followed Dessauer had ever before set eyes upon this youth, who came with fresh despatches, and, in consequence, great was the consternation and many the surmises as to who he might be who stood so high in favour with the Prince and Princess.

But his very first words made the matter clear.

"Your Excellency," he said to the Ambassador, "I bring you the most recent instructions from their Highnesses Hugo and Helene of Plassenburg. They sojourn for the time being in the city of Thorn, where they build a new palace for themselves. I was brought from Hamburg to be one of the master-builders. I have skill in plans, and I bring you these for your approval and in order to go over the rates of cost with you, as Treasurer of Plassenburg and the Wolfsmark."

Dessauer took, with every token of deference, the sheaf of papers so carefully enwrap and sealed with the seal of Plassenburg.

"I thank you for your diligence, good master architect," he said; "I shall peruse these at my leisure, and, I doubt not, call upon you frequently for explanations."

The young man rode on at his side, modestly waiting to be questioned.

"What is your name, sir?" asked Dessauer, so that all the escort might hear.

"I am called Johann Pyrmont," said the youth promptly, and with engaging frankness; "my father is a Hamburg merchant, trading to the Spanish ports for oil and wine, but I follow him not. I had ever a turn for drawing and the art of design!"

"Also for having your own way, as is common with the young," said the Ambassador, smiling shrewdly. "So, against your father's will, you apprenticed yourself to an architect?"

The young man bowed.

"Nay, sir," he said, "but my good father could deny me nothing on which I had set my mind."

"Not he," muttered Dessauer under his breath; "no, nor any one else either!"

So, bridle by jingling bridle, they rode on over the interminable plain till Kernsberg, with its noble crown of towers, became first grey and afterwards pale blue in the utmost distance. Then, like a tall ship at sea, it sank altogether out of sight. And still they rode on through the marshy hollows, round innumerable little wildfowl-haunted lakelets, and so over the sandy, rolling dunes to the city of Courtland, where was abiding the Prince of that rich and noble principality.

It had been a favourite scheme of dead princes of Courtland to unite to their fat acres and populous mercantile cities the hardy mountaineers and pastoral uplands of Kernsberg. But though Wilna and Courtland were infinitely more populous, the Eagle's Nest was ill to pull down, and hitherto the best laid plans for their union had invariably fallen through. But there had come to Joan's father, Henry called the Lion, and the late Prince Michael of Courtland a better thought. One had a daughter, the other a son. Neither was burdened with any law of succession, Salic or other. They held their domains by the free tenure of the sword. They could leave their powers to whomsoever they would, not even the Emperor having the right to say, "What doest thou?" So

with that frank carelessness of the private feelings of the individual which has ever distinguished great politicians, they decreed that, as a condition of succession, their male and female heirs should marry each other.

This bond of Heritage-brotherhood, as it was called, had received the sanction of the Emperor in full Diet, and now it wanted only that the Duchess Joan of Hohenstein should be of age, in order that the provinces might at last be united and the long wars of highland and lowland make an end.

The scheme had taken everything into consideration except the private character of the persons principally affected, Prince Louis of Courtland and the young Duchess Joan.

As they came nearer to the ancient city of Courtland, it spread like a metropolis before the eyes of the embassy of the Prince and Princess of Plassenburg. The city stretched from the rock whereon the fortress-palace was built, along a windy, irregular ridge. Innumerable crow-stepped gables were set at right angles to the street. The towers of the minster rose against the sky at the lower end, and far to the southward the palace of the Cardinal Archbishop cast peaked shadows from its many towers, walled and cinctured like a city within a city.

It was a far-seen town this of Courtland, populous, prosperous, defenced. Its clear and broad river was navigable for any craft of the time, and already it threatened to equal if not to outstrip in importance the free cities of the Hanseatic League – so far, at least, as the trade of the Baltic was concerned.

Courtland had long been considered too strong to be attacked, save from the Polish border, while the adhesion of Kernsberg, and the drafting of the Duchess's hardy fighting mountaineers into the lowland armies would render the principedom safe for many generations.

Pity it was that plans so far-reaching and purposes so politic should be dependent upon the whims of a girl!

But then it is just such whims that make the world interesting.

It was the last day of the famous tournament of the Black Eagle in the princely city of Courtland. Prince Louis had sent out an escort to bring in the travellers and conduct them with honour to the seats reserved for them. The Ambassador and High Councillor of Plassenburg must be received with all observance. He had, he gave notice, brought a secretary with him. For so the young architect was now styled, in order to give him an official position in the mission.

The Prince had also sent a request that, as this was the day upon which all combatants wore plain armour and jostled unknown, for that time being the Ambassador should accept other escort and excuse him coming to receive him in person. They would meet at dinner on the morrow, in the great hall of the palace.

The city was arrayed in flaming banners, some streaming high from the lofty towers of the cathedral, while others (in streets into which the wind came only in puffs) more languidly and luxuriously unfolded themselves, as the Black Eagle on its ground of white everywhere took the air. All over the city a galaxy of lighter silk and bunting, pennons, bannerettes, parti-coloured streamers of the national colours danced becking and bowing from window and roof-tree.

Yet there was a curious silence too in the streets, as they rode towards the lists of the Black Eagle, and when at last they came within hearing of the hum of the thousands gathered there, they understood why the city had seemed so unwontedly deserted. The Courtlanders surrounded the great oval space of the lists in clustered myriads, and their eyes were bent inwards. It was the crisis of the great *mêlée*. Scarcely an eye in all that assembly was turned towards the strangers, who passed quite unobserved to their reserved places in the Prince's empty box. Only his sister Margaret, throned on high as Queen of Beauty, looked down upon them with interest, seeing that they were men who came, and that one at least was young.

It was a gay and changeful scene. In the brilliant daylight of the lists a hundred knights charged and recharged. Those who had been unhorsed drew their swords and attacked with fury others of the enemy in like case. The air resounded with the clashing of steel on steel.

Fifty knights with white plumes on their helmets had charged fifty wearing black, and the combat still raged. The shouts of the people rang in the ears of the ambassador of Plassenburg and his secretary, as they seated themselves and looked down upon the tide of combat over the flower-draped balustrades of their box.

"The blacks have it!" said Dessauer after regarding the *mêlée* with interest. "We have come in time to see the end of the fray. Would that we had also seen the shock!"

And indeed the Blacks seemed to have carried all before them. They were mostly bigger and stronger built men, knights of the landward provinces, and their horses, great solid-boned Saxon chargers, had by sheer weight borne their way through the lighter ranks of the Baltic knights on the white horses.

Not more than half a dozen of these were now in saddle, and all over the field were to be seen black knights receiving the submission of knights whose broken spears and tarnished plumes showed that they had succumbed in the charge to superior weight of metal. For, so soon as a knight yielded, his steed became the property of his victorious foe, and he himself was either carried or limped as best he could to the pavilion of his party, there to remove his armour and send it also to the victor – to whom, in literal fact, belonged the spoils.

Of the half-dozen white knights who still kept up the struggle, one shone pre-eminent for dashing valour. His charger surged hither and thither through the crowd, his spear was victorious and unbroken, and the boldest opponent thought it politic to turn aside out of his path. Set upon by more than a score of riders, he still managed to evade them, and even when all his side had submitted and he alone remained – at the end of the lists to which he had been driven, he made him ready for a final charge into the scarce broken array of his foes, of whom more than twenty remained still on horseback in the field.

But though his spear struck true in the middle of his immediate antagonist's shield and his opponent went down, it availed the brave white knight nothing. For at the same moment half a score of lances struck him on the shield, on the breastplate, on the vizor bars of his helmet, and he fell heavily to the earth. Nevertheless, scarcely had he touched the ground when he was again on his feet. Sword in hand, he stood for a moment unscathed and undaunted, while his foes, momentarily disordered by the energy of the charge, reined in their steeds ere they could return to the attack.

"Oh, well ridden!" "Greatly done!" "A most noble knight!" These were the exclamations which came from all parts of the crowd which surged about the barriers on this great day.

"I would that I were down beside him with a sword in my hand also!" said the young architect, Master Johann Pymont, secretary of the embassy of Plassenburg.

"'Tis well you are where you are, madcap, sitting by an old man's side, instead of fighting by that of a young one," growled Dessauer. "Else then, indeed, the bent would be on fire."

But at this moment the Princess Margaret, sister of the reigning Prince, rose in her place and threw down the truncheon, which in such cases stops the combat.

"The black knights have won," so she gave her verdict, "but there is no need to humiliate or injure a knight who has fought so well against so many. Let the white knight come hither – though he be of the losing side. His is the reward of highest honour. Give him a steed, that he may come and receive the meed of bravest in the tourney!"

The knights of the black were manifestly a little disappointed that after their victory one of their opponents should be selected for honour. But there was no appeal from the decision of the Queen of Love and Beauty. For that day she reigned alone, without council or diet imperial.

The black riders had therefore to be contented with their general victory, which, indeed, was indisputable enough.

The white knight came near and said something in a low voice, unheard by the general crowd, to the Princess.

"I insist," she said aloud; "you must unhelm, that all may see the face of him who has won the prize."

Whereat the knight bowed and undid his helmet. A closely-cropped fair-haired head was revealed, the features clearly chiselled and yet of a grave and massive beauty, the head of a marble emperor.

"My brother – you!" cried Margaret of Courtland in astonishment.

The voice of the Princess had also something of disappointment in it. Clearly she had wished for some other to receive the honour, and the event did not please her. But it was otherwise with the populace.

"The young Prince! The young Prince!" cried the people, surging impetuously about the barriers. "Glory to the noble house of Courtland and to the brave Prince."

The Ambassador looked curiously at his secretary. That youth was standing with eyes brilliant as those of a man in fever. His face had paled even under its dusky tan. His lips quivered. He straightened himself up as brave and generous men do when they see a deed of bravery done by another, or like a woman who sees the man she loves publicly honoured.

"The Prince!" said Johann Pymont, in a voice hoarse and broken; "it is the Prince himself."

And on his high seat the State's Councillor, Leopold von Dessauer, smiled well pleased.

"This turns out better than I had expected," he muttered. "God Himself favours the drunkard and the madcap. Only wise men suffer for their sins – aye, and often for those of other people as well."

CHAPTER VI

AN AMBASSADOR'S AMBASSADOR

After the tourney of the Black Eagle, Leopold von Dessauer had gone to bed early, feeling younger and lighter than he had done for years. Part of his scheme for these northern provinces of his fatherland consisted in gradual substitution of a few strong states for many weak ones. For this reason he smiled when he saw the eyes of his secretary shining like stars.

It would yet more have rejoiced him had he known how uneasy lay that handsome head on its pillow. Aye, even in pain it would have pleased him. For Von Dessauer was lying awake and thinking of the strange chances which help or mar the lives of men and women, when a sudden sense of shock, a numbness spreading upwards through his limbs, the rising of rheum to his eyes, and a humming in his ears, announced the approach of one of those attacks to which he had been subject ever since he had been wounded in a duel some years before – a duel in which his present Prince and his late master, Karl the Miller's Son, had both been engaged.

The Ambassador called for Jorian in a feeble voice. That light-sleeping soldier immediately answered him. He had stretched himself out, wrapped in a blanket for all covering, on the floor of the antechamber in Dessauer's lodging. In a moment, therefore, he presented himself at the door completely dressed. A shake and a half-checked yawn completed his inexpensive toilet, for Jorian prided himself on not being what he called "a pretty-pretty captainet."

"Your Excellency needs me?" he said, standing at the salute as if it had been the morning guard changing at the palace gate.

"Give me my case of medicine," said the old man; "that in the bag of rough Silesian leather. So! I feel my old attack coming upon me. It will be three days before I can stir. Yet must these papers be put in the hands of the Prince early this morning. Ah, there is my little Johann; I was thinking about her – him, I mean. Well, he shall have his chance. This foul easterly wind may yet blow us all good!"

He made a wry face as a twinge of pain caught him. It passed and he resumed.

"Go, Jorian," he said, "tap light upon his chamber door. If he chance to be in the deep sleep of youth and health – not yet distempered by thought and love, by old age and the eating of many suppers – rap louder, for I must see him forthwith. There is much to set in order ere at nine o'clock he must adjourn to the summer palace to meet the Prince."

So in a trice Jorian was gone and at the door of the architect-secretary, he of the brown skin and Greekish profile.

Johann Pymont was, it appeared, neither in bed nor yet asleep. Instead, he had been standing at the window watching the brighter stars swim up one by one out of the east. The thoughts of the young man were happy thoughts. At last he was in the capital city of the Princes of Courtland. His many days' journey had not been in vain. Almost in the first moment he had seen the noble youthful Prince and his sister, and he was prepared to like them both. Life held more than the preparation of plans and the ordering of bricklayers at their tasks. There was in it, strangely enough, a young man with closely cropped head whom Johann had seen storm through the ranks of the fighting-men that day, and afterwards receive the guerdon of the bravest.

Though what difference these things made to an architect of Hamburg town it was difficult (on the face of things) to perceive. Nevertheless, he stood and watched the east. It was five of a clear autumnal morning, and a light chill breath blew from the point at which the sun would rise.

A pale moon in her last quarter was tossed high among the stars, as if upborne upon the ebbing tide of night. Translucent greyness filled the wide plain of Courtland, and in the scattered farms all about the lights, which signified early horse-tending and the milking of kine, were already

beginning to outrival the waning stars. Orion, with his guardian four set wide about him, tingled against the face of the east, and the electric lamp of Sirius burnt blue above the horizon. The lightness and the hope of breathing morn, the scent of fields half reaped, the cool salt wind from off the sea, filled the channels of the youth's life. It was good to be alive, thought Johann Pymont, architect of Hamburg, or otherwise.

Jorian rapped low, with more reverence than is common from captains to secretaries of legations. The young man was leaning out of the window and did not hear. The ex-man-at-arms rapped louder. At the sound Johann Pymont clapped his hand to the hip where his sword should have been.

"Who is there?" he asked, turning about with keen alertness, and in a voice which seemed at once sweeter and more commanding than even the most imperious master-builder would naturally use to his underlings.

"I – Jorian! His Excellency is taken suddenly ill and bade me come for you."

Immediately the secretary opened the door, and in a few seconds stood at the old man's bedside.

Here they talked low to each other, the young man with his hand laid tenderly on the forehead of his elder. Only their last words concern us at present.

"This will serve to begin my business and to finish yours. Thereafter the sooner you return to Kernsberg the better. Remember the moon cannot long be lost out of the sky without causing remark."

The young man received the Ambassador's papers and went out. Dessauer took a composing draught and lay back with a sigh.

"It is humbling," he said to Jorian, "that to compose young wits you must do it through the heart, but in the case of the old through the stomach."

"'Tis a strange draught *he* hath gotten," said the soldier, indicating the door by which the secretary had gone forth. "If I be not mistaken, much water shall flow under bridge ere his sickness be cured."

As soon as he had reached his own chamber Johann laid the papers upon the table without glancing at them. He went again to the window and looked across the city. During his brief absence the stars had thinned out. Even the moon was now no brighter than so much grey ash. But the east had grown red and burned a glorious arch of cool brightness, with all its cloud edges teased loosely into fretted wisps and flakes of changeful fire. The wind began to blow more largely and statedly before the coming of the sun. Johann drew a long breath and opened wide both halves of the casement.

"To-day I shall see the Prince!" he said.

It was exactly nine of the clock when he set out for the palace. He was attired in the plain black dress of a secretary, with only the narrowest corded edge and collar of rough-scrolled gold. The slimness of his waist was filled in so well that he looked no more than a well-grown, clean-limbed stripling of twenty. A plain sword in a scabbard of black leather was belted to his side, and he carried his papers in his hand sealed with seals and wrapped carefully about with silken ties. Yet, for all this simplicity, the eyes of Johann Pymont were so full of light, and his beauty of face so surprising, that all turned to look after him as he went by with a free carriage and a swing to his gait.

Even the market girls ran together to gaze after the young stranger. Maids of higher degree called sharply to each other and crowded the balconies to look down upon him. But through the busy morning tumult of the streets Johann Pymont walked serene and unconscious. Was not he going to the summer palace to see the Prince?

At the great door of the outer pavilion he intimated his desire to the officer in charge of the guard.

"Which Prince?" said the officer curtly.

"Why," answered the secretary, with a glad heart, "there is but one – he who won the prize yesterday at the tilting!"

"God's truth! – And you say true!" ejaculated the guardsman, starting. "But who are you who dares blurt out on the steps of the palace of Courtland that which ordinary men – aye, even good soldiers – durst scarcely think in their own hearts?"

"I am secretary of the noble Ambassador of Plassenburg, and I come to see the Prince!"

"You are a limber slip to be so outspoken," said the man; "but remember that you could be right easily broken on the wheel. So have a care of those slender limbs of yours. Keep them for the maids of your Plassenburg!"

And with the freedom of a soldier he put his hand about the neck of Johann Pymont, laying it upon his far shoulder with the easy familiarity of an elder, who has it in his power to do a kindness to a younger. Instinctively Johann slipped aside his shoulder, and the officer's hand after hanging a moment suspended in the air, fell to his side. The Courtlander laughed aloud.

"What!" he cried, "is my young cock of Plassenburg so mightily particular that he cannot have an honest soldier's hand upon his shoulder?"

"I am not accustomed," said Johann Pymont, with dignity, "to have men's hands upon my shoulder. It is not our Plassenburg custom!"

The soldier laughed a huge earth-shaking laugh of merriment.

"Faith!" he cried, "you are early begun, my lad, that men's hands are so debarred. 'Not our custom!' says he. Why, I warrant, by the fashion of your countenance, that the hands of ladies are not so unwelcome. Ha! you blush! Here, Paul Strelitz, come hither and see a young gallant that blushes at a word, and owns that he is more at home with ladies than with rough soldiers."

A great bearded Bor-Russian came out of the guard-room, stretching himself and yawning like one whose night has been irregular.

"What's ado? – what is't, that you fret a man in his beauty-sleep?" he said. "Oh, this young gentleman! Yes, I saw him yesterday, and the Princess Margaret saw him yesterday, too. Does he go to visit her so early this morning? He loses no time, i' faith! But he had better keep out of the way of the Wasp, if the Princess gives him many of those glances of hers, half over her shoulder – you know her way, Otto."

At this the first officer reiterated his jest about his hand on Johann's shoulder, being of that mighty faction which cannot originate the smallest joke without immediately wearing it to the bone.

The secretary began to be angry. His temper was not long at the longest. He had not thought of having to submit to this when he became a secretary.

"I am quite willing, sir captain," he said, with haughty reserve, "that your hand should be – where it ought to be – on your sword handle. For in that case my hand will also be on mine, and very much at your service. But in my country such liberties are not taken between strangers!"

"What?" cried Otto the guardsman, "do men not embrace one another when they meet, and kiss each other on either cheek at parting? How then, so mighty particular about hands on shoulders? Answer me that, my young secretary."

"For me," said Johann, instantly losing his head in the hotness of his indignation, "I would have you know that I only kiss ladies, or permit them to kiss me!"

The Courtlander and the Bor-Russian roared unanimously.

"Is he not precious beyond words, this youngling, eh, Paul Strelitz?" cried the first. "I would we had him at our table of mess. What would our commander say to that? How he would gobble and glower? 'As for me, I only kiss ladies!' Can you imagine it, Paul?"

But just then there came a clatter of horse's hoofs across the wide spaces of the palace front, into which the bright forenoon sun was now beating, and a lady of tall figure and a head all a-ripple with sunny, golden curls dashed up at a canter, the stones spraying forward and outward as she reined her horse sharply with her hands low.

"The Princess Margaret!" said the first officer. "Stand to it, Paul. Be a man, secretary, and hold your tongue."

The two officers saluted stiffly, and the lady looked about for some one to help her to descend. She observed Johann standing, still haughtily indignant, by the gate.

"Come hither!" she said, beckoning with her finger.

"Give me your hand!" she commanded.

The secretary gave it awkwardly, and the Princess plumped rather sharply to the ground.

"What! Do they not teach you how to help ladies to alight in Plassenburg?" queried the Princess. "You accompany the new ambassador, do you not?"

"You are the first I ever helped in my life," said Johann simply. "Mostly – "

"What! I am the first? You jest. It is not possible. There are many ladies in Plassenburg, and I doubt not they have noted and distinguished a handsome youth like you."

The secretary shook his head.

"Not so," he said, smiling; "I have never been so remarked by any lady in Plassenburg in my life."

The Courtlander, standing stiff at the salute, turned his head the least fraction of an inch towards Paul Strelitz the Bor-Russian.

"He sticks to it. Lord! I wish that I could lie like that! I would make my fortune in a trice," he muttered. "'As for me, I only kiss ladies!' Did you hear him, Paul?"

"I hear him. He lies like an archbishop – a divine liar," muttered the Bor-Russian under his breath.

"Well, at any rate," said the Princess, never taking her eyes off the young man's face, "you will be good enough to escort me to the Prince's room."

"I am going there myself," said the secretary curtly.

"Certainly they do not teach you to say pretty things to ladies," answered the Princess. "I know many that could have bettered that speech without stressing themselves. Yet, after all, I know not but I like your blunt way best!" she added, after a pause, again smiling upon him.

As she took the young man's arm, a cavalier suddenly dashed up on a smoking horse, which had evidently been ridden to his limit. He was of middle size, of a figure exceedingly elegant, and dressed in the highest fashion. He wore a suit of black velvet with yellow points and narrow braidings also of yellow, a broad golden sash girt his waist, his face was handsome, and his mustachios long, fierce, and curling. His eye glittered like that of a snake, with a steady chill sheen, unpleasant to linger upon. He swung from his horse, casting the reins to the nearest soldier, who happened to be our Courtland officer Otto, and sprang up the steps after the Princess and her young escort.

"Princess," he said hastily, "Princess Margaret, I beg your pardon most humbly that I have been so unfortunate as to be late in my attendance upon you. The Prince sent for me at the critical moment, and I was bound to obey. May I now have the honour of conducting you to the summer parlour?"

The Princess turned carelessly, or rather, to tell it exactly, she turned her head a little back over her shoulder with a beautiful gesture peculiar to herself.

"I thank you," she said coldly, "I have already requested this gentleman to escort me. I shall not need you, Prince Ivan."

And she went in, bending graciously and even confidingly towards the secretary, on whose arm her hand reposed.

The cavalier in banded yellow stood a moment with an expression on his face at once humorous and malevolent.

He gazed after the pair till the door swung to and they disappeared. Then he turned bitterly towards the nearest officer.

"Tell me," he said, "who is the lout in black, that looks like a priest-cub out for a holiday?"

"He is the secretary of the embassy of Plassenburg," said Otto the guardsman, restraining a desire to put his information in another form. He did not love this imperious cavalier; he was a Courtlander and holding a Muscovite's horse. The conjunction brought something into his throat.

"Ha," said the young man in black and yellow, still gazing at the closed door, "I think I shall go into the rose-garden; I may have something further to say to the most honourable the secretary of the embassy of Plassenburg!" And summoning the officer with a curt monosyllable to bring his horse, he mounted and rode off.

"I wonder he did not give me a silver groat," said the Courtlander. "The secretary sparrow may be dainty and kiss only ladies, but this Prince of Muscovy has not pretty manners. I hope he does not marry the Princess after all."

"Not with her goodwill, I warrant," said Paul Strelitz; "either you or I would have a better chance, unless our Prince Ludwig compel her to it for the good of the State!"

"Prince Wasp seemed somewhat disturbed in his mind," said the Courtlander, chuckling. "I wish I were on guard in the rose-garden to see the meeting of Master Prettyman and his Royal Highness the Hornet of Muscovy!"

CHAPTER VII

H.R.H. THE PRINCESS IMPETUOSITY

The Princess Margaret spoke low and confidentially to the secretary of embassy as they paced along. Johann Pymont felt correspondingly awkward. For one thing, the pressure of the Princess's hand upon his arm distracted him. He longed to have her on his other side.

"You are noble?" she said, with a look down at him.

"Of course!" said the secretary quickly. The opposite had never occurred to him. He had not considered the pedigree of travelling merchants or Hamburg architects.

The Princess thought it was not at all of course, but continued —

"I understand — you would learn diplomacy under a man so wise as the High Councillor von Dessauer. I have heard of such sacrifices. My brother, who is very learned, went to Italy, and they say (though he only laughs when I ask him) worked with his hands in one of the places where they print the new sort of books instead of writing them. Is it not wonderful?"

"And he is so brave," said the secretary, whose interest suddenly increased; "he won the tournament yesterday, did he not? I saw you give him the crown of bay. I had not thought so brave a man could be learned also."

"Oh, my brother has all the perfections, yet thinks more of every shaveling monk and unfledged chorister than of himself. I will introduce you to him now. I am a pet of his. You will love him, too — when you know him, that is!"

"Devoutly do I hope so!" said the secretary under his breath.

But the Princess heard him.

"Of course you will," she said gaily; "I love him, therefore so will you!"

"An agreeable princess — I shall get on well with her!" thought Johann Pymont. Then the attention of his companion flagged and she was silent and distraught for a little, as they paced through courts and colonnades which to the secretary seemed interminable. The Princess silently indicated the way by a pressure upon his arm which was almost more than friendly.

"We walk well together," she said presently, rousing herself from her reverie.

"Yes," answered the secretary, who was thinking that surely it was a long way to the summer parlour, where he was to meet the Prince.

"I fear," said the Princess Margaret quaintly, "that you are often in the habit of walking with ladies! Your step agrees so well with mine!"

"I never walk with any others," the secretary answered without thought.

"What?" cried the Princess, quickly taking away her hand, "and you swore to me even now that you never helped a lady from her horse in your life!"

It was an *impasse*, and the secretary, recalled to himself, blushed deeply.

"I see so few ladies," he stammered, in a tremor lest he should have betrayed himself. "I live in the country — only my maid —"

"Heaven's own sunshine!" cried the Princess. "Have the pretty young men of Plassenburg maids and tirewomen? Small wonder that so few of them ever visit us! No blame that you stay in that happy country!"

The secretary recovered his presence of mind rapidly.

"I mean," he explained, "the old woman Bette, my nurse, who, though now I am grown up, comes every night to see that I have all I want and to fold my clothes. I have no other women about me."

"You are sure that Bette, who comes for your clothes and to see that you have all you want, is old?" persisted the Princess, keeping her eyes sharply upon her companion.

"She is so old that I never remember her to have been any younger," replied the secretary, with an air of engaging candour.

"I believe you," cried the outspoken Princess; "no one can lie with such eyes. Strange that I should have liked you from the first. Stranger that in an hour I should tell you so. Your arm!"

The secretary immediately put his hand within the arm of the Princess Margaret, who turned upon him instantly in great astonishment.

"Is that also a Plassenburg custom?" she said sharply. "Was it old Bette who taught you thus to take a lady's arm? It is otherwise thought of in our ignorant Courtland!"

The young man blushed and looked down.

"I am sorry," he said; "it is a common fashion with us. I crave your pardon if in aught I have offended."

The Princess Margaret looked quizzically at her companion.

"I' faith," she said, "I have ever had a curiosity about foreign customs. This one I find not amiss. Do it again!"

And with her own princessly hand she took Johann's slender brown fingers and placed them upon her arm.

"These are fitter for the pen than for the sword!" she said, a saying which pleased the owner of them but little.

The Courtlander Otto, who had been on guard at the gate, had meantime been relieved, and now followed the pair through the corridors to the summer palace upon an errand which he had speciously invented.

At this point he stood astonished.

"I would that Prince Wasp were here. We should see his sting. He is indeed a marvel, this fellow of Plassenburg. Glad am I that he does not know little Lenchen up in the Kaiser Platz. No one of us would have a maid to his name, if this gamester abode in Courtland long and made the running in this style!"

The Princess and her squire now went out into the open air. For she had led him by devious ways almost round the entire square of the palace buildings. They passed into a thick avenue of acacias and yews, through the arcades of which they walked silently.

For the Princess was content, and the secretary afraid of making any more mistakes. So he let the foreign custom go at what it might be worth, knowing that if he tried to better it, ten to one a worse thing might befall.

"I have changed my mind," said the Princess, suddenly stopping and turning upon her companion; "I shall not introduce you to my brother. If you come from the Ambassador, you must have matters of importance to speak of. I will rest me here in an arbour and come in later. Then, if you are good, you shall perhaps be permitted to reconduct me to my lodging, and as we go, teach me any other pleasant foreign customs!"

The secretary bowed, but kept his eyes on the ground.

"You do not say that you are glad," cried the Princess, coming impulsively a step nearer. "I tell you there is not one youth – but no matter. I see that it is your innocence, and I am not sure that I do not like you the better for it."

Behind an evergreen, Otto the Courtlander nearly discovered himself at this declaration.

"His innocence – magnificent Karl the Great! His Plassenburger's innocence – God wot! He will not die of it, but he may be the death of me. Oh, for the opinion of Prince Wasp of Muscovy upon such innocence."

"Come," said the Princess, holding out her hands, "bid me goodbye as you do in your country. There is the Prince my brother's horse at the door. You must hasten, or he will be gone ere you do your message."

At this the heart of the youth gave a great leap.

"The Prince!" he cried, "he will be gone!" And would have bolted off without a word.

"Never mind the Prince – think of me," commanded the Princess, stamping her foot. "Give me your hand. I am not accustomed to ask twice. Bid me goodbye."

With his eyes on the white charger by the door the secretary hastily took the Princess by both hands. Then, with his mind still upon the departing Prince, he drew her impulsively towards him, kissed her swiftly upon both cheeks, and finished by imprinting his lips heartily upon her mouth!

Then, still with swift impulse and an ardent glance upward at the palace front, he ran in the direction of the steps of the summer palace.

The Princess Margaret stood rooted to the ground. A flush of shame, anger, or some other violent emotion rose to her brow and stayed there.

Then she called to mind the straightforward unclouded eyes, the clear innocence of the youth's brow, and the smile came back to her lips.

"After all, it is doubtless only his foreign custom," she mused. Then, after a pause, "I like foreign customs," she added, "they are interesting to learn!"

Behind his tree the Courtlander stood gasping with astonishment, as well he might.

"God never made such a fellow," he said to himself. "Well might he say he never kissed any but ladies. Such abilities were lost upon mere men. An hour's acquaintance – nay, less – and he hath kissed the Princess Margaret upon the mouth. And she, instead of shrieking and calling the guard to have the insulter thrust into the darkest dungeon, falls to musing and smiling. A devil of a secretary this! Of a certainty I must have little Lenchen out of town!"

CHAPTER VIII

JOHANN IN THE SUMMER PALACE

At the door of the summer palace not a soul was on guard. A great quiet surrounded it. The secretary could hear the gentle lapping of the river over the parapet, for the little pavilion had been erected overhanging the water, and the leaves of the linden-trees rustled above. These last were still clamorous with the hum of bees, whose busy wings gave forth a sort of dull booming roar, comparable only to the distant noise of breakers when a roller curls slowly over and runs league-long down the sandy beach.

It was with a beating heart that Johann Pymont knocked.

"Enter!" said a voice within, with startling suddenness.

And opening the door and grasping his papers, the secretary suddenly found himself in the presence of the hero of the tournament.

The Prince was standing by a desk covered with books and papers. In his hand he held a quill, wherewith he had been writing in a great book which lay on a shelf at his elbow. For a moment the secretary could not reconcile this monkish occupation with his idea of the gallant white-plumed knight whom he had seen flash athwart the lists, driving a clean furrow through the hostile ranks with his single spear.

But he remembered his sister's description, and looked at him with the reverence of the time for one to whom all knowledge was open.

"You have business with me, young sir?" said the Prince courteously, turning upon the youth a regard full of dignity and condescension. The knees of Johann Pymont trembled. For a full score of moments his tongue refused its office.

"I come," he said at last, "to convey these documents to the noble Prince of Courtland and Wilna." He gained courage as he spoke, for he had carefully rehearsed this speech to Dessauer. "I am acting as secretary to the Ambassador – in lieu of a better. These are the proposals concerning alliance between the realms proposed by our late master, the Prince Karl, before his death; and now, it is hoped, to be ratified and carried out between Courtland and Plassenburg under his successors, the Princess Helene and her husband."

The tall fair-haired Prince listened carefully. His luminous and steady eyes seemed to pierce through every disguise and to read the truth in the heart of the young architect-secretary. He took the papers from the hand of Johann Pymont, and laid them on a desk beside him, without, however, breaking the seals.

"I will gladly take charge of such proposals. They do as much credit, I doubt not, to the sagacity of the late Prince, your great master, as to the kindness and good-feeling of our present noble rulers. But where is the Ambassador? I had hoped to see High Councillor von Dessauer for my own sake, as well as because of the ancient kindliness and correspondence that there was between him and my brother."

"His brother," thought the secretary. "I did not know he had a brother – a lad, I suppose, in whom Dessauer hath an interest. He is ever considerate to the young!" But aloud he answered, "I grieve to tell you, my lord, that the High Councillor von Dessauer is not able to leave his bed this morning. He caught a chill yesterday, either riding hither or at the tourney, and it hath induced an old trouble which no leech has hitherto been skilful enough to heal entirely. He will, I fear, be kept close in his room for several days."

"I also am grieved," said the Prince, with grave regret, seeing the youth's agitation, and liking him for it. "I am glad he keeps the art to make himself so beloved. It is one as useful as it is unusual in a diplomatist!"

Then with a quick change of subject habitual to the man, he said, "How found you your way hither? The corridors are both confusing and intricate, and the guards ordinarily somewhat exacting."

The tall youth smiled.

"I was in the best hands," he said. "Your sister, the Princess Margaret, was good enough to direct me, being on her way to her own apartment."

"Ah!" muttered the Prince, smiling as if he knew his sister, "this is the way to the Princess's apartments, is it? The Moscow road to Rome, I wot!"

He said no more, but stood regarding the youth, whose blushes came and went as he stood irresolute before him.

"A modest lad," said the Prince to himself; "this ingenuousness is particularly charming in a secretary of legation. I must see more of him."

Suddenly a thought crossed his mind.

"Why, did I not hear that you came to us by way of Kernsberg?" he said.

The blushes ceased and a certain pallor showed under the tan which overspread the young man's face as the Prince continued to gaze fixedly at him. He could only bow in assent.

"Then, doubtless, you would see the Duchess Joan?" he continued. "Is she very beautiful? They say so."

"I do not think so. I never thought about it at all!" answered the secretary. Suddenly he found himself plunged into deep waters, just as he had seen the port of safety before him.

The Prince laughed, throwing back his head a little.

"That is surely a strange story to bring here to Courtland," he said, "whither the lady is to come as a bride ere long! Especially strange to tell to me, who –"

"I ask your pardon," said Johann Pymont; "your Highness must bear with me. I have never done an errand of such moment before, having mostly spent my life among soldiers and ("he was on his guard now") in a fortress. For diplomacy and word-play I have no skill – no, nor any liking!"

"You have chosen your trade strangely, then," smiled the Prince, "to proclaim such tastes. Wherefore are you not a soldier?"

"I am! I am!" cried Johann eagerly; "at least, as much as it is allowed to one of my – of my strength to be."

"Can you fence?" asked the Prince, "or play with the broad blade?"

"I can do both!"

"Then," continued his inquisitor, "you must surely have tried yourself against the Duchess Joan. They say she has wonderful skill. Joan of the Sword Hand, I have heard her called. You have often fenced with her?"

"No," said the secretary, truthfully, "I have never fenced with the Duchess Joan."

"So," said the Prince, evidently in considerable surprise; "then you have certainly often seen her fence?"

"I have never seen the Duchess fence, but I have often seen others fence with her."

"You practise casuistry, surely," cried the Prince. "I do not quite follow the distinction."

But, nevertheless, the secretary knew that the difference existed. He would have given all the proceeds and emoluments of his office to escape at this moment, but the eye of the Prince was too steady.

"I doubt not, young sir," he continued, "that you were one of the army of admirers which, they say, continually surrounds the Duchess of Hohenstein!"

"Indeed, you are in great error, my lord," said Johann Pymont, with much earnestness and obvious sincerity; "I never said one single word of love to the Lady Joan – no, nor to any other woman!"

"No," said a new voice from the doorway, that of the Princess Margaret, "but doubtless you took great pleasure in teaching them foreign customs. And I am persuaded you did it very well, too!"

The Prince left his desk for the first time and came smilingly towards his sister. As he stooped to kiss her hand, Johann observed that his hair seemed already to be thin upon the top of his head.

"He is young to be growing bald," he said to himself; "but, after all" (with a sigh), "that does not matter in a man so noble of mien and in every way so great a prince."

The impulsive Princess Margaret scarcely permitted her hand to be kissed. She threw her arms warmly about her brother's neck, and then as quickly releasing him, she turned to the secretary, who stood deferentially looking out at the window, that he might not observe the meeting of brother and sister.

"I told you he was my favourite brother, and that you would love him, too," she said. "You must leave your dull Plassenburg and come to Courtland. I, the Princess, ask you. Do you promise?"

"I think I shall come again to Courtland," answered the secretary very gravely.

"This young man knows the Duchess Joan of Hohenstein," said the Prince, still smiling quietly; "but I do not think he admires her very greatly – an opinion he had better keep to himself if he would have a quiet life of it in Courtland!"

"Indeed," said the Princess brusquely. "I wonder not at it. I hear she is a forward minx, and at any rate she shall never lord it over me. I will run away with a dog-whipper first."

"Your husband would have occasion for the exercise of his art, sister mine!" said the Prince. "But, indeed, you must not begin by misliking the poor young maid that will find herself so far from home."

"Oh," cried the Princess, laughing outright, "I dislike her not a whit. But there is no reason in the world why, because you are all ready to fall down and worship, this young man or any other should be compelled to do likewise."

And right princess-like she looked as she pouted her proud little lips and with her foot patted the polished oak.

"But," she went on again to her brother, "your poor beast out there hath almost fretted himself into ribands by this time. If you have done with this noble youth, I have a fancy to hear him tell of the countries wherein he has sojourned. And, in addition, I have promised to show him the carp in the ponds. You have surely given him a great enough dose of diplomatics and canon law by this time. You have, it seems to me, spent half the day in each other's society."

"On the contrary," returned the Prince, smiling again, but going towards the desk to put away the papers which Dessauer's secretary had brought – "on the contrary, we talked almost solely about women – a subject not uncommon when man meets man."

"But somewhat out of keeping with the dignity of your calling, my brother!" said the Princess pointedly.

"And wherefore?" he said, turning quickly with the papers still in his hand. "If to guide, to advise, to rule, are of my profession, surely to speak of women, who are the more important half of the human race, cannot be foreign to my calling!"

"Come," she said, hearing the words without attending to the sense, "I also like things foreign. The noble secretary has promised to teach me some more of them!"

The tolerant Prince laughed. He was evidently accustomed to his sister's whims, and, knowing how perfectly harmless they were, he never interfered with them.

"A good day to you," he said to the young man, by way of dismissal. "If I do not see you again before you leave, you must promise me to come back to the wedding of the Duchess Johanna. In that event you must do me the honour to be my guest on that occasion."

The red flooded back to Johann's cheek.

"I thank you," he said, bowing; "I *will* come back to the wedding of the Duchess Joan."

"And you promise to be my guest? I insist upon it," continued the kindly Prince, willing to gratify his sister, who was smiling approval, "I insist that you shall let me be your host."

"I hope to be your guest, most noble Prince," said the secretary, looking up at him quickly as he went through the door.

It was a singular look. For a moment it checked and astonished the Prince so much that he stood still on the threshold.

"Where have I seen a look like that before?" he mused, as he cast his memory back into the past without success. "Surely never on any man's face?"

Which, after all, was likely enough.

Then putting the matter aside as curious, but of no consequence, the Prince rode away towards that part of the city from which the towers of the minster loomed up. A couple of priests bowed low before him as he passed, and the people standing still to watch his broad shoulders and erect carriage, said one to the other, "Alas! alas! the truest Prince of them all – to be thus thrown away!"

And these were the words which the secretary heard from a couple of guards who talked at the gate of the rose-garden, as they, too, stood looking after the Prince.

"Wait," said Johann Pymont to himself; "wait, I will yet show them whether he is thrown away or not."

CHAPTER IX

THE ROSE GARDEN

The rose garden of the summer palace of Courtland was a paradise made for lovers' whisperings. Even now, when the chills of autumn had begun to blow through its bowers, it was over-clambered with late-blooming flowers. Its bowers were creeper-tangled. Trees met over paths bedded with fallen petals, making a shade in sunshine, a shelter in rain, and delightful in both.

It was natural that so fair a Princess, taking such a sudden fancy to a young man, should find her way where the shade was deepest and the labyrinth most entangled.

But this secretary Johann of ours, being creditably hard of heart, would far rather have hied him straight back to old Dessauer with his news. More than anything he desired to be alone, that he might think over the events of the morning.

But the Princess Margaret had quite other intentions.

"Do you know," she began, "that I might well have lodged you in a dungeon cell for that which in another had been dire insolence?"

They were pacing a long dusky avenue of tall yew-trees. The secretary turned towards her the blank look of one whose thoughts have been far away. But the Princess rattled on, heedless of his mood.

"Nevertheless, I forgive you," she said; "after all, I myself asked you to teach me your foreign customs. If any one be to blame, it is I. But one thing I would impress upon you, sir secretary: do not practise these outland peculiarities before my brothers. Either of them might look with prejudice upon such customs being observed generally throughout the city. I came back chiefly to warn you. We do not want that handsome head of yours (which I admit is well enough in its way, as, being a man, you are doubtless aware) to be taken off and stuck on a pole over the Strasburg Gate!"

It was with an effort that the secretary detached himself sufficiently from his reveries upon the interview in the summer palace to understand what the Princess was driving at.

"All this mighty pother, just because I kissed her on the cheek," he thought. "A Princess of Courtland is no such mighty thing – and why should I not? – Oh, of course, I had forgotten again. I am not now the person I was."

But how can we tell with what infinite condescension the Princess took the young man's hand and read his fortune, dwelling frowningly on the lines of love and life?

"You have too pretty a hand for a man," she said; "why is it hard here and here?"

"That is from the sword grip," said the secretary, with no small pride.

"Do you, then, fence well? I wish I could see you," she cried, clapping her hands. "How splendid it would be to see a bout between you and Prince Wasp – that is, the Prince Ivan of Muscovy, I mean. He is a great fencer, and also desires to be a great friend of mine. He would give something to be sitting here teaching me how they take hands and bid each other goodbye in Bearland. They rub noses, I have heard say, a custom which, to my thinking, would be more provocative than satisfactory. I like your Plassenburg fashion better."

Whereat, of course there was nothing for it but that the secretary should arouse himself out of his reverie and do his part. If the Princess of Courtland chose to amuse herself with him, well, it was harmless on either side – even more so than she knew. Soon he would be far away. Meanwhile he must not comport himself like a puking fool.

"I think in somewise it were possible to improve upon the customs even of Plassenburg," said the Princess Margaret, after certain experiments; "but tell me, since you say that we are to be friends, and I have admitted your plea, what is your fortune? Nay, do you know that I do not even know your name – at least, not from your own lips."

For, headlong as she had proved herself in making love, yet a vein of Baltic practicality was hidden beneath the princess's impetuosity.

"My father was the Count von Löen, and I am his heir!" said the secretary carefully; "but I do not usually call myself so. There are reasons why I should not."

Which there were, indeed – grave reasons, too.

"Then you are the Count von Löen?" said the Princess. "I seem to have heard that name somewhere before. Tell me, are you the Count von Löen?"

"I am certainly the heir to that title," said the secretary, grilling within and wishing himself a thousand miles away.

"I must go directly and tell my brother. He will be back from the cathedral by this time. I am sure he did not know. And the estates – a little involved, doubtless, like those of most well-born folk in these ill days? Are they in your sole right?"

"The estates are extensive. They are not encumbered so far as I know. They are all in my own right," explained the newly styled Count with perfect truth. But within he was saying, "God help me! I get deeper and deeper. What a whirling chaos a single lie leads one into! Heaven give me speedy succour out of this!" And as he thought of his troubles, the noble count, the swordsman, the learned secretary, could scarce restrain a desire to break out into hysterical sobbing.

A new thought seemed to strike the Princess as he was speaking.

"But so young, so handsome," she murmured, "so apt a pupil at love!" Then aloud she said, "You are not deceiving me? You are not already betrothed?"

"Not to any woman!" said the deceitful Count, picking his words with exactness.

The gay laugh of the Princess rang out prompt as an echo.

"I did not expect you to be engaged to a man!" she cried. "But now conduct me to the entrance of my chambers" (here she reached him her hand). "I like you," she added frankly, looking at him with unflinching eyes. "I am of the house of Courtland, and we are accustomed to say what we think – the women of us especially. And sooner than carry out this wretched contract and marry the Prince Wasp, I will do even as I said to my brother, I will run away and wed a dog-whipper! But perhaps I may do better than either!" she said in her heart, nodding determinedly as she looked at the handsome youth before her, who now stood with his eyes downcast upon the ground.

They were almost out of the yew-tree walk, and the voice of the Princess carried far, like that of most very impulsive persons. It reached the ears of a gay young fashionable, who had just dismounted at the gate which led from the rose garden into the wing of the palace inhabited by the Princess Margaret and her suite.

"Now," said the Princess, "I will show you how apt a pupil I make. Tell me whether this is according to the best traditions of Plassenburg!" And taking his face between her hands she kissed him rapidly upon either cheek and then upon the lips.

"There!" she said, "I wonder what my noble brothers would say to that! I will show them that Margaret of Courtland can choose both whom she will kiss and whom she will marry!"

And flashing away from him like a bright-winged bird she fled upward into her chambers. Then, somewhat dazed by the rapid succession of emotions, Johann the Secretary stepped out of the green gloom of the yew-tree walk into the broad glare of the September sun and found himself face to face with Prince Wasp.

CHAPTER X

PRINCE WASP

Now Ivan, Prince of Muscovy, had business in Courtland very clear and distinct. He came to woo the Princess Margaret, which being done, he wished to be gone. There was on his side the certainty of an excellent fortune, a possible succession, and, in any case, a pretty and wilful wife. But as he thought on that last the Wasp smiled to himself. In Moscow there were many ways, once he had her there, of taming the most wilful of wives.

As to the inheritance – well, it was true there were two lives between; but one of these, in Prince Ivan's mind, was as good as nought, and the other – In addition, the marriage had been arranged by their several fathers, though not under the same penalty as that which threatened the Prince of Courtland and Joan Duchess of Hohenstein.

Prince Wasp had not favourably impressed the family at the palace. His manners had the strident edge and blatant self-assertion of one who, unlicensed at home, has been flattered abroad, deferred to everywhere, and accustomed to his own way in all things. Nevertheless, Ivan had managed to make himself popular with the townsfolk, on account of the largesse which he lavished and the custom which his numerous suite brought to the city. Specially, he had been successful in attaching the rabble of the place to his cause; and already he had headed off two other wooers who had come from the south to solicit the smiles of the Princess Margaret.

"So," he said, as he faced the secretary, now somewhat compositely styled – Johann, Count von Löen, "so, young springald, you think to court a foolish princess. You play upon her with your pretty words and graceful compliments. That is an agreeable relaxation enough. It passes the time better than fumbling with papers in front of an escritoire. Only – you have in addition to reckon with me, Ivan, hereditary Prince of Muscovy."

And with a sweep of his hand across his body he drew his sword from its sheath.

The sword of the young secretary came into his hand with equal swiftness. But he answered nothing. A curious feeling of detachment crept over him. He had held the bare sword before in presence of an enemy, but never till now unsupported.

"I do you the honour to suppose you noble," said Prince Wasp, "otherwise I should have you flogged by my lacqueys and thrown into the town ditch. I have informed you of my name and pretensions to the hand of the Princess Margaret, whom you have insulted. I pray you give me yours in return."

"I am called Johann, Count von Löen," answered the secretary as curtly as possible.

"Pardon the doubt which is in my mind," said the Prince of Muscovy, with a black sneering bitterness characteristic of him, "but though I am well versed in all the noble families of the north, and especially in those of Plassenburg, where I resided a full year in the late Prince's time, I am not acquainted with any such title."

"Nevertheless, it is mine by right and by birthright," retorted the secretary, "as I am well prepared to maintain with my sword in the meantime. And, after, you can assure yourself from the mouth of the High State's Councillor Dessauer that the name and style are mine. Your ignorance, however, need not defer your chastisement."

"Follow me, Count von Löen," said the Prince; "I am too anxious to deal with your insolence as it deserves to quarrel as to names or titles, legal or illegitimate. My quarrel is with your fascinating body and prettyish face, the beauty of which I will presently improve with some good Northland steel."

And with his lithe and springy walk the Prince of Muscovy passed again along the alleys of the rose garden till he reached the first open space, where he turned upon the secretary.

"We are arrived," he said; "our business is so pressing, and will be so quickly finished, that there is no need for the formality of seconds. Though I honour you by crossing my sword with yours, it is a mere formality. I have such skill of the weapon, as I daresay report has told you, that you may consider yourself dead already. I look upon your chastisement no more seriously than I might the killing of a fly that has vexed me with its buzzing. Guard!"

But Johann Pymont had been trained in a school which permitted no such windy preludes, and with the fencer's smile on his face he kept his silence. His sword would answer all such boastings, and that in good time.

And so it fell out.

From the very first crossing of the swords Prince Wasp found himself opposed by a quicker eye, a firmer wrist, a method and science infinitely superior to his own. His most dashing attack was repelled with apparent ease, yet with a subtlety which interposed nothing but the most delicate of guards and parries between Prince Ivan and victory. This gradually infuriated the Prince, till suddenly losing his temper he stamped his foot in anger and rushed upon his foe with the true Muscovite fire.

Then, indeed, had Johann need of all his most constant practice with the sword, for the sting of the Wasp flashed to kill as he struck straight at the heart of his foe.

But lo! the blade was turned aside, the long-delayed answering thrust glittered out, and the secretary's sword stood a couple of handbreadths in the boaster's shoulder.

With an effort Johann recovered his blade and stood ready for the ripost; but the wound was more than enough. The Prince staggered, cried out some unintelligible words in the Muscovite language, and pitched forward slowly on his face among the trampled leaves and blown rose petals of the palace garden.

The secretary grew paler than his wont, and ran to lift his fallen enemy. But, all unseen, other eyes had watched the combat, and from the door by which they had entered, and from behind the trees of the surrounding glade, there came the noise of pounding footsteps and fierce cries of "Seize him! Kill him! Tear him to pieces! He has slain the good Prince, the friend of the people! The Prince Ivan is dead!"

And ere the secretary could touch the body of his unconscious foe, or assure himself concerning his wound, he found himself surrounded by a yelling crowd of city loafers and gallows'-rats, many of them rag-clad, others habited in heterogeneous scraps of cast-off clothing, or articles snatched from clothes-lines and bleaching greens – long-mourned, doubtless, by the good wives of Courtland.

The secretary eyed this unkempt horde with haughty scorn, and his fearless attitude, as he striped his stained sword through his handkerchief and threw the linen away, had something to do with the fact that the rabble halted at the distance of half-a-dozen yards and for many minutes contented themselves with hurling oaths and imprecations at him. Johann Pymont kept his sword in his hand and stood by the body of his fallen foe in disdainful silence till the arrival of fresh contingents through the gate aroused the halting spirit of the crowd. Knives and sword-blades began to gleam here and there in grimy hands where at first there had been only staves and chance-snatched gauds of iron.

"At him! Down with him! He can only strike once!" These and similar cries inspired the rabble of Courtland, great haters of the Plassenburg and the Teutonic west, to rush in and make an end.

At last they did come on, not all together, but in irregular undisciplined rushes. Johann's sword streaked out this way and that. There was an answering cry of pain, a turmoil among the assailants as a wounded man whirled his way backward out of the press. But this could not last for long. The odds were too great. The droning roar of hate from the edges of the crowd grew louder as new and ever newer accretions joined themselves to its changing fringes.

Then suddenly came a voice. "Back, on your lives, dogs and traitors! Germans to the rescue! Danes, Teuts, Northmen to the rescue!"

Following the direction of the sound, Johann saw a young man drive through the press, his sword bare in his hand, his eyes glittering with excitement. It was the Danish prisoner of the guard-hall at Kernsberg, that same Sparhawk who had fought with Werner von Orseln.

The crowd stared back and forth betwixt him and that other whom he came to succour. Far more than ever his extraordinary likeness to the secretary appeared. Apparent enough at any time, it was accentuated now by similarity of clothing. For, like Johann Pymont, the Sparhawk was attired in a black doublet and trunk hose of scholastic cut, and as they stood back to back, little difference could be noted between them, save that the newcomer was a trifle the taller.

"Saint Michael and all holy angels!" cried the leader of the crowd, "can it be that there are scores of these Plassenburg black crows in Courtland, slaying whom they will? Here be two of them as like as two peas, or a couple of earthen pipkins from the same potter's wheel!"

The Dane flung a word over his shoulder to his companion.

"Pardon me, your grace," said the Sparhawk, "if I stand back to back with you. They are dangerous. We must watch well for any chance of escape."

The secretary did not answer to this strange style of address, but placed himself back to back with his ally, and their two bright blades waved every way. Only that of Johann Pymont was already reddened well-nigh half its length.

A second time the courage of the crowd worked itself up, and they came on.

"Death to the Russ, to the lovers of Russians!" cried the Sparhawk, and his blade dealt thrusts right and left. But the pressure increased every moment. Those behind cried, "Kill them!" For they were out of reach of those two shining streaks of steel. Those before would gladly have fallen behind, but could not for the forward thrust of their friends. Still the ring narrowed, and the pair of gallant fighters would doubtlessly have been swept away had not a diversion come to alter the face of things.

Out of the gate which led to the wing of the palace occupied by the Princess Margaret burst a little company of halberdiers, at sight of whom the crowd gave suddenly back. The Princess herself was with them.

"Take all prisoners, and bring them within," she cried. "Well you know that my brother is from home, or you dare not thus brawl in the very precincts of the palace!"

And at her words the soldiers advanced rapidly. A further diversion was caused by the Sparhawk suddenly cleaving a way through the crowd and setting off at full speed in the direction of the river. Whereupon the rabble, glad to combine personal safety with the pleasures of the chase, took to their heels after him. But, light and unexpected in motion as his namesake, the Sparhawk skimmed down the alleys, darted sideways through gates which he shut behind him with a clash of iron, and finally plunged into the green rush of the Alla, swimming safe and unhurt to the further shore, whither, in the absence of boats at this particular spot, none could pursue him.

CHAPTER XI

THE KISS OF THE PRINCESS MARGARET

The Princess and her guard were left alone with the secretary and the unconscious body of the Prince of Muscovy.

"Sirrah," she cried severely to the former, "is this the first use you make of our hospitality, thus to brawl in the street underneath my very windows with our noble guest the Prince Ivan? Take him to my brother's room, and keep him safely there to await our lord's return. We shall see what the Prince will say to this. And as for this wounded man, take him to his own apartments, and let a surgeon be sent to him. Only not in too great a hurry!" she added as an afterthought to the commander of her little company of palace guards.

So, merely detailing half a dozen to carry the Prince to his chambers, the captain of the guard conducted the secretary to the very room in which an hour before he had met the brother of the Princess. Here he was confined, with a couple of guards at the door. Nor had he been long shut up before he heard the quick step of the Princess coming along the passage-way. He could distinguish it a long way off, for the summer palace was built mostly of wood, and every sound was clearly audible.

"So," she said, as soon as the door was shut, "you have killed Prince Wasp!"

"I trust not," said the secretary gravely; "I meant only to wound him. But as he attacked me I could not do otherwise than defend myself."

"Tut," cried the Princess, "I hope you have killed him. It will be good riddance, and most like the Muscovites will send an army – which, with your Plassenburg to help us, will make a pretty fight. It serves him right, in any event, for Prince Wasp must always be thrusting his sting into honest folk. He will be none the worse for some of his own poison applied at a rapier's point to keep him quiet for some few days."

But Johann was not in a mood to relish the jubilation of the Princess. He grew markedly uneasy in his mind. Every moment he anticipated that the Prince would return. A trial would take place, and he did not know what might not be discovered.

The Princess Margaret delivered him from his anxiety.

"The laws are strict against duelling," she continued. "The Prince Ivan is in high favour with my elder brother, and it will be well that you should be seen no more in Courtland – for the present, that is. But in a little the Prince Wasp will die or he will recover. In either case the affair will blow over. Then you will come back to teach me more foreign customs."

She smiled and held out her hand. Johann kissed it, perhaps without the fervour which might have been expected from a brisk young man thus highly favoured by the fairest and sprightliest of princesses.

"To-night," she went on, "there will be a boat beneath that window. It will be manned by those whom I can trust. A ladder of rope will be thrown to your casement. By it you will descend, and with a good horse and a sufficient escort you can ride either to Plassenburg – or to Kernsberg, which is nearer, and tell Joan of the Sword Hand that her sister the Princess Margaret sends you to her. I will give you a letter to the minx, though I am sure I shall not like her. She is so forward, they say. But be ready at the hour of midnight. Who was that youth who fled as we came up?"

"A Danish knight who came hither in our train from Kernsberg," replied Johann. "But for him I should have been lost indeed!"

"I must have a horse also for him!" cried the Princess. "He will surely be on the watch and join you, knowing that his danger is as great as yours. Hearken – they are mourning for their precious Prince Wasp. To-morrow they will howl louder if by good hap he goes home to – purgatory!"

And through the open windows came a sound of distant shoutings as they carried the wounded Prince to his lodgings.

"Now," said the Princess, "for the present fare you well – in the colder fashion of Courtland this time, for the sake of the guards at the door. But remember that you are more than ever plighted to me to be my instructor, dear Count von Löen!"

She went to the door, and with her fingers on the handle she turned her about with a pretty vixenish expression. "I am so glad you stung the Wasp. I love you for it!" she said.

But after she had vanished with these words the secretary grew more and more downcast in spirit. Even this naïve declaration of affection failed to cheer him. He sat down and gave himself up to the most melancholy anticipations.

At six a servitor silently entered with a well-chosen and beautifully cooked meal, of which the secretary partook sparingly. At seven it grew dark, and at ten all was quiet in the city. The river rushed swiftly beneath, and the noise of it, as the water lapped against the foundations of the summer palace, helped to disguise the sound of oars, as the boat, a dark shadow upon greyish water, detached itself from the opposite shore and approached the window from whose open casement Johann Pymont looked out.

A low whistle came from underneath, and presently followed the soft reeving *whisk* of a coil of rope as it passed through the window and fell at his feet. The secretary looked about for something to fasten it to, and finally decided upon the iron uprights of the great desk at which the Prince had stood earlier in the day.

No sooner was this done than Johann set his foot on the top round and began to descend. It was with a sudden emptiness at the pit of the stomach and a great desire to cry out for some one to hold the ladder steady that the secretary found himself swaying over the dark water. The boat seemed very far away, a mere spot of blackness upon the river's face.

But presently, and while making up his mind to practise the gymnastic of rope ladders quietly at home, he made out a man holding the ladder, while two others with grappled boat-hooks kept the boat steady fore and aft.

A shrouded figure sat in the stern. The secretary seemed rather to find himself in a boat which rose swiftly to meet him than to descend into it. He was handed from one to the other of the rowers till he reached the shrouded figure in the stern, out of the folds of whose enveloping cloak a small warm hand shot forth and pulled him down upon the seat.

"Draw this corner about you, Count," a low voice whispered; and in another moment Johann found himself under the shelter of one cloak with that daring slip of nobility, the Princess Margaret of Courtland.

"I was obliged to come; there is no danger. These fellows are of my household and devoted to me. I did not dare to risk anything going wrong. Besides, I am a princess, and – why need not I say it? – I wanted to come. I wanted to see you again, though, indeed, there is small chance of that in such a night. And 'tis as well, for I am sure my hair is blown every way about my face."

"The horses are over there," she added after a pause; "we are almost at the shore now – alas, too quickly! But I must not keep you. I want you to come back the sooner. And remember, if Prince Wasp gets better and worries me too much, or my brother is unkind and insists upon marrying me to the Bear, I will take one or two of these fellows and come to seek you at Plassenburg, so make your reckoning with that, Sir Count von Löen. As I said, what is the use of being a princess if you cannot marry whom you will? Most, I know, marry whom they are told; but then they have not the spirit of a Baltic weevil, let alone that of Margaret of Courtland."

They touched the shore almost at the place where the Sparhawk had landed in the morning when he escaped from the city rabble, and a stone's-throw further up the bank they found the horses waiting, ready caparisoned for the journey.

Two men were, by the Princess's orders, to accompany Johann.

But with great thoughtfulness she had provided a fourth horse for the companion who, equally with himself, was under the ban of the law for wounding the lieges of the Prince of Courtland within the precincts of the palace.

"He cannot have gone far," said the Princess. "He would certainly conceal himself till nightfall in the first convenient hiding-place. He will be on the look-out for any chance to release you."

And the event proved the wisdom of her prophecy. For as soon as he had distinguished the slim figure of the secretary landing from the boat the Sparhawk appeared on the crest of the hill, though for the moment he was still unseen by those below.

"Goodbye! For the present, goodbye, dear Princess," said Johann, with his heart in his voice. "God knows, I can never thank or repay you. My heart is heavy for that. I am unworthy of all your goodness. It is not as you think –"

He paused for words which might warn without revealing his secret; but the Princess, never long silent, struck in.

"Let there be no talk of parting except for the moment," she said. "Go, you are my knight. Perhaps one day, if you do not forget me, I may be yet far kinder to you!"

And with a most tender kiss and a little sob the Princess sent her lover, more and more downcast and discouraged by reason of her very kindness, upon his way. So much did his obvious depression affect Margaret of Courtland, that after the secretary, with one of the men-at-arms leading the spare horse, had reached the top of the river bank, she suddenly bade the rowers wait a moment before casting loose from the land.

"Your sword! Your sword!" she called aloud, risking any listener in her eagerness; "you have forgotten your sword."

Now it chanced that the Sparhawk had already come up with the little party of travellers. He kissed the hand of Johann Pymont, placed him on his beast, and was preparing to mount his steed with a glad heart, when the voice from beneath startled him.

"Do not trouble, I will bring the sword," said the Sparhawk to Johann, with his usual impetuosity, putting the reins into the secretary's hands. And without a moment's hesitation he flung himself down the bank. The Princess had leaped nimbly ashore, and was standing with the sheathed sword in her hand.

When she saw the figure came bounding towards her down the pebbly bank, she gave a little cry, and dropping the scabbard, threw her arms impulsively about the Sparhawk's neck.

"I could not let you go like that – without ever telling you that I loved you – really, I mean," she whispered, while the youth stood petrified with astonishment, without sound or motion. "I will marry none but you – neither Prince Ivan nor another. A woman should not tell a man that, I know, lest he despise her; but a princess may, if the man dare not tell her."

"And what answered you?" asked the secretary of his companion, as they rode together through the night out on their road to Kernsberg.

"Why, I said nothing – speech was not needed," quoth the Dane coolly.

"She kissed you?"

"Well," said the Sparhawk, "I could not help that, could I?"

"But what said you to that?"

"Why, of course, I kissed her back again, as a man ought!" he made answer.

"Poor Princess," mused the secretary; "it is more than I could ever have done for her!" Aloud he said, "But you do not love her – you had not seen her before! Why then did you kiss her?"

For these things are hidden from women.

The Dane shrugged his shoulders in the dark.

"Well, I take what the gods send," he replied. "She was a pretty girl, and her Princess-ship made no difference in her kissing so far as I could see. I serve you to the death, my Lady Duchess; but if a princess loves me by the way – why, I am ready to indulge her to the limit of her desirings!"

"You are indeed an accommodating youth," sighed the secretary, and forthwith returned to his own melancholy thoughts.

And ever as they rode westward they heard all around them the rustle of corn in the night wind. Stacks of hay shed a sweet scent momentarily athwart their path, and more than once fruit-laden branches swept across their faces. For they were passing through the garden of the Baltic, and its fresh beauty was never fresher than on that September night when these four rode out of Courtland towards the distant blue hills on which was perched Kernsberg, built like an eagle's nest on a crag overfrowning the wealthier plain.

At the first boundaries of the group of little hill principalities the two soldiers were dismissed, suitably rewarded by Johann, to carry the news of safety back to their wayward and impulsive mistress. And thence-forward the Sparhawk and the secretary rode on alone.

At the little *châlet* among the hills where the Duchess Joan had so suddenly disappeared they found two of her tire-maidens and an aged nurse impatiently awaiting their mistress. To them entered that composite and puzzling youth the ex-architect and secretary of the embassy of Plassenburg, Johann, Count von Löen. And wonder of wonders, in an hour afterwards Joan of the Sword Hand was riding eagerly towards her capital city with her due retinue, as if she had merely been taking a little summer breathing space at a country seat.

Her entrance created as little surprise as her exit. For as to her exits and entrances alike the Duchess consulted no man, much less any woman. Werner von Orseln saluted as impassively as if he had seen his mistress an hour before, and the acclamations of the guard rang out as cheerfully as ever.

Joan felt her spirits rise to be once more in her own land and among her own folk. Nevertheless, there was a new feeling in her heart as she thought of the day of her marriage, when the long-planned bond of brotherhood-heritage should at last be carried out, and she should indeed become the mistress of that great land into which she had ventured so strangely, and the bride of the Prince – her Prince, the most noble man on whom her eyes had ever rested.

Then her thoughts flew to the Princess who had delivered her out of peril so deadly, and her soul grew sick and sad within her, not at all lest her adventure should be known. She cared not so much about that now. (Perhaps some day she would even tell him herself when – well, *after*!)

But since she had ridden to Courtland, Joan, all untouched before, had grown suddenly very tender to the smarting of another woman's heart.

"It is in no wise my fault," she told herself, which in a sense was true.

But conscience, being a thing not subject to reason, dealt not a whit the more easily with her on that account.

It was six months afterwards that the Sparhawk, who had been given the command of a troop of good Hohenstein lancers, asked permission to go on a journey.

He had been palpably restless and uneasy ever since his return, and in spite of immediate favour and the prospect of yet further promotion, he could not settle to his work.

"Whither would you go?" asked his mistress.

"To Courtland," he confessed, somewhat reluctantly, looking down at the peaked toe of his tanned leather riding-boot.

"And what takes you to Courtland?" said Joan; "you are in danger there. Besides, even if you could, would you leave my service and engage with some other?"

"Nay, my lady," he burst out, "that will not I, so long as life lasts. But – but the truth is" – he hesitated as he spoke – "I cannot get out of my mind the Princess who kissed me in the dark.

The like never happened before to any man. I cannot forget her, do what I will. No, nor rest till I have looked upon her face."

"Wait," said Joan. "Only wait till the spring and it is my hap to ride to Courtland for my marriage day. Then I promise you you shall see somewhat of her – the Lord send that it be not more than enough!"

So through many bitter winter days the Sparhawk abode at the castle of Kernsberg, ill content.

CHAPTER XII

JOAN FORSWEARS THE SWORD

It was not in accordance with etiquette that two such nobly born betrothed persons, to be allied for reasons of high State policy, should visit each other openly before the day of marriage; but many letters and presents had at various times come to Kernsberg, all bearing witness to the lover-like eagerness of the Prince of Courtland and of his desire to possess so fair a bride, especially one who was to bring him so coveted a possession as the hill provinces of Kernsberg and Hohenstein.

Amongst other things he had forwarded portraits of himself, drawn with such skill as the artists of the Baltic at that time possessed, of a man in armour, with a countenance of such wooden severity that it might stand (as the Duchess openly declared) just as well for Werner, her chief captain, or any other man of war in full panoply.

"But," said Joan within herself, "what care I for armour black or armour white? Mine eyes have seen – and my heart does not forget."

Then she smiled and for a while forgot the coming inevitable disappointment of the Princess Margaret, which troubled her much at other times.

The winter was unusually long and fierce in the mountains of Kernsberg that year, and even along the Baltic shores the ice packed thicker and the snow lay longer by a full month than usual.

It was the end of May, and the full bursting glory of a northern spring, when at last the bridal cavalcade wound down from the towers of the Castle of Kernsberg. Four hundred riders there were, every man arrayed like a prince in the colours of Hohenstein – four fairest maids to be bridesmaids to their Duchess, and as many matrons of rank and years to bring their mistress with dignity and discretion to her new home. But the people and the rough soldiers openly mourned for Joan of the Sword Hand. "The Princess of Courtland will not be the same thing!" they said.

And they were right, for since the last time she rode out Joan had thought many thoughts. Could it be that she was indeed that reckless maid who once had vowed that she would go and look once at the man her father had bidden her marry, and then, if she did not like him, would carry him off and clap him into a dungeon till he had paid a swinging ransom? But the knight of the white plume, and the interview she had had with a certain Prince in the summer palace of Courtland, had changed all that.

Now she would be sober, grave – a fit mate for such a man. Almost she blushed to recall her madcap feats of only a year ago.

As they approached the city, and each night brought them closer to the great day, Joan rode more by herself, or talked with the young Dane, Maurice von Lynar, of the Princess Margaret – without, however, telling him aught of the rose garden or the expositions of foreign customs which had preceded the duel with the Wasp.

The heart of the Duchess beat yet faster when at last the day of their entry arrived. As they rode toward the gate of Courtland they were aware of a splendid cavalcade which came out to receive them in the name of the Prince, and to conduct them with honour to the palace prepared for them.

In the centre of a brilliant company rode the Princess Margaret, in a well-fitting robe of pale blue brodered with crimson, while behind and about her was such a galaxy of the fashion and beauty of a court, that had not Joan remembered and thought on the summer parlour and the man who was waiting for her in the city, she had almost bidden her four hundred riders wheel to the right about, and gallop straight back to Kernsberg and the heights of rustic Hohenstein.

At sight of the Duchess's party the Princess alighted from off her steed with the help of a cavalier. At the same moment Joan of the Sword Hand leaped down of her own accord and came forward to meet her new sister.

The two women kissed, and then held each other at arm's length for the luxury of a long look.

The face of the Princess showed a trace of emotion. She appeared to be struggling with some recollection she was unable to locate with precision.

"I hope you will be very happy with my brother," she faltered; then after a moment she added, "Have you not perchance a brother of your own?"

But before Joan could reply the representative of the Prince had come forward to conduct the bride-elect to her rooms, and the Princess gave place to him.

But all the same she kept her eyes keenly about her, and presently they rested with a sudden brightness upon the young Dane, Maurice von Lynar, at the head of his troop of horse. He was near enough for her to see his face, and it was with a curious sense of strangeness that she saw his eyes fixed upon herself.

"He is different – he is changed," she said to herself; "but how – wait till we get to the palace, and I shall soon find out!"

And immediately she caused it to be intimated that all the captains of troops and the superior officers of the escort of the Duchess Joan were to be entertained at the palace of the Princess Margaret.

So that at the moment when Joan was taking a first survey of her chambers, which occupied one entire wing of the Palace of the Princes of Courtland, Margaret the impetuous had already commanded the presence of the Count von Löen, one of the commanders of the bridal escort.

The young officer entrusted with the message returned almost immediately, to find his mistress impatiently pacing up and down.

"Well?" she said, halting at the upper end of the reception-room and looking at him.

"Your Highness," he said, "there is no Count von Löen among the officers of Kernsberg!"

Margaret of Courtland stamped her foot.

"I expected as much," she said. "He shall pay for this. Why, man, I saw him with my own eyes an hour ago – a young man, slender, sits erect in his saddle, of a dark allure, and with eyes like those of an eagle."

A flush came over the youth's face.

"Does he look like the brother of the Duchess Joan?" he said.

"That is the man – Count von Löen or no. That is the man, I tell you. Bring him immediately to me."

The young officer smiled.

"Methinks he will come readily enough. He started forward as if to follow me when first I told my message. But when I mentioned the name of the Count von Löen he stood aside in manifest disappointment."

"At all events, bring him instantly!" commanded the Princess.

The officer bowed low and retired.

The Princess Margaret smiled to herself.

"It is some more of their precious State secrets," she said. "Well – I love secrets, and I can keep them too; but only my own, or those that are told to me. And I will make my gentleman pay for playing off his Counts von Löen on me!"

Presently she heard heavy footsteps approaching the door.

"Come in – come in straightway," she said in a loud, clear voice; "I have a word to speak with you, Sir Count – who yet deny that you are a count. And, prithee, to how many silly girls have you taught the foreign fashions of linked arms, and all that most pleasant ceremony of leave-taking in Kernsberg and Plassenburg?"

Then the Sparhawk had his long-desired view in full daylight of the woman whose lips, touched once under cloud of night, had dominated his fancy and enslaved his will during all the weary months of winter.

Also he had before him, though he knew it not, a somewhat difficult and complicated explanation.

CHAPTER XIII

THE SPARHAWK IN THE TOILS

The Princess Margaret was standing by the window as the young man entered. Her golden curls flashed in the late sunshine, which made a kind of haze of light about her head as she turned the resentful brilliance of her eyes upon Maurice von Lynar.

"Is it a safe thing, think you, Sir Count, to jest with a princess in her own land and then come back to flout her for it?"

Maurice understood her to refer to the kiss given and returned in the darkness of the night. He knew not of how many other indiscretions he was now to bear the brunt, or he had turned on the spot and fled once more across the river.

"My lady," he said, "if I offended you once, it was not done intentionally, but by mistake."

"By mistake, sir! Have a care. I may have been indiscreet, but I am not imbecile."

"The darkness of the night – " faltered von Lynar, "let that be my excuse."

"Pshaw!" flashed the Princess, suddenly firing up; "do you not see, man, that you cannot lie yourself out of this? And, indeed, what need? If *I* were a secretary of embassy, and a princess distinguished me with her slightest favour, methinks when next I came I would not meanly deny her acquaintance!"

Von Lynar was distressed, and fortunately for himself his distress showed in his face.

"Princess," he said, standing humbly before her, "I did wrong. But consider the sudden temptation, the darkness of the night – "

"The darkness of the night," she said, stamping her foot, and in an instinctively mocking tone; "you are indeed well inspired. You remind me of what I ventured that you should be free. The darkness of the night, indeed! I suppose that is all that sticks in your memory, because you gained something tangible by it. You have forgotten the walk through the corridors of the Palace, all you taught me in the rose garden, and – and – how apt a pupil you said I was. Pray, good Master Forgetfulness, who hath forgotten all these things, forgotten even his own name, tell me what you did in Courtland eight months ago?"

"I came – I came," faltered the Sparhawk, fearful of yet further committing himself, "I came to find and save my dear mistress."

"Your – dear – mistress?" The Princess spoke slowly, and the blue eyes hardened till they overtopped and beat down the bold black ones of Maurice von Lynar; "and you dare to tell me this – me, to whom you swore that you had never loved woman in the world before, never spoken to them word of wooing or compliment! Out of my sight, fellow! The Prince, my brother, shall deal with you."

Then all suddenly her pride utterly gave way. The disappointment was too keen. She sank down on a silk-covered ottoman by the window side, sobbing.

"Oh, that I could kill you now, with my hands – so," she said in little furious jerks, gripping at the pillow; "I hate you, thus to put a shame upon me – me, Margaret of Courtland. Could it have been for such a thing as you that I sent away the Prince of Muscovy – yes, and many others – because I could not forget you? And after all – !"

Now Maurice von Lynar was not quick in discernment where woman was concerned, but on this occasion he recognised that he was blindly playing the hand of another – a hand, moreover, of which he could not hope to see the cards. He did the only thing which could have saved him with the Princess. He came near and sank on one knee before her.

"Madam," he said humbly and in a moving voice, "I beseech you not to be angry – not to condemn me unheard. In the sense of being in love, I never loved any but yourself. I would rather

die than put the least slight upon one so surpassingly fair, whose memory has never departed from me, sleeping or waking, whose image, dimly seen, has never for a moment been erased from my heart's tablets."

The Princess paused and lifted her eyes till they dwelt searchingly upon him. His obvious sincerity touched her willing heart.

"But you said just now that you came to Courtland to see 'your dear mistress?'"

The young man put his hand to his head.

"You must bear with me," he said, "if perchance for a little my words are wild. I had, indeed, no right to speak of you as my dear mistress."

"Oh, it was of me that you spoke," said the Princess, smiling a little; "I begin to understand."

"Of what other could I speak?" said the shameless Von Lynar, who now began to feel his way a little clearer. "I have indeed been very ill, and when I am in straits my head is still unsettled. Oftentimes I forget my very name, so sharp a pang striking through my forehead that I dote and stare and forget all else. It springs from a secret wound that at the time I knew nothing of."

"Yes – yes, I remember. In the duel with the Wasp – in the yew-tree walk it happened. Tell me, is it dangerous? Did it well-nigh cost you your life?"

The youth modestly hung down his head.

This sudden spate of falsehood had come upon him, as it were, from the outside.

"If the truth will not help me," he muttered, "why, I can lie with any man. Else wherefore was I born a Dane? But, by my faith, my mistress must have done some rare tall lying on her own account, and now I am reaping that which she hath sown."

As he kneeled thus the Princess bent over him with a quizzical expression on her face.

"You are sure that you speak the truth now? Your wound is not again causing you to dote?"

"Nay," said the Sparhawk; "indeed, 'tis almost healed."

"Where was the wound?" queried the Princess anxiously.

"There were two," answered Von Lynar diplomatically; "one in my shoulder at the base of my neck, and the other, more dangerous because internal, on the head itself."

"Let me see."

She came and stood above him as he put his hand to the collar of his doublet, and, unfastening a tie, he slipped it down a little and showed her at the spring of his neck Werner von Orseln's thrust.

"And the other," she said, covering it up with a little shudder, "that on the head, where is it?"

The youth blushed, but answered valiantly enough.

"It never was an open wound, and so is a little difficult to find. Here, where my hand is, above my brow."

"Hold up your head," said the Princess. "On which side was it? On the right? Strange, I cannot find it. You are too far beneath me. The light falls not aright. Ah, that is better!"

She kneeled down in front of him and examined each side of his head with interest, making as she did so, many little exclamations of pity and remorse.

"I think it must be nearer the brow," she said at last; "hold up your head – look at me."

Von Lynar looked at the Princess. Their position was one as charming as it was dangerous. They were kneeling opposite to one another, their faces, drawn together by the interest of the surgical examination, had approached very close. The dark eyes looked squarely into the blue. With stuff so inflammable, fire and tow in such immediate conjunction, who knows what conflagration might have ensued had Von Lynar's eyes continued thus to dwell on those of the Princess?

But the young man's gaze passed over her shoulder. Behind Margaret of Courtland he saw a man standing at the door with his hand still on the latch. A dark frown overspread his face. The Princess, instantly conscious that the interest had gone out of the situation, followed the direction of Von Lynar's eyes. She rose to her feet as the young Dane also had done a moment before.

Maurice recognised the man who stood by the door as the same whom he had seen on the ground in the yew-tree walk when he and Joan of the Sword Hand had faced the howling mob of the city. For the second time Prince Wasp had interfered with the amusements of the Princess Margaret.

That lady looked haughtily at the intruder.

"To what," she said, "am I so fortunate as to owe the unexpected honour of this visit?"

"I came to pay my respects to your Highness," said Prince Wasp, bowing low. "I did not know that the Princess was amusing herself. It is my ill-fortune, not my fault, that I interrupted at a point so full of interest."

It was the truth. The point was decidedly interesting, and therein lay the sting of the situation, as probably the Wasp knew full well.

"You are at liberty to leave me now," said the Princess, falling back on a certain haughty dignity which she kept in reserve behind her headlong impulsiveness.

"I obey, madam," he replied; "but first I have a message from the Prince your brother. He asks you to be good enough to accompany his bride to the minster to-morrow. He has been ill all day with his old trouble, and so cannot wait in person upon his betrothed. He must abide in solitude for this day at least. Your Highness is apparently more fortunate!"

The purpose of the insult was plain; but the Princess Margaret restrained herself, not, however, hating the insulter less.

"I pray you, Prince Ivan," she said, "return to my brother and tell him that his commands are ever an honour, and shall be obeyed to the letter."

She bowed in dignified dismissal. Prince Wasp swept his plumed hat along the floor with the profundity of his retiring salutation, and in the same moment he flashed out his sting.

"I leave your Highness with less regret because I perceive that solitude has its compensations!" he said.

The pair were left alone, but all things seemed altered now. Margaret of Courtland was silent and distraught. Von Lynar had a frown upon his brow, and his eyes were very dark and angry.

"Next time I must kill the fellow!" he muttered. He took the hand of the Princess and respectfully kissed it.

"I am your servant," he said; "I will do your bidding in all things, in life or in death. If I have forgotten anything, in aught been remiss, believe me that it was fate and not I. I will never presume, never count on your friendship past your desire, never recall your ancient goodness. I am but a poor soldier, yet at least I can faithfully keep my word."

The Princess withdrew her hand as if she had been somewhat fatigued.

"Do not be afraid," she said a little bitterly, "I shall not forget. *I* have not been wounded in the head! *Only in the heart!*" she added, as she turned away.

CHAPTER XIV AT THE HIGH ALTAR

When Maurice von Lynar reached the open air he stood for full five minutes, light-headed in the rush of the city traffic. The loud iteration of rejoicing sounded heartless and even impertinent in his ear. The world had changed for the young Dane since the Count von Löen had been summoned by the Princess Margaret.

He cast his mind back over the interview, but failed to disentangle anything definite. It was a maze of impressions out of which grew the certainty that, safely to play his difficult part, he must obtain the whole confidence of the Duchess Joan.

He looked about for the Prince of Muscovy, but failed to see him. Though not anxious about the result, he was rather glad, for he did not want another quarrel on his hands till after the wedding. He would see the Princess Margaret there. If he played his cards well with the bride, he might even be sent for to escort her.

So he made his way to the magnificent suite of apartments where the Duchess was lodged. The Prince had ordered everything with great consideration. Her own horsemen patrolled the front of the palace, and the Courtland guards were for the time being wholly withdrawn.

It seemed strange that Joan of the Sword Hand, who not so long ago had led many a dashing foray and been the foremost in many a brisk encounter, should be a bride! It could not be that once he had imagined her the fairest woman under the sun, and himself, for her sake, the most miserable of men. Thus do lovers deceive themselves when the new has come to obliterate the old. Some can even persuade themselves that the old never had any existence.

The young Dane found the Duchess walking up and down on the noble promenade which faces the river to the west. For the water curved in a spacious elbow about the city of Courtland, and the summer palace was placed in the angle.

Maurice von Lynar stood awhile respectfully waiting for the Duchess to recognise him. Werner, John of Thorn, or any of her Kernsberg captains would have gone directly up to her. But this youth had been trained in another school.

Joan of Hohenstein stood a while without moving, looking out upon the river. She thought with a kind of troubled shyness of the morrow, oft dreamed of, long expected. She saw the man whom she was not known ever to have seen – the noble young man of the tournament, the gracious Prince of the summer parlour, courteous and dignified alike to the poor secretary of embassy and to his sister the Princess Margaret of Courtland. Surely there never was any one like him – proudly thought this girl, as she looked across the river at the rich plain studded with far-smiling farms and fields just waking to life after their long winter sleep.

"Ah, Von Lynar, my brave Dane, what good wind blows you here?" she cried. "I declare I was longing for some one to talk to." A consciousness of need which had only just come to her.

"I have seen the Princess Margaret," said the youth slowly, "and I think that she must mistake me for some other person. She spoke things most strange to me to hear. But fearing I might meddle with affairs wherewith I had no concern, I forebore to correct her."

The eyes of the Duchess danced. A load seemed suddenly lifted off her mind.

"Was she very angry?" she queried.

"Very!" returned Von Lynar, smiling in recognition of her smile.

"What said the Princess?"

"First she would have it that my name and style were those of the Count Von Löen. Then she reproached me fiercely because I denied it. After that she spoke of certain foreign customs she

had been taught, recalled walks through corridors and rose gardens with me, till my head swam and I knew not what to answer."

Joan of the Sword Hand laughed a merry peal.

"The Count von Löen, did she say?" she meditated. "Well, so you are the Count von Löen. I create you the Count von Löen now. I give you the title. It is mine to give. By to-morrow I shall have done with all these things. And since as the Count von Löen I drank the wine, it is fair that you, who have to pay the reckoning, should be the Count von Löen also."

"My family is noble, and I am the sole heir – that is, alive," said Maurice, a little drily. To his mind the grandson of Count von Lynar, of the order of the Dannebrog, had no need of any other distinction.

"But I give you also therewith the estates which pertain to the title. They are situated on the borders of Reichenau. I am so happy to-night that I would like to make all the world happy. I am sorry for all the folk I have injured!"

"Love changes all things," said the Dane sententially.

The Duchess looked at him quickly.

"You are in love – with the Princess Margaret?" she said.

The youth blushed a deep crimson, which flooded his neck and dyed his dusky skin.

"Poor Maurice!" she said, touching his bowed head with her hand, "your troubles will not be to seek."

"My lady," said the youth, "I fear not trouble. I have promised to serve the Princess in all things. She has been very kind to me. She has forgiven me all."

"So – you are anxious to change your allegiance," said the Duchess. "It is as well that I have already made you Count von Löen, and so in a manner bound you to me, or you would be going off into another's service with all my secrets in your keeping. Not that it will matter very much – after to-morrow!" she added, with a glance at the wing of the palace which held the summer parlour. "But how did you manage to appease her? That is no mean feat. She is an imperious lady and quick of understanding."

Then Maurice von Lynar told his mistress of his most allowable falsehoods, and begged her not to undeceive the Princess, for that he would rather bear all that she might put upon him than that she should know he had lied to her.

"Do not be afraid," said the Duchess, laughing, "it was I who tangled the skein. So far you have unravelled it very well. The least I can do is to leave you to unwind it to the end, my brave Count von Löen."

So they parted, the Duchess to her apartment, and the young man to pace up and down the stone-flagged promenade all night, thinking of the distracting whimsies of the Princess Margaret, of the hopelessness of his love, and, most of all, of how daintily exquisite and altogether desirable was her beauty of face, of figure, of temper, of everything!

For the Sparhawk was not a lover to make reservations.

The morning of the great day dawned cool and grey. A sunshade of misty cloud overspread the city and tempered the heat. It had come up with the morning wind from the Baltic, and by eight the ships at the quays, and the tall beflagged festal masts in the streets through which the procession was to pass, ran clear up into it and were lost, so that the standards and pennons on their tops could not be seen any more than if they had been amongst the stars.

The streets were completely lined with the folk of the city of Courtland as the Princess Margaret, with the Sparhawk and his company of lances clattering behind her, rode to the entrance of the palace where abode the bride-elect.

"Who is that youth?" asked Margaret of Courtland of Joan, as they came out together; she looked at the Dane – "he at the head of your first troops? He looks like your brother."

"He has often been taken for such!" said the bride. "He is called the Count von Löen!"

The Princess did not reply, and as the two fair women came out arm in arm, a sudden glint of sunlight broke through the leaden clouds and fell upon them, glorifying the white dress of the one, and the blue and gold apparel of the other.

The bells of the minster clanged a changeful thunder of brazen acclaim as the bride set out for the first time (so they told each other on the streets) to see her promised husband.

"'Twas well we did not so manage our affairs, Hans," said a fishmonger's wife, touching her husband's arm archly.

"Yea, wife," returned the seller of fish; "whatever thou beest, at least I cannot deny that I took thee with my eyes open!"

They reached the Rathhaus, and the clamour grew louder than ever. Presently they were at the cathedral and making them ready to dismount. The bells in the towers above burst forth into yet more frantic jubilation. The cannons roared from the ramparts.

The Princess Margaret had delayed a little, either taking longer to her attiring, or, perhaps, gossiping with the bride. So that when the shouts in the wide Minster Place announced their arrival, all was in readiness within the crowded church, and the bridegroom had gone in well-nigh half an hour before them. But that was in accord with the best traditions.

Very like a Princess and a great lady looked Joan of Hohenstein as she went up the aisle, with Margaret of Courtland by her side. She kept her eyes on the ground, for she meant to look at no one and behold nothing till she should see – that which she longed to look upon.

Suddenly she was conscious that they had stopped in the middle of a vast silence. The candles upon the great altar threw down a golden lustre. Joan saw the irregular shining of them on her white bridal dress, and wondered that it should be so bright.

There was a hush over all the assembly, the silence of a great multitude all intent upon one thing.

"My brother, the Prince of Courtland!" said the voice of the Princess Margaret.

Slowly Joan raised her eyes – pride and happiness at war with a kind of glorious shame upon her face.

But that one look altered all things.

She stood fixed, aghast, turned to stone as she gazed. She could neither speak nor think. That which she saw almost struck her dead with horror.

The man whom his sister introduced as the Prince of Courtland was not the knight of the tournament. He was not the young prince of the summer palace. He was a man much older, more meagre of body, grey-headed, with an odd sidelong expression in his eyes. His shoulders were bent, and he carried himself like a man prematurely old.

And there, behind the altar-railing, clad in the scarlet of a prince of the Church, and wearing the mitre of a bishop, stood the husband of her heart's deepest thoughts, the man who had never been out of her mind all these weary months. He held a service book in his hand, and stood ready to marry Joan of Hohenstein to another.

The man who was called Prince of Courtland came forward to take her hand; but Joan stood with her arms firmly at her sides. The terrible nature of her mistake flashed upon her and grew in horror with every moment. Fate seemed to laugh suddenly and mockingly in her face. Destiny shut her in.

"Are you the Prince of Courtland?" she asked; and at the sound of her voice, unwontedly clear in the great church, even the organ appeared to still itself. All listened intently, though only a few heard the conversation.

"I have that honour," bowed the man with the bent shoulders.

"Then, as God lives, I will never marry you!" cried Joan, all her soul in the disgust of her voice.

"Be not disdainful, my lady," said the bridegroom mildly; "I will be your humble slave. You shall have a palace and an establishment of your own, an it like you. The marriage was your father's desire, and hath the sanction of the Emperor. It is as necessary for your State as for mine."

Then, while the people waited in a kind of palpitating uncertainty, the Princess Margaret whispered to the bride, who stood with a face ashen pale as her own white dress.

Sometimes she looked at the Prince of Courtland, and then immediately averted her eyes. But never, after the first glance, did Joan permit them to stray to the face of him who stood behind the altar railings with his service book in his hand.

"Well," she said finally, "I *will* marry this man, since it is my fate. Let the ceremony proceed!"

"I thank you, gracious lady," said the Prince, taking her hand and leading his bride to the altar. "You will never regret it."

"No, but you will!" muttered his groomsman, the Prince Ivan of Muscovy.

The full rich tones of the prince bishop rose and fell through the crowded minster as Joan of Hohenstein was married to his elder brother, and with the closing words of the episcopal benediction an awe fell upon the multitude. They felt that they were in the presence of great unknown forces, the action and interaction of which might lead no man knew whither.

At the close of the service, Joan, now Princess of Courtland, leaned over and whispered a word to her chosen captain, Maurice von Lynar, an action noticed by few. The young man started and gazed into her face; but, immediately commanding his emotion, he nodded and disappeared by a side door.

The great organ swelled out. The marriage procession was re-formed. The prince-bishop had retired to his sacristy to change his robes. The new Princess of Courtland came down the aisle on the arm of her husband.

Then the bells almost turned over in their fury of jubilation, and every cannon in the city bellowed out. The people shouted themselves hoarse, and the line of Courtland troops who kept the people back had great difficulty in restraining the enthusiasm which threatened to break all bounds and involve the married pair in a whirling tumult of acclaim.

In the centre of the Minster Place the four hundred lances of the Kernsberg escort had formed up, a serried mass of beautiful well-groomed horses, stalwart men, and shining spears, from each of which the pennon of their mistress fluttered in the light wind.

"Ha! there they come at last! See them on the steps!" The shouts rang out, and the people flung their headgear wildly into the air. The line of Courtland foot saluted, but no cheer came from the array of Kernsberg lances.

"They are sorry to lose her – and small wonder. Well, she is ours now!" the people cried, congratulating one another as they shook hands and the wine gurgled out of the pigskins into innumerable thirsty mouths.

On the steps of the minster, after they had descended more than half-way, the new Princess of Courtland turned upon her lord. Her hand slipped from his arm, which hung a moment crooked and empty before it dropped to his side. His mouth was a little open with surprise. Prince Louis knew that he was wedding a wilful dame, but he had not been prepared for this.

"Now, my lord," said the Princess Joan, loud and clear. "I have married you. The bond of heritage-brotherhood is fulfilled. I have obeyed my father to the letter. I have obeyed the Emperor. I have done all. Now be it known to you and to all men that I will neither live with you nor yet in your city. I am your wife in name. You shall never be my husband in aught else. I bid you farewell, Prince of Courtland. Joan of Hohenstein may marry where she is bidden, but she loves where she will."

The horse upon which she had come to the minster stood waiting. There was the Sparhawk ready to help her into the saddle.

Ere one of the wedding guests could move to prevent her, before the Prince of Courtland could cry an order or decide what to do, Joan of the Sword Hand had placed herself at the head of her four hundred lances, and was riding through the shouting streets towards the Plassenburg gate.

The people cheered as she went by, clearing the way that she might not be annoyed. They thought it part of the day's show, and voted the Kernsbergers a gallant band, well set up and right bravely arrayed.

So they passed through the gate in safety. The noble portal was all aflutter with colour, the arms of Hohenstein and Courtland being quartered together on a great wooden plaque over the main entrance.

As soon as they were clear the Princess Joan turned in her saddle and spake to the four hundred behind her.

"We ride back to Kernsberg," she cried. "Joan of the Sword Hand is wed, but not yet won. If they would keep her they must first catch her. Are you with me, lads of the hills?"

Then came back a unanimous shout of "Aye – to the death!" from four hundred throats.

"Then give me a sword and put the horses to their speed. We ride for home. Let them catch us who can!"

And this was the true fashion of the marrying of Joan of the Sword Hand, Duchess of Hohenstein, to the Prince Louis of Courtland, by his brother Conrad, Cardinal and Prince of Holy Church.

CHAPTER XV

WHAT JOAN LEFT BEHIND

After the departure of his bride, the Prince of Courtland stood on the steps of the minster, dazed and foundered by the shame which had so suddenly befallen him. Beneath him the people seethed tumultuously, their holiday ribands and maypole dresses making as gay a swirl of colour as when one looks at the sun through the facets of a cut Venetian glass. Prince Louis's weak and fretful face worked with emotion. His bird-like hands clawed uncertainly at his sword-hilt, wandering off over the golden pouches that tasselled his baldric till they rested on the sheath of the poignard he wore.

"Bid the gates be shut, Prince!" The whisper came over his shoulder from a young man who had been standing all the time twisting his moustache. "Bid your horsemen bit and bridle. The plain is fair before you. It is a long way to Kernsberg. I have a hundred Muscovites at your service, all well mounted – ten thousand behind them over the frontier if these are not enough! Let no wench in the world put this shame upon a reigning Prince of Courtland on his wedding-day!"

Thus Ivan of Muscovy, attired in silk, banded of black and gold, counselled the disdained Prince Louis, who stood pushing upward with two fingers the point of his thin greyish beard and gnawing the straggling ends between his teeth.

"I say, 'To horse and ride, man!' Will you dare tell this folk of yours that you are disdained, slighted at the very church door by your wedded wife, cast off and trodden in the mire like a bursten glove? Can you afford to proclaim yourself the scorn of Germany? How it will run, that news! To Plassenburg first, where the Executioner's Son will smile triumphantly to his witch woman, and straightway send off a messenger to tickle the well-larded ribs of his friend the Margraf George with the rare jest."

The Prince Louis appeared to be moved by the Wasp's words. He turned about to the nearest knight-in-waiting.

"Let us to horse – every man of us!" he said. "Bid that the steeds be brought instantly."

The banded Wasp had further counsels to give.

"Give out that you go to meet the Princess at a rendezvous. For a pleasantry between yourselves, you have resolved to spend the honeymoon at a distant hunting-lodge. Quick! Not half a dozen of all the company caught the true import of her words. You will tame her yet. She will founder her horses in a single day's ride, while you have relays along the road at every castle, at every farm-house, and your borders are fifty good miles away."

Beneath, in the square, the court jesters leaped and laughed, turning somersaults and making a flying skirt, like that of a morrice dancer, out of the long, flapping points of their parti-coloured blouses. The streets in front of the cathedral were alive with musicians, mostly in little bands of three, a harper with his harp of fourteen strings, his companion playing industriously upon a Flute-English, and with these two their 'prentice or servitor, who accompanied them with shrill iteration of whistle, while both his hands busied themselves with the merry tuck of tabour.

In this incessant merrymaking the people soon forgot their astonishment at the sudden disappearance of the bride. There was, indeed, no understanding these great folk. But it was a fine day for a feast – the pretext a good one. And so the lasses and lads joked as they danced in the lower vaults of the town house, from which the barrels had been cleared for the occasion.

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