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## THE SWORD MAKER

### I

#### AN OFFER TO OPEN THE RIVER

Considering the state of the imperial city of Frankfort, one would not expect to find such a gathering as was assembled in the Kaiser cellar of the Rheingold drinking tavern. Outside in the streets all was turbulence and disorder; a frenzy on the part of the populace taxing to the utmost the efforts of the city authorities to keep it within bounds, and prevent the development of a riot that might result in the partial destruction at least of this once prosperous city. And indeed, the inhabitants of Frankfort could plead some excuse for their boisterousness. Temporarily, at any rate, all business was at a standstill. The skillful mechanics of the town had long been out of work, and now to the ranks of the unemployed were added, from time to time, clerks and such-like clerical people, expert accountants, persuasive salesmen, and small shopkeepers, for no one now possessed the money to buy more than the bare necessities of life. Yet the warehouses of Frankfort were full to overflowing, with every kind of store that might have supplied the needs of the people, and to the unlearned man it seemed unjust that he and his family should starve while granaries were packed with the agricultural produce of the South, and huge warehouses were glutted with enough cloth from Frankfort and the surrounding districts to clothe ten times the number of tatterdemalions who clamored through the streets.

The wrath of the people was concentrated against one man, and he the highest in the land; to blame, of course, in a secondary degree, but not the one primarily at fault for this deplorable state of

things. The Emperor, always indolent from the time he came to the throne, had grown old and crabbed and fat, caring for nothing but his flagon of wine that stood continually at his elbow. Laxity of rule in the beginning allowed his nobles to get the upper hand, and now it would require a civil war to bring them into subjection again. They, sitting snug in their strongholds, with plenty of wine in their cellars and corn in their bins, cared nothing for the troubles of the city. Indeed, those who inhabited either bank of the Rhine, watching from their elevated castles the main avenue of traffic between Frankfort and Cologne, her chief market, had throughout that long reign severely taxed the merchants conveying goods downstream. During the last five years, their exactions became so piratical that finally they killed the goose that laid the golden eggs, so now the Rhine was without a boat, and Frankfort without a buyer.

For too long Frankfort had looked to the Emperor, whose business it was to keep order in his domain, and when at last the merchants, combining to help themselves, made an effort towards freedom, it was too late. The result of their combination was a flotilla of nearly a hundred boats, which, gathering at Frankfort and Mayence, proceeded together down the river, convoyed by a fleet containing armed men, and thus they thought to win through to Cologne, and so dispose of their goods. But the robber Barons combined also, hung chains across the river at the Lorely rocks, its narrowest part, and realizing that this fleet could defeat any single one of them, they for once acted in concert, falling upon the boats when their running against the chains threw them into confusion.

The nobles and their brigands were seasoned fighters all, while the armed men secured by the merchants were mere hirelings, who fled in panic; and those not cut to pieces by their savage adversaries became themselves marauders on a small scale, scattered throughout the land, for there was little use of tramping back to the capital, where already a large portion of the population suffered the direst straits.

Not a single bale of goods reached Cologne, for the robbers divided everything amongst themselves, with some pretty quarrels, and then they sank the boats in the deepest part of the river as a warning, lest the merchants of Frankfort and Mayence should imag-

ine the Rhine belonged to them. Meantime, all petitions to the Emperor being in vain, the merchants gave up the fight. They were a commercial, not a warlike people. They discharged their servants and underlings, and starvation slowly settled down upon the distressed city.

After the maritime disaster on the Rhine, some of the merchants made a futile attempt to amend matters, for which their leaders paid dearly. They appealed to the seven Electors, finding their petitions to the Emperor were in vain, asking these seven noblemen, including the three warlike Archbishops of Cologne, Treves, and Mayence, to depose the Emperor, which they had power to do, and elect his son in his stead. But they overlooked the fact that a majority of the Electors themselves, and probably the Archbishops also, benefited directly or indirectly by the piracies on the Rhine. The answer to this request was the prompt hanging of three leading merchants, the imprisonment of a score of others, and a warning to the rest that the shoemaker should stick to his last, leaving high politics to those born to rule. This misguided effort caused the three Archbishops to arrest Prince Roland, the Emperor's only son, and incarcerate him in Ehrenfels, a strong castle on the Rhine belonging to the Archbishop of Mayence, who was thus made custodian of the young man, and responsible to his brother prelates of Cologne and Treves for the safe-keeping of the Prince. The Archbishops, as has been said, were too well satisfied with the weak administration then established at Frankfort to wish a change, so the lad was removed from the capital, that the citizens of Frankfort might be under no temptation to place him at their head, and endeavor to overturn the existing order of things.

This being the state of affairs in Frankfort, with every one gloomy, and a majority starving, it was little wonder that the main cellar of the Rheingold tavern should be empty, although when times were good it was difficult to find a seat there after the sun went down. But in the smaller Kaiser cellar, along each side of the single long table, sat young men numbering a score, who ate black bread and drank Rhine wine, to the roaring of song and the telling of story. They formed a close coterie, admitting no stranger to their circle if one dissenting voice was raised against his acceptance, yet in spite of this exclusiveness there was not a drop of noble blood in

the company. They belonged, however, to the aristocracy of craftsmen; metal-workers for the most part, ingenious artificers in iron, beaters of copper, fashioners of gold and silver. Glorious blacksmiths, they called themselves; but now, like every one else, with nothing to do. In spite of their city up-bringing all were stalwart, well-set-up young men; and, indeed, the swinging of hammers is good exercise for the muscles of the arm, and in those turbulent days a youth who could not take care of himself with his stick or his fists was like to fare ill if he ventured forth after nightfall.

This, indeed, had been the chief reason for the forming of their guild, and if one of their number was set upon, the secret call of the organization shouted aloud brought instant help were any of the members within hearing. Belonging neither to the military nor the aristocracy, they were not allowed to wear swords, and to obtain this privilege was one of the objects of their organization. Indeed, each member of the guild secretly possessed a weapon of the best, although he risked his neck if ever he carried it abroad with him. Among their number were three of the most expert sword makers in all Germany.

These three sword makers had been instrumental in introducing to their order the man who was now its leader. This youth came to one of them with ideas concerning the proper construction of a sword, and the balancing of it, so that it hung easily in the hand as though part of the fore-arm. Usually, the expert has small patience with the theories of an amateur; but this young fellow, whose ambition it was to invent a sword, possessed such intimate knowledge of the weapon as it was used, not only in Germany, but also in France and Italy, that the sword maker introduced him to fellow-craftsmen at other shops, and they taught him how to construct a sword. These instructors, learning that although, as Roland laughingly said, he was not allowed to wear a sword, he could wield it with a precision little short of marvelous, the guild gave permission for this stranger to be a guest at one of their weekly meetings at the Kaiser cellar, where he exhibited his wonderful skill.

Not one of them, nor, indeed, all of them together, stood any chance when confronting him. They clamored to be taught, offering good money for the lessons, believing that if they acquired but a

title of his excellence with the blade they might venture to wear it at night, and let their skill save them from capture. But the young fellow refused their money, and somewhat haughtily declined the rôle of fencing-master, whereupon they unanimously elected him a member of the coterie, waiving for this one occasion the rule which forbade the choice of any but a metal-worker. When the stranger accepted the election, he was informed that it was the duty of each member to come to the aid of his brethren when required, and they therefore requested him to teach them swordsmanship. Roland, laughing, seeing how he had been trapped, as it were, with his own consent, acceded to the universal wish, and before a year had passed his twenty comrades were probably the leading swordsmen in the city of Frankfort.

Shortly after the disaster to the merchants' fleet at the Lorely, Roland disappeared without a word of farewell to those who had come to think so much of him. He had been extremely reticent regarding his profession, if he had one, and no one knew where he lodged. It was feared that the authorities had arrested him with the sword in his possession, for he grew more reckless than any of the others in carrying the weapon. One night, however, he reappeared, and took his seat at the head of the table as if nothing had happened. Evidently he had traveled far and on foot, for his clothes were dusty and the worse for wear. He refused to give any account of himself, but admitted that he was hungry, thirsty, and in need of money.

His hunger and thirst were speedily satisfied, but the money scarcity was not so easily remedied. All the score were out of employment, with the exception of the three sword makers, whose trade the uncertainty of the times augmented rather than diminished. To cheer up Roland, who was a young fellow of unquenchable geniality, they elected him to the empty honor of being their leader, Kurzbold's term of office having ended.

The guild met every night now, instead of once a week, and it may be shrewdly suspected that the collation of black bread and sausage formed the sole meal of the day for many of them. Nevertheless, their hilarity was undiminished, and the rafters rang with song and laugh, and echoed also maledictions upon a supine Gov-

ernment, and on the rapacious Rhine lords. But the bestowal of even black bread and the least expensive of wine could not continue indefinitely. They owed a bill to the landlord upon which that worthy, patient as he had proved himself, always hoping for better times, wished for at least something on account. All his other customers had deserted him, and if they drank at all, chose some place where the wine was thin and cheap. The landlord held out bravely for three months after Roland was elected president, then, bemoaning his fate, informed the guild that he would be compelled to close the Rheingold tavern.

"Give me a week!" cried Roland, rising in his place at the head of the table, "and I will make an effort to get enough gold to settle the bill at least, with perhaps something over for each of our pockets."

This promise brought forth applause and a rattle of flagons on the table, so palpably empty that the ever-hopeful landlord proceeded forthwith to fill them.

"There is one proviso," said Roland, as they drank his health in the wine his offer produced. "To get this money I must do something in return. I have a plan in mind which it would be premature to disclose. If it succeeds, none of us will ever need to bend back over a workman's bench again, or hammer metal except for our own pleasure. But acting alone I am powerless, so I must receive your promise that you will stand by any pledge I make on your behalf, and follow me into whatever danger I choose to lead you."

There was a great uproar at this, and a boisterous consent.

"This day week, then," said Roland, as he strapped sword to side, threw cloak over shoulders, so that it completely concealed the forbidden weapon, waved a hand to his cheering comrades, and went out into the night.

Once ascended the cellar steps, the young man stood in the narrow street as though hesitating what to do. Faintly there came to him the sound of singing from the cellar he had quitted, and he smiled slightly as he listened to the rousing chorus he knew so well. From the direction of the Palace a more sinister echo floated on the night air; the unmistakable howl of anger, pain, and terror; the noise that a pursued and stricken mob makes when driven by soldiers.

The populace had evidently been engaged in its futile and dangerous task of demonstrating, and proclaiming its hunger, and the authorities were scattering it; keeping it ever on the move.

It was still early; not yet ten o'clock, and a full moon shone over the city, unlighted otherwise. Drawing his cloak closer about him, Roland walked rapidly in an opposite direction to that from which the tumult of the rabble came, until he arrived at the wide Fahrgasse, a street running north and south, its southern end terminating at the old bridge. Along this thoroughfare lived the wealthiest merchants of Frankfurt.

Roland turned, and proceeded slowly towards the river, critically examining the tall, picturesque buildings on either hand, cogitating the question which of them would best answer his purpose. They all seemed uninviting enough, for their windows were dark, most of them tightly shuttered; and, indeed, the thoroughfare looked like a street of the dead, the deserted appearance enhanced, rather than relieved, by the white moonlight lying on its cobble-stones.

Nearing the bridge, he discovered one stout door ajar, and behind it shone the yellow glow of a lamp. He paused, and examined critically the façade of the house, which, with its quiet, dignified architectural beauty, seemed the abode of wealth. Although the shutters were closed, his intent inspection showed him thin shafts of light from the chinks, and he surmised that an assemblage of some sort was in progress, probably a secret convention, the members of which entered unannounced, and left the door ajar ready for the next comer.

For a moment he thought of venturing in, but remembering his mission required the convincing of one man rather than the persuasion of a group, he forbore, but noted in his mind the position and designation of the house, resolving to select this building as the theater of his first effort, and return to it next morning. It would serve his purpose as well as another.

Roland's attention was then suddenly directed to his own position, standing in the bright moonlight, for there swung round from the river road, into the Fahrgasse, a small and silent company, who marched as one man. The moon was shining almost directly up the street, but the houses to the west stood in its radiance, while those

in the east were still in shadow. Roland pressed himself back against the darkened wall to his left, near the partially opened door; between it and the river. The silent procession advanced to the door ajar, and there paused, forming their ranks into two lines, thus making a passage for a tall, fine-looking, bearded man, who walked to the threshold, then turned and raised his bonnet in salute.

"My friends," he said, "this is kind of you, and although I have been silent, I ask you to believe that deeply I appreciate your welcome escort. And now, enter with me, and we will drink a stoup of wine together, to the somber toast, 'God save our stricken city!'"

"No, no, Herr Goebel. To-night is sacred. We have seen you safely to your waiting family, and at that reunion there should be no intruders. But to-morrow night, if you will have us, we will drink to the city, and to your own good health, Herr Goebel."

This sentiment was applauded by all, and the merchant, seeing that they would not accept his present invitation, bowed in acquiescence, and bade them good-by. When the door closed the delegation separated into units, and each went his own way. Roland, stepping out of the shadow, accosted the rearmost man.

"Pardon me, mein Herr," he said, "but may I ask what ceremony is this in which you have been taking part?"

The person accosted looked with some alarm at his questioner, but the moonlight revealed a face singularly gentle and winning; a face that in spite of its youth inspired instinctive confidence. The tone, too, was very persuasive, and seemed devoid even of the offense of curiosity.

"'Tis no ceremony," said the delegate, "but merely the return home of our friend, Herr Goebel."

"Has he, then, been on a journey?"

"Sir, you are very young, and probably unacquainted with Frankfort."

"I have lived here all my life," said Roland. "I am a native of Frankfort."

"In that case," replied the other, "you show yourself amazingly ignorant of its concerns; otherwise you would know that Herr Goebel is one of the leading merchants of the city, a man honorable, enlightened, and energetic—an example to us all, and one esteemed alike by noble or peasant. We honor ourselves in honoring him."

"Herr Goebel should be proud of such commendation, mein Herr, coming I judge, from one to whom the words you use might also be applied."

The merchant bowed gravely at this compliment, but made no remark upon it.

"Pardon my further curiosity," continued the young man, "but from whence does Herr Goebel return?"

"He comes from prison," said the other. "He made the mistake of thinking that our young Prince would prove a better ruler than his father, our Emperor, and but that the Archbishops feared a riot if they went to extremes, Herr Goebel ran great danger of losing his life rather than his liberty."

"What you say, mein Herr, interests me very much, and I thank you for your courtesy. My excuse for questioning you is this. I am moved by a desire to enter the employ of such a man as Herr Goebel, and I purpose calling upon him to-morrow, if you think he would be good enough to receive me."

"He will doubtless receive you," replied the other, "but I am quite certain your mission will fail. At the present moment none of us are engaging clerks, however competent. Ignorant though you are of civic affairs, you must be aware that all business is at a standstill in Frankfort. Although Herr Goebel has said nothing about it, I learn from an unquestionable source that he himself is keeping from starvation all his former employees, so I am sure he would not take on, for a stranger, any further obligation."

"Sir, I am well acquainted with the position of affairs, and it is to suggest a remedy that I desire speech with Herr Goebel. I do not possess the privilege of acquaintance with any merchant in this city, so one object of my accosting you was to learn, if possible, how I might secure some note of introduction to the merchant that would

ensure his receiving me, and obtain for me a hearing when once I had been admitted to his house."

If Roland expected the stranger to volunteer such a note, he quite underestimated the caution of a Frankfort merchant.

"As I said before, you will meet with no difficulty so far as entrance to the house is concerned. May I take it that you yourself understand the art of writing?"

"Oh yes," replied Roland.

"Then indite your own letter of introduction. Say that you have evolved a plan for the redemption of Frankfort, and Herr Goebel will receive you without demur. He will listen patiently, and give a definite decision regarding the feasibility of your project. And now, good sir, my way lies to the left. I wish you success, and bid you good-night."

The stranger left Roland standing at the intersection of two streets, one of which led to the Saalhof. They had been approaching the Romerberg, or market-place, the center of Frankfort, when the merchant so suddenly ended the conversation and turned aside. Roland remembered that no Jew was allowed to set foot in the Romerberg, and now surmised the nationality of his late companion. The youth proceeded alone through the Romerberg, and down directly to the river, reaching the spot where the huge Saalhof faced its flood. Roland saw that triple guards surrounded the Emperor's Palace. The mob had been cleared away, but no one was allowed to linger in its precincts, and the youth was gruffly ordered to take himself elsewhere, which he promptly did, walking up the Saal-gasse, and past the Cathedral, until he came once more into the Fahrgasse, down which he proceeded, pausing for another glance at Goebel's house, until he came to the bridge, where he stood with arms resting on the parapet, thoughtfully shaping in his mind what he would say to Herr Goebel in the morning.

Along the opposite side of the river lay a compact mass of barges; ugly, somber, black in the moonlight, silent witnesses to the ruin of Frankfort. The young man gazed at this melancholy accumulation of useless floating stock, and breathed the deeper when he reflected

that whoever could set these boats in motion again would prove himself, temporarily at least, the savior of the city.

When the bells began to toll eleven, Roland roused himself, walked across the bridge to Sachsenhausen, and so to his squalid lodging, consoling himself with the remembrance that the great King Charlemagne had made this his own place of residence. Here, before retiring to bed, he wrote the letter which he was to send in next day to Herr Goebel, composing it with some care, so that it aroused curiosity without satisfying it.

It was half-past ten next morning when Roland presented himself at the door of the leading merchant in the Fahrgasse, and sent in to that worthy his judiciously worded epistle. He was kept waiting in the hall longer than he expected, but at last the venerable porter appeared, and said Herr Goebel would be pleased to receive him. He was conducted up the stair to the first floor, and into a front room which seemed to be partly library and partly business office. Here seated at a stout table, he recognized the grave burgher whose home-coming he had witnessed the night before.

The keen eyes of the merchant seemed to penetrate to his inmost thought, and it struck Roland that there came into them an expression of disappointment, for he probably did not expect so youthful a visitor.

"Will you be seated, mein Herr," said his host; and Roland, with an inclination of the head, accepted the invitation. "My time is very completely occupied to-day," continued the elder man, "for although there is little business afoot in Frankfort, my own affairs have been rather neglected of late, and I am endeavoring to overtake the arrears."

"I know that," said Roland. "I stood by your doorcheek last night when you returned home."

"Did you so? May I ask why?"

"There was no particular reason. It happened that I walked down the Fahrgasse, endeavoring to make up my mind upon whom I should call to-day."

"And why have I received the preference?"

"Perhaps, sir, it would be more accurate to say your house received the preference, if it is such. I was struck by its appearance of solidity and wealth, and, differing from all others in the door being ajar, I lingered before it last night with some inclination to enter. Then the procession which accompanied you came along. I heard your address to your friends, and wondered what the formality was about. After the door was closed I accosted one of those who escorted you, and learned your name, business, and reputation."

"You must be a stranger in Frankfort when you needed to make such inquiry."

"Those are almost the same words that my acquaintance of last night used, and he seemed astonished when I replied that I was born in Frankfort, and had lived here all my life."

"Ah, I suppose no man is so well known as he thinks he is, but I venture to assert that you are not engaged in business here."

"Sir, you are in the right. I fear I have hitherto led a somewhat useless existence."

"On money earned by some one else, perhaps."

"Again you hit the nail on the head, Herr Goebel. I lodge on the other side of the river, and coming to and fro each day, the sight of all those useless barges depresses me, and I have formulated a plan for putting them in motion again."

"I fear, sir, that wiser heads than yours have been meditating upon that project without avail."

"I should have been more gratified, Herr Goebel, if you had said 'older heads.'"

The suspicion of a smile hovered for a brief instant round the shrewd, firm lips of the merchant.

"Young sir, your gentle reproof is deserved. I know nothing of your wisdom, and so should have referred to the age, and not to the equipment of your head. It occurs to me, as I study you more closely, that I have met you before. Your face seems familiar."

"'Tis but a chance resemblance, I suspect. Until very recently I have been absorbed in my studies, and rarely left my father's house."

"I am doubtless mistaken. But to return to our theme. As you are ignorant of my name and standing in this city, you are probably unaware of the efforts already made to remove the deadlock on the Rhine."

"In that, Herr Goebel, you are at fault. I know an expedition of folly was promoted at enormous expense, and that the empty barges, numbering something like fivescore, now rest in the deepest part of the Rhine."

"Why do you call it an expedition of folly?"

"Surely the result shows it to be such."

"A plan may meet with disaster, even where every precaution has been taken. We did the best we could, and if the men we had paid for the protection of the flotilla had not, with base cowardice, deserted their posts, these barges would have reached Cologne."

"Never! The defenders you chose were riff-raff, picked up in the gutters of Frankfort, and you actually supposed such cattle, undisciplined and untrained, would stand up against the fearless fighters of the Barons, swashbucklers, hardened to the use of sword and pike. What else was to be expected? The goods were not theirs, but yours. They had received their pay, and so speedily took themselves out of danger."

"You forget, sir, or you do not know, that several hundred of them were cut to pieces."

"I know that, also, but the knowledge does not in the least nullify my contention. I am merely endeavoring to show you that the heads you spoke of a moment ago were only older, but not necessarily wiser than mine. It would be impossible for me to devise an expedition so preposterous."

"What should we have done?"

"For one thing, you should have gone yourselves, and defended your own bales."

The merchant showed visible signs of a slowly rising anger, and had the young man's head contained the wisdom he appeared to claim for it, he would have known that his remarks were entirely lacking in tact, and that he was making no progress, but rather the reverse. "You speak like a heedless, untutored youth. How could we defend our bales, when no merchant is allowed to wear a sword?"

Roland rose and put his hands to the throat of his cloak.

"I am not allowed to wear a sword;" and saying this, he dramatically flung wide his cloak, displaying the prohibited weapon hanging from his belt. The merchant sat back in his chair, visibly impressed.

"You seem to repose great confidence in me," he said. "What if I were to inform the authorities?"

The youth smiled.

"You forget, Herr Goebel, that I learned much about you from your friend last night. I feel quite safe in your house."

He flung his cloak once more over the weapon, and sat down again.

"What is your occupation, sir?" asked the merchant.

"I am a teacher of swordsmanship. I practice the art of a fencing-master."

"Your clients are aristocrats, then?"

"Not so. The class with which I am now engaged contains twenty skilled artisans of about my own age."

"If they do not belong to the aristocracy, your instruction must be surreptitious, because it is against the law."

"It is both surreptitious and against the law, but in spite of these disadvantages, my twenty pupils are the best swordsmen in Frankfort, and I would willingly pit them against any twenty nobles with whom I am acquainted."

"So!" cried the merchant. "You are acquainted with twenty nobles, are you?"