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Frederick Barbarossa

Franz Kuhn

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The second Crusade was ended. Exploits as heroic as those in the first Crusade, under Godfrey of Bouillon, had been performed, but no battles as glorious as those in the first had been fought. It was a difficult task to wrest Palestine from the domination of the Turks. Scarcely the tenth part of the stout champions who set out from the various provinces of France and Germany returned, and of this little remnant many were exhausted by marches, enfeebled by disease, and doomed to speedy death. Most of the castles resounded with lamentations over the death of their masters. Widows and orphans stood wringing their hands around catafalques in front of the altars in the castle chapels, as the chaplains prayed for the souls of the noble ones who had given their lives for the Christian religion in the far distant wastes of Asia.

Every province mourned its dead, for in many cases the people had lost their lord and protector, who had restrained cruelty and lawlessness. Even in cases where these masters had ruled with an iron hand and, in violation of their knightly and Christian duties, had maltreated their inferiors, there was no rejoicing over their death; for during the son’s minority the guardian came into absolute control and might rob and plunder at will, while if there were no heir, the Emperor had the power to place a stranger over them. “It is better to cling to the old ways” was a German saying, even then.

Felseck was one of the few joyous castles. A great banner bearing the colors of its master waved from the loftiest turret. Armed servitors stood upon the ramparts and the guardians of his widely scattered possessions awaited his coming at the gates and portcullises. From the watchtower the warder scanned the plain, which stretched a long distance from the castle heights, watching with experienced eye every cloud of dust raised by each little passing troop. Many a time the heart of the warder, who had grown gray in faithful service to his master, beat more quickly as his keen glance recognized signs of an approaching company, and repeatedly he brushed away a tear when he found himself deceived and saw the company riding off in another direction, or not displaying the colors of the house.

It was already past midday. Many a face was clouded with anxiety and suspense, and some even feared that the report of the safe return of the lord of the castle might be false, especially as so many reports had proved untrue. Rather than have their joy turn to bitter grief, it would have been less sorrowful tidings had they been told at once that Conrad of Feuchtwangen was no longer among the living. It would have been a crushing sorrow, but they could have submitted to the inevitable with more courage than if they had had to realize that the hope of his return, once aroused, must give place to life-long disappointment…

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