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THE SILENT MAID

by

FREDERIC · W PANGBORN

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The Silent Maid

BEING THE STORY OF STILLE MÆGTH, HER STRANGE BEWITCHMENT AND HER WONDROUS SONG, AND HOW SHE CAME TO LOVE A MORTAL MAN

BY

FREDERIC WERDEN PANGBORN

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THE SILENT MAID

CHAPTER I

HOW THE SILENT MAID CAME INTO THE STORY

IN the cool, gray twilight of mid-summer evening, that hour of brief calm which frequently comes upon the mountain lands between the setting of the sun and the rising of the night winds, the Baron von Rabenhörst sat at ease before the window of his favour-

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tation out upon the domain that was his own. Far as the eye could view the prospect, even to the uttermost summits of the distant ranges that marked the limits of his possessions, there was nothing upon which another might tread his foot, save by the grace of Rabenhörst, nothing upon which he could not bravely lay his hand and proudly say "'tis mine." The castle in which he dwelt and the lands about it, these, in sooth, had been so long the ancestral home of his family, that there was no certitude even as to the precise period at which they had their beginning, and tradition had long added its charm to the more or less accurate history by which the story of their years had grown.

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He, of course, knew the boundaries of the domain that had been his father's grandfather's, for that was not ancient history as the Rabenhörsts cited history, and could easily tell what new lands had been added with the coming of each succeeding generation that followed; but back of that the records failed and merged themselves into a maze of folk-tales and legends, not unmixed at certain points with an interesting dash of the supernatural. But this only pleased the Baron, and increased his sense of pride. In truth, a family that had none of these things, and could only trace itself back to a definite point, was one with which he cared to have no dealings, unless it were to make war upon it, and drive

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it out and seize its lands to add them to his own. Such had always been the practice of the Barons Rabenhörst, down to his own time, during which he had succeeded in spreading the limits of his princedom, until all that was visible from the ancient castle's watch-tower owed allegiance to him.

Long ago, ages back, in fact, as the peasants measure time, the first Raben-hörst, having won his rights as usurper of the mountain upon whose summit the castle subsequently raised its impreg-nable walls, had said that, not until the Sun could rise and set upon the Rabenhörsts alone should his descend-ants sheathe the sword and cultivate the arts of peace. Whether this story be true or not is of little moment. Each

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successor had believed it, and each in his turn had done his best to carry out the plan, until, little by little, and at what fearful cost of blood and suffering no man knew, — for they kept no record of such things, — Roderich, the last of the line, found himself, in middle life, the undisputed possessor of "the limits of the rising and the setting of the Sun." The prophecy of the first Rabenhörst had been fulfilled; and, weary of war and heartsick in his loneliness, — for the struggle, as he found it, had been so continuously severe that he had no time for anything else, — he thankfully laid aside his battle-axe and spear and sword, and said that he would rest.

It would be difficult, in this age, to

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find a monarch whose right to rule would be as clear as that of such a man as he. Such allegiance as he owed his sovereign, he loyally gave; but, beyond an occasional call to arms, it was little the monarch asked of him, and usually this was liberally paid for; and, again, he knew he was himself a man of almost equal power, and one not likely to be interfered with. Monarchy, in his time, was more dependent on its princes than now, and seldom opposed them if they were strong. And Rabenhörst was strong. So he cared little for his sovereign, and ruled his lands with undisputed sway. Naturally, he was very proud, and, albeit a kindly and gentle-mannered person, was a man who demanded strict obedience and positive

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respect, who brooked no undue familiarity, even from his equals in title, and signed his letters "Roderich," as though he were a king.

The years that followed upon his withdrawal from incessant conflict, he spent in strengthening his position, that nothing which the Rabenhörsts had gained might be lost. For he knew well that the friends of such a man as himself were few, and that nothing would satisfy certain others better than to strip him of the results of the centuries of conquests which were now become a trust in his unaided individual hand. So he kept his subjects ever drilled in the arts of war as well as in the arts of peace, reforti-

fied his castle, dug new moats, built

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watch-towers at proper points in the mountains, and, in every way he could devise, brought his petty kingdom to a state of vigour and prosperity. Being a wise man, as well as a brave soldier, he also cultivated his people, and taught them, by fair dealing and much kindness, that their interests were safest with him. He was a generous taskmaster and just, kind to women and tender with little children, and withal charitable beyond question for a man of his time. So the peasants blessed him, and called him good, and no man who dwelt under his protection wished him ill. And yet he grew sad and lonely, with each advancing year that brought him added peace and comfort, for he

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had no wife or child to bear him company in his ancestral home.

At times, he would absent himself and travel into the more thickly populated haunts of men, there seeking such diversions as society gives; but he always returned less happy than before. He had seen so much, during his numerous campaigns, and had mingled so frequently with men of military ways and so little with civilians, that the social life of the world did not charm him, and he longed for something more real, more sincere, more heart-compelling. Again, he was no longer young, and the pleasures which satisfy youth could not interest him. What he yearned for was something to love, and that should love him. This alone, he knew, would

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bring him contentment. He could have married at any time, — for it is not difficult for a prince to secure a princess from the ranks of women, — but every time he tested the suggestion, he keenly perceived that it was not himself, but what he had, that won the lady's heart. He wanted a wife — this he frankly confessed to himself at all times — and he needed an heir who should succeed him, but he wanted more to love and be loved. So he delayed marriage, always in the hope that chance would yet send him his heart's desire. And the people wondered why he took no woman to wife, and sometimes shook their heads solemnly, and said it was not good their master should thus dwell in solitude, and that he give them no son to govern and

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protect them when he should be gone; and aged Godgifu, who had lived in the castle so many years she could not count them, and who was his nurse when he was a child, would sometimes mildly chide him for his omission of duty to the family, and ask him why it was he brought no mistress to the castellany, and raised no child that should extend his name.

At such times as this, he would smile upon the old nurse sadly, and bid her come and sit beside him and tell him of his mother and her life, — for Rabenhörst had never seen her, — and ask what manner of woman she was, and was she happy with his father, and did the people love and honour her, and what sort of a life they all led under

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her rule, until, having started the old woman upon her favourite theme, she would become garrulous and forget to press him on the main point. So nothing ever came of the suggestions made by Godgifu, and she had to keep her worries to herself. But she never ceased to pray for her master, and to ask the good God to bring him a wife and son. And the Baron pursued his lonely life as before, and grew more sad and restless every year.

The Baron von Rabenhörst had lived beyond the fiftieth year of life before completing the task of his ancestors, and it was about ten years before the opening of the story that he first saw the Silent Maid. Whether it was decreed by fate that he should meet her, or a

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mere accident, or the result of old prophecy, no one ever could tell; though Godgifu always said it was the prophecy, and there were other very old people among the peasants who held the same view, some of whom said it was the will of the good God that it should end that way, while others insisted that a proper exercise of wisdom on the Baron's part would have made his misfortunes impossible. "For," said they, "had he chosen a suitable wife when he should, the maid could not have won his heart and brought misfortune on his later years." No one had ever had the courage to speak to him, which was not strange, and even Godgifu herself deserved no censure, although she knew the prophecy, for she had no knowledge of the Baron's

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fondness for the maid until it was too late to warn him. After that, a protest even from her would have been equivalent to uttering her own death-warrant, for the Baron was not a man to be crossed. But Rabenhörst knew of the prophecy, for he had it long before from his father. It held no terrors for him, however, since it was not in his nature or training to dread anything, and he even made light of it, and deemed it nothing better than an old wife's tale. Forty years of life in the grim presence of siege and battle, and a habit of absolute self-reliance that was part of his ancestral heritage, had rendered him impatient of all tradition that smacked of superstition.

And this was the prophecy handed

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down by word of mouth among the people of the castellany of the Barons von Rabenhörst, made, it was said, in the dead of night, by a mad woman, whom the first Rabenhörst had stolen captive, from a conquered neighbouring lord, and who shrieked it from the parapets of the castle, while her captor lay dying in the tower:

"Tyrant Lord of Rabenhörst,
By thy crimes forever curst:—
Keep thy castles; keep thy lands;
Keep thy conquered servile bands;
Keep thy treasures; keep thy gold;
Keep the price of honour sold;
Keep thy gains, nor heed the woes
Wrought upon thy self-made foes.
All the plunderings of the sword
Well befit a tyrant lord.
Yet moor and mountain, field and flood
Still allegiance owe to God;

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Draw their warmth from Heaven above,
Home of light and peace and love.
Subject to His will alone,
Nature knows no despot's throne,
Fears no tyrant, loves no king,
Gives to man no reckoning.
Tyrant Lord of Rabenhörst,
In thy heart forever curst —
Man of avarice and hate,
Keep thy gains, and face thy fate.
Love shall never come to thee,
Through the years that onward flee.
Hands with murder gory red
Ill prepare the marriage-bed.
Tyrant Lord of Rabenhörst,
Be thy loves forever curst.
Love is ne'er begot of strife.
Seek no maiden bride to wife.
Heed the warning, while you may —
God and Nature speak — obey!"

Who this mad woman was, not even the most shrewd of the wisest old grandams had ever assumed to positively say.

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But a very ancient legend, handed down from a period so remote that none might doubt its genuineness, clearly stated that she had been the wife of a minor baron, who loved her very dearly; and that this minor baron, having been mortally wounded in the defence of his estate, had warned his slayer, the first of the Rabenhörsts, against certain fearful consequences that would ensue if he made her captive, and, with his dying words, had urged him to set her free that she might " return to her people and mingle no more with mortal men." This, the legend said, was the precise form of the request; and out of the suggestion thus made, the natural inference was that the woman had her origin somewhere apart from men, and was, so the story ran, a

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daughter of immortals. Some believed her to have been a stray child of the Undines, whose love for her husband had kept her long among the mortals; but others, reading the prophecy as the utterance of an evil mind, said this could scarcely be correct, since the Undines were not cruel, and gave it as their opinion that it was more probable she claimed sisterhood with the Erl-folk or other sprites of the forests, many of whom were known to be vindictive, and that perhaps her hatred of the first Rabenhörst was due to his killing of her beloved lord. "For," said they, "it is well-known that, when an Erl-sprite loves a mortal, she never loves but once, and loves no other human thing. Probably this sprite chose her love, and was happy

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with him, for the people of the forests never love, save freely, and cannot be subdued, like the maidens of our mortal world, by violence or cajolery, and always hate any who try to coerce or enslave them, and, once wronged, will strive to place a curse upon those whom they hate."

So it was generally admitted that the curse placed upon the house of Rabenhörst by the mad woman came not from mortal source, and was therefore especially a thing to be heeded. Roderich von Rabenhörst cared nothing for it, viewing it as silly and purely fanciful, but his ancestors had always respected and feared it wholesomely. And thus it had come to pass that no Rabenhörst, from the earliest times, had ever dared

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to wed a maid, but each in his turn had wooed, or bought, or captured his wife — as occasion best favoured — from among the ranks of women previously married to other men, and none of them, within the memory of the oldest romance that chronicled the family history, had ever married for love. Should such an event transpire, at any time, the gossips always said, there was good reason to believe it would be followed by calamity and the immediate extinction of the family.

Ten years before the coming of the day when the sun should rise and set on Rabenhörst alone, the Baron Roderich, returning from a solitary journey through the forests, found himself, at

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nightfall, in a densely wooded glen too far from his castle to admit of his arrival there before the darkness should enfold him. He was weary and hungry, and saw little prospect of getting food or shelter. The lack of shelter did not annoy him, — he was too hardy for that, — but the want of nourishment did, for he was a lusty man and proud of a vigorous appetite. There was yet light enough to see near-by objects well. The glen seemed cosy, and a good place in which to pass the night, and there was water in a brook that babbled through the forests, and ample grazing for his horse; so he dismounted, turned the creature loose to feed, and, taking with him a light huntsman's bow and some arrows, strolled slowly onward, hoping

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to secure some belated bird or burrower that might furnish him a meal.

For some time he continued his walk, following the trend of the brook, and wishing he had the means of catching a fish, — for there were many there, — occasionally turning upward toward the mountain, as he pursued his quest, or pressing into the thicker underbrush that lined the waterway at intervals, but nothing that would serve could he discover. An hour spent in this manner added to his weariness and hunger, and did not tend to improve his naturally imperious temper. He could hear his horse moving about and evidently enjoying his evening repast, and this, too, added to his sense of appetite and made the matter worse. Barring the sounds

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made by the horse and the rustling of his own movements, there were no others. All was silence. There was not even the usual fluttering of the leaves upon the trees, for there was as yet no wind. He began to feel lonely, accustomed though he was to being alone, and the feeling wore upon his nerves, and made him both sad and irritable. It would soon be dark, and then he could expect nothing. So he retraced his steps, following the sounds made by the horse, and prepared to endure the coming night in patience.

Suddenly the silence, that lay like the calm of death upon the glen, was broken by a voice, and the man paused spellbound where he stood. It seemed a human voice that cut upon the stillness of

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the falling night, and yet again it scarcely sounded like the voice of ordinary mortal, its utterance was so weird, its words — if words they were — so strangely vague and elf-like. The voice was scarcely that of one who spoke, but rather that of one who sang, and yet it was not music such as he often heard that smote upon his ear, but something strangely different. Low at first, now shrilly rising to a strength and volume that seemed to load the higher air above with floods of melody, then gradually falling away into faintest whisperings, that sobbed and quivered like the notes of a dying bird, the music came to him, as he stood there listening, entranced, bewildered, wondering, not daring to move lest he lose one note that he would catch; and,

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as it rose and fell again and yet again upon the night, and he began to grow familiar with the now repeated phrasings of the melody, he seemed to realise in the voice that spoke to him thus strangely, the music of a child, and still he was not certain, so eerily sense-confusing was the song.

"La-la, La-la, La-li-o:
Hither come and thither go.
Swing your waving branches high,
Dream-tree, growing in the sky.
Eaglets, in your mountain nest,
Hide your heads on mother's breast.
Winds and waters pass you by;
Fire and tempest come not nigh.
La-la, La-la, La-li-o:
Hither come and thither go.

"La-la, La-la, La-li-o:
Hither come and thither go

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Hear the Elf-king's trumpet ring:
Answer echo; answer king.
La-la, La-la, who shall tell
Where the Erl-men's daughters dwell?
Glen and forest, far and free,
Answer to their melody.
La-la, La-la, La-li-o:
Hither come and thither go.

"La-la, La-la, La-li-o:
Hither come and thither go.
Cloudlets, floating in the air,
Ever soaring, white and fair,
Take me up, and let me be,
Sister-friends, as one of ye.
Where do all the cloudlets go?
Sister-spirits, let me know.
La-la, La-la, La-li-o:
Hither come and thither go.

"La-la, La-la, La-li-o:
Hither come and thither go.
Spirits of the dell below,
Tell me how the flowers grow.

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Wreathe me o'er with roses rare,
Twine your lilies in my hair,
Soft on dewy violets prest,
Let me lie and be at rest.
La-la, La-la, La-li-o:
Hither come and thither go."

"Marvellous! Marvellous!" he softly muttered to himself. "Child or spirit, which can it be that sings so strangely in a place like this? If it be indeed a spirit, one might gladly wish to dwell apart with such as this, and be a man no more. The music satisfies, although I understand it not at all. It soothes, rests, comforts, charms. And yet I have, in my time, heard many goodly singers, said by men to be the best and greatest in the world. But none of them could sing like this. If the singer be a child, what joy to possess it. Almost would I

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surrender half my wealth and lands to have a child like that. Ha!—"

The song suddenly ceased. There was a pause. Then followed an outburst of laughter, clear, merry, and jovial, the hearty, happy laughter of a care-unknowing child. It was so contagious that the Baron gave way to its inspiration, and began to laugh himself.

"It is a child," he said. "What joy to possess a child like that! What happiness to feel the influence of its presence; to hear it sing, and laugh, and have it always with one. Old Godgifu is right. I should have married, long ago, and had a child to cheer me in my lonely home. But yet," he murmured, after a pause, "who knows? Would my child be like this one? Have any of my line

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been like to this? I know that I was not. A diet of wars and constant strivings to master a world that is hardly worth the having when one gets it, makes no happy childhood. Godgifu may be right, but I doubt it. Merriment and lightsomeness of heart are not the heritage of the Rabenhörsts. I will see this child. Perhaps I may coax its parents to let me have it. These peasants are not difficult to deal with. Of course I shall have trouble with their lord, if I carry them and their child to my abode, but" — and the grim look of the warrior darkened his face an instant — "that is nothing. One small war more or less is naught with us."

Thereupon he strode rapidly in the direction whence had come the sounds,

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and, passing quickly through a group of furze that screened a level bed of moss not far away, he came upon the object of his desire.

The child, for it was a child, indeed, was sitting upon the moss, surrounded by garlands of wild growths, which she appeared to have just discarded, and, with folded hands placidly laid upon her lap, was gazing vacantly into the distance like one in a trance. She did not seem to notice the approach of the man, and gave no heed to him at all, as he drew close and stood before her, not even turning her eyes toward him. For several minutes the man and the maid remained thus face to face, the one intent with interest, the other ap-

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parently oblivious to any change in the situation.

As the Baron von Rabenhörst studied the child, he noted that her face was no unfit companion to her voice. In its way it was equally beautiful, and the lithe and graceful body that sat erect upon the turf, that, too, he saw was good, and gave promise of a superbly gracious beauty, by and by. After a time she seemed to be aware of his presence, and looked him fair in the face. Her expression was calm and betokened no sense of alarm or surprise, but rather a quiet friendliness that seemed to say: "I see you. Be at ease;" and then he noticed that the eyes that gazed into his were of a marvellous size and hue, and that there was a some-

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thing in them that did not give the impression of childhood he would expect to find in one so young, but spoke of mysteries unfathomed save by those of riper years.

At length he addressed her, speaking as men usually do to children, asking her name, her age, her father's name, and such things, but to each question her answer was the same:

"Stille-Mægth."

Several times, and with all the gentleness of a man naturally kind to children, he essayed to make her talk, — for it was presumable she could talk if she wanted to do so, — but without success. No matter what he asked, no matter what his suggestion, the reply was always:

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"Stille-Mægth."

This, and nothing more.

"Surely, little one," said he, "thou'rt not afraid to speak with me. I am the Baron von Rabenhörst, owner of the mountains and the valleys and all the lands that lie beyond these hills. Everybody knows of me, and children count me always a friend — whatever men may say to the contrary," he added under his breath. "May I not become thy friend, too? Wilt thou not sing for me again? 'Tis very pleasing to hear thee sing. Wilt thou sing for me again, little one?"

She looked him frankly in the eyes, and seemed to understand, but her words were as before:

"Stille-Mægth."

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He came close to her, and threw himself beside her on the greensward, gently took her hand in his and smiled at her. Her reply was an answering smile.

"Little one," said he, "dost know it is not often a rough old soldier needs must plead thus hardly for the favour of a simple maid? I am about to kiss thee. May I?"

The delicate lips of the beautiful child bloomed with a winsome smile, the trusting smile of absolute innocence that only babes and little children wear, and formed themselves in readiness, as the Baron lowered his face to kiss her, and, at the moment of their touching, softly murmured:

"Stille-Mægth."

"This is a mystery, indeed," said he,

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as he smiled upon the child, and stroked her hand with his big rough fingers, fingers better fitted, he thought, to grasp a spear than hold so frail a thing as seemed this tiny hand. "A mystery, indeed. She is fearless, and has no dread of me. She smiles upon me as though she understood my every word. She lets me hold her hand, she is willing to kiss me. She sings like an angel, or a wild-wood fairy. She can speak, and speak a language familiar to me. She plainly is no mute. And yet, all she can seem to say is just these two short words, which she speaks as one. 'Silent-Maid.' If that be her name I must confess it seems a goodly fit. And yet she is not silent, for I have heard her sing. Whatever be her station or condition, I feel that

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I must have her. Already my heart goes out to her as never to any other I have seen. It is not the common love of man for maid that moves me thus, for she is but a child. In that respect the maid is not for me. But yet I love her already to that degree I'd wage untiring war upon the man who sought to take her from me. Ah, God! to think that I should find, at last, a creature I can love and that seems to be fond of me, — in a strange way, it is true, but with evident sincerity. Would'st thou like to go with me, far away, to live in the mountains," he said, smiling encouragingly upon the child, "and become my little maid, and have me love thee always?"

She gently stroked his beard with her disengaged hand, much as one might

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caress a favourite dog, and gave the same answer as before:

"Stille-Mægth."

There was no one present but themselves, and it seemed strange to Rabenhörst that this should be so. "Surely," said he, "this child must have some one to care for her. No child could live in a place like this. There is not even a cave in which one might find shelter from the rain. Possibly she has strayed from her home. I would not steal her from father or mother. But I cannot leave her here to pass the night. I will carry her down to my resting-place, and, in the morning, will seek her father and arrange to have him come with his family to my domain. Come, little one," he said aloud, "we cannot remain here all

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night. Let us go down the glen to my horse. See! Thus I take thee in my big strong arms, that have had no child to love ere this, and bear thee next my heart. May I always wear thee so?"

He stooped and tenderly lifted the child. She made no resistance, and, as he folded her close to his breast, she threw her arms about his neck, and drew his face to hers. He turned his head and softly kissed her cheek, and she nestled in his embrace contentedly, as he started off, filled with an emotion so intense that a tear stood clear and bright upon his face, — the first he remembered ever to have shed.

"Little one," said he, "I love thee. Be my child."

But the maiden only answered:

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"Stille-Mægth."

And quickly fell asleep.

It was of this night, ten years before, that the Baron von Rabenhörst was thinking, in the cool gray twilight of midsummer evening, as he sat at ease before the window of his favourite apartment, and gazed, in deep meditation, out upon the domain that was his own. For the morrow was to be his wedding-day, and the Silent Maid his bride.

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CHAPTER II

HOW THE BARON VON RABENHORST STOLE THE CHILD

WITH the sleeping child tenderly clasped to his breast, Roderich von Rabenhörst carefully picked his way toward the opening in the glen where his horse was peacefully grazing, and softly called the animal. It raised its head, neighed once faintly, as though it, too, recognised the rights of the little slumberer in its master's arms, and came quickly.

"So, so, gently, Graf," said he. "We have a new companion for the night,

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and one thou must bear softly on the morrow to our home. In truth, thou'lt need to curb thy mettle much, with such a tender charge, and cease to think of soldier ways, until the journey's end."

He patted the beast with his disengaged hand, and was about to lift himself with his burden to the saddle, when an aged woman suddenly rushed upon him from the woods, and made attempt to seize the child. He restrained her firmly, but without violence, and forced her back a step before he spoke to her.

"Gently, little mother, gently," said he. "Not so fast. But have no fear. I would not harm thee or the child. What she is to thee, I know not, but 'tis plain she is not of thy bearing. Too old art thou to mother one so young, and

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much I doubt she is of kindred stock with thee. Flowers so rare bloom not on such a tree. But tell me of the child, that I may know her keepers, and seek them on the morrow to make dealing with them. For it is my intent to take her with me to my home."

An instant the aged creature made motion, as though she would again attempt to take the child, but a glance from the Baron and an impatient gesture checked her. She then fell upon her knees and began to moan and cry piteously, clasping her hands in an attitude of prayer to him, and was plainly in great distress; but she spoke no words. The Baron began to grow angry, and lost something of his self-control.

"Saints and devils!" he said, "is this

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one also dumb? Do the people of this country have no tongues for speech? 'Tis true the child can sing, — she therefore is not mute, — but," he laughed grimly at the suggestion, " this creature could not smite the air with music. That were impossible. She can cry; she can moan; and, like the child, she seems to understand me. Ergo, she must be able to talk. Come, good mother," he continued, " tell me at once. Who is this child, and what is she to thee? If thou hast claim upon her, speak it, and great benefit will I give thee. Thou dost not know me. I am Rabenhörst. That name should satisfy thee that I am a man with whom it were not wise to trifle. Say thy say, and say it quickly. It were best, both for thee and the child. If thou

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tellest what is true, thy friend am I from this hour on; lie to me, and no power can save thee. Speak!"

The woman appeared to comprehend the intent of his words, for, with every sentence, she showed, by gestures and expressions, that his meaning was clear to her; but, when he finished, she made no audible reply beyond a renewal of her moans and cries.

"Tush!" said he; "but this is weariness. If thou hast no words to give, at least point the way to those who have, that I may have speech with them, at morn, before I take the child away; for go she shall, of this be well assured. No sign? Then let us end this parley, for the night is on, and rest is needed ere the morrow's faring."

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He quickly mounted his horse, with the child still sleeping on his heart, and was about to ride slowly down the glen to his camping-place, when the old woman suddenly sprang to her feet, uttered a frightful scream, and vanished, or seemed to vanish, in the waters of the brook that ran close by. With the utterance of her cry, a thousand voices seemed to fill the air at once, above, below, and on every side, as though a host of rudely wakened spirits had been startled from their slumbers, each one filled with fear. A moment these clamourings beat upon the night, then ceased, and silence reigned again.

Rabenhörst, although a man of sturdy mould, and one not easily unnerved, was startled by the suddenness of the strange

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outburst of sound, and a sense of doubt, that was somewhat fearsome, though he had no real fear of anything, came upon him. But he quickly recovered, remembering his charge, and spoke to his horse, that stood, a rigid figure, rooted to the spot, and seemed unable to move. The thought flashed through the mind of the man that it was well the animal had not bolted, and he was grateful, as he realised what injury this might cause in such a thickly wooded country. His next act was to look at the child. It slept peacefully, and had not been disturbed.

"Strange," he muttered, as he lightly kissed the rippling hair that lay upon his shoulder. "One would suppose such hideous sounds could rouse the very dead. What was it caused them? Surely

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not that aged crone? And yet mayhap 'twas she. Some of these forest people know the echoes as familiars. Yes; the case is plain. The voices were but echoes of her cry. There is no danger here. 'Tis but a spell of patience till the dawn, and then away. So, good horse."

Thus urging his beast onward in the darkness, he started again, the child held safely in his arm, and was feeling more calm, when a new sound fell upon his keenly sensitive ears, that caused him to rein in and listen. It seemed distant, yet had the quality of an approaching presence he could almost feel, and a sense of uneasiness at the darkness came upon him and made him wish for light that he might see what peril, if peril it were, was drawing near. At first this sound

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was soft and mellow, like the running of a river over stony places; then it became less gentle, and a touch of menace mingled with its lighter tones; and, as it drew yet nearer, and he knew it was coming, he perceived it had grown to the dimensions of the voice of rushing waters, and that danger, real and not fanciful, was upon him.

The brook, that peacefully rippled through the glen, was rising rapidly, — this he knew by its sound, — and was already lapping the feet of his horse, who showed by his restlessness that he was conscious of danger. It would not be long before the waters would become too deep for safety. The darkness was intense now, and haste was impossible; yet hasten he must. Firmly grasping his

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bridle, and reassuring himself of the security of the child, he spoke commandingly to the horse, and urged him on. The gentler expressions of his countenance were gone now, and his thoughts were not of love and peace, as, with firm-set mouth and steady eye, he sat his horse, and gave his mind to this new conflict soon to be waged with nature, and became again the man of battle, ready to face the worst, and fight his fight to victory or death.

The rushing of the torrent now increased with great rapidity, and he was compelled to trace his way upon the higher slopes that edged the valley of the brook; the din of the waters grew and filled the air about with mighty roarings; boulders and broken trees came

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hurtling down the flood and threatened speedy death; but he pressed steadily onward, occasionally encouraging his horse with calming words. New voices now came to him, mingled with the babel of the waters, and whisperings, strange and uncanny, beat upon his ears. There were moanings, too, and cries of spirits in the air, and once he heard a call distinctly uttered from the mountain-top and answered by another in the glen below.

Something seemed to brush against his cheek, and faintly plead with him to abandon the child, telling him he must not take her away, and threatening him with calamity if he did; and then he heard again the moanings of the aged woman, this time answered by a chorus

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of cries and wailings. But these things only made him bitter and more determined than before to keep the maid, who still slept peacefully next his heart, and did not wake. The waters were roaring like a cataract, and rising high up the sides of the hills; but he kept pressing upward, as they rose, and managed to escape the flood. His horse was weary now, and could scarcely struggle on, but he bravely did his best, stumbling and halting in the gloom, and picking his way with care, as opportunity offered. The wind was rising, too, and brought an added danger as it blew down the trees that seemed to be thrown across the way with purposeful design.

In the midst of this confusion of winds and waters, and just as the jaded horse

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had cleared the onrushing of a sudden rising of the stream, a hand was laid upon the arm of the Baron, and a melodious voice, that fell upon his sense, amid the tumult of the night sounds, like a strain of music threading its way amid the thunderings of a cannonade, addressed him. He could make nothing of the presence of the speaker, for the darkness was so profound that only the barest outlines of near-by objects were discernible, and yet he felt no fear at the sudden meeting with this unseen being, so peacefully it spoke. He was not even certain that he could see the figure of the speaker at all, but rather felt than saw; and the touch of its hand upon his arm was so very soft that even this seemed

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doubtful. And the words of the voice were simply these:

"Tyrant Lord of Rabenhörst,
By thy crimes forever curst,
Love shall never come to thee,
Through the years that onward flee.
Hands with murder gory red
Ill prepare the marriage-bed.
Love is ne'er begot of strife.
Seek no maiden bride to wife.
Heed the warning while you may.
God and Nature speak — Obey."

Rabenhörst had not remembered the lines of the mad woman's curse for so many years that he might almost have been said to have forgotten them. But, as they came to him now, it seemed but yesterday that his father had told him the story of which they were a part, and he began to ask himself if there was

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any sense in them, and whether it could be true that a curse, uttered by a crazed creature centuries before, had anything in it that should interest him. He was not certain, as he sat there in the darkness, now that the voice was silent, that it was not his own tongue that spoke the lines, and yet — the tones were not his own; of this he was positive. He could not realise how any one had come near him, for, even in that deep gloom, a person close at hand would be dimly visible. But something had undoubtedly touched his arm; and he had heard the words. Could it have been the child?

He bent low over the face of the girl and laid his ear close to her mouth, intently listening. Her sleep was peaceful, and her breathing light and gentle, and

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the soft, sweet waft that warmed his cheek entranced him and filled him with a sense of calm.

"No, little love," he murmured, tenderly, "it was not thou. The curse of the Rabenhörsts concerns not thee. Sleep on. 'Twas memory, and these accursed noises and the gloom, enough, in sooth, to bring the phantoms of a hundred ages back and set a man of brass romancing."

He kissed her on the brow, and, tightening his rein, spoke to the horse again.

"Up, good boy! Once more, and then a rest. Let us but clear the valley, and wait until the dawn. So!"

The brave beast resumed his tedious ascent in the darkness, but his progress was very slow, for up here on the higher

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ground the undergrowth was close, and the hill was very stony and covered with boulders. He paused, at times, from sheer exhaustion, and his strength was fast giving out, but it would not do to stop yet, for the rising of waters could still be heard below, and safety lay above. So Rabenhörst urged him on. How long this progress lasted, the Baron could not tell, but it seemed it never would end. He was growing weak himself, for the child lay heavy now upon his arm, and realised he could not long hold out. The wailing of the voices in the valley did not cease, and the roarings of the waters made incessant accompaniment to the wild, tumultuous singing of the storm. And still the maiden slept.

It could not last forever. With a pit-

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eous sigh, the noble charger, who had so often borne his master through the thickest of his battles, staggered, made effort to recover, failed, and dropped upon his knees, whinnied once, and died. Even in his death-moment he had not forgotten to spare the man who loved him the danger of a fall. Thus had he been taught to do, in other days, when bearing wounded men; thus had he been trained to do his duty.

Kneeling beside the faithful creature, the Baron touched his head, felt for the pulse-waves in his heart, and, feeling nothing, knew his friend was dead. But it was not a time for musing, and the child was still alive; so, striking out in the darkness, he pursued his way on foot,

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painfully feeling out such path as seemed the safest.

He was far up the mountain now, and out of reach of the waters. He prepared to pause and rest for the night, for he was so weary that longer progress would soon become impossible. The loss of his faithful horse, too, filled him with intense sorrow. He would wait for the sunlight.

He was about to stop, and had already prepared to lay his burden down upon some mossy growth he chanced upon, when he suddenly became aware of another's presence. Something was stealthily creeping toward him in the gloom, but whether man or beast, he could not yet decide. The instincts of the soldier and the huntsman responded at once to

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this new danger, and he turned about and faced the direction of the sound, at the instant drawing a short sword that hung at his side. The child still slept upon his left shoulder, for he had not yet laid her down. And then again he heard the cry that startled him before, the piercing shriek of the aged beldame of the glen, and, after that, the sad, strange wailings of the answering night.

Strung to the uttermost pitch of his mental endurance by the trials of the past hours, and filled with a sense of rage at the repetition of these fearful sounds, he strode at once in the direction of the first shrill cry, and came upon its author. She was moaning and gesturing as before, and seemed, in the gloom, to mock him. She stretched forth her

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hands to seize the child. The suggestion maddened him. With one full sweep of his free right arm, he swung his sword about, and struck the head from her body as she stood.

What happened after this, the Baron von Rabenhörst could never distinctly remember. Immediately the air was filled with shrieks of woe and frightful cries of anguish, and there was an on-rushing as of many winged creatures hurrying toward the spot; the thunderings of the storm increased, the flash of fitful lightning was added to the terrors of the night; crashing bolts descended upon the mountain; winds tore up great trees and cast them in the air; and, underneath the chorus of these myriad

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midnight cries, the diapason of the waters moaned.

With the child close clasped to his now rapidly beating heart, and his dripping sword ready in his hand, he rushed sternly onward along the mountainside, sometimes with comparative ease, for the undergrowth was less than lower down, again with constant stumblings and many narrow escapes from sudden falls. And, as he went, he knew he was being pursued by things he could dimly see, that darted in and out among the trees and mocked him and tried to reach out and check his progress, and that shrieked as he threatened them with his bloody blade, and snatched at his burden and cried in fear or hate as he passed them by. And once, one of these mysterious

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beings crept behind him and whispered the words of the curse in his ear; and another far up the mountain sang them in a dreadful tone, like a devil's incantation, and it made him shudder. But he still pressed on, sometimes striking at his pursuers with his sword, that never seemed to harm them, again going doggedly forward, as though he did not see them, — until a suddenly discovered opening in the trees disclosed an ancient clearing, and goats that browsed upon a moonlit hill.

He had crossed the mountain, in his flight, and stood once more upon the land that was his own.

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CHAPTER III

WHAT FOLLOWED THE ESCAPE FROM THE FOREST

THE clearing upon which the Baron had come, in his flight from the forest, was an allotment made by the master of the castellany, long ago, to Swarz, an aged goatherd, formerly a loyal vassal of the previous Rabenhörst, who had served him well in many of his wars with the neighbour princes, and to whom this privilege had been granted as reward. The old man dwelt with his wife in a hut not far away; and thither the Baron turned his steps, with the child

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still sleeping in his arms. He was now utterly overcome by weariness, and greatly in need of rest.

The night was waning now, and the first pale tints of coming sunlight began to show upon the distant mountains toward the east, although the light that filled the clearing was still of the moon. Down below the pasture, upon the edge of a coppice, through which ran a brook, the home of the goatherd was plainly discernible, — a grayish pile of rudely built-up rocks and crudely moulded thatch. A monster dog, rough-coated and of hideous aspect, paced slowly back and forth in the foreground, like a grim sentinel on guard, and mouthed a surly bay at intervals, as the man drew near.

"Hell's curse!" he muttered, as he

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perceived the brute. "Must I kill him, too? Another time 'twould be a task scarce worthy of the effort, but now my hand is tired and holds no certain grip. The hound is large and powerful, too, and lacks not courage, as I know of old. Alone I would not fear him, even now; but with the child — The devil's death upon that swinish lout within! Why wakes he not to stay his beast and greet his master? There's noise enough, in sooth, to stir the sleeping Wodan in his rest, or drown the hammerings of mighty Thor. Holla! Holla, there!" he called, in sharp, clear tones. "Arouse, good Swarz!" at the moment laying the child upon the grass, and stepping forward, with sword in hand, to meet the coming

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onslaught of the dog that seemed about to charge.

But the animal did not charge, as dogs most often do at such a challenge. He advanced slowly, snarling as he came, and seemed disposed to take the conflict deliberately. The man braced himself, anticipating the spring of the huge body that would surely bear him down, if he failed to thrust with prompt precision at the instant. He knew that, once in the hold of the dog, a battle at close quarters would result in death, for then his weapon would be useless, and he could not hope to cope with the beast bare-handed, in his present weakened state. He cast a hasty glance behind him at the child upon the ground. She had awakened, and was standing, with out-

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stretched arms extended toward the savage brute, and seemed to have no fear of him. Von Rabenhörst was so astounded at the sight that he forgot to keep his attention on the dog, for an instant, and might have been killed at once, had fate so willed it. But the creature had paused in his advance, and was now watching the child. His snarling, too, had ceased, and he no longer showed his teeth in anger. In a moment, the Baron recovered himself and resumed his defensive attitude. There was a sound of life in the hut, and the tones of voices, that showed the inmates were at last aroused.

Suddenly there burst upon the night the music of a strange, weird song. The child was singing again, as she sang before in the forest, wild, unheard-of melo-

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dies that never man had sung before. The Baron lowered his sword and stood there spellbound; the sounds that had begun in the goatherd's cottage ceased, as though its inmates, too, were listening intent, and the great dog, with lowered head and gently waving tail, came quickly forward, softly whining as he walked, and crouched at the feet of the maid. She threw her thin, lithe arms about his shaggy throat, drew his monster head to her breast, patted his neck with her hands, and paused in the midst of her song and spoke to him. The Baron strained his ear to catch the words.

"Good dog," said she, caressing his cheeks with her hands, as she addressed him, "tell me, where have I come? I slept, I know, but nothing more can say.

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There was one that talked, but him I might not answer, though his words were fair. 'Tis forbid, and the spell that lies upon my lips makes speech with men impossible. But thou art different, and no chantment binds me here. I heard thy houndings in my dreams, and loved thee. Take me home."

The dog whined a gentle answer to the tones of her voice, and laid his head yet closer to her breast. The Baron slowly drew near and spoke to him. He raised his eyes to look at the man, but made no sign of enmity. It was plain that, with the child to command him, he would be harmless. Just then, the door of the hut opened, and old Swarz appeared, anxiously peering across the meadow. The Baron saw, and called

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to him at once, and he hastened, trembling, to the group, and fell upon his knees before his lord.

"A handy slave, indeed, art thou, old man," cried Rabenhörst, "that keeps thy master night-bound on the hills and sets thy dog to slay him and this child. Were't not for thy fair record in those troublous times long gone, I'd beat thee here to death for this neglect."

"Forgive, O gracious lord!" moaned Swarz, in his terror. "I knew not thou wert nigh; and, then, I slept. The aged sleep not well till nigh the dawn, and then awaken hardly. Had I known, I would have spent the night without in watching for thy coming. Surely thou wouldst not slay me for no wrong intent."

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He began to weep and to prostrate himself before the Baron, and begged so piteously for mercy that the heart of Rabenhörst, never long hardened toward any of his people, relented, and he saw the folly of blaming the old man for what was not his fault. So he bade him rise and attend to them.

"But," he added, "see thou guard thy dog more carefully in future. Had he harmed the child or pressed me hard, I surely would have killed both him and thee. And yet," he continued, meditatively, "the brute seems fair disposed; and 'twas his duty to protect thy home. So, so; say no more of this. Perhaps 'tis well as 'tis. One point at least is proven. She can speak. Lead on, good

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Swarz, and find us shelter, for thy lord is weary."

He essayed to take the child in his arms again; but she drew away and clung to the dog, smiling at the man, as she did so. She, clearly, had no fear of him, but preferred to remain with the new friend who had taken her fancy. Old Swarz led off toward his hut, and the child and the dog followed. She walked beside him with her arm about his neck, and seemed pleased with his comradeship.

"A pretty sight, a very pretty sight," said Rabenhörst, as he glanced at the pair. "Angel and devil together, and seemingly with benefit to the devil. This picture remindeth me of the tale of the triumph of good over evil I used to hear

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my nurse Godgifu tell, when boyhood's fancies had their day. What a strange child she is," he mused. "She would not speak with me, though fair indeed my words, and she plainly had no fear of me. None of them would speak in that accursed forest, save the mysteries one might not see. Yet she talks with that senseless brute, as though the creature were a man. And, Jesu, how she sings! To-morrow I will test her again, and get her to talk with me."

Arrived at the hut, the peasant and his wife made haste to minister to the comforts of their master and the child, and soon prepared repast and lodging. The Baron was so utterly worn out with his night's ordeal that he quickly fell asleep, having first placed his charge in the care

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of the woman, with strict commands for her safety. Swarz was dispatched to the castle to fetch a horse and leave word of the master's coming. Quiet fell once more upon the valley, the goats browsed undisturbed upon the hills, and Gor, the dog, kept guard before the open door.

The Baron von Rabenhörst, having decided to keep the little maid, soon made arrangements for her comfort and protection. At first he had her brought to the castle, where nurses and a governess were given her, with instructions to rear her as a lady, and to omit no point of her mental and physical training, under penalty of losing their own brains and the boxes that contained them. But it soon transpired that the child could not

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be brought up in the common ways of girls of that period. She could not learn to sew, she either would or could not speak, excepting to old Gor, the goat-herd's dog, — and but little even to him, — she seemed to detest the interiors of houses, and preferred to spend the days in the open air; and nothing, in fine, could be done to change her habits, try as they would. The Baron himself frequently had her brought to him, hoping to probe the mystery that enfolded her, and spent many hours in her company, but learned nothing beyond the fact that she was very gentle in disposition, was fond of petting, and seemed pleased at kindly companionship with any one. Sometimes, too, he would try to get her to speak, employing every device he

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could think of to coax a conversation from her, but to all his questions her answer was always the same:

"Stille-Mægth."

This and nothing more.

It seemed the only utterance of which she was capable, save in song, and, had he not heard her address the dog, he would have believed her dumb. He grew perplexed and sometimes almost angry at her apparent obstinacy, but nothing came either of his perplexity or his anger; for moods did not affect the child, and anger seemed to have no responsive sense of fear in her heart. And once, to test the maid, he threatened her with fearsome words and awesome punishment, if she would not speak to

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him, but she only looked at him as before, wonderingly, and answered:

"Stille-Mægth," —

so tenderly and sweetly, his conscience smote him for his cruelty, and he took her to his arms and begged her to forgive his unkind words. Whereupon she stroked his beard with her slender hands, and kissed him on his war-worn cheek, and softly murmured, as at first, the same low, gentle sounds:

"Stille-Mægth."

And then he loved her, if possible, more deeply than before, and said to himself that she must be his little one always, and love no other, and always let him wear her next his heart. "For," said he, "she is one afflicted by the hand

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of God, for some good purpose of His own, and is not as other maids."

So it came to pass, in time, that the people of the castellany learned to look upon her as a sacred being, and none molested her, or thought to question anything she did. And she roamed at will about the country, and spent many of her days abroad in the fields and woods, with none to guard her but the faithful Gor, who always went with her, and lived chiefly at the home of the goatherd Swarz, when the Baron was absent or at war. And Swarz and his wife became as father and mother to her, and loved her very dearly, and blessed her often in their prayers, saying she was a gift sent by the good God to brighten their declining years, and a benison granted

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their noble lord to soften his heart and teach him how to love.

Often she would sing, and, when this happened, the people would gather and, in silence, drink in the music that she made. She never could be induced to sing at anybody's request, not because she seemed unwilling, but simply because she could not. This they soon discovered, and, therefore, never tried to coax her. But she sang so much it made no difference, for never day went by that did not find her pouring forth her melodies, as she roamed about or sat among the flowers she had gathered in her walks. And when she sang, she seemed like one inspired, and did not see them or heed their presence at all, but let her warblings flow as free as the air

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into which she sent them, and sang them to the heavens like a witless bird. The people often thought it strange she sang no songs they ever heard before, nor any she had ever heard them sing. All her melodies were new to them; and even those who occasionally came from other lands and heard her said the songs were strange. But she taught the people many songs, for they did not easily forget the strains she gave. And thus, in time, the country of the Rabenhörsts had learned to sing as did no other, and the fame of its ballads even spread to other places. But the words of her songs they could not master, for she never sang them twice alike. So they made her music theirs and sang it to such words as pleased them best. And Rabenhörst, hearing them

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repeat the music she had taught them, blessed the maid, and felt a sense of pride in the pleasure it gave him to see them contented and happy, and to realise the songs of his people were so fair to listen to, and that they were songs peculiar to themselves alone, and not the borrowed melodies of other lands.

Thus it was the time passed on, and the child grew in size and beauty, until there were none but deemed she was the fairest maid in all the country round. And Rabenhörst was fonder of the maiden every year, and had her with him always when he could. But she never spoke to him excepting as at first:

"Stille-Mægth."

So he called her Stille, because she

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seemed to like the name, and silent always was, save when she sang.

The years passed on, and, excepting that she became more beautiful with each advancing season that added to her growth, and sang with fuller tones and deeper pathos as her voice matured, there was no change. She roamed, as at first, among the moors and mountains, singing as she went, spent much time with the aged goatherd and his wife, cheered the Baron in his loneliness, and let him pet her to his heart's content, and spoke to no one. For old Gor, grown far beyond the limit of his natural span of life, had long since passed away; and, after this, she used no language other than her songs. She had wept when he died, and seemed unhappy for a time; but her spell

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of grieving was brief, and it was not very long before she ceased to look for him. "Surely," the peasants said, "her love for the faithful dog had not been great;" and some of them even hinted that it was doubtful if she loved any one, she seemed so light and eery in her ways, and made no real distinctions among her friends. They did not tell the Baron this, but there were some among them who said to one another that they feared it might yet come to pass that he would discover a truth suspected by Godgifu from the first, and, some day, learn she had no heart for love. "For," said they, "it is well known that the maid who loves no person better than another, in truth, loves none at all." And others among them hinted darkly that she was

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bewitched, and others yet did fear she had no soul, but was a creature of the Elverkonge, while some, who gravely jested when 'twas safe, would say she had no head. And once it chanced the Baron, passing by a peasant's hut, did overhear three louts discoursing of these matters, and, without ado, dismounting from his horse, did enter and, with wrathful hand, did slay them as they talked; and, after this, 'twas death to touch upon the theme.

She had now grown to the full ripeness of her maidenhood, and Roderich von Rabenhörst, from loving her as a child, began to feel a different interest in her, that grew upon him till he said the time must come when she should be his bride. Nothing less than this, said he, would ever satisfy the yearning in his

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heart. This maid, and no other, would he wed. Pride of ancestry, wealth, position, birth, none of these things should stand between him and his heart's desire. But yet he could not wed her save by her own consent. To love and be loved, that was his intent. He was not certain she would love him, fond though she was of his petting and his tender care, and since she could not speak he lived in doubt. So he endeavoured in many ways to win a sweet confession from the maid, and by endearments, signs, and pretty gifts made siege upon her affections. But there was no change. If she loved him at all, her love was nothing different from the first she gave him when a child, and this, he knew, would not suffice. And often he would gravely study her,

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as she roamed about with him, and wonder if the coarse jests of the peasants could be true, and marvel how a maid so fair could have no heart to win. And sometimes, when she came to him and sat upon his knee, he would gaze long and tenderly into the deep, unfathomable violet of her strange, large eyes, and gently stroke the shining tresses of her lustrous ebon hair, and smooth the velvet of her pale, soft cheeks, and say:

"Dear little one, I love thee. Dost thou also love?"

But her answer was always the same:

"Stille-Mægth."

Nor was there any sign her heart was touched.

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CHAPTER IV

WHY HAMMERSCHLAAG MADE WAR TO GET THE MAID

SHE had just turned her fifteenth year, and nothing unusual had happened to disturb the peace of the castellany, since the night that Roderich von Rabenhörst brought her in his arms to the cottage of the goatherd Swarz, when a stranger came one day and demanded audience with her master. The traveller was on foot, without escort or companion of any kind, and seemed a person who had journeyed far, for the coverings of his feet were worn, and the grego, that served

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him both as cloak and hat, was gray with long-accumulated dust and sadly stained by the rains and the moisture of the ground, on which he had slept for many days. He seemed a peaceable man, and Swarz, the goatherd, who had seen him first, as he came down the mountain — for his journey had been in the direction taken by the Baron years before — had been the first to bid him welcome, and had fed him at his board before he told his errand, deeming him an holy one whose blessing 'twould be well to have. And in this the aged goatherd, judging by his lights, was wise, for the man was sandalled like a monk, and the latchets of his gear were double crossed, as was the custom of the time.

But, although a peaceable and seem-

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ingly a pious man, he did not prove himself an interesting guest. For his words, though mild and civil, were few, and served no purpose other than to voice his thanks and ask the way to the master's dwelling-place. So Swarz and his good wife, whose fund of gossip never was enough, were forced to sit in silence, while he rested at their hearth, and got no tales from him to trade among their friends, and deemed it strange a traveller should be so dull of speech. But once, while he was yet at meat, he suddenly paused in his repast, and quickly passed without and stood intent beyond the hut. For the song of the Silent Maid was heard among the hills, and the strains of her voice had caught his ear. At the sounds of this strange music, the traveller

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bowed his head and wept a moment, standing thus like one in prayer, nor moved he from the spot until the song was hushed and silence fell again. But he made no comment, nor asked an explanation of his host. So the goatherd told him naught.

When rested of his weariness, he arose from the board and blessed the hearth and all that there belonged, thanked the old woman for her gracious courtesy, and said Godspeed to Swarz, who pointed him the way, departed down the mountainside and vanished in the woods.

"A good enough man, I vow," said Swarz, when he had gone, "and one of holy ways. But not too civil, though his wandering hath been wide enough to

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teach him better manners. What seeks he of the master, think you, wife?"

"Little that he'll get, if he pay scant courtesy for the favour there as here," the woman said. "But 'tis not like to be much he asks. Perhaps a lodging for the night. Such men as he need nothing of the great. The matter's not worth telling, since he brought no tales."

So Swarz and his wife dismissed the stranger from their minds and went about their duties. A traveller, who had naught but a blessing to leave with his departure, counted as nothing after he was gone. But the stranger had importance, though the goatherd guessed it not.

Arrived at the castle, the traveller demanded audience with its lord, the Baron Roderich von Rabenhörst, and with him

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alone. His manner, as before, was mild, but there was a firmness in his address and an expression in his eye, as he spoke his message, that showed he was one not easily deflected from his purpose. So word was sent to the master that a traveller, one who seemed an holy man and whose journeyings had been far, demanded audience with him, and would not be gainsaid. In a brief space of time he stood before the Baron in his audience-room, prepared to speak his message, for 'twas indeed a message that he bore.

"Roderich von Rabenhörst;" said he, "thou of the dreaded name and wide domain, that endeth with the rising and the setting of the sun; a messenger of peace I come to thee, if so thou wilt; of war, if so it please thee to decide.

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'Tis true, this cloak that covers me is but the garb of one whose business is not warfare, and a solitary man am I, whose dwelling rightly is a hermit's cave. Little care I how men in conflict fare. My tendance is their souls and what concerns them after death, and never would it be my choice to bear a soldier's woes. But, in this particular duty, one who has the right commands me. Thus it comes to pass that, journeying as a messenger of peace, my mission first is peace, and, if not that, then war. Know then, thou of the dreaded name, that he who sends me unattended to thy home is one thou must respect as equal, whether friend or foe, — Konrad von Hammerschlaag, Prince of the Seven Castellanies of the

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Lower Hills, thy brother lord and neighbour. He it is who speaks in me."

"I know him well," Von Rabenhörst replied. "A valiant man and worthy of my recognition, whether friend or foe. Speak on, good friar. What asks the Hammerschlaag of me? If reason's in it, 'twill be granted, rest assured of that."

"This, and this alone, good knight," the stranger said. "That thou release to him a certain maiden now with thee. She is the Hammerschlaag's, and never has been thine, save by a chance. Long years hath he been seeking her in every land, nor can he stay his quest until she cometh back to him who first possessed her. The maiden hath been sought for without ceasing, since the night, now many summers passed, when Konrad's

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huntsman, roaming in the hills, did find her guard, an aged woman, lying headless on the sward, but found no thing beyond to tell this tale of murder. But the child they could not find, or any trace of her. Dead she could not be, for were this so, her songs would yet be dwelling in the forest, for the spirit of such song as hers dies not, as all men know that know the tale thou knowest not, O man of blood! Learn, then, at once the truth, and render back the maid.

"In the years of his youth, when the Baron von Hammerschlaag, my master, came to his estates, long pillaged by the wars of princes previous to his time, he found the people dead in soul and coarse with hardening ages of rapine and sordid toil. 'Give me,' he cried in prayer to

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the gods, 'no land like this; but let my heritage be a land of sunshine and a people warm with love. My people are dull, dead to all emotion, and they have no songs. Give them music, and I will do the rest.' For it is a truth, O Lord of Rabenhörst, that there was no music in the land nor any voice that sang. And it came to pass that there appeared to him a messenger from the Klidskjalf, saying that, by command of Hlin herself, a boon would soon be granted him, since the goddess deemed him worthy, — for he is, 'tis said, of distant kindred with the gods, — and that a maiden would be sent him who should teach the people song. But, said the messenger, 'tis strictly stipulated in the gift that none shall dwell apart with the maid save one old woman,

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and that never shall she converse hold with men, or wed a mortal. And, to make the matter more secure, 'twas also said a spell should be laid upon her tongue, that she might not learn to use it save in song. Thus, speaking with no one, none should speak with her. And, furthermore, the story runs, the goddess, having no heart to rob the maid of all communication with the things that live, did grant to her that full communion she might hold with the creatures of the waters and the woods, and with all that were not given human speech. So the goddess sent the maid, and Konrad gave her in charge of the aged woman — the same that was beheaded in the forest — for the woman, too, was dumb and had no speech. And because

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there was no name given the maid by which to mention her, the Baron called her 'Stille-Mægth,' and this alone was all her speech with men.

"And it was so, that the maid soon came to be known by all the people, and dwelt among them as she pleased, and was everywhere abroad in the land. And wherever she went she gave them music, until they caught her songs by hearing them, and learned the value of emotion and grew warm-hearted, and were happier than before. Thus it was, O Knight, that the castellanies of Von Hammerschlaag, my master, learned to sing, and abandoned their old-time habits and took to peaceful ways.

"And now, after many years of mourning for the soul-spirit of their

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songs, the people learn that she is housed with thee; and Konrad justly calls for what is his. Thou surely wouldst not keep the maid from him against his will, for, as the gods my witness are, she is not thine."

At the close of this address, Von Rabenhörst paused before he spoke. His mind was working with intense emotion, and there was a conflict of many feelings in his heart, as he pondered the story told him by the traveller, and dwelt upon its points, and realised the force of what he heard. He saw the justice of the demand, yet he was not fully prepared to believe the tale. Being a man of hardy mould, and singularly free from the superstitions of his time, it seemed to him absurd. And yet the recollection

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of the voices of the forest, long ago, somehow came to him now with telling strength, as never before, and he could not wholly put them out of his memory. Again he lived that gruesome night, again he seemed to hear the aged beldame shrilling her weird cry of agony, again he felt the strain of his sword, as it swept her defenceless head from her body, and again he felt the warm breath of the child upon his cheek, as he bore her away through the gloom, amid the hideous dinnings of the woods; and, as it all came back to him, it seemed once more that she was small again, and that he drew her to his heart, repeating the words of long ago, and saying, softly:

"Little one; I love thee. Be my child," and that she answered, —

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"Stille-Mægth," —

and quickly fell asleep. Now that he had learned to love her with a man's full passion and desire, he felt he could not part with her.

"Tell me," he said, at length, "how came the good Graf Hammerschlaag to learn the maid was here?"

"The merest accident, master," replied the messenger. "Thy goatherd Swarz, that hath his flocks on yonder hill, did chance one night to entertain a wayfarer of our land, and, sitting with his good wife round the fire at eve, while Swarz was off among his herd, the man was given all the tale by her. And, in the morning, ere he took his way, the man made effort to discern the truth, and lingered in the fields, and heard the

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maiden sing; and then he knew it was she, for none that sing have ever sung her songs, save those who learn them from her lips, and none do sing as she."

The darkening brow of the Baron showed the anger rising in his soul, as he heard these words.

"'Tis simple," he said, "and could have happened any time. No more of that. Now tell me, doth thy master give no compromise? States he nothing save his demand for the maid?"

"Nothing, lord," replied the messenger. "His words are plain. Send him the maid, and he becomes thy friend; refuse, and he calls to arms at once. 'Tis peace or war, O Lord of Rabenhörst, and justice fights upon my master's side, if

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war it be. I have no more to say to thee. Let me depart with thy reply."

"Tell thy master, then," replied Von Rabenhörst, "that what he craves cannot be granted. The maiden is not his to claim. If he cared for her as thou sayest, he should have kept his treasure better guarded. What is once abandoned goes to him that takes it. I did not seek to steal the maid. She came to me. Therefore will I keep her, even were there no other reason. If so't must be, Von Rabenhörst will fight for her. And tell thy master to be well assured the warfare will be that which men who fight with love do wage; and say to him Von Rabenhörst doth purpose with the maid to wed — be sure to mention that. If this be sacrilege, let Wodan and the mighty

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Hlin command me to surrender her, not thy lord. This is the answer of Von Rabenhörst. Depart."

So the messenger departed, and returned to the master of the Seven Castellanies of the Lower Hills, and told him all that Roderich von Rabenhörst had said; and Konrad von Hammerschlaag was very angry, because he would not surrender the maid, and, calling together all his dependent princes, he bade them prepare to wage relentless war upon the Baron of the mountain castle, and to spare no man that sought to aid him in his bold defiance of the mighty Hlin.

And after this, the princes went among their vassals and related what he had said, and pledged them, even to the last

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man of every dependency that was under the rule of Hammerschlaag, to take up arms and fight for their rightful lord in his most just of wars, and to swear by the hand of Wodan and the hammer of great Thor, that never should their valour flag till Hammerschlaag was victor, and the maid who gave them music should come to them again.

Meantime the Baron von Rabenhörst, knowing well the temper of his enemy, made careful preparations for the war, and sent to all that were his friends among the neighbouring lords a summons, engaging their allegiance to his cause, and promising much plunder to such as served him well. For it was agreed in the compact that, should the banner of the Rabenhörst prevail, the

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Baron himself would take no portion of the conquered lands, or anything that was upon them, but all should be divided among his allies, the Silent Maid alone to be his prize.

And, when his plans were well matured and men at arms stood ready for the strife on every side, he called his trusted servitors to the audience-room one day, and bade them gather, at the morrow's dawn, to celebrate a feast. "For then," said he, "'twill be my wedding-day."

For Rabenhörst, long pondering on the love that filled his heart, now said the maiden should be his without delay, and that, before he flung his battle-banner out, the castle should receive its chatelaine. So he called the maiden to him-

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self, and asked her did she love him, as he oft had asked before, and told her he would wed her on the morn, but nothing further prayed for till her heart should turn to him; and that, though she now would be his bride, she yet should still remain his child, against the time to come when she would grow to him. And Stille bowed her head in answer to his words, and seemed to understand and give consent. And then, dismissing from his presence all that there were gathered, he betook himself to the window of his favourite apartment, and sat there long in meditation deep, and gazed upon the domain that was his own.

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CHAPTER V

WHAT FOLLOWED THE MARRIAGE OF THE BARON

'TWAS while the day was yet an infant in the arms of Mother Night, and the yokels had but just begun their preparations for the wedding-feast, that two horsemen rode at easy speed from the mountains to the north, and set their course directly toward the castle gates. They were equipped in the style of the roving knights, and carried little cumberment save the weapons they bore, and on the pennants that floated 'neath the pistolets of their spears two hearts,

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that merged as one, were broidered on a ground of white. The dress they wore, like the banners, was counterpart each garment of the other, and even the beasts that bore them might be brothers of twin-foaling, so close akin they seemed, white as the snows that lie upon the sun-kissed mountain peaks, and sleek and supple as the woodland elk in head and neck and limb. The brothers that rode them — for they were, in truth, the children of one mother and one sire — were garbed alike in clothing of one cloth, and this was also white, with naught to add the touch of colour save the trappings, which were blue; nor was there anything to make distinction 'twixt the twain when distance favoured. Yet, close at hand, there was no near resemblance any one would see.

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For one was fair and like a child of sunshine as to his hair, and had the colour of the eyes that seems reflected skylight; while he that rode beside him was of swart and sombre hue, with raven locks and eyes that darkly glowed 'neath darker brows.

As the brothers sped upon their way to the castle, entering the country of its master, they were frequently challenged by the sentries set at various points to guard against attack. But to each they gave good reason for their venturing, and, since their sole demand was audience with the Baron himself, there seemed no reason to detain them. So they soon crossed the hills that lay between and were quickly come to the gates.

"Tell thy lord," said he who seemed

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the elder, the one that was dark of skin, "that two young rovers, brothers and knights of noble lineage, having neither kin nor home nor country, having heard, while far away, that Rabenhörst makes war upon his neighbour Hammerschlaag, Prince of the Seven Castellanies of the Lower Hills, do much desire engagement in his service, and do pledge him full allegiance in his cause, if chance there be with him to battle for a land long time their rightful heritage, but now in wrongful holding."

The keeper of the gate gave word, and Rabenhörst soon sent for the two brothers, asking them what 'twas they claimed as payment for their service, for he saw they were of goodly stuff and had the proper mettle.

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"This, and this only, Lord of Rabenhörst," said he who spoke for both. "That, serving in thy cause, we may reclaim the Castellany of the Lowest Hill that lieth toward the south of Hammerschlaag's domain, for 'twas our father's and his father's father's, too. Our story is brief, and 'twill convince thee of the merit of our claim. Many years ago, before the present lord of the Seven Castellanies came to his estate, our fathers possessed the lands of which we speak. They were a kind and peaceable people and sought no strife with any that dwelt about them, nor asked extension of their small domain. But he that was the father of the present Hammerschlaag did covet that which was our father's, and did come one day, with sword and

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fire, when our father lay in mortal illness and was not able to contend with any one, and, sweeping o'er the land with overwhelming force, did drive us forth, our mother and ourselves — for we were but children then — and foully slew our father in his bed. And after that, our mother, fleeing far into the forests to escape the power of the Hammerschlàag, for she feared his threat to utterly destroy us all, found refuge with some holy people in the north and succour for her children. And, after a time, when we were older grown, she told us of our wrongs, and bade us bear in mind our duty to our name and station, and swore us, ere she died, to bear the sword, and lay it not aside till we should come into our own again. And more than this, her

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teachings always were of honour and of love to one another, and that we should be ever ready to stand together in the common cause, and dwell not apart; 'for in your double strength, my sons,' said she, 'lies all the secret of an ultimate success.' And thus she passed away, blessing us, her children, and setting us our task. But never yet have we found fair chance to strike the blow at our ancient enemy, for the time was not yet come. So our years have been spent in warring for the king, whose service we have lately left by courtesy, — for the king doth know our story and is kind, — and not until to-day hath seemed the occasion good to press our claim. And hearing of thy quarrel with the Hammerschlaag, and that thou dost not

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intend to take his domain, but only to retain the maid, of whom also we have heard, it seemed the time was ripe to lend our service in thy cause, to aid thee well and take our lands. Surely, O lord, no other friend of thine hath better right to them."

This proposition seemed good to Rabenhörst, who had no objection to securing the services of two such knights as these, and he made ready to assent at once, saying:

"I see no cause for haggling with thee or with thy brother over this. My purpose, as thou sayest, is not gain, but simply to protect mine own. Serve me well, thy lands are thine again. And since 'tis settled, pray announce your names, that

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men may know you rightly, for I like not mysteries."

"Our father's name was Björn," replied the knight. "From the far north his grandsires came and bore it to that new country once our heritage. In those old times, a man that had one name was satisfied. He had no other, and it was his wish his sons should follow him. But, for convenience, and lest the people be confused, he let his name become the family word-mark, and, though he placed no bonds upon his sons, did wisely consecrate it to their use when necessary. Thus he called thy servant Thorg, and this, thy servant's brother, Ola. By these names alone are we known among men; but should we come again upon our

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lands, our titles would be Thorg and Ola of the Björn. We use them not till then."

"It is enough," said the Baron. "Thorg and Ola shall ye be with me. The words are good and have no petty sound. What names ye choose to use besides concerns me not. And since ye both are now my allies and my guests, I bid you prepare to join the feast, and pledge your mistress on her wedding-day."

The brothers departed with escorts assigned them by the Baron to get ready for the coming feast, and, the day being now well advanced, a bustle was everywhere about the castle; for, although the master had decided to marry in haste, and little time was given for prep-

aration, he proposed to make the few

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hours that remained a season of merriment for his people, and to spread a generous entertainment for his warrior guests, of whom there were a goodly number camped upon his lands.

The feast was good and ample, despite the sudden preparation, for the Baron's hunters had been sent abroad the night before, and every man that had supplies of edibles to spare was ready with his tribute. Word had been passed throughout the night of the master's marriage on the following day, and the vassals gathered speedily at the summons to meet and greet their lord, while those whose duty was to bear him arms supplied a gallant pageantry to enhance the brilliancy of the demonstration. The great hall of the castle spread its walls about

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the tables set for honoured guests, while in the yard below was proper space for those of lower state, and even the humblest had his share of food and wine. All was mirth and gaiety, as the day waxed warm, and cheers and frequent soundings of good-will were often in the air.

Yet one there was who gave no sign of joy, but moved about in silence and said little, and avoided converse with all others when she could. The aged nurse, Godgifu, fearing this event, sat lonely by the hearth and mourned apart in secret, dreading unseen woes and mindful of the curse. And Rabenhörst looked on, and gave no special thought to her, for Godgifu was old and not in full possession of her sense. Perhaps, too, he

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thought, with kindness in his heart for her, she is grieving at her master's need of absence and the dangers of the conflict soon to come, "for Godgifu doth love me, and would mourn to have me harmed." So he asked her no questions, but went to her just once, and laid his hand upon her head and bent him down and kissed her withered cheek, and passed again among his guests, and soon forgot her. And then she crept in sadness to a distant place, and took no part in the festivities, but lay the whole long day upon her face, and wept in solitude.

The guests were gathered in, the feast was spread, and all were ready for the ceremony, when Rabenhörst remembered he had asked no man to stand with him. Quickly running his eye over

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the company of assembled knights, he suddenly fixed his glance upon the stranger brothers, standing with some other men, and easily distinguished by their snowy garb.

"'Tis wisely done," he murmured. "None will take offence if these two strangers serve." So he spoke aloud and said he would elect the unknown knights to stand with him, that all might feel he had no favour shown to any of his older friends. And all approved right heartily, and said 'twas shrewdly done, and gazed upon the brothers without malice. Then the two went forward and took their places beside the Baron, in readiness to receive the bride, for the hour of her coming was at hand.

The maiden had been housed at the

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castle since the day before, and was given women servitors to attend her and prepare the wedding-gown. A friar, wandering from the forests, and with whom the Baron had made friendship long ago, was there to join the pair; and, after that, to join the merry party at the board, for never better man at meat and drink did live than he, as all that knew him said. He now was ready with his service-book, and, rising, called on God to witness bear of all that was to come. The maiden bride was ushered through an opened door, attended by her women, and silence fell upon the company.

She bore upon her face no sign of care, nor any faint suggestion she was moved by thoughts of doubt or fear or wonder, but smiled at the Baron when she saw

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him, sweetly and happily, as she always did. This might have been a matter in which she bore no special part, she seemed so free of interest; and he doubted if she really understood she was a bride, or realised she was bounden henceforth to himself for evermore.

Turning her glance upon the near-by Thorg, she next surveyed him with a pleased expression, and seemed to deem him something worthy, for she smiled into his face and showed he had good favour in her heart; but it was only an instant she looked at him ere her eyes wandered in the opposite direction, where fair Ola stood beside her lord; and there they rested with a wistful gaze, that was so piteous the youth could scarce withstand it as it met his own. And, as he thus

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beheld the maid, there grew upon him something that was new, and he yearned to draw her to his heart and have her always near; for he had seen, in the depths of the maiden's eyes, a soul that spoke to his. She let her glance fall from his face and rest upon the ground, as a colour came upon the usual pallor of her cheeks and a sudden agitation heaved her bosom. And Thorg saw the change and marvelled; and, looking at her, as she stood there all unconscious of his presence, he realised the maiden was most fair, and loved her as a true man loves but once, — then put the thought aside.

The monastic gave a sign, and Thorg and Ola, as the custom was, approached the maid, and, taking stand at either side

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of her, seized her by the hands, and led her to her lord. She laid the hand that Thorg received upon his own content-edly, like a trustful child, and showed no fear of him, but smiled as if 'twere pleasure thus to let him guide her; but when the gentle Ola did appropriate its mate, a sudden trembling shook it, and she made as though she fain would draw away, nor did she look again upon his face. And, after this, the brothers placed her hands upon her master's palms, and stood apart, while, kneeling at the friar's feet, the Baron and the maid were joined in marriage, and prayers and blessing o'er the twain were said. But, first, be-cause the maiden had no speech, and could no answer make to any question, the holy man invoked a special privilege

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that should suffice in lieu thereof, and said the conduct of the lady gave a full consent, although her voice was dumb, and that the good God knew her heart and saw 'twas much inclined unto her lord. Then Rabenhörst, arising with his bride, did face the knights, and swore them to allegiance to his arms and to the lady's cause. And all assembled there did swear it, and, with swords held high, made oath to stand in battle for the Baron and his bride. And, after this, they fell upon the feast, and made much merriment, and filled the air with cheer and jest and song. But Stille, sitting mute beside her spouse, took little notice of the jovial company, that oft did raise their beakers in honour of herself, and seemed absorbed in thoughts of other

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things, and never turned her glance upon Von Rabenhörst, save when he spoke to her; and even then,'twas like the glance of one whose mind was otherwhere and heard without attention what he said. Yet once chance brought the eyes of gentle Ola to her own, and then there was a change, so quick 'twas like to nothing but a flash of light, but still a change; and Ola, seeing how the maiden paled beyond her wont, and knowing 'twas his look had wrought the mischief, grieved, and ever after turned his eyes away. And none did know of this, save Ola and the maid herself.

Meantime the revelry ran high, and, the lady and her women having sat the accustomed hour at the board, withdrew to their apartments, for in the later feast-

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ing women took no part. The boards were supplied with stronger wines, the draughts of heavy brewings, yet unbroached, appeared, and jovial jesters, ready with their sport, engaged the merry company. Von Rabenhörst, albeit an abstemious man and one not given much to joviality, relaxed somewhat his usual sterner mood, and led with gracious pleasantry in the jest; the sunny-headed Ola, being urged, sang ballads of his fatherland, that joyed the listeners much, for mellow were his tones in song; the graver Thorg, at the suggestion of his host, gave tales of other days, that long had been the stories of his mother's Northern home, and charmed the knights with talk of wars, rehearsing Sagas old; and Friar Braun,

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his piety at rest beneath the spell of good red wine, his favourite brew when not engaged in penance or at prayer, made effort to discourse of love and other things that friars know not well, until, too overcome — by love or wine, 'tis not said which — he slipped beneath the table and vanished out of sight.

The day grew small, and still the merry revellers plied their jests and sang their songs and passed the hours in changing tales of war and love and feast, and none were ready to depart, though night was close at hand and the moon hung close above the highest mountain-tops. Within the walls, the knights made merry music to the touching of the cups, while, in the open of the castle-yard, the clowns disported various fooleries and

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aped their lords as best they knew in wit; and it was said an hundred years at least had passed since Rabenhörst had witnessed such a scene. The Baron, with his bridesmen, Thorg and Ola, placed at either hand, waxed vigorous in speech, and often raised his voice in loudest plaudit at the jests that flew about the board, and showed himself an host of genial mould, and was as gay and free of care as any of the youngest, though 'twas seen he kept his head upon his shoulders better than the rest, and sometimes cast his eye upon the men-at-arms with keenest scrutiny, remindful of the special worth of each particular knight. And still the hours wore on, and saw no signs of breaking up the feast.

It was well on toward the time when

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gentle-folk seek slumber, and when cocks and yokels long have been at rest, and the sounding of the feasters was at highest pitch, that a sudden clamour smote the air, and with it came the summons of a sentry's bugling, calling an alarm. Full and strong it shrilled adown the mountainside upon the wind, that, wafted from the watch-tower on a distant crag, swept o'er the bents that lay between, and bore it to the ear of Rabenhörst and his crew. And yet again it came, and filled the night with warning; again and yet again, until the echoing slopes took up the call and spread it through the whole domain that lay between the rising and the setting of the sun. And with it came the shouts of many tongues, and voices swelling

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hoarse, as through the valleys rode a mounted guard with message for the master, crying, as he passed:

"To arms! The Hammerschlaag! The foe doth come!"

The revelry ceased at once, and each good knight, his ready sword in hand, betook him to his company in haste, prepared to lead his men. And Rabenhörst, arising from the board, strode quickly to the outer gates, and got upon his horse, then hurried forth, with Thorg and Ola following fast, to intercept the messenger and learn his tale, issuing orders as he passed among the groups. And, such had been their training and the discipline of their lord, 'twas scarce a quartering of the hour in all, ere each man was in place and ready to advance.

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Meantime the horseman, bearing the alarm, was come, and all his message was delivered. Konrad von Hammerschlaag, he said, was seen the day before advancing with an army toward the mountains at the south. His passage was between the hills that bordered on the Valley of the Brook, and 'twas plain that his intention was to attack the castle from that quarter, and to make his onslaught by the shortest way. He came with many men, and seemed equipped for heavy conflict, for a herd of asses followed in his rear, full burdened with supplies and ample food for a long siege. At first the outlying sentries of the Lord of Rabenhörst had thought that he would need at least a full two days to pass the mountain; but it seemed he journeyed both

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by night and in the day, his army resting only for an hour at a time, and thus made quicker progress; so 'twas deemed a wise precaution to bear the news at once. And thus the messenger had ridden without ceasing, save for hurried taste of food and water for his horse, and would have hastened faster but his beast had died upon the way, and left him to pursue his course for miles, until the sentry at the outer tower supplied another mount.

"And even now, O lord," said he, "the time is short. For, if thou hadst the daylight to assist, thine eyes could see his coming; for the valley hath been passed, and Hammerschlaag doth camp in yonder vale beside the goatherd's hut. Him hath he slain, and with him his good

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wife, because they did refuse to play the traitor and decoy the maid from thee."

Even as he spoke, there came a sound of trumpets from the hills, and words of stern command. The voice that spoke was that of Hammerschlaag summoning his men to advance. Von Rabenhörst turned quickly to his knights and spoke to them.

"Men and soldiers all," said he, "the hour hath come. Ye need no soft encouragement from one who knows your mettle as do I. Our cause is just; our swords are sharp; our valour of the kind that flags not until death. Bear witness for me that I do not seek this conflict with my brother lord, who comes to steal away my new-made bride, but take up arms to fend the lady's cause alone. The

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rest is your affair. Destroy the Hammerschlàag, whose seven castellanies seem not yet sufficient to his greed, and take his lands among you, as is right; for none should wish to see him larger grow, against the time when, not my bride alone, but each fair bride of every honest knight assembled here, will be demanded as his prize; for Hammerschlaag doth covet everything that is another's. Therefore, let him be destroyed. There is no other safety. Have I spoken true?"

Then every knight made answer that his speech was good, and swore to stand beside him.

"My gratitude is rudely phrased," said Rabenhörst, "but it is sincere. A few commands, and then we move upon

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the foe. Do thou, my Otto, friend of many a long campaign, lead thy force up yonder hill in silence, there to flank the enemy if thou may. Let lusty Gregor, hungry more for battle than for meat, as is his nature, take the opposite way and range upon the other side; the ground is heavy there, and hardy men are needed. You will I separate from the rest, because your men are mounted all and lighter builded than most, and nimbleness is needed in this work. The others stay with me to press the central charge; and honest Thorg, who cometh not in company, but alone, to join us, him will I station at my side to fight with me. And all, save Ola there, who is both brave and gentle, shall go at once; but he shall stay behind and keep the castle

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guard. God grant the struggle be not there before the victory; but, if it be, let none pass through the gates, on forfeit of thy life, for the charge I give to thee is greater than all others."

Speaking thus, he gave the word, and led the way to battle. And Ola, taking with him men assigned as aids and a band of lusty yeomen chosen for their courage, repaired to the castle yard, and made quick preparations to defend it from attack.

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CHAPTER VI

HOW RABENHORST PREVAILED AGAINST HIS FOE

THE moonlight flooded hill and vale that night, and showed fierce carnage raging o'er the lands of Rabenhörst; and, ere its radiance paled before the coming of the potent Sun, the waters ran good blood, and earth, that bred brave men, received a-many of them back again. For Hammerschlàag came, intending no return till he should have the maiden back, and Roderich, her spouse, defended as a man who fights for castle, lands and wife defends, with-

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out regard for aught save victory and destruction of his foe. Nor was the conflict always with the knights that fought on one side or the other; for many valiant heroes there engaged, and courage was not wanting anywhere along the lines.

The first to strike a decisive blow was Hammerschlaag himself, who, sweeping down the hillock from his point of vantage on the higher slope, charged full upon the advancing column of the Baron's force, dividing it in twain by the violence of the onslaught; and almost would this charge have ended in a rout had not the wily Otto, seeing him advance, swung quickly upon his rear with all his swiftest horse, and there wrought direful havoc; while sturdy Gregor,

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coming on the side, drove straight among the scattered men and put them to the sword. Meantime the Baron's fantassin, with spear and knife, plied vigorously at the chargers of the foe and kept them from advancing; the mass of fallen horses and their riders made a wall between the two divisions of the fight and stayed its progress; and, discouraged at the failure of his first attack, the Hammerschlaag, uncertain of the end, withdrew apart a little and rallied in his knights.

Von Rabenhörst soon formed his lines again, but made no advance, fearing the consequence of any rash attempt to mount the hill. He stationed Gregor at the western side and Otto at the east, to flank whatever movement Hammerschlaag

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might try, and waited, slowly retreating, till the lower level ground should give a surer chance for even contest. A silence fell upon the assembled knights, and naught was heard save the distant cry of the mountain owl and one lone cur that bayed the yellow moon. How long a time this stillness reigned, no man could tell; but 'twas not long, for soon the trumpet of the foe gave tongue, and, charging down the slope again, this time in columns three, his lines advanced. The spearmen of Von Rabenhörst ran forth, and, forming in a wedge, prepared to take the brunt of this fierce onslaught, and Gregor and his mate, old Otto, struck their spurs and swung to either side straight up the hill, to crowd the columns in. Thus forced, they could no

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longer stay divided, but were driven close together, as they came, and rushed upon the spears, bearing down the men that held them, though losing many a horse and rider. But their progress was not checked, and soon the battle turned to them; for Rabenhörst's wide columns, broken by this overwhelming crush of man and horse, were backward driven, fighting inch by inch at every step, until they made a stand upon a knoll without the castle gates.

While Roderich and his forces were gone forth to meet the foe, the youthful Ola, left to guard the castle, had been busy at his task. He double-sentinelled each entrance to the towers, made careful journey to all points of vantage, and placed upon the walls such yeomen as

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were brave and strong of thew to hurl destruction on invaders if the need should be, disposed his soldiers at the proper stations, and spared no pains to make a good defence. Then, thinking it were wise to look within, he ran the castle through, inspecting every chamber and its ports; and, in the apartments of the women folk, came sudden on the maid. With gracious courtesy, he paused upon the sill and begged permission to secure the place against such danger as might happen there. The maiden heard his voice and raised her eyes; when, as before, he saw reflected there the wistful look that moved his heart, and knew the soul behind them yearned to his. But he made no motion that could tell he noticed, though his heart beat quickly.

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He sighed at thought of what such love would be to him whose right it was, and marvelled if she knew the Baron's bride might love no other man. A moment thus he paused, then took his way, for time was brief.

And now the battling neared the castle gates, and Ola, gazing from his station on the turret, beheld the Baron's men retreating to the knoll, and saw them thither come and make their stand. He gripped his sword, and felt the sudden tremor that enthrills the veins of soldiers at the call to arms, gave orders to his crew, and paused intent upon the scene below. Thus, gazing from his height, he soon discerned the crest of Roderich, the Unconquered, waving about among the knights, and saw that

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Thorg, his brother, moved beside him in his garb of white, that shone conspicuous in the mass and had a hue of argent lustre, as the rays of moonlight fell upon it; and the sight inspired him with desire to go without and join him where he stood, for he felt his place was at the side of him he loved. But duty held him to another task, so he thought of the lady trusted to his care, and patiently kept watch upon the wall.

The forces of the Hammerschlaag were gathering for a desperate attack, and soon the battle would be on again; and Roderich von Rabenhörst, gazing from the knoll, sat stern and silent on his horse, full conscious of the mettle of his foe, and realised the fight would be to death on either side. His lands and

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castle, and his bride within its walls, heritage of centuries, power and lordly sway, — all were now at stake upon this single conflict with the man who claimed the maid; for well he knew that Hammerschlaag, victorious, would never cease from strife till all that was the Rabenhörst's should be his own. And, as he pondered on these things, and thought of her within and Ola the young knight that guarded her, his voice grew tender for a time, and love, that softens even the hardest soldier heart, burned in his soul and gave him added courage.

"It is indeed the beginning or the end," he said. "Our years of warfare cease with this last fight, or death doth close our line. First am I of all the Rabenhörsts that loved a maid and fought

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to keep her mine for sake of her sweet face; last will I be to die, if fortune fail this night. My sires, for ages back, have warriors been, and many, in their day, have battled well for home and lands and king; but never knight of all our line hath had such cause as mine, or faced the foe because of love alone. So, come what may, the cause is best of all the causes of our ancient line, and therefore should be won."

Recovered from his reverie, he scanned the enemy's force again, and made his quick decision to attack; and, followed by his trusted body-guard, charged straightway on the foe. It seemed the better tactics to advance at once, while yet the Hammerschläag deliberated what to do.

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Down the smooth greensward of the rolling knoll the Baron swept, with Thorg and other knights about him pressing close, while Gregor and old Otto charged at either flank and kept the line an even measure all the way across. It was a fair sight, though fearful in its import, and those upon the castle's walls stood tranced in admiration as they gazed upon the scene. And Ola chafed and envied much his brother, and almost cursed the Baron for setting him an idle task that kept him from the fray. And now the Hammerschlaag, perceiving the importance of the charge, and that 'twas sure defeat to hesitate, sprang quickly to the fore, and led his men at countercharge, to meet the Baron on the

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knoll and win the battle, fighting hand-to-hand.

What followed was a strain of bitter conflict, each man warring at his best with whatsoever man attacked him. And sometimes one prevailed and then again another, till 'twas difficult for those upon the castle walls to say which banner led the fray. For now the men of Hammerschlaag, fierce-pressing toward the gates, did drive the defenders near them; and then again the knights of Rabenhörst, recovering from the attack, did force the others back, with horrid clamour and destruction great; and thus the battle wavered in the balance, as the hours passed, and none could say 'twas victory anywhere.

Two knights that fought with Ham-

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merschlaag conspicuous were, and seemed at times to bear the greater burden of the fray, for these were ever near him in the thickest of the fight, and men that came upon them fell beneath their swinging blows like grain beneath the reaper's circling scythe. And one of these was hideous to behold, a huge, uncouthy wight, with ponderous head thick-grown with hair of red, and nose that had been broken in his youth; while he that fought beside him comelier seemed and had a gracious presence. The second of these twain made feint to draw his blade upon a youth that rode beside Von Rabenhörst, when sudden chance did favour, at which the Baron, seeing 'twas no match for one so young, turned quick upon the man to fend him

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off; but, at the instant, as it had been planned, the other, he that larger was and more in power, drove straight upon Von Rabenhörst with sword aloft to cleave him from behind. But Thorg, remindful of the peril, and though himself pressed hard by many close at hand, swung his horse about, and, with his spear at rest, did charge the group, and struck the knight upon the breast so fierce a blow it almost caused his fall. The lance was shattered to the hold, and, as the knight fell back, the valiant Thorg discharged the remnant of its splintered shaft upon his face with words of scorn.

"Coward that thou art," said he, "that dare not face a foe, but strikes him from the rear a churlish blow. Come hither,

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and let one who fears thee not instruct thee in the arts of generous warfare."

"Son of a measly pig!" the man replied. "Beware of insult toward thy betters!"

At the word, recovering his balance, he made a dash at Thorg, and would have there engaged him, but that men contending got between and forced the twain apart against their will. Then each had business at his master's side, for now it chanced that Hammerschlaag and Rabenhörst did battle face to face, with many knights about them striving.

With firm-set teeth and eyes aflame with passion, the leaders now began to test each other's skill in mortal combat. Well matched they were in size and strength, and none might say that for-

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tune favoured either in her gifts. Long time they battled, with their knights about them fighting hard, and strove in tensest conflict; but the guard of each so deftly handled was, that never blow reached home, though oft they struck, and sparks that flew from their clashing blades glowed star-like in the air as each gave forth its bright and fitful ray. At last the sword of Rabenhörst, cutting full upon the steel of Hammerschlaag, too near the upper part, snapped off, and, even as it broke, clipped half the other's weapon from its length, and both were crippled of their means to fight, just as the red-haired knight, close-forcing in upon the group, with spear in hand, drove at the Baron's horse and killed him as he stood. But Thorg, the ever-

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ready, hewing down the guard-mate as he came with one good blow upon his head, rode quickly in, and, plying both at Hammerschläag and the other, pressed them back, and saved his master, as the dying horse went down. And here, old Otto, seeing how it was, and that the horse of Rabenhörst was gone, did grasp a spear from one that near him fought, and, plunging in among the men, did slay the mount of Hammerschläag. And after this the champions fought afoot. And thus it was that twice that day the loyal Thorg did save the Baron's life.

The battle now had come to such a pass that men contended in a solid mass, and some there were who made grave error and did slay their own; and dead so many lay upon the knoll that fighting

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there was difficult for the heaps of men and horse that lay about. But still the conflict waged and neither side prevailed. The handsome knight that rode with Hammerschlaag once more had tried to trick Von Rabenhörst, and quickly had been slain by sturdy Gregor, who, unhorsed, now fought alone with bloody sword that told its tale of how its master's work was done; the fantassin, long striving on the outer edge, still slew each other, as they pressed about the knights and strove to clear a passage to the gates; and, in this hour of the waning light, for dying was the moon far in the distant west, the carnage raged more fiercely than before. For desperation added to the valour of the foes, and none would yield.

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Meantime the monster knight that thrice had tempted conflict with the Baron's bridesman, Thorg, did seek him in the medley, for each had long since lost his horse, and strove with battle-axe aloft to cleave a way to where he fought among his own. And seeing him, at last, a challenge bold he called that rose above the din of conflict so that all could hear.

"Come hither, thou that dost defy me; thou that blacker are in face than Hell's most swarthy imp! Child of an unknown dog, draw near, that I may teach thee how to fight!" he called.

And Thorg, perceiving how he cut his way among the lesser ones and that they seemed to fear him so they dared not stay his course, received the challenge, and

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with axe that he had taken from a dying foe, made toward him.

Then men-at-arms stood back appalled at what they saw. For, rushing at each other, swift they swung their weapons to the air — so swift that, like the music of a sweeping sword, they sung a woful tune upon the night — then struck. But each in turn did quickly fend the blow. Again they struck, and failed of harm; and then again, at every stroke with careful aim; but yet they 'scaped the blows, so shrewdly did they guard against attack. Then round and round they trod the sward, exchanging feints and threats of sudden onslaught, each one watchful of the chance that should give value to his work. The monster changed his tactic once, and,

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making as if he would raise his blade in air, quick veered its course and swung it sidewise; but Thorg stooped deftly low, and, as the axe swung past, escaped the blow that fell upon his crest and clipped it from his helmet, as he rose again with eye alert, and, with a level sweep, made effort to cut clean across the other's neck. The giant saw it coming and drew back, just as the glittering knife flew past, and, in the passing, took a finger from his nearer hand. The foes were breathing heavily now, and a sweat that ran upon their faces dropped like rain in summer from the forest-trees and trickled on the ground; but still they swung their dreadful blades, and neither spake, so precious was the breath that

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swelled their bodies and gave them strength to fight.

Another glancing blow of the hideous knight fell close to Thorg, and would have cut him down had not he fended with his weapon and turned it off his side. The giant now was fired with savage passion, and his sense, with desperation blind, was weaker than at first; and Thorg, perceiving this, and seeing how it was with him, grew calm, and softly breathed a prayer. Then, watching well his chance, when wild the other had his weapon hurled, he raised his axe on high and backward swung it in a circle bold (so twice it travelled round before it fell), and brought it fair upon the monster's head. Crashing through helmet, skull, and flesh, the blade went down and

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came to rest among the giant's ribs; and 'twas ever after said no blow like that was struck again that day upon the field of Rabenhörst, nor many like it anywhere in war.

The battle now was forced anear the gates, and still the champions, fighting 'mid their men, but little chance at personal combat found. For soon as the one did find the other to engage him, knights of either side did quickly force the fray to where they stood, so eager they to guard their masters well. And thus it came to pass that, crowding toward the point of danger, Hammerschlaag at last did drive his enemy across the knoll, the pressure of his heavy footmen forcing the battle ever toward the gates, and Rabenhörst was crushed, with

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all his knights, almost against the walls, so Ola and his men could hurl no missiles from the tops upon the mass below, lest friend and foe alike be killed.

Perceiving how the matter stood, and realising how the strength of Hammerschlaag was greater, having play upon the open ground, while half the Baron's force was still at rest within the castle walls, it seemed to Ola time to bear a hand in battle with his men. A few reserving to remain at guard, the rest he quickly mustered at the gate in readiness, and, when the moment favoured, flung the portals wide and led them forth, the panels closing as they passed without.

At the moment of this changing of the front of battle, and while the hinges yet their soundings gave, a flame shot high

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upon the topmost battlements, and doleful music swelled above the din of voices and the clash of arms, dirging the fearsome burthen of the mad woman's curse. The warring ceased a moment at these sounds, and those who gazed aloft saw, standing on the dizzy height, a figure robed in black, that waved a glowing torch. They paused aghast at such a gruesome sight; and Rabenhörst, hearing, shuddered and remembered all the stories of the past, and marvelled, seeing 'twas his nurse, Godgifu, that did love him yet chanted thus upon a time like this. And many were afraid and crossed themselves, and made such other signs as each particular man had learned in youth to deem protection against enchantment and the wiles of evil spirits, for none save

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Rabenhörst saw who it was that sang upon the tower.

Then one within, a stranger soldier stationed there by Ola to defend the upper ports, hearing the sounds, and being overzealous in his work, made haste to reach the summit; and, seeing there a raving woman putting, as he thought, a fire upon the roof, mistook her for a spy, and seized her by the waist and hurled her down upon the rocks below, still clinging to her torch and shrilling, as she fell, the ancient curse.

A wail of horror rose upon the air, as down she dropped and vanished in the gloom that filled a chasm at the castle's base.

Here Ola, now recovering his sense, pressed forward with his men and forced

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the battle home, nor stayed his fierce advance till side by side with Rabenhörst and Thorg he fought. Thus aided at the crucial point, Von Rabenhörst's tired soldiers took new vigour, and drove hard upon the Hammerschlaag; and soon 'twas plain the battle had been turned against the invader. The knights fought stubbornly, as became them, and on neither side was any cowardice shown; and Hammerschlaag's worn fantassin still did good work, but now, harassed by fresher men and sorely pressed by Ola's yeomen, who with pike and club kept crowding them, they could not long maintain their stand, and backward down the knoll were surely urged. 'Twas seen the castle had been saved, **and that the men of Rabenhörst at last**

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prevailed, and Hammerschlaag, grown frenzied at the turn affairs had taken, strode boldly through his ranks and made to kill the Baron if he could. Von Rabenhörst met the challenge as a brave knight should, and, standing forth, said none should interfere, since blood too much already had been shed among good knights, and 'twas but just the battle now should close in personal combat by himself with him who claimed the maid.

The leaders faced each other and the fight began, with much precaution at the first, for neither sought to spare his foe, or wished to inflict a wound that meant not death. No sporting for the entertainment of observers here prevailed above the cause at issue. The Hammerschlaag was on his guard, with eyes alert

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and muscles tensely drawn, for well he knew Von Rabenhörst of old, and oft had seen him wield the sword against a stronger force with good success. Nor was the Baron less attentive to the chance of battle, seeing how it was with Hammerschlaag, and that he had no portion of his former skill and strength abated. Long time they parried blows and feints and shrewdly attempted thrusts without receiving harm, though once it seemed the Hammerschlaag would cut his enemy down, and thrice almost did Rabenhörst throw off the other's guard, while breathless stood the groups of men about in silence witnessing. Then once the Hammerschlaag, boldly swinging his sword, struck hard at the head of Rabenhörst, but not upon his head fell the blow, for,

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quickly shifting to the left, the Baron struck the other's blade aloft; and yet again the Hammerschlaag did try this trick, and yet again the Baron turned it all to naught. And then Von Rabenhörst, the calmer of the twain, since less exertion had he made, began to press his enemy with rapid thrusts and sweeping cuts that would have soon despatched a man of lesser skill than Hammerschlaag; till Hammerschlaag, grown weary of this teasing, made to kill him with a mighty blow that should pass downward through any brief resistance held against its force, and swung his weapon high. The blow fell true and struck upon the guard of Rabenhörst; but the shield of the Baron was tough and firmly grasped, and, though 'twas cleft, it was not cut apart,

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but held the sword of Hammerschlaag in its leathern folds an instant ere he drew it back. And thereupon, the Baron, thrusting with his point at once, drove straight against the heart of Hammerschlaag, and he fell without a gasp.

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CHAPTER VII

HOW THE MAIDEN CAME TO LOVE A MORTAL MAN

THE yoemen of Ola, seeing how it was their lord had slain the enemy's leader, and being inspired to slaughter by what they had witnessed through the night, soon as the combat closed, fell pell-a-mell upon the ranks of Hammerschlaag, and, ere their leader could command them, caused a lively skirmish. The soldiers of Hammerschlaag, seeing them attacking, quickly turned upon them, with result that all were soon involved in a new battle, and

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blood was shed once more. Then certain knights of the Hammerschlaag's army, hoping to become its leaders and to take the lands of the dead master, set to fight against the Baron's forces, each one striving for himself; for, now that Hammerschlaag was gone, there was no man among them certain how the end would be, or what particular portion of reward would come to him. Von Rabenhörst, now mounted on another horse, at sight of all this pother, gave a sharp command; and, quickly falling in, his men advanced upon the enemy, driving them before, till sudden panic fell among them and they broke away from all restraint and scurried through the darkness toward the hills.

And, in this medley, Ola was unhorsed

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and had a wound from one who used a spear, so that he could no longer fight; which Thorg, his brother, seeing, made excuse to leave the Baron's side, and after bore him safely to his bed within the castle's walls.

When morning came, the Baron and his weary men returned, bearing their wounded and such prisoners as had come to them in the night. The remnants of the enemy's forces, having fled beyond the mountains, and being no longer a menace to the peace of the castle, were left to go their ways as best they could, and the defenders, being worn out with their night's work, sought rest, and even Rabenhörst himself desired to sleep. But Thorg stayed with his brother, and would not leave him till he should be

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safe from danger. So he placed him in a quiet chamber in the tower of the castle, and attended to his wants until his fever should abate; and Stille with her women gave him aid.

But the Baron von Rabenhörst, though his castle and his lands and all that lay about them were now safe from attack, was not yet done with war's contention. For, as the day advanced and men-at-arms recovered their lost rest, those of his trusted knights who had survived the battle sought him and demanded that he go with them to the country of the Seven Castellanies of the Lower Hills to take the lands of Hammerschlaag and divide them with fair justice, according to his promise. Rabenhörst heard all they had to say, and, seeing there would be no

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peace among them if he went not, pledged them he would go.

"'Tis only right," he said. "Even as I promised so shall it be. The lands are yours, all save the Lowest Castellany of the Lowest Hill that lieth to the south. This have I sworn to restore to Thorg and Ola, his brother, as ye know. The rest shall be divided as ye wish, with even justice, as reward of your good service. On the morrow we set forth. To-night we rest."

And so it was agreed.

Having thus made peace among them, and arranged for many things that should restore order in his domain, he went, as evening fell, within the castle's tower, to ask of Ola and his wound; and, entering the chamber where he lay, found Thorg

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and Stille sitting by his couch. He spoke to them with gentle greeting, and the maiden rose and came to him, and laid her arms about his neck and let him kiss her, as was her wont; and tender words came to his lips, as he took her to his heart and softly touched her on the cheek.

"A little while, my child," said he, "and thou wilt learn to love me as thou shouldst. Dost thou not love me now?"

She trembled in his clasp and a tear stole from between her lids and trickled down her face. But she made no answer to his words.

"Poor child," he murmured. "Too much turmoil hath unnerved thee for the time. But 'twill pass off. No hand shall steal thee from thy lord. To-morrow I must leave thee once again, but only for

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a season. Think kindly of me in my absence, and, ere my coming back, thou'lt learn to know thy heart. For even now, I think, it doth incline to me."

She raised her head and patted his face, as she always did whenever his words were soft and tender, but she gave no smile, and soon began to weep. He kissed her gently, and in silence drew her with him to the side of Ola's bed, and spoke good comfort to the suffering knight.

Ola answered him with whispered words, telling him he was better and would soon be on his horse again; but ever kept his glances turned away. And once they fell upon the maid and caused her to weep afresh, so that Thorg, re-

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requested all to leave them, lest the fever should return; and the Baron, with his bride, stole softly from the place.

On the morrow, followed by his band of knights and men that bore their equipment and supplies, Von Rabenhörst set forth to subdue the Castellanies of the Lower Hills and make peace among his allies. Thorg and Ola alone remained at the castle, for one was too ill to journey, and the other would not leave him. So Rabenhörst left the affairs of his estate to Thorg, until his brother should recover, with instructions to follow when the time should come.

"All thy lands," said he, "shall be secured to thee, as if thou and thy brother were at hand, and naught that is yours shall be taken. Guard well my castle

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till thy brother is safe without thee; then take horse and come to me. And after that, thou shalt return with me and bring thy brother, who, in the meantime, shall succeed to thee and serve till we arrive."

So Thorg remained and nursed his brother; and the maid was often with them and ministered to the wounded knight while he lay ill, and sometimes served in place of Thorg, who often was constrained to go abroad upon the affairs of Rabenhörst. And, as Ola's wound was healed and strength came back to him, Thorg spent more and more of his time apart from him; for the Baron's domain was wide, and Thorg was faithful. And thus it came to pass the maid was much with Ola, and her heart grew toward him, so that seldom did she dwell in

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mind upon another, but went about in silence, and never sang the songs the people loved to hear. And they said to one another 'twas strange their lady sang no more, but only seemed to weep in secret, but yet it was a natural thing, for "surely she doth pine to see her lord." And Ola saw the change, and knew its cause, but ever strove to think it was not so. For though he knew his heart was grown to love the maid, he had not yet the mind to let her know. For Ola still was loyal.

But once it chanced, when Thorg was farther gone than usual, and would not return until the night, that Ola, feeling much refreshed and weary of his chamber, yearned to go abroad and breathe the outer air and roam awhile among

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the meadows and the groves. So, stealing softly down the castle stairs, he passed without, receiving greeting, as he passed, from one who watched the gates, and took his way among the greenwoods to the clearing where the cottage of the murdered goatherd stood, abandoned now, for none would occupy a haunted hut, and strolled about at leisure, dreaming of his love and how its dearling was another's bride, and marvelling at the silence of the maid and at the story of her wondrous song. And, as he sat there musing, there fell upon his ear the sound of footfalls and a rustling of the grass, and, ere he scarce had noted the direction of the disturbance, the maid appeared before him; and, seeing him, came

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quickly to his side with eager haste, and spoke.

Her voice, thus used, was sweeter than the song of mavis or the soughing of the summer breeze that wantons in the pines, so burning Ola thought, as, hearing it, he marvelled yet again, knowing the tale of old that made her always mute. But deeper than the sound of voice her words sank to his soul, for love it was that spoke to him in her tones.

"At last," she said, "I find thee. Oh, 'tis good to see thee safe. My heart such throbbing hath not known before, as when it sought thee by thy couch and saw thou wert not there. Why dost thou wander forth alone, with none to watch thee if thou shouldst be weak and sore in need of help?"

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The words were nothing amorous, yet the tones — it was the tones, he said — were those of tenderest passion. And he bowed his head upon his hands and strove to stay the feeling that they wrought within him. But his heart was weak. Yet still he spoke no word, not trusting to his tongue.

"Why art thou silent?" said the maid. "'Tis true, thou art the first to whom my prisoned words have gone, since Gor, the faithful hound, was taken away. But surely thou dost hear, and couldst reply, for speech to thee hath never been denied. Tell me, fair Ola, why didst thou depart?"

He held his voice in check and answered her, choosing with care his words, and said:

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"Dear lady, there is naught to fret thee in my rambling. I did but seek the outer air and sunshine for a time, and soon would have returned. I thank thee for thy interest, yet there was no need for thee to come. Strong enough am I to wander far, and soon upon my horse to take my way to my domain."

"To thy domain!" she said, with trembling. "And wouldst thou now depart and never let me see thy face again?"

"The good God knows 'twere best I ne'er had come," he murmured. Then, with an effort, raised his eyes and, looking at her, added: "True, fair lady, pleasant it is to receive such gracious care as thou hast given; but a knight

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must sometime go his way. Thy lord no longer needs me, so I go."

"Yes," she made answer, "this is so. But yet, I cannot let thee go. Thou art, in truth, more dear to me than any other I have ever known. And, then, it is to thee alone that I may speak."

"Pray tell me, fair one, how this may be so?" said Ola. "For, if thou canst to me address thy gentle words, why not to any other? There surely is some mystery in this, unless it is to humour a sick man thou sayest it. Why shouldst thou not with words speak unto all; or why to me alone?"

She stood a moment, swaying like a wind-blown lily ere she spoke; and then, with passionate moanings and with many tears, slipped down beside him where he

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sat upon the goatherd's wooden bench, and, clinging close upon his neck, rained kisses on his face and drew his head upon her heaving bosom; and the knight, scarce knowing what he did, and filled with gracious ardour toward the maid, slipped his engaging arms about her balmy shape, and let her have her way, nor uttered any word. At last she spoke to him, and her voice was eery and had a sound of distant music in its tones that seemed unhumanlike and of another world, but sweet it was beyond all music he had ever heard, and held him spell-bound by its spirit charm.

"O Love," she said. "At last my words are given me back, and with them sense to know how sweet it is to barter speech with mortal. Long, so long ago

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it seemeth it must ages be, I found myself a child, that sang alone all day among the woods and waters, and wandered in the glens, with none to be companion save an aged one, and she no speech possessed. And often when I sang, I yearned to speak in words that seemed to lie imprisoned in my breast and would not come, though always was my song a pleasure. And one day, rambling deep into the forest, it chanced I slept and dreamed, and, in my dreaming, saw a mighty one that was not mortal but a spirit, standing with a creature of the Erlenfolk, and gazing upon me as I slept, and heard her say: 'This is the child that thou must give me for my use. To her shall beauty and a lightsome heart be given, and music such as never man hath

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heard. But, since she is to wed no mortal man, nor ever know of love, her speech must be confined, that never may she cease to serve me well. Yet, mark me; if at any time she love a mortal man, all this enchantment shall depart from her, and she shall be as mortal for awhile and suffer the pains of mortal life, until she return to thee again. And, furthermore, her soul I will remove, against the time to come when men may woo her, seeking her to wife. Thus, soulless, she will be care-free nor yield to any pleadings of the heart. But this I cannot promise unless she be kept apart from converse with the world. For one there is whose soul is counterpart of hers, and, should she chance to meet him, through his soul her soul will quick return to her again, and

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after that no power can keep her bound.' Then I awoke and found myself alone, save that the aged one was near. And so it was. For years I roamed among my friends, these mortal ones, and naught of love or loving understood, and sang my songs at morn and eve, and had no words, but ever happy was; for, having no soul, I could not suffer. And then my master bade me be his wife, and, knowing not what he meant, 'twas done. But even at the tying of that bond, mine eyes met thine, and then, alas! I knew — for there I saw a soul that gave mine own to me. Oh, tell me, Ola, dost thou love my soul as mine loves thine?"

And Ola, trembling at the tale and at the awesome mystery of it all, made answer:

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"Yes; I love thee. To deny it is absurd. But yet thou'rt not for me."

"I understand thee not," the maid replied. "I love thee, and thou lovest me. My soul looks into thine and thine to mine goes forth; and yet thou sayest I am not for thee."

"Poor child," he said, as tenderly he drew her to his heart; "thou dost not know the ways of mortals well. Thou art the bride of Rabenhörst, and bound to him for life."

Then wildly passionate she broke forth: "The bride of Rabenhörst! Not thine, but his for life! Is this the love of mortals? Would my noble lord dare bind a soul that loves not his? It is not so. Thee only will I love, because thou lovest me. The people of the Elver-

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konge love but once, and have no souls for others. Thou art mine."

She wrapped him in her arms and would not let him go, pouring delicious passion o'er his sense, until he had no thought of how it all would end, and even for the time forgot his duty and his honour and the honour of his host; and not until the waning light gave warning of the night's approach did these two leave the goatherd's hut and seek the castle gate.

And after this, for many a day, when Thorg, his brother, was abroad attending to the duties of the Baron, Ola and the maid would ramble o'er the farthings of the castellany and beguile the time with words of tenderness and sweet endearments. For it seemed to Ola that to

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cut her off with harsh repulse would be more than he could bear, loving her as he did with all his soul. And yet he knew the day would come when this must be, and, knowing, still delayed its coming. He soon discerned the maiden had no sense of her allegiance to her spouse, but rather seemed a child, whose only thought was of the one immediate object that she craved; and when, at times, his manhood made its protest at the wrong that he was doing to the maid, the master, and himself and Thorg, he made attempt to woo her from her fancy, and to show her why it was she must not dwell on him. But either she was ignorant, or else devoid of any power to see how 'twas, for never could she seem to understand, but always laughed his grave re-

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bukes to scorn, and said her soul was all the guide she had, and that her love was fixed and could not change, and that the maidens of her fatherland, once loving mortal, never loved again, and might retain their mortal shape save only while they loved. "If thou shouldst leave me now, O Soul," she said, "this form that thou dost see would vanish, and the soul thou gavest me would wander forth forever, sad, companionless, and homeless, for the people of the Elverkonge never may receive again a maid that once hath loved a mortal man. Therefore, leave me not, but let me have thee near."

And Ola was much troubled, hearing her, and marvelled what it was he ought to do. He saw his duty clear, but still

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his heart would not obey, for much he yearned to have the maid.

Meantime the loyal Thorg went always on his rounds and served the Baron justly, and at eve, when all were gathered at the board, talked much of these affairs with Ola, who would sometimes answer him with interest, striving to conceal the trouble in his heart. And Stille, sitting with them, often smiled and seemed to find the brother's company good, and, in her childlike manner, would stretch forth her hand and pat him on the cheek, and laugh a merry laugh that rang like music through the castle halls. For only when alone with Ola did she speak, nor seemed she to have words for any other. Thus it was none save himself suspected there was any

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change in her; and those who served at table often gazed upon the group in secret wonder, and said the lady surely had no sense, but was bewitched, and marvelled that their master dared to wed a creature so bereft of wit. But yet they loved her well, for always was she gentle, and there surely was no harm to come of her. And Thorg, oft gazing at the lady, when she knew it not, was sorely tried, for deep within his heart there burned a tender passion nothing could allay. But never man would know of this, — for Thorg was always loyal, and the lady was not his.

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CHAPTER VIII

WHAT HAPPENED AFTER RABENHORST'S RETURN

A FULL round year had passed since Rabenhörst and his knights departed to subdue the Castellanies of the Lower Hills, and still there was no word of him, nor any summons telling how he fared, when, on a bright particular morn, there came a calling from the distant hills, and, swinging down the slopes, a merry band of horsemen cantered through the land and came to the castle gates. And Ola, seeing them draw near, while gazing from a window, saw

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the company were Rabenhörst and his crew, and, hastening to the gate, swung wide the portals and admitted them; for Thorg was gone abroad at early dawn on business, and there was no other to receive. And, as he met the Baron, and perceived his noble mien, and how he came with mind intent on kindness, Ola sighed, and, after proper greeting, dropped his glances to the ground, and, as soon as it was possible, made excuse and fled away among the groves.

"A gentle knight, but timid and reserved and shy beyond the common," said Von Rabenhörst; "but withal a goodly youth, and one who hath much courage in the fray. What he did that night upon these hills is not to be forgotten. But yet his brother charms me

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best. In him all qualities seem blent with balance smooth that makes the perfect man."

Having despatched his comrades to their various quarters, he ordered a feast made ready to celebrate their coming. And then, with eager steps, he sought the upper rooms, to greet his bride, and, entering unannounced, beheld her sitting near a couch and fondling a babe that lay upon her lap, as softly she gave tongue to sweetest melodies.

A moment thus the Baron paused unnoticed, and let his loving glances fall upon the lady, for as yet he gave no thought save only to herself, nor cared what babe it was she coddled on her knee. And, as he gazed upon her, and the picture grew in charm, a tender pride filled

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all his soul; and once again a tear, the twin of that he shed long years before when first he took the maid, crept gently down his cheek and dewed his beard. And still the lady sang and had not seen him.

Softly stepping to her side, he laid his hand upon her head, and spoke:

"Sweet one," he said, "look up and greet thy lord. His warrings all at last are done, and now he comes to claim thee. Hast thou, in my absence, learned thy lesson well, and dost thou love me now. Little one, see; I love thee. Dost thou also love?"

But Stille only clasped the babe close in her arms, and sadly answered:

"Stille-Mægth," then gazed upon her

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lord and wept a rain of waters from her wildly staring eyes.

Von Rabenhörst drew back apace, astounded at the sight, and paused a moment ere he spoke again. A doubt, so dim, uncertain, and obscure he scarcely felt it, came upon him — just an instant — vanished, and, recovered from the doubt, he once again addressed her.

"This," said he, "is scarce a cordial greeting, yet I have no heart to censure. Tell me, child, what 'tis that grieveth thee, and why it is thou carest for that foundling in thine arms. It is, in truth, a pretty babe, and much I honour thee for loving it. Such things do mark the woman-nature well. But yet thou surely hast some care for me. Come hither, that I may take thee in my arms and set

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thee on my knee; and let me kiss away those tears, that ill become an hour like this. If thou art grieving, surely thy lord would comfort thee."

But she made him no reply, and only clasped the babe yet closer in her arms, and murmured, as before:

"Stille-Mægth," and wept again.

Then Thorg, in haste to greet the master, coming through the halls, paused at the open door, uncertain of his right to enter there; and, overhearing what was said, and seeing how it was and that the lady was in deepest peril, waited, ear intent upon the voices. For he now perceived (what none had thought before) that the babe that lay upon the lady's lap was not the heir of Rabenhörst, but another's. And, perceiving this, he fee-

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bly groaned, for quickly 'twas made clear to him his brother owned the child. Thus, seeing how it was, he soon recalled the tenderness of the maid for Ola, and remembered many things his eyes had noticed, taking little thought of them, and, at the recollection, shuddered, and a faintness fell upon his heart. So once again a groaning scaped his lips. At which the Baron turned and saw him standing there.

" Come hither, honest Thorg," he said. " I greet thee here, with gratitude for thy noble service and the care thou gavest my affairs. Thy duties are well done, and nothing needs complaint. But here, I feel, my welcome hath been somewhat cold. Pray tell me, if thou canst, why

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'tis the lady weeps, and why she clings so tightly to that child?"

But Thorg was silent, like a guilty man, and could no answer make.

At which Von Rabenhörst, turning on his bride, his temper rising, made to take the child away and draw her to his side. But she resisted him with feeble violence, and would not give it up, and wept again and fell upon her knees, with moanings, so the Baron was perplexed.

Then Thorg, recovered of his weakness, stepped within and tried to take the child; but she strove with him as with the other, and would not let it go. And Rabenhörst, suspecting now a little how the truth might be, yet never yet believing, thought to move her by rebuke, and spoke in words of anger, saying:

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"This, in sooth, is out of reason. Surely thou art beside thyself to so behave. I give thee words of greeting, and thy answer is to weep. I ask thee to release the child an instant, and thou holdest it from me as if it were thine own, and I some robber that would steal it from thy heart. I am weary of this silliness, though I love thee far beyond the limit of rebuke, and would not chide thee for thy folly; but I claim thee now as mine, and have no patience longer to be gainsaid. Release the child to Thorg and come to me."

But Stille only moaned, and clung yet tighter to the babe.

At which, Von Rabenhörst, grown impatient, seized the child and tore it from her. Whereat she cried aloud and made

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to take it from him, so he was forced to gently put her arms away. And then again a doubt grew on his soul; and, more to dispel the faint suggestion than for any other cause, he sternly spoke to her in these words:

"Tell me at once," he said, "without delay, whose child is this?" And, as he thus addressed her, he forgot her strange bewitchment, and that speech was not upon her tongue, for his mind was much disturbed.

Then Thorg, perceiving how the Baron raved, and that the lady could not long escape his wrath, and, thinking of his brother's sin and all the love he bore him from his earliest boyhood days, stepped close and stood between the twain, with saddened eyes, and said:

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"O Lord of Rabenhörst; release the lady, for she hath no speech to tell thee of her wrong. And pledge me, on thine honour as a knight, to spare her any harm. 'Tis all I ask of thee. One person of thy household is alone the cause of this misfortune, and thy wrath should fall on him. Roderich von Rabenhörst, master kind and true, I ask no pardon at thy hands, for never could forgiveness be at wrong like this; but only that thou spare the lady, for her sense is weak, and she hath no rightful knowledge of this matter. I alone am guilty. I alone should suffer. Lord; the babe is mine."

Uttering these words in measured tones, he took the child from Rabenhörst and gently laid it in its mother's lap; then turned again and faced the master. The

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Baron stood like one absorbed in many things, and spoke not for a time; so silence fell upon the group, and naught was heard within the chamber save the gentle breathing of the child that slept. Recovering, at last, from all this shock, the Baron raised his eyes and let them rest on Thorg, and said:

"I understand. And yet it seemeth not a truth that thou hast spoken. Had it been thy brother, easier would it be to take the sense of all this error, for, albeit a good knight, he yet is one who hath a comely face and bearing of the sort that women like, and is not strong at every point as thou dost seem. O man, in whom I trusted much, more than in any other I have ever known! this blow is double hard, for it doth strike my confi-

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dence both in one I cherished as my bride and one I loved more fondly than a brother. It matters not what Rabenhörst becomes when this is o'er, for all that made his life worth living hath been torn from him. But one thing now remains, and this is quickly settled. Again the sword, long ages curse of all our line, must dip in human blood by hand of Rabenhörst. For I must slay thee, Thorg; there is no other thing to do. But yet, I may not kill thee as a man doth kill some loathsome churl that wrongs him in his home, for I owe thee much, and a knight thou art of noble lineage, and always honest at the core until this hour. And then, thou hast, in days now past, both served and loved me well, and twice didst save my life upon the battle-

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field. These things a Rabenhörst may not forget. Yet I must slay thee. So at once prepare to meet me, on the open in the clearing of the forests, with thy sword. 'Tis all I have to say to thee. Depart."

Before the sun was set that day, Von Rabenhörst and Thorg were met in mortal combat. And, ere the darkness fell, the noble knight, that bore the burden of his brother's sin, lay dead upon the sward, and Roderich, his foe, was carried, dying, to the castle tower. And then it was that Ola, hearing of these things, and heavy with remorse, returned from cowardly wanderings in the forest, and, coming to the gate, begged sore to see the master, that he might speak to

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him before it should be too late; and, ushered to the bedside of the dying lord, he told him all the truth and nothing left unsaid. Then Rabenhörst, perceiving how it was, and that the maiden of no mortal people came, and that she never loved him or could love, forgave the knight his wrong against himself, and sent him far away to a distant place, with strict command to be an holy man until his hour should come. "For nevermore," said he, "can stained knight hold lance at rest, and sin so deep as thine needs much repentance. As for me," he slow continued, "nothing may be said. I understand it now, and see the truth. The curse of all the Rabenhörsts doth bind upon me, and from that there is no hiding, nor in love could I have hoped

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to dwell, e'en had the maid been true, for such as she can love but once, and are not won like mortal maids. And so it is that nevermore it shall be mine to love a maid, or friendship have with thee or any man. But Thorg, thy brother, whom I slew (not knowing this was wrong), him will I seek among the noble dead; and he, forgiving me, as I do thee, will let me dwell beside him, for his love is broad, and large enough to cover even me."

Thus speaking, he dismissed the knight, and, sending for his servitors, gave strict orders for the caring of the child, that should become his heir. "Perhaps," he said, "he being of a different blood, the curse may not descend to him." And also strictest orders gave

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he for the mother's guard — but he called her not, for 'twas not good, he said, to see her face again. And then, as night came on and darkness grew within the castle walls, he passed away. Nor was there any certain when he died, so gentle was his end.

That night, when all the castellany slept, save those that watched beside the coffined master, a wild, sweet singing thrilled upon the air, and filled the groves and swept across the opens to the mountains far away. And those who heard it started at the sound, for weird and strange the music came, not seeming to have cause at any point within the whole domain, but everywhere at once, and then again too far among the hills

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to give it definite origin. And certain ones attention gave, and caught the tones, and knew it was their lady's voice that sang upon the night:

"La-La, La-La, La-Li-o!
Hither come and thither go.
Swing your waving branches high,
Dream-tree, growing in the sky.
Eaglets, in your mountain nest,
Hide your heads on mother's breast.
Winds and waters pass you by,
Fire and tempest come not nigh.
Spirits of the dell below,
Tell me how the flowers grow.
Wreathe me o'er with roses rare,
Twine your lilies in my hair.
Cloudlets floating in the air,
Ever soaring, white and fair,
Take me up and let me be,
Sister friends, as one of ye.
La-La, La-La, La-Li-o.
Where do all the waters flow?

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"La-La, La-La, La-Li-o!
Hither come and thither go.
Hear the Elf-king's trumpet ring;
Answer Echo; answer King.
La-La, La-La, who shall tell
Where the Erlmen's daughters dwell?
Glen and forest, far and free,
Answer to their melody.
Yet moor and mountain, field and
flood
Still allegiance owe to God;
Draw their warmth from Heaven
above,
Home of light and peace and love —
Subject to His will alone,
Nature knows no despot's throne,
Fears no tyrant, loves no king,
Gives to Man no reckoning.
La-La, La-La, La-Li-o.
Where do all the echoes go?"

In haste pursuing up the sounds, they made to bring her back, lest, wandering thus alone, some harm might come to

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her. But, though they hunted far, and always heard the song, they never found her; and, at early dawn, the music ceased, so none could trace it.

The people searched all day to bring their mistress back, but nothing found, and yet again at night, when clear and strong the music rang upon the air, and still there were no tidings of the lost. And so, for many days, they hunted, but without success. And always there was music on the night, that filled the forests and the open glens, but never human presence, until at last 'twas said the Silent Maid had been a spirit, dwelling in mortal form among the people, her melody a benison of peace and happiness, and that her kinfolk of the Elverkonge claimed her, when the curse that lay

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upon the Baron's lands was gone, and they could enter there. Thus the legend grew, until the people of the land that lies between the rising and the setting of the Sun enshrined her as their saint and blessed her memory — saying it was her music gave them purer souls and warmer hearts, and drew them close to Nature and to God — and taught their children to preserve her songs.

THE END.

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BY
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