

S. R. CROCKETT

***THE RED
AXE***

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The Red Axe

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Contact: DigiCat@okpublishing.info



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THE END

CHAPTER I

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DUKE CASIMIR RIDES LATE

Well do I, Hugo Gottfried, remember the night of snow and moonlight when first they brought the Little Playmate home. I had been sleeping—a sturdy, well-grown fellow I, ten years or so as to my age—in a stomacher of blanket and a bed-gown my mother had made me before she died at the beginning of the cold weather. Suddenly something awoke me out of my sleep. So, all in the sharp chill of the night, I got out of my bed, sitting on the edge with my legs dangling, and looked curiously at the bright streams of moonlight which crossed the wooden floor of my garret. I thought if only I could swim straight up one of them, as the motes did in the sunshine, I should be sure to come in time to the place where my mother was—the place where all the pretty white things came from—the sunshine, the moonshine, the starshine, and the snow.

And there would be children to play with up there—hundreds of children like myself, and all close at hand. I should not any longer have to sit up aloft in the Red Tower with none to speak to me—all alone on the top of a wall—just because I had a crimson patch sewn on my blue-corded blouse, on my little white shirt, embroidered in red wool on

each of my warm winter wristlets, and staring out from the front of both my stockings. It was a pretty enough pattern, too. Yet whenever one of the children I so much longed to play with down on the paved roadway beneath our tower caught sight of it he rose instantly out of the dust and hurled oaths and ill-words at me—aye, and oftentimes other missiles that hurt even worse—at a little lonely boy who was breaking his heart with loving him up there on the tower.

"Come down and be killed, foul brood of the Red Axe!" the children cried. And with that they ran as near as they dared, and spat on the wall of our house, or at least on the little wooden panel which opened inward in the great trebly spiked iron door of the Duke's court-yard.

But this night of the first home-coming of the Little Playmate I awoke crying and fearful in the dead vast of the night, when all the other children who would not speak to me were asleep. Then pulling on my comfortable shoes of woollen list (for my father gave me all things to make me warm, thinking me delicate of body), and drawing the many-patched coverlet of the bed about me, I clambered up the stone stairway to the very top of the tower in which I slept. The moon was broad, like one of the shields in the great hall, whither I went often when the great Duke was not at home, and when old Hanne would be busy cleaning the pavement and scrubbing viciously at the armor of the iron knights who stood on pedestals round about.

"One day I shall be a man-at-arms, too," I said once to Hanne, "and ride a-foraying with Duke Iron-teeth."

But old Hanne only shook her head and answered:

"Ill foraying shalt thou make, little shrimp. Such work as thine is not done on horseback—keep wide from me, *toadchen*, touch me not!"

For even old Hanne flouted me and would not let me approach her too closely, all because once I had asked her what my father did to witches, and if she were a witch that she crossed herself and trembled whenever she passed him in the court-yard.

Now, having little else to do, I loved to look down from the top of the tower at all times. But never more so than when there was snow on the ground, for then the City of Thorn lay apparent beneath me, all spread out like a painted picture, with its white and red roofs and white houses bright in the moonlight—so near that it seemed as though I could pat every child lying asleep in its little bed, and scrape away the snow with my fingers from every red tile off which the house-fires had not already melted it.

The town of Thorn was the chief place of arms, and high capital city of all the Wolfmark. It was a thriving place, too, humming with burghers and trades and guilds, when our great Duke Casimir would let them alone; perilous, often also, with pikes and discontents when he swooped from the tall over-frowning Castle of the Wolfsberg upon their booths and guilderies—"to scotch the pride of rascaldom," as he told them when they complained. In these days my father was little at home, his business keeping him abroad all the day about the castle-yard, at secret examinations in the Hall of Judgment, or in mysterious vaults in the deepest parts of the castle, where the walls are eighteen feet thick, and from which not a groan can penetrate to the outside while the

Duke Casimir's judgment was being done upon the poor bodies and souls of men and women his prisoners.

In the court-yard, too, the dogs, fierce russet-tan blood-hounds, ravined for their fearsome food. And in these days there was plenty of it, too, so that they were yelling and clamoring all day, and most of the night, for that which it made me sweat to think of. And beneath the rebellious city cowered and muttered, while the burghers and their wives shivered in their beds as the howling of Duke Casimir's blood-hounds came fitfully down the wind, and Duke Casimir's guards clashed arms under their windows.

So this night I looked down contentedly enough from my perched eyrie on the top of the Red Tower. It had been snowing a little earlier in the evening, and the brief blast had swept the sky clean, so that even the brightest stars seemed sunken and waterlogged in the white floods of moonlight. Under my hand lay the city. Even the feet of the watch made no clatter on the pavements. The fresh-fallen snow masked the sound. The kennels of the blood-hounds were silent, for their dreadful tenants were abroad that night on the Duke's work.

Yet, sitting up there on the Wolfsberg, it seemed to me that I could distinguish a muttering as of voices full of hate, like men talking low on their beds the secret things of evil and treason. I discerned discontent and rebellion rumbling and brooding over the city that clear, keen night of early winter.

Then, when after a while I turned from the crowded roofs and looked down upon the gray, far-spreading plain of the Wolfmark, to the east I saw that which appeared like

winking sparks of light moving among the black clumps of copse and woodland which fringed the river. These wimpled and scattered, and presently grew brighter. A long howl, like that of a lonely wolf on the waste when he calls to his kindred to tell him their where-about, came faintly up to my ears.

A hound gave tongue responsively among the heaped mews and doggeries beneath the ramparts. Lights shone in windows athwart the city. Red nightcaps were thrust out of hastily opened casements. The Duke's standing guard clamored with their spear-butts on the uneven pavements, crying up and down the streets: "To your kennels, devil's brats, Duke Casimir comes riding home!"

Then I tell you my small heart beat furiously. For I knew that if I only kept quiet I should see that which I had never yet seen—the home-coming of our famous foraying Duke. I had, indeed, seen Duke Casimir often enough in the castle, or striding across the court-yard to speak to my father, for whom he had ever a remarkable affection. He was a tall, swart, black-a-vised man, with a huge hairy mole on his cheek, and long dog-teeth which showed at the sides of his mouth when he smiled, almost as pleasantly as those of a she-wolf looking out of her den at the hunters.

But I had never seen the Duke of all the Wolfmark come riding home ere daybreak, laden with the plunder of captured castles and the rout of deforced cities. For at such times my father would carefully lock the door on me, and confine me to my little sleeping-chamber—from whence I could see nothing but the square of smooth pavement on which the children chalked their games, and from which

they cried naughtily up at me, the poor hermit of the Red Tower. But this night my father would be with the Duke, and I should see all. For high or low there was none in the empty Red Tower to hinder or forbid.

As I waited, thrilling with expectation, I heard beneath me the quickening pulse-beat of the town. The watch hurried here and there, hectoring, threatening, and commanding. But, in spite of all, men gathered as soon as their backs were turned in the alleys and street openings. Clusters of heads showed black for a moment in some darksome entry, cried "U-g-g-hh!" with a hateful sound, and vanished ere the steel-clad veterans of the Duke's guard could come upon them. It was like the hide-and-seek which I used to play with Boldo, my blood-hound puppy, among the dusty waste of the lumber-room over the Hall of Judgment, before my father took him back to the kennels for biting Christian's Elsa, a child who lived in the lower Guard opposite to the Red Tower.

But this was a stranger hide-and-seek than mine and Boldo's had been. For I saw one of the men who cried hatefully to the guard stumble on the slippery ice; and lo! or ever he had time to cry out or gather himself up, the men-at-arms were upon him. I saw the glitter of stabbing steel and heard the sickening sound of blows stricken silently in anger. Then the soldiers took the man up by head and heels carelessly, jesting as they went. And I shuddered, for I knew that they were bringing him to the horrible long sheds by the Red Tower through which the wind whistled. But in the moonlight the patch which was left on the snow was black, not red.

After this the crooked alleys were kept clearer, and I could see down the long High Street of Thorn right to the Weiss Thor and the snow-whitened pinnacles of the Palace, out of which Duke Casimir had for the time being frightened Bishop Peter. Black stood the Gate Port against the moonlight and the snow when I first looked at it. A moment after it had opened, and a hundred lights came crowding through, like sheep through an entry on their way to the shambles—which doubtless is their Hall of Judgment, where there waits for them the Red Axe of a lowlier degree.

The lights, I say, came thronging through the gate. For though it was moonlight, the Duke Casimir loved to come home amid the red flame of torches, the trail of bituminous reek, and with a dashing train of riders clattering up to the Wolfsberg behind him, through the streets of Thorn, lying black and cowed under the shadows of its thousand gables.

So the procession undulated towards me, turbid and tumultuous. First a reckless pour of riders urging wearied horses, their sides white-flecked above with blown foam, and dark beneath with rowelled blood. Many of the horsemen carried marks upon them which showed that all had not been plunder and pleasuring upon their foray. For there were white napkins, and napkins that had once been white, tied across many brows. Helmets swung clanking like iron pipkins from saddle-bows, and men rode wearily with their arms in slings, drooping haggard faces upon their chests. But all passed rapidly enough up the steep street, and tumbled with noise and shouting, helter-skelter into the great court-yard beneath me as I watched, secure as God in heaven, from my perch on the Red Tower.

Then came the captives, some riding horses bare-backed, or held in place before black-bearded riders—women mostly these last, with faces white-set and strange of eye, or all beblubbered with weeping. Then came a man or two also on horseback, old and reverend. After them a draggled rabble of lads and half-grown girls, bound together with ropes and kept at a dog's trot by the pricking spears of the men-at-arms behind, who thought it a jest to sink a spear point-deep in the flesh of a man's back—"drawing the claret wine" they called it. For these riders of Duke Casimir were every one jolly companions, and must have their merry jest.

After the captives had gone past—and sorry I was for them—the body-guard of Duke Casimir came riding steadily and gallantly, all gentlemen of the Mark, with their sons and squires, landed men, towered men, free Junkers, serving the Duke for loyalty and not servitude, though ever "living by the saddle"—as, indeed, most of the Ritterdom and gentry of the Mark had done for generations.

Then behind them came Duke Casimir himself. The Eastland blood he had acquired from his Polish mother showed as he rode gloomily apart, thoughtful, solitary, behind the squared shoulders of his knights. After him another squadron of riders in ghastly armor of black-and-white, with torches in their hand and grinning skulls upon their shields, closed in the array. The great gate of the Wolfsberg was open now, and, leaving behind him the hushed and darkened town, the master rode into his castle. The Wolf was in his lair. But in the streets many a burgher's wife trembled on her bed, while her goodman peered

cautiously over the leads by the side of a gargoyle, and fancied that already he heard the clamor of the partisans thundering at his door with the Duke's invitation to meet him in the Hall of Judgment.

CHAPTER II

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THE LITTLE PLAYMATE COMES HOME

But there was to be no Session in the Hall of Judgment that night. The great court-yard, roofed with the vault of stars and lit by the moon, was to see all done that remained to be done. The torches were planted in the iron hold-fasts round about. The plunder of the captured towns and castles was piled for distribution on the morrow, and no man dared keep back so much as a Brandenburg broad-piece or a handful of Bohemian gulden. For the fear of the Duke and the Duke's dog-kennels was upon every stout fighting-kerl. They minded the fate of Hans Pulitz, who had kept back a belt of gold, and had gotten himself flung by the heels with no more than the stolen belt upon him, into the kennels where the Duke's blood-hounds howled and clambered with their fore-feet on the black-spattered barriers. And they say that the belt of gold was all that was ever seen again of the poor rascal. Hans Pulitz—who had hoped for so many riotous evenings among the Fat Pigs of Thorn and so many draughts of the slippery wine of the Rheingan careering down the poor thirsty throat of him. But, alas for Hans Pulitz! the end of all imagining was no more than five minutes of snapping, snarling, horrible Pandemonium in the kennels of the

Wolfsberg, and the scored gold chain on the ground was all that remained to tell his tale. Verily, there were few Achans in Duke Casimir's camp.

And it is small wonder after this, that scant and sparse were the jests played on the grim master of the Wolfsberg, or that the bay of a blood-hound tracking on the downs frightened the most stout-hearted rider in all that retinue of dare-devils.

Going to the side of the Red Tower, which looked towards the court-yard, I saw the whole array come in. I watched the prisoners unceremoniously dismounted and huddled together against the coming of the Duke. There was but one man among them who stood erect. The torch-light played on his face, which was sometimes bent down to a little child in his arms, so that I saw him well. He looked not at all upon the rude men-at-arms who pushed and bullied about him, but continued tenderly to hush his charge, as if he had been a nurse in a babe-chamber under the leads, with silence in all the house below.

It pleased me to see the man, for all my life I had loved children. And yet at ten years of age I had never so much as touched one—no, nor spoken even, only looked down on those that hated me and spat on the very tower wherein I dwelt. But nevertheless I loved them and yearned to tell them so, even when they mocked me. So I watched this little one in the man's arms.

Then came the Duke along the line, and behind him, like the Shadow of Death, paced my father Gottfried Gottfried, habited all in red from neck to heel, and carrying for his badge of office as Hereditary Justicer to the Dukes of the

Wolfmark that famous red-handled, red-bladed axe, the gleaming white of whose deadly edge had never been wet save with the blood of men and women.

The guard pushed the captives rudely into line as the Duke Casimir strode along the front. The women he passed without a sign or so much as a look. They were kept for another day. But the men were judged sharp and sudden, as the Duke in his black armor passed along, and that scarlet Shadow of Death with the broad axe over his shoulder paced noiselessly behind him.

For as each man looked into the eyes of Casimir of the Wolfsberg he read his doom. The Duke turned his wrist sharply down, whereupon the attendant sprites of the Red Shadow seized the man and rent his garment down from his neck—or the hand pointed up, and then the man set his hand to his heart and threw his head back in a long sigh of relief.

It came the turn of the man who carried the babe.

Duke Casimir paused before him, scowling gloomily at him.

"Ha, Lord Prince of so great a province, you will not set yourself up any more haughtily. You will quibble no longer concerning tithes and tolls with Casimir of the Wolfmark."

And the Duke lifted his hand and smote the man on the cheek with his open hand.

Yet the captive only hushed the child that wailed aloud to see her guardian smitten.

He looked Duke Casimir steadfastly in the eyes and spoke no word.

"Great God, man, have you nothing to say to me ere you die?" cried Duke

Casimir, choked with hot, sudden anger to be so crossed.

The elder man gazed steadily at his captor.

"God will judge betwixt me, a man about to die, and you, Casimir of the

Wolfmark," he said at last, very slowly—"by the eyes of this little maid

He will judge!"

"Like enough," cried Casimir, sneeringly. "Bishop Peter hath told me as much. But then God's payments are long deferred, and, so far as I can see, I can take Him into my own hand. And your little maid—pah! since one day you took from me the mother, I, in my turn, will take the daughter and make her a titbit for the teeth of my blood-hounds."

The man answered not again, but only hushed and fondled the little one.

Duke Casimir turned quickly to my father, showing his long teeth like a snarling dog:

"Take the child," he said, "and cast her into the kennels before the man's eyes, that he may learn before he dies to dread more than God's Judgment Seat the vengeance of Duke Casimir!"

Then all the men-at-arms turned away, heart-sick at the horror. But the man with the child never blanched.

High perched on the top tower, I also heard the words and loved the maid. And they tell me (though I do not remember it) that I cried down from the leads of the Red Tower: "My father, save the little maid and give her to me—

or else I, Hugo Gottfried, will cast myself down on the stones at your feet!"

At which all the men looked up and saw me in white, a small, lonely figure, with my legs hanging over the top of the wall.

"Go back!" my father shouted. "Go back, Hugo! 'Tis my only son—my successor—the fifteenth of our line, my lord!" he said to the Duke in excuse.

But I cried all the more: "Save the maid's life, or I will fling myself headlong. By Jesu-Mary, I swear it!"

For I thought that was the name of one great saint.

Then my father, who ever doted on me, bent his knee before his master: "A boon!" he cried, "my first and last, Duke Casimir—this maid's life for my son!"

But the Duke hung on the request a long, doubtful moment.

"Gottfried Gottfried," he said, even reproachfully, "this is not well done of you, to make me go back on my word."

"Take the man's life," said my father—"take the man's life for the child's and the fulfilling of your word, and by the sword of St. Peter I will smite my best!"

"Aye," said the man with the babe, "even so do, as the Red Axe says. Save the young child, but bid him smite hard at this abased neck. Ye have taken all, Duke Casimir, take my life. But save the young child alive!"

So, without further word or question, they did so, and the man who had carried the child kissed her once and separated gently the baby hands that clung about his neck. Then he handed her to my father.

"Be gracious to Helene," he said; "she was ever a sweet babe."

Now by this time I was down hammering on the door of the Red Tower, which had been locked on the outside.

Presently some one turned the key, and so soon as I got among the men I darted between their legs.

"Give me the babe!" I cried; "the babe is mine; the Duke himself hath said it." And my father gave her to me, crying as if her heart would break.

Nevertheless she clung to me, perhaps because I was nearer her own age.

Then the dismal procession of the condemned passed us, followed by my father, who strode in front with his axe over his shoulder, and the laughing and jesting men-at-arms bringing up the rear.

As I stood a little aside for them to pass, the hand of the man fell on my head and rested there a moment.

"God's blessing on you, little lad!" he said. "Cherish the babe you have saved, and, as sure as that I am now about to die, one day you shall be repaid." And he stooped and kissed the little maid before he went on with the others to the place of slaughter.

Then I hurried within, so that I might not hear the dull thud of the Red Axe, on the block nor the inhuman howlings of the dogs in the kennels afterwards.

When my father came home an hour later, before even he took off his costume of red, he came up to our chamber and looked long at the little maid as she lay asleep. Then he gazed at me, who watched him from under my lids and from behind the shadows of the bedclothes.

But his quick eye caught the gleam of light in mine.

"You are awake, boy!" he said, somewhat sternly.

I nodded up to him without speaking.

"What would you with the little maid?" he said. "Do you know that you and she together came very near losing me my favor with the Duke, and it might be my life also, both at one time to-night?"

I put my hand on the maiden's head where it lay on the pillow by me.

"She is my little wife!" I said. "The Duke gave her to me out in the court-yard there!"

And this is the whole tale of how the Little Playmate came to dwell with us in the Red Tower.

CHAPTER III

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THE RED AXE OF THE WOLFMARK

Just as clearly do I remember the next morning. The Little Playmate lay by me on my bed, wrapped in one of my childish night-gowns—which old Hanne had sought out for her the night before. It was a brisk, chill, nippy daybreak, and I had piled most of the bedclothes upon her. I lay at the nether side clipped tight in my single brown blanket. It was perishing cold. Out of the heaped coverings I saw presently a pair of eyes, great and dark, regarding me.

Then a little voice spoke, sweetly and clearly, but yet strangely sounding to me who had never before heard a babe speak.

"I want my father—tell him to send Grete, my maid, to attend on me, and then to come himself to sit by the bed and amuse me!"

Alas! her father—well I knew what had come to him—that which in the mercy of the Duke Casimir and in the crowning mercy of the Red Axe, I had seen come to so many. The dogs did not howl at all that morning. They, too, were tired with the hunting and sated with the quarry.

All the same, I tried to answer my companion.

"Little Maid!" said I, "let me be your maid and your father. I will gladly get you all you want. But your good father has gone on a weary journey, and it will be long ere he can hope to return."

"Well," she said, "send lazy Grete, then. I will scold her soundly for not bringing the sop of hot milk-and-bread, which, indeed, is not food for a lady of my age. But my father insists upon it. He is dreadfully obstinate."

Now there was no one but our old deaf Hanne in the kitchen of the Red Tower. She stayed only for cooking and keeping the house clean. My father never paid her wages, and she never asked any. She did her work and took that which she needed out of the household purse without check or question. It was long before I guessed that Hanne also owed her life to my father's care. I had noticed, indeed, when he had upon him the red headman's dress, which fitted him like a flame climbing up a tall back log on the winter's fire, that old Hanne trembled from head to foot and shrank away into her den under the stairs. Many a time have I seen her peeping round the corner of the kitchen-door and tottering back when she heard him come down the stair from the garret. And I guessed so well the reason of her fear that I used to cry to her:

"Come out, good Hanne; the Red Axe is gone."

Then would she run, pattering like a scared rabbit over the uneven floor, to the window, and watch my father stalking, grim and tall, across the open spaces of the yard towards the Judgment Hall of Duke Casimir, the men-at-arms avoiding him with deft reverence. For though they hated him almost as much as did the fat burghers, they

feared him, too. And that because Gottfried Gottfried was deep in the confidence of the Duke; and, besides, was no man to stand in the ill-graces of when one lived within the walls of the Wolfsberg.

So this morning it was to the ancient Hanne that I ran down and told her how, as quickly as she might, she must bring milk and bread to the little one.

"But," said she, "there is none save that which is to be sodden for your father's breakfast and your own."

"Do as you are bid, bad Hanne!" cried I, being, like all solitary children, quickly made angry, "or I will tell my father to drive you before him when next he goes forth clad in red to the Hall of Justice."

At which the poor old woman gave vent to a sharp, screechy cry and caught at her skinny throat with twitching, bony fingers.

"Oh, but you know not what you say, cruel boy!" she gasped. "For the love of God, speak not such words in the house of the Red Axe!"

But, like an ill-governed child, I was cruel because I knew my power, and so made sure that Hanne would do what I asked.

"Well, then, bring the sop quickly," said I, "or by Peter-and-Paul I will speak to my father. He and I can well be doing with beaten cakes made crisp on the iron girdle. In these you have great skill."

This last I said to cheer her, for she loved compliments on her cooking. Though, strange to tell, I never saw her eat anything herself all the years she remained in our house.

When I was gone up-stairs again I looked about for the Little Playmate. She was not to be seen anywhere. There was only a tiny cosey-hole down among the blankets, which was yet warm when I thrust my hand within it. But it was empty and the top a little fallen in, as if the occupant had set her knee on it when she crawled out. A baby stocking lay outside it on the floor.

"Little maid!" I cried, "where are you?"

But I heard nothing except a hissing up on the roof, and then a great slithering rumble down below, which boomed like the distant cannons the Margraf sent to besiege us. I listened and shuddered; but it was only the snow from the tall roof of the Red Tower which had slipped off and fallen to the ground. Then I had a vision of a slender little figure clambering on the leads and the treacherous snow striking her out into the air, and then—the cruel stones of the pavement.

"Little maid, little maid!" I cried out again, beginning to weep myself for pity at my thought, "where are you? Speak to me. You are my playmate."

Then I ran to the roof, and, though the stones chilled me to the bone and the frost-bitten iron hasps of the fastenings burned me like fire, I opened the trap-door and looked out. There above me was the crow-stepped gable of the Red Tower, with the axe set on the pinnacle rustily bright in the coming light of the morning—all swept clean of snow. But no little maid.

I ran to the verge and peered down. I saw a great heap of frozen snow fallen on its edge and partly canted over, half

covering a deep red stain which was turning black and horrid in the daylight. But no little maid.

Then I ran all over the house calling to her, but could not find her anywhere. I was just beginning to bethink me that she might be a fairy child, one that came at night and vanished like the dream gold which is forever turning to withered leaves in the morning. At last I bethought me of my father's room, where even I, his son, had never been at night, and indeed but seldom in the day. For it was the Hereditary Justicer's fancy to lodge himself in the high garret which ran right across the top of the Red Tower, and was entered only by a little ladder from the first turning of the same staircase by which I had run out upon the leads.

I went to the bottom of the garret turnpike. The little barred door stood open, and I heard—I was sure that I heard—light, irregularly pattering footsteps moving about above.

It gave me strange shakings of my heart only to listen. For, though I was noways afraid of my father myself, yet since I had never seen any man, woman, or child (save the Duke only) who did not quail at his approach, it was a curious feeling to think of the lonely little child skipping about up there, where abode the axe and the block—the axe which had done, I knew so well what, to her father only the night before.

So I mustered all my courage—not from any fear of Gottfried Gottfried, but rather from the uncertainty of what I should see, and quickly mounted the stair.

I shall never forget what I saw as I stood with my feet on the rickety hand-rail of the ladder. The long dim garret was already half-lighted by the coming day. Red cloaks swung

and flapped like vast, deadly, winged bats from the rafters, and reached almost to the ground. There was no glass in any of the windows of the garret, for my father minded neither heat nor cold. He was a man of iron. Summer's heat nor winter's cold neither vexed nor pleased him. So it was no marvel that at the chamber's upper end, and quite near to my father's bed, lay a wreath of snow, with a fine, clean-cut, untrampled edge, just as it had blown in at the gable window when the storm burst from the east.

My father lay stretched out on his bed, his head thrown back, his neck bare—almost as if he had done justice on himself, or at least as if he waited the stroke of another Red Axe through the eastern skylight which the morning was already crimsoning. His scarlet sheathings of garmentry lay upon a black oaken stool, trailing across the floor lank and hideous, one of the cuffs which had been but recently dyed a darker hue making a wet sop upon the boards.

All this I had seen many a time before. But that which made me tremble from head to foot with more and worse than cold, was the little white figure that danced about his bed—for all the world like a crisped leaf in late autumn which whirls and turns, skipping this way and spinning that in the wanton breezes. It was the Little Playmate. But I could not form a word wherewith to call her. My tongue seemed dried to the roots.

She had taken the red eye-mask which came across my father's face when he did his greater duties and tied it about her head. Her great, innocent, childish eyes looked elfishly through the black socket holes, sparkling with a fairy merriment, and her tangled floss of sunny hair escaped from

the string at the back and fell tumultuously upon her shoulders.

And even as I looked, standing silent and trembling, with a little balancing step she danced up to the Red Axe itself where it stood angled against the block, and seizing it by the handle high up near the head she staggered towards the bed with it.

Then came my words back to my mouth with a rush.

"For the Holy Virgin's sake, little maid, put the Red Axe down!" I cried, whisperingly. "You know not what you do!"

Then even as I spoke I saw that my father had drawn himself up in bed, and that he too was staring at the strange, elfish figure. Gottfried Gottfried, as I remember him in these days, was a tall, dark, heavily browed man, with a shock of bushy blue-black hair, of late silvering at the temples—grave, sombre, quiet in all his actions.

But what was my surprise as the little maid came nearer to the bed with her pretty dancing movement, carrying the axe much as if it had been an over-heavy babe, to see the Duke's Justicer suddenly skip over the far side of the bedstead and stand with his red cloak about him, watching her.

CHAPTER IV

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THE PRINCESS HELENE

"What devil's work is this?" he said, frowning at her severely.

And I confess that I trembled, but not so the little maid.

"Do not be afraid, mannie," she said, laying down the axe on the stock of the couch, against which its broad red blade and glass-clear cutting edge made an irregular patch of light. "Come and sit down beside me on your bed. I shall not hurt you indeed, mannie, and I want to talk to you. There is nothing but a little boy down-stairs. And I like best to talk with men."

"I declare it is the dead man's brat I saved last night for Hugo's sake!"

I heard my father mutter, "the maid with the girdle of golden letters."

Presently a smile of amusement struggled about his mouth at her bairnly imperiousness, but he came obediently enough and sat down. Nevertheless he took away the heavy axe from her and said, "Put this down, then, or give it to me. It is not a pretty plaything for little girls!"

The small figure in white put up a tiny fat hand, and solemnly withdrew the red patch of mask from before the

wide-open baby eyes.

"I am not a little *girl*, remember, mannie," she said, "I am a Princess and a great lady."

My father bowed without rising.

"I shall not forget," he said.

"You should stand up and bow when I tell you that," said she. "I declare you have no more manners than the little boy in the brown blanket down-stairs."

"Princess," said my father, gravely, "during my life I have met a great many distinguished people of your rank; and, do you know, not one of them has ever complained of my manners before."

"Ah," cried the little maid, "then you have never met my father, the Prince. He is terribly particular. You must go *so*" (she imitated the mincing walk of a court chamberlain), "you must hold your tails thus" (wagging her white nightrail and twisting about her head to watch the effect), "and you must retire—so!" With that she came bowing backward towards the well of the staircase, so far that I was almost afraid she would fall plump into my arms. But she checked herself in time, and without looking round or seeing me she tripped back to my father's bedside and sat down quite confidently beside him.

"Now you see," cried she, "what you would have had to put up with if you had met my father. Be thankful then that it is only the little Princess Helene that is sitting here."

"I think I had the honor to meet your father," said Gottfried Gottfried, gravely, again removing the restless baby fingers from the Red Axe and laying it on the far side of the couch beyond him.