At Swords' Points;

OR,

A SOLDIER OF THE RHINE.

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CHAPTER XX.

At the Wolf's Head Drinking Fountain.

Even at the risk of their being noticed by hostile eyes, Paul turned his head so that he might look into his companion's face.

"I see you, too, have met with an adventure, Karl," he muttered, once more scanning his paper, although the French words danced up and down before his eyes.

"Perhaps one could hardly call it by such a name, when compared with your double exploit," modestly. "But perhaps you can guess she is here in Metz."

"Beatrix, my sister?"

"Yes; and not alone. A nun accompanies her. I myself have seen her, and under conditions little short of tragic."

Paul breathed hard.

Already he had begun to find love in his long desolate heart for this pretty sister, and the thought of danger overtaking her aroused his spleen.

"Tell me what happened, brother," he muttered.

"It was last night. I had succeeded in gaining an entrance to the city, bringing with me three carrier pigeons belonging to a man within our lines, and which were to take my messages in cipher to the general.

"While wandering around, picking up all the information possible, chance —no, it was a favor of Providence, threw me among a group of soldiers in one of the parks.

"They had been drinking to drown the impending woe, and were in a condition far removed from the usually polite Frenchman.

"Enough to say they stopped two women who came from the direction of the hospital—I heard a scream, and forgot the danger I ran, for the voice was that of Beatrix."

"How many were there?"

"Some four or five."

"Excellent. And you put them to flight alone and unaided?"

"Yes; and Beatrix was horrified at discovering my identity, though I believe, pleased to know that it was to a German arm she was indebted for the rescue."

"What of—her companion?"

"She thanked me most sweetly. You remember what your mother looked like when as a child you saw her last. She is still the same, with a fate purified by suffering. I fear she is not long for this world. Her incessant labors in the field she has chosen have undermined her health. It may come back, but the chances are she will presently slip away from you all."

Somehow this gave Paul a shock, and he immediately resolved that he would seize the very first available opportunity to make his peace with the poor lady whose life history had been so sad.

"I must see her."

"When would you dare to seek her?"

"Soon. This evening, if it is possible."

Karl considered.

"Do you know the wolf's head fountain, down by the high wall yonder?"

"I drank there not an hour ago."

"It is well. Meet me there at nine to-night, and together we will seek those in whose interests we are so deeply concerned."

"Done! At nine, you say?"

"Yes; and now I am about to move off. Remember."

Paul counted the minutes until nightfall.

A great yearning had come upon him to see his mother and reassure her that forgiveness had come at last —to take her weary form in his manly arms and look into the eyes that had wept so many tears of bitter regret.

Totally ignorant of the exciting events which this night of nights had in store for him, Paul sauntered in the direction of the little wolf's head drinking fountain that projected from the wall which he had agreed to as a rendezvous for meeting Karl.

As he drew near the drinking fountain he remembered that caution was an absolutely necessary adjunct to his mission. Keenly he surveyed each lounger in turn.

Fortunately the two comrades had arranged a crude system of signaling, based somewhat upon the code in use during their days at old Heidelberg, and by a cautious use of this Paul was at last enabled to clutch the hand of his comrade.

All seemed working well.

He found Karl somewhat worried under the belief that he was being watched.

It might be imagination, but he feared that suspicions had arisen regarding his identity.

"I have news," he said, as their hands were pressed together.

"News—of Hildegarde?" demanded Paul.

"No. You know what we guessed was the reason for Conrad's being here?"

"Yes—a woman," replied Paul, quickly turning his head to look over his shoulder, as though the mention of the countess might cause her to appear.

"Well, she is in Metz, though I hope not within sound of my voice, and you may depend upon it just as much a factor in the game as ever. I saw her come out of the hospital where your victim was being nursed, and the look on her face was worth studying."

"You give me a cold shiver, comrade. I fear no man alive, but heaven deliver me from such a woman. However, let us dismiss her from our thoughts. Tel me more about Hildegarde. Such a subject will take the bad taste from my mouth."

"Well, I have seen the young woman again and you may even have that pleasure to-night."

"How so?"

"Simply because we are going to a house that adjoins the Red Cross hospital, where she is engaged in her holy labor."

"That is singular indeed."

"It may be more ere we are through. You know I am a firm believer in the working of Providence, and to my mind there is something more than a mere coincidence in this thing."

They were now near their destination. Apparently there was no suspicious craft above the horizon—at least Von Stettin gave no indication of serious alarm.

"The hospital!" he muttered.

Paul came to a stand for a moment—who could blame him under the circumstances?

Although he halted to look in at the open door only a brief time, it proved a most unfortunate piece of business for him, as subsequent events turned out.

A figure stood to one side, perhaps waiting until the wounded soldiers had all been carried into the house of mercy—a figure screened by the shadows that fell on that side of the great building