

"Marie, Marie, you are in the hands of God. Come weal, come wo, can you not trust yourself to Him? See, the sun goes lower and lower; but before I release your hand you must swear that it shall shed no blood."

Alas! Yes—the sun was rapidly sinking, and she must hasten, or her father's life would be lost. "I promise," said she, "and now, father, pray—pray for—"

She could say no more; but rising she went alone up the steps that led to Esslingen Castle. The people, still on their knees, followed her lithe figure till it was hidden for a time by the fir-trees that grew along the heights; then, as she emerged again and appeared at the hill-top, the multitude gave vent to their feelings in prayer.

Higher and higher she mounted, until they saw that she had reached the gates, and disappeared.

CHAPTER VII.

HER RETURN.

HOURS went by and darkness set in. It was a cold night in March; the wind howled in fitful gusts along the streets, but the people could not disperse. They sat shivering together in the market-place; for how was it possible for sleep to visit their eyes, when every moment might hurl destruction upon their heads. The old priest went from one to another, encouraging the desponding, and comforting the afflicted; praying with the mothers, and covering their shivering children, who, stretched at the feet of their parents, or resting within their arms, were the only ones there to whom sleep brought oblivion of sorrow.

At last that fearful night of suspense went by. A rosy flush tinged the eastern sky, it deepened to gold, and the sun rose. The people raised a hymn of thanksgiving, and, as they were rising from their devotions, the roll of a drum was heard, and a file of soldiers were seen issuing from the castle-gates. They came nearer and nearer, until they reached the city;

but by the time they had neared the market-place, not a human being was there to confront them: the people had all fled to their houses.

They stopped before the residence of the burgomaster, and from an opening made in the ranks there issued two persons; the one a man, the other a woman. The latter was veiled, and her head rested languidly upon the shoulders of her companion.

A group of French officers escorted them to the door, where they took off their hats, and, bowing low, retired. The father and daughter were lost to view, the drum beat anew, and the men, without exchanging a word with the inhabitants, returned to their quarters at Esslingen Castle.

The people were no sooner reassured as to the intentions of the soldiers, than they poured in streams from their homes, and took their way to the burgomaster's house. Congratulations were exchanged between friends, parents embraced their children, husbands pressed their wives to their bosoms; every heart overflowed with gratitude to Marie, every voice was lifted in her praise.

But she! Scarcely enduring her mother's caresses, she had torn herself from that mother's embrace, and, hastening away to the solitude of her own room, had bolted herself within.

Two hours went by, and the house of the burgomaster could scarcely contain the friends that flocked thither to welcome his daughter. Without, a band of music was playing martial airs, while within, halls, parlors, and staircases, were crowded with magistrates in their robes of office, churchmen in their clerical gowns, and women and maidens in gay and festive apparel.

A deputation of citizens now requested to be permitted to pay homage to the heroine that had rescued her townsmen from death; and Frau Wengelin ventured to knock at the door of her daughter's chamber. She was so earnest in her pleadings, that at last the bolt was withdrawn, and Marie, with bloodshot eyes, and mouth convulsed, appeared upon the threshold.

"Come, my child," said the poor mother, "the citizens will

not leave the house until they have seen you." And compelling her forward, Frau Wengelin, with some difficulty, brought her as far as the foot of the staircase.

She was greeted with loud and repeated cheerings, which scarcely appeared to reach her ear, while her eyes, fixed upon the throng before her, seemed to ask what meant this turmoil.

Suddenly she heard her name whispered, and, with a fearful shriek, she recoiled from the outstretched hand of a young man, who had just rushed forward to clasp her in his arms.

"What ails my Marie on this festive day, where all is joy around?" said he. "I have just this moment arrived, to say that help is nigh, my countrymen," added he, addressing the crowd. "Our army is at hand, and the French shall suffer for their deeds of violence in Germany. But what means this large and gay assemblage? And who are these?" asked he, as a group of young maidens came forward with a crown of laurel, and some of the principal burgomasters, leading the bewildered Marie to a throne decked with flowers, seated her on a chair under its green and fragrant canopy.

No answer was made to his inquiry, for one of the deputies began an address, in which Marie was hailed as the heroine that had rescued her fellow-citizens from death, and her native place from destruction. Her portrait was to grace the council-hall of Esslingen, and such honors as it lay in the power of its magistrates to confer, were to be hers forever.

At this moment Marie rose suddenly from her seat, gasped for breath, and fell as suddenly back, for the first time lifting her face, which, as she lay against the wall of flowers that concealed her chair, was marble-white, and strangely convulsed.

Her mother started forward, and Caspar, catching her in his arms, covered her face with kisses.

"What ails thee, my beloved? Oh, do not look so wildly at thy Caspar! Marie, my own one, what is it?"

"It is over," murmured she, almost inaudibly.

"What is over?" cried the frightened mother, bending over her child's writhing form.

"Life!" sighed the girl, and her eyes closed wearily.

The frightful stillness was unbroken by a sound. Frau Wengelin suppressed her sobs, that she might gaze upon her dying child; while her father stood by, the picture of dumb despair. Caspar held her to his heart, dimly apprehending the fearful tragedy of the hour, and the guests pressed noiselessly around, vainly striving to catch a glimpse of their victim's face.

The crowd opened to allow passage to the priest, who, approaching the throne, came and knelt beside Caspar.

"Marie," said he, in a loud, distinct voice, that reached the portals of her soul, and aroused her departing senses.

Marie slowly opened her eyes, and gazed upon the speaker. "I have kept my oath," said she, hoarsely. "No blood was shed, but I have returned to die."

"Wherefore to die?" cried several voices at once.

"Ask my Caspar," murmured she, looking fondly into the face of her betrothed, and, with her eyes fixed upon his, Marie's soul took its flight to heaven.