The South.

THE ARMOURER OF MUNSTER.

A PAGE FROM THE

HISTORY OF FANATICISM.

(Continued.)

XXIV.—THE BEGINNING OF THE END.

Munster held out with a resolution worthy of the noblest cause. The fanaticism of the citizens made them endure with exemplary patience the savage cruelties of their king and the horrors of famine. In the meanwhile plans were in progress abroad to reduce the heroic city by a concentration of diplomatic and military movements.

The Diet of Worms, opened by the Roman King Ferdinand in April, had voted a large subsidy to the prince-bishop; but the contributions of the various states of the German League were so irregularly paid, that the mercenaries in the bishop's camp became clamorous for the payment of the arrears. From clamor they broke out into violence and ended in a mutiny, which was quelled only by measures of the utmost severity. Count Oberstein was doubtful of the fidelity of such troops, and was unwilling to risk the issue of an assault with men who had betrayed a spirit so mean and selfish. He wisely preferred the policy of starvation, and persevered in cutting off every hope of relief from without, expecting from day to day that the city would be compelled to cast itself upon his mercy.

This effective policy wrought its end with fearful rapidity. The citizens were reduced to the last extremity. Carrion from the slaughter-yards, leaves of trees, bark, and grass, were sought for and fought for with wolfish eagerness. Wherever the king appeared he saw men pale and wasted, with gaunt long hands and hungry eyes, pressing round him with cries for bread, and insane demands for a miraculous deliverance. Their faith was still firm even in death. In vain the prince-bishop summoned the town to surrender, promising an amnesty to all except Johannes and his principal prophets. In vain the Landgrave of Hesse implored the Lutherans who had joined the schismatic Church to return to their old and saving faith. The voice of the prophet-king still seemed to his deluded followers the voice of God; and his own endurance was equal to theirs. He announced to them a glorious deliverance so soon as the trials they were suffering should have separated the dross from the gold—the true saints from the weak and vacillating. In evidence of his reliance upon his result, he resorted to the most daring acts. The emissaries of the bishop were hung over the gates of the city, and the envoy of the landgrave refused admittance. While these events were going on, the eight-and-twenty missionaries had arrived at their respective destinations, with fanatical enthusiasm. But the local authorities, warned by the fate of Munster, were every where prepared to take decisive steps for the suppression of this dangerous crusade. The itinerant prophets, with few exceptions were seized and examined touching their dogmata; and as all alike persisted in claiming prophetic authority, they were executed with all possible despatch.—Amongst the few who escaped was one named Heinrich Helversum, who had fallen into the hands of the prince-bishop. He purchased his life by undertaking to betray the town. The compact was not creditable to either party; but the moment was critical, and justified to some extent the employment of sinister means. Heinrich Helversum, to do him justice, accomplished his task with fearlessness and discretion. He went at once openly to Johannes, and, putting a bold face upon the matter, announced to him that his deliverance was effected by supernatural interposition. He said, that on the night of his condemnation to death he sat praying and awaiting his last hour, when an angel suddenly appeared to him and commanded him to proclaim to the king and the people that Amsterdam, Wesel, and Deventer had taken arms and were even then organising forces to raise the siege of Zion.

This divine intelligence diffused the greatest joy through the city. The king received Helversum with open arms, took him into his palace, and entrusted him with enormous sums and valuables to aid in purchasing assistance; while, by his advice, he sent two prophets Johann von Kemper and Johann von Geelan, to compile the conversion of the powerful city of Amsterdam. Helversum took the money, and that same night returned to the camp of the bishop, but not until he had posted up in all the public places a proclamation calling on the people to abandon the imposter, Jan Bockhold.

This proclamation had a fatal influence upon the cause of Johannes. It at once overthrew the prestige of his inspired mission, which gave him such extraordinary ascendency over the mass of the people. Those who yet possessed the least particle of common sense, having their eyes thus opened, saw at once the enormity of the delusion under which they had hitherto been labouring, and every day some new conspiracy for the admission of the emissaries of the besieger was detected by the officers of the king; but, although a majority of the citizens were thus detached from his cause, a strong party still adhered to him—strong in their superstition, their zeal, and their resentments. The more violent fanatics still believed in him. By their support he was yet enabled to control the populace, and by the terrors of his ruthless vengeance he yet contrived to maintain his despotic sway in the imperial city.

XXV.—THE ASSIGNATION.

Franz still held his commission in the Guards; and although his hatred of the king had undergone no abatement, he continued to discharge his duties with fidelity. Perhaps the very perils in which the king was placed, rendered him the more watchful and devoted. On the other hand, the king recognized and rewarded his zeal by showing him further marks of favour, and admitting him constantly to the private circles of the court. This habitual intimacy with the king's family threw him into frequent intercourse with the beautiful Gertrude. Openly they dared not overstep the ceremonious forms of the court. But Franz could not forget the sleeping whisper of his name; and Gertrude, on her side, wearied of the fractional attention which she shared with thirteen rivals, made no effort to conceal the desire she felt to avail herself of the right of divorce, which the new Church liberally accorded to all its members. It was clear to Franz that she longed to abandon her present position, and to seek happiness in an humble destiny, of which he was chosen to be the minister. He saw this, and shrank from it; but circumstances conspired to keep him within her toils.

While the streets echoed with the moans of starving wretches, all was luxury and gorgeousness at the palace. The wail of famishing thousands penetrated not into the halls where Johannes endeavoured to bury his terrors in revelry and dissipation.

One night the carouse had been more gay than usual. The dance had already ceased from excess of enjoyment; and the king sat apart with Elise, pouring out incoherent vows which made her cheek burn, and her eyes flash with triumph. Franz, fatigued with pleasures in which his heart had no participation, leaned against a pillar near an open window. As he stood here musing, a soft hand clasped his, and left in his grasp a piece of paper tightly folded together. He turned quickly round, and at the instant Queen Gertrude passed rapidly to the supper-room, leaning on the arm of her partner. Franz hastily went out, and by the light of the great lamp over the entrance-gate of the palace he read these words:—"The first hour after midnight...the first door on the left in the great gallery."

Confounded, and hardly capable of calculating consequences, he hurried home. Klara was sitting by her lamp spinning, and weary of watching. He fancied she had been weeping; but there was no reproach upon her lips or in her eye. She merely wondered why he was so late.

"The festival lasted longer than usual," said Franz, as he arranged the waving plumes of his velvet cap in a manner which at once betrayed excitement and embarrassment.

Klara lighted a lamp, and offered it to him to light him to his room.

"Indeed," he continued, "It is not over yet, and I must return. I merely came home to tell you so, that you might not waste the night in watching."

"Surely this is not the time for your round?" inquired Klara, anxiously.

"Every thing is in confusion," said Franz; "I really must return."

She took his hand and looked at him earnestly, then with a sigh turned away, and her little hand released him from her hold.

"Beware!" she said, with a voice so tremulous that he could scarcely hear the word.

"You are dreaming, dear Klara. Go to bed, and sleep soundly," he answered, stooping to kiss her brow, a custom which he had latterly introduced. But Klara drew back, and said gently but mournfully,—

"Good-night, Franz."

"You are a little fool, dear Klara," he cried, as, assuming an air of business, he left the house.

Impatience and curiosity hastened his steps to the palace. He did not suffer himself to speculate upon the mysterious summons he had received, nor did he allow himself to feel quite certain by what hand it had been conveyed. He only regarded it as the opening of some strange adventure, which excited all the dormant romance of his daring spirit. When he reached the palace the festival was over, and the revellers were about to seek their several apartments. The officers of the household, the ladies in waiting, and the queens had already retired to their respective suites of rooms. The king had returned to his private apartments. Franz gave the customary orders to the sentries, and then took his place in the corridor leading to the king's apartments, which was upon the gallery mentioned in his note. He paced the gallery wrapped up in his watch-cloak, sometimes speaking to the Trabants who sat at each side of the arched doorway leading to the royal antechamber. As the hour drew nigh he began to feel anxious and uneasy.

Suddenly a door on the right hand opened, and a flare of light flashed into the corridor. It came from a side passage opening by that door into the great gallery. A light step was heard, and a woman appeared attired in white robes, such as the queens had worn at the festival. She advanced slowly along the corridor. Franz knew her but too well. It was Elise!

"Elise!" he exclaimed.

The queen started, and grew as pale as death, and the lamp trembled in her hand. But suddenly recovering her haughty and commanding mien, and bending her head slightly, with wonderful self-composure she said,—

"How, Colonel Kippenbrock—how came you here at this hour?"

"Your majesty should remember," said Franz, bitterly, bowing at the same time with sarcastic ceremony, "that my duty commands me to watch over the safety of the king."

Elise looked at him for a moment, and their eyes met. With a low, faint sigh, she raised her white hand to her brow, and murmuring in a scarcely audible voice,—

"I wish you a peaceful watch, Colonel," she turned towards the king's apartments.

The Trabants drew back the curtain to let her enter. By the light within, Franz saw Johannes rising from his writing-desk, and seizing her hand with a lover's eagerness. He saw yet more. Elise seated herself by the king's side on a heap of cushions, and while with one hand he continued to write, the other played with her hair until she pressed it to her lips. Fortunately, this galling sight continued but a moment. The curtain was hastily drawn over the doorway by the Trabants, who quietly resumed their places in large easy chairs by the door.

Franz paced the gallery with agitated steps. All his hatred for the king, all his desire for revenge, was aroused with tenfold fury. He thought of Taiskoschirer's nightly visit, and he almost regretted he had withstood the temptations of the demon. At that moment a door opened on the left hand, discovering a passage corresponding with that from whence Elise had issued. A faint gleam of light shone from the farther end from a half-opened door. This was the signal. Franz stepped lightly along the passage and through the half-opened door. It closed upon him as he entered. Gertrude stood before him, and by her side the tempter Taiskoschirer.

What took place at that interview tested the courage and honor of Franz severely, but his conscience triumphed over temptation. In vain the queen and her evil adviser urged the means, which lay securely before them, of relieving themselves of the presence of the king. His own passions, rendered more turbulent than ever by the scene he had previously witnessed, worked fiercely upon him; but he withstood the suggestions of vengeance, and placing his final resolution clearly and firmly before the queen, he left her to the bad counsels of the fiend, who was now goading her on to an act of sanguinary violence. The next morning, calmed and purified by the ordeal through which he had passed, he stood as usual in the king's anteroom awaiting his orders for the day.

The first person who craved audience was Kreckling, the provost of the city, a ferocious zealot, and a worthy disciple of Johannes. He was followed by his guard of mercenaries, in whose custody Franz perceived the two pages of the prince-bishop, who had for so many months endured captivity in the household of the king.

"What crime can these poor children have committed?" inquired Franz.

"I caught them on the outworks," replied Kreckling; "they were about to flee to the camp of the priest of Baal. Colonel, announce my name to the king."

"We were so hungry!" cried the poor children.

"My lord-provost," said Franz, "you can well pass it over in silence. If you denounce the children to the king, you send them to the block. I will not bring their blood upon my soul."

Kreckling scowled at the colonel, and without reply entered the royal bed-room. In the next moment he called his men to bring the boys before the king. There was much confused and loud speaking of angry voices.

"They shall die!" exclaimed the deep and terrible voice of the king.

The children wept and and prayed for pardon in piercing accents of terror.

"Johannes," cried an imploring voice, which Franz gratefully recognized as that of Elise, "Johannes, for my sake—for our love—I implore you to pardon them!"

"Silence!" roared Johannes.

"No, I will not be silent. Am I not privileged to ask a boon at your hands? Do not stain with the innocent blood of children those hands which have so lately clasped mine in fondness and tender emotion. I beseech you pardon them; it would be a great crime—a horrible sacrifice—a murder. Oh, God, if you take their young lives, how! could I again endure the sacrilegious touch of those clotted fingers!"

A sharp and thrilling scream of agony was the only answer. Franz rushed into the room, impelled by an irresistible impulse.

The deed of blood was done. The victims lay upon the floor, writhing in the throes of death.

The king coldly wiped the blood from his sword, with a look of fixed and unrelenting vengeance in his face. Elise still knelt at his feet.—Suddenly she sprang up. Abhorring the cruelty of her husband, and infuriated by his rejection of her petition, the proud woman cast upon him a look of mortal hatred and scorn.

"I do not believe," she said, slowly, "that Heaven approves the misery you are inflicting on these deluded people. I believe that God will punish thee in this life and the next. My soul loathes your blood-guiltiness. Nothing can stay thy thirst for human life, which you value not,—thy contempt for mercy, of which you know not the holy sweetness,—thy heartless indifference to the love and devotion which a credulous faith has brought to thy feet. Never again will I submit to thy hateful presence—never—never? I leave thee; the Church that has snared me to thy embraces shall divorce and liberate me!"

Kreckling, hardened as he was, trembled for the daring woman, and turned pale with dread. The king cast upon Elise one sidelong glance, full of demoniac rage.

"I will answer thee before the congregation," he said. "Divorce! Yes, thou shalt be divorced!" Then turning to Franz, he continued—"Command the attendance of my consorts, and of my whole court and household, in the market-place. You, Colonel Kippenbrock, with your guards, await me with them there."

XXVII.—THE CROWNING SACRIFICE.

The congregation of the faithful, now wofully diminished by famine and pestilence, were assembled in the market-place. A fearful silence brooded over the multitude. It was suddenly broken by the blast of a distant trumpet. Then nearer and louder, the solemn notes of the Dead March pealed through the morning air. Hanslein, the third duke, with his regiment of mercenaries, marched into the place, and formed on three sides of a hollow square under the towers of St. Lambert, whose rich carvings and painted windows were brightly illuminated by the rising sun.

The procession appeared. The band, which still played the Dead March, was followed by Franz at the head of his troop of Trabants. Then came the king attended by the provost. He led the ill-fated queen Elise. She was pale with terror; her step tottered as she advanced; her form was scarcely veiled by the white folds of her night dress; her feet were bare; and her long black hair streamed in disorder over her shoulders.—The queen Gertrude, her cheek blanched, and her once haughty brow contracted by agony and fear, followed her unhappy rival. The other wives of the king, all equally appalled, accompanied her. A troop of Trabants closed the procession.

The king stood in the centre of the square. He signed to the provost to retire. The thirteen wives of the king formed a circle round him and Elise.

"Kneel, ye pure ones!" shouted the king. The women fell to the earth. A shudder ran through the crowd. It was plain, as if the purpose of the executioner had been announced, that a deed of violence was about to be consummated.

The space round Johannes was clear. The wretched wives of the fanatic formed a circle, prostrate upon the ground, their heads buried in their hands with an aspect of stricken misery. The suppressed sob, the stifled groan, the cry of unavailing pity, were felt like a heavy weight in the atmosphere. Even the soldiers, chilled by suffering and privation, stern from the cold-blooded duties to which they had become habituated, were conscious of that nervous sickness which in the face of extreme cruelty will sometimes steal upon the strongest frame.

Elise was crouched at the feet of the king. Her fingers with convulsive energy were twisted in his robes; her face at one moment was turned upwards towards him with an imploring ghastly expression of mortal terror, and then fell in utter helplessness upon her own outstretched arms. The king gazed around him for a moment; a maniac frenzy flashed in his eyes; he had disengaged his hands from the clambering grasp of his victim, and tossing them abroad in the air, seemed to invoke the attention of the audience. His lips moved, but no words followed. The whiteness of his face betrayed the horrible passions that agitated him. There was a gasping effort to speak, but the power of utterance was choked by rage. Looking round and round, as if it were for the applause of the spectators, he suddenly stood erect—a naked sword flashed in the sunlight—a piercing shriek rang through the air—and then a palpable shudder shook the terrified congregation. It was the work of an instant, and the body of the doomed Elise fell in a heap upon the ground, the bleeding head tumbling at the feet of the slayer.

Franz hardly saw what had happened, but he inferred it from the aspect of fear which filled the faces of those about him, and from the movement which supervened upon the act of murder. Maddened beyond all power of control by atrocity so barbarous, committed on the person of the woman he had once passionately loved, he tore his sword from the scabbard and rushed towards the king. But the motion had been observed by one who stood close to him, and a grasp of iron drew him back, while a low powerful voice whispered, "Madman! not now!"

While this was going forward, the king turned to the congregation, and resuming his usual ferocious calmness exclaimed, "The doom was just. The deceased queen committed blasphemy—she blasphemed the Holy Spirit incarnated in the person of her king and consort. Her doom was pronounced by a voice from Heaven, and executed by the hand of Heaven's minister. Join with me, brethren, in chanting the Hallelujah!"

The trembling women rose from their knees, and gathering confusedly round the king, made a fearful discord of the sacred song. Johannes whirled Queen Gertrude round and round in a frantic movement of dancing exultation, and the whole congregation followed his example, till the market-place exhibited a scene of delirious riot.

After a short lapse of time an order was issued for the Trabants to form. There was a call for the colonel. They looked for him in vain. He was already gone.

[To be Concluded.]

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