

THE LILY OF GOLDENFERN.

(By the author of "Tyborne." In the *Ave Maria*.)

(Concluded).

There was a great deal of coming and going at the castle for the next few days, but only of poor peasants receiving alms and food. There was also much needlework going on in the long workroom, where spinning-wheels and embroidery frames were kept busy, and a great outfit was apparently being made for the young Baron. Carpenters were busy down in the hamlet at the foot of the hill on which the castle stood; and mules went up to the castle gate laden with large packages and returned to the village without their burdens. But nothing was said, and those who were in the secret of these preparations held their tongue.

A week after the chaplain's return the neighbourhood was roused by the thundering of horses' feet, as the Baron, at the head of a train of followers, all fully armed, swept through the hamlet and up the ascent to the castle, never drawing rein till arrived at the drawbridge, which was down. Seeing no sign of resistance, they crossed it, and throwing his horse's bridle to his groom, the Baron sprang to the ground, and, followed, by his suite, strode into the hall. Up the stairs to his lady's chamber he went, his spurs and sword clanking at every step and giving notice of his approach. He threw open the door and entered.

His wife rose pale and gentle.

"Welcome, my lord," she said, calmly. "Will you be seated while I order refreshments for you?"

His eyes roamed through the room as he replied, roughly: "Where is my son? I have come for him."

"You cannot mean to take him from his poor mother," she said, pleadingly. "Think, Fritz, he is too little to learn more than a mother's love can teach him as yet. Leave him a while."

"No!" thundered the Baron, and his eyes sparkled with anger. "I will have him now, and feed him on the forest wolves' milk rather than that he should drink in cowardice and learn psalm-singing in his cradle."

"Then, if you can find him, you will take him," said the mother, bravely. "I am defenceless."

"Where is he?" shouted the Baron.

"Here," said the mother, drawing aside a heavy curtain at the end of the room.

The Baron entered, and his companions crowded round him to catch a sight of the young heir. But though he entered, and though he searched and stormed, and threatened the dungeon and the rack to all concerned, he could never find the child, and yet the child was there. There was no wonderful machinery introduced to conceal the young infant. God did not strike the father with sudden blindness, nor was any miracle wrought in favour of the poor young mother, whose heart, inspired by the Virgin Mother, had prompted her to adopt a wonderful expedient, and at the same time to do a deed of charity.

The sight that met the Baron's eyes on entering the room was that of twelve cradles, each exactly alike, within which twelve babes were lying, all clothed in the same costly linen and embroidery. How could he tell one from another? If he took any one, it might be that very one was the son of Ralph, the one-eyed wood-cutter; or of half-crazy Huldah, the kitchen girl, whose husband had been hanged for murder by the Baron's own order six months before.

There was an atmosphere of peace in the room; and even the confusion caused by the Baron's rough entrance, and the cries of the twelve babies as he took one after another, vainly trying to find some sign of superior birth or resemblance to himself, could not long mar the tranquillity. A stormy scene with his wife followed, in which her resolution bore him down; for if he should kill her, as he threatened, how could he ever hope to discover his child?

At length he departed, secretly determined to return on some unexpected day, and find his own son restored to his rightful position. But that day never came. Whenever he made a sudden raid upon the castle he found the twelve boys all growing up round the youthful mother, and vying with one another in love and obedience to her.

As years went on he questioned them. "What is your name, my boy?" he said to a fine, dark-eyed, black-haired boy, whom he thought might prove his image when older.

"Fritz Peter, my lord," was the child's ready answer.

"And yours, my little fellow?" as he turned from Fritz Peter, scowling, to a golden-haired lad, with the blue eyes and fair complexion which seemed to point him out, as the son of the Lily of Goldenfern.

"Fritz Johann, Lord Baron."

And so, in turn, each answered to the name of Fritz, with that of an apostle added.

Did he say to either, "who is your mother?" each answered "There is our lady mother," and bowed to the Baroness in reverence and love; while she smiled on them, well pleased that her inspiration to adopt eleven little peasants in honour of the twelve Apostles, and to bring them up as her own, had been a blessed.

After years of hopeless searching, the wild man gave up all quest of his son, but went daily from bad to worse. One day, however, Our Lord had mercy on him; and while pursuing a stag along a rocky path, his horse slipped, rolled over with him; and when he came to his senses he found himself lying in a cave hewn out of a rock, with a venerable old man watching him anxiously. For many days he raved in fever from his injuries, and when he began to recover he heard that his horse had been killed close to the hermit's cave, and he himself seriously wounded. He was still compelled to remain for some weeks dependant on the hospitality and good nursing of the hermit for recovery of strength.

Little by little, as he lay there watching the old man at his vigils and disciplines before the rude crucifix in his cave, the Baron's proud heart softened. Memories of days of innocence, recollections of his gentle wife, longings for the boy who might have been his stay in sickness and old age, crept over him.

One day the hermit said to him, pointing to the figure of the Crucified:

"My son, thou seest what He has done for thee: what wilt thou do for Him?"

The strong man's frame shook with emotion, as he answered, humbly and sadly:

"For me, Father? Ah, you do not know me! I am Fritz von Thornstein. He can not do anything for me."

Then the aged saint spoke to him of the Refuge of Sinners, and of St Dismas, the penitent thief; and by degrees won him to confession and the promise of a new life.

But when at last, whole in body and soul, he was preparing to leave the cave, he said to his spiritual guide:

"My Father, I can not yet preent myself to my dear and holy wife. I must first do penance and expiate my sins in the Holy Land, which saw my Saviour die. I will at once join the Crusading army, which even now must be embarking for the East; and if it please Our Lord that I return, then will I seek her whom I have so sinned against, and pray her to show my son to these unworthy eyes."

"So be it, my son; and God be with thee in thy going out and in thy coming in!"

Thus they parted.

Before the gates of Acre lay heaps of the slain. Good St Louis had died on the coast of Africa, but the English Edward and Crusaders of all ranks and nations had pressed on to the Holy Land. They had fought valiantly that day, and driven back the infidels; the last rays of the sun were sinking into the sea, or gilding the bloody field with promises of crowns of glory awaiting those who had died in Our Lord's own land, fighting in defence of the faith.

A knight was going round among the wounded, giving drink to one, staunching the wounds of another with his own scarf, lifting another from beneath the horse which had fallen on him, when he heard a groan from one close at his side.

"Water, sir knight! A drink, for the love of God and the Lily of Goldenfern!"

At those words the knight started. He turned hastily, and saw a young warrior lying with upturned, boyish face. The golden-brown hair was clotted with blood, and the death-damp lay on his forehead.

"Who are you? In the name of God and Our Lady, speak again!" And he raised the lad's head—for he seemed little more than seventeen or eighteen years.—and put his flask to his lips, helping him tenderly to swallow a few drops of the cordial.

The young crusader revived, and opening his large blue eyes, answered:

"Fritz Johann von Thornstein."

"Tell me," gasped the knight, who was none other than Baron von Thornstein, "how came you here? Have you any brothers?"

"My mother is the Baroness von Thornstein. When the news of a fresh crusade came to our castle, she agreed, at our urgent request, that I with my eleven brothers should take the Cross and offer our services to Our Lord to obtain my father's conversion. We were to ask for everything in the name of God and for the love of the Lily of Goldenfern, while she united her prayers at home with ours on the battlefield."

"But where are your brothers?" asked the father, in his agony of uncertainty as to which might prove to be his son.

The young Crusader gave a sweet, proud smile, and pointed right and left.

"We fought shoulder to shoulder as we had lived; and we all fell together, but they are dead. I crawled to each, and gave them all I had of wine in my flask. I am the last."

"And you—are you her son and mine?" And briefly the penitent knight recounted his fall and his conversion.

"Thanks be to God! Bless me, my father!" murmured the dying soldier. "I am her son, but only she and I know it. She named me Johann in honour of the Beloved Disciple to whom the Blessed Mother was given. Ah! my head swims—see—there is light indeed! Dear father, take my mother my last word—*Love!*"

The sun sank, and the young Crusader's face lay in the marble stillness of death, with a golden halo lingering round it.

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