

**THE BOY AND
THE BARON**

Table of Contents

- CHAPTER I WHAT THE CHILDREN SAW FROM THE
PLAYGROUND ON THE PLATEAU
- CHAPTER II HOW KARL THE ARMORER TOOK THE
SHINING KNIGHT'S TREASURE FROM
AMONG THE OSIERS
- CHAPTER III HOW WULF FARED AT KARL THE
ARMORER'S HUT
- CHAPTER IV OF HOW WULF FIRST WENT TO THE
CASTLE, AND WHAT BEFELL
- CHAPTER V HOW WULF WENT TO THE SWARTZBURG,
AND OF HIS BEGINNING THERE
- CHAPTER VI HOW CONRADT PLOTTED MISCHIEF, AND
HOW WULF WON A FRIEND
- CHAPTER VII HOW WULF CLIMBED THE IVY TOWER,
AND WHAT HE SAW AT THE BARRED
WINDOW
- CHAPTER VIII HOW BARON EVERHARDT WAS
OUTLAWED, AND HOW WULF HEARD OF
THE BABY IN THE OSIERS
- CHAPTER IX OF THE ILL NEWS THAT THE BARON BROKE
TO HIS MAIDEN WARD, AND OF HOW SHE
TOOK THAT SAME
- CHAPTER X HOW WULF TOOK ELISE FROM THE
SWARTZBURG

CHAPTER XI WHAT THE FUGITIVES FURTHER SAW IN
THE FOREST, AND HOW THEY CAME TO ST.
URSULA AND MET THE EMPEROR

CHAPTER XII HOW WULF TOOK THE EMPEROR'S
MESSAGE TO KARL OF THE FORGE

CHAPTER XIII HOW WORD OF HIS DANGER CAME TO
WULF AT THE FORGE

CHAPTER XIV OF THE GREAT BATTLE THAT WAS
FOUGHT, AND OF HOW WULF SAVED THE
DAY

CHAPTER XV HOW THE SHINING KNIGHT'S TREASURE
WAS BROUGHT TO LIGHT



“THE TWO KNIGHTS WHEELED THEIR HORSES AND DASHED AT EACH OTHER AGAIN AND AGAIN.”

**TO
MERODINE KEELER**

CHAPTER I

WHAT THE CHILDREN SAW FROM THE PLAYGROUND ON THE PLATEAU

One sunny forenoon in the month of May, something over six hundred years ago, some children were playing under the oak-trees that grew in little companies here and there in a pleasant meadow on a high plateau. This meadow was part of a great table-land overlooking a wide stretch of country. It was hedged along the west with white-thorn, setting it off from the tillage on the other side, and on the east it dipped to the bank of a little stream fringed with willows and low bushes. The south side descended in a steep cliff, and up and down its slope the huts of a little village seemed to climb along the stony path that led to the plateau. Farther away lines of dark forest stretched off out of sight, in solid walls that looked almost black over against the bright green of meadow and field and the rich brown of the tilled land. On all sides were mountains, covered with trees or crowned with snow, from which, when the sun went down, the wind blew chill. Beyond the stream a highway climbed the valley, and the children could see, from their playground, the place where it issued from the edge of the wood. They could not follow its windings very far beyond the plateau, however, for it soon bent off to the left and wound up a narrow pass among the hills.

Toward the north, and far overhead, rose the grim walls and towers of the great castle that watched the pass and sheltered the little village on the cliffside. Those were rude, stern times, and the

people in the village were often glad of the protection which the castle gave from attacks by stranger invaders; but they paid for their security, from time to time, when the defenders themselves sallied forth upon the hamlet and took toll from its flocks and herds.

It was "the evil time when there was no emperor" in Germany. Of real rule there was none in the land, but every man held his life in his own charge. Knights sworn to deeds of mercy and bravery, returning from the holy war which waged to uphold Christ's name at Jerusalem, were undone by the lawlessness of the times, and, forgetful of all knightly vows, turned robbers and foes where they should have been warders and helpers. The lesser nobles and landholders were become freebooters and plunderers, while the common people, pillaged and oppressed by these, had few rights and less freedom, as must always be the case with peoples or with single souls where there is no strong law, fended and loved by those whom it is meant to help.

The children under the oak-trees played at knights and robbers. Neighboring the meadow was the common pasture, where tethered goats and sheep, and large, slow cattle, stood them as great flocks and caravans to sally out upon and harry. Now and again a party would break forth from one clump of trees to raid their playmates in a pretended village within another. Of storming castles, or of real knights' play, they knew naught; for they were of the common people, poor working-folk sunk to a state but little above thralldom, and heard, in the guarded talk of their elders, stories only of the robber knights' dark acts, never of deeds daring and true, such as belong to unspotted knighthood.

As the whole company lay in make-believe ambush among the shrubbery near the edge of the plateau, Ludovic, the oldest boy,

suddenly called to them to look where, from the forest, a figure on horseback was coming out upon the highway.

“See,” Ludovic cried. “Yonder comes a sightly knight. Look, Hansei, at his shining armor and his glittering lance.”

“He is none of hereabout,” nodded Hansei, flashing his wide blue eyes upon the gleaming figure. “My lord’s men-at-arms are none so shining fair. Whence may he be, Ludovic?”

“How should I know?” asked Ludovic, testily, with the older boy’s vexation when a youngster asks him that which he cannot answer.

“Small chance he bringeth good,” added he, “wherever he be from; but, in any case, let us lie here until he passes.”

“He weareth a long, ruddy beard,” said keen-eyed Gretel, as a slight bend in the road brought the knight full-facing the group. “Oh, Ludovic,” she suddenly cried, “what if it should be Barbarossa, come to help the land again?”

“Barbarossa!” exclaimed Ludovic, scornfully. “Old woman’s yarn! Mark ye, Gretel, Barbarossa will never wake from his sleep. He has forgotten the land. My father says God has forgotten it in his heaven, and how shall Barbarossa remember it, sleeping in his stone chamber? No; it is the truth: he will never come.”

“It is no long beard,” said Hansei, who had been watching eagerly. “’Tis something that he bears before him at his saddle-peak.”

This was indeed true. The shining stranger, as the children could now plainly see, held in front of him, on the saddle-peak, a good-sized burden, though what it was the young watchers could not, for the distance, make out. Nevertheless they could see that it was no

common burden; nor, in truth, was it any common figure that rode along the highway. He was still some distance off, but already the children began to hear the ring of the great horse's iron hoofs on the stones of the road, and the jangle of metal about the rider when sword and armor clashed out their music to the time of trotting hoofs. As they watched and harkened, their delight and wonder ever growing, they suddenly caught, when the knight had now drawn much closer, the tuneful winding of a horn.



“THE SHINING STRANGER HELD IN FRONT OF HIM A GOOD-SIZED BURDEN.”

The rider on the highway heard the sound as well; but, to the children's amaze, instead of pricking forward the faster, like a knight of hot courage, he drew rein and turned half-way about, as minded to seek shelter among the willows growing along-stream. There was no shelter there, however, for man or horse, and on the other hand the narrowing valley shut the road in, with no footing up the wooded bluff. When the knight saw all this, he rode close into the thicket, and leaning from his saddle, dropped, with wondrous gentleness, his burden among the osiers.

"'Tis some treasure," murmured Ludovic. "He fears the robber knights may get it."

By now there showed, coming down the pass, another knight. But the second comer was no such goodly figure as the one below. His armor, instead of gleaming in the sunlight, was tarnished and stained. His helmet was black and unplumed, and upon his shield appeared the white cross of a Crusader. Nevertheless, albeit of no glistening splendor, he was of right knightly mien, and the horse he bestrode was a fine creature, whose springy step seemed to scorn the road he trod.

"'Tis a knight from the castle," the children said, and Hansei added: "Mighty Herr Banf, by his white cross. Now there will be fighting."

Down below, where the road widened a bit, winding with a bend of the stream, the shining stranger sat his horse, waiting, lance at rest, to see what the black knight would do. The moment the latter espied him he left the matter in no doubt, but couched his lance and bore hard along the road, as minded to make an end of the stranger; whereupon the latter urged forward his own steed, and

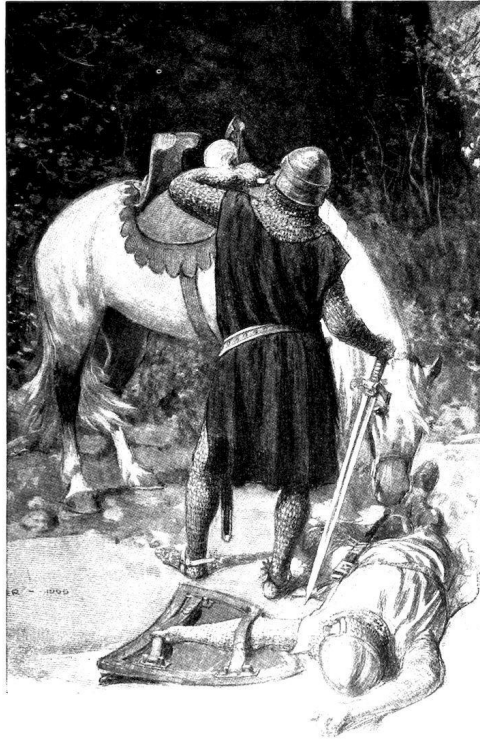
the two came together with a huge rush, so that the crash of armor against armor rang out fierce and clear up the pass, and both spears were shattered in the onset.

Then the two knights fought with their swords, dealing such blows as seemed to the children watching enough to fell forest trees. They wheeled their horses and dashed at each other again and again, until the air was filled with the din of fighting, and the young watchers were spellbound at the sight.

The shining stranger was a knight of valor, despite the unwillingness he first showed. He laid on stoutly with his blade, so that more than once his foe reeled in saddle; but the black knight came back each time with greater fury, while the stranger and his horse were plainly weary.

Especially was this true of the horse. Eagerly he wheeled and sprang forward to each fresh charge; but each time he dashed on more heavily, and more than once he stumbled, so that his rider missed a blow, and was like to have come to the ground through the empty swing of his sword.

At last the Crusader came on with mighty force, whereupon his foe charged again to meet him; but the weary horse stumbled, caught himself, staggered forward a pace or two, and came first to his knees, then shoulder down, upon the rough stones of the road. The shining knight pitched forward over his head, and lay quite still in the highway, while the Crusader reined in beside him with threatening blade, and shouted to him to cry "quits." But the stranger neither moved nor spoke; so the other lighted down from his horse and bent over him to see his face.



“PUTTING HORN TO LIP, HE BLEW FOUR GREAT BLASTS.”

When he had done this he drew back, and putting horn to lip, blew four great blasts, which he repeated again and again, waiting after each to listen.

Presently an answering horn sounded in the distance, and a little later a party of mounted men came dashing down the road from the castle. These clustered about the fallen knight, and when one who seemed to be their leader, and whom the children knew for Baron Everhardt himself, saw the stranger's face, he turned to the victor and for very joy smote him between the iron-clad shoulders—from

which the children thought that the newcomer could have been no friend of their baron.

Then the men stooped and by main force lifted the limp figure, in its jangling armor, and set it astride the great horse that stood stupidly by, as wondering what had befallen his master. The latter made no move, but lay forward on the good steed's neck, and so they made him fast; after doing which, the whole party turned their faces upward and rode along toward the castle.

Not until the last sound died away up the pass did the children come out from their maze and great awe. They drew back from the edge of the cliff and looked wonderingly at one another, for it seemed to them as if years must have gone by since they had begun their play on the plateau. At last Ludovic spoke.

“The treasure is still among the osiers,” he said. “When night falls, Hansei, thou and I will slip down across the stream and find it. There may be great riches there. But no word about it, for if they knew it at the castle we should lose our pains.”

Solemnly little Hansei agreed to Ludovic's plan, and the children left the plateau, climbing down the rocky goat-paths to their homes along the cliff.

CHAPTER II

HOW KARL THE ARMORER TOOK THE SHINING KNIGHT'S TREASURE FROM AMONG THE OSIERS

The children had scarcely gone from the plateau when there came down the defile from the castle a figure unlike, in manner and attire, any that had but shortly before gone that road.

This was a tall, broad-shouldered man, clad in leather that was worn and creased, showing much hard wear. Over his left shoulder he carried two great swords in their scabbards, and his right hand gripped a long, stout staff, the iron point of which now and then rang out against the stone of the road as he thrust his great arm forward in rhythm with the huge stride of his long, leather-clad legs. The face beneath his hood was brown and weather-beaten, of long and thoughtful mold, but turned from overmuch sternness by the steady, kindly gleam of his gray eyes, pent in under great brows that met midway of his forehead, almost hiding the eyes from sight.

Had the children still been upon the plateau they would have known the figure for Karl of the forge in the forest below the village. He had been, as was often his errand, to the castle, this time with a breast-let that he had wrought for the baron, and was returning with the very sword wherewith the Herr Banf had made end of the shining knight, and with that blade also which had been

the stranger's own, to make good all hurts to their tempered edges and fit them for further service in battle.

He swung along the descending road until he came over against the place by the clump of osiers, where the children had seen the knight drop his burden. There he suddenly stopped, and leaned to listen. He thought that he heard a faint cry from the green tangle, so he waited a little space, to learn if it would sound again. Sure enough, it came a second time—a feeble, piteous moan, as of some young creature in distress and spent with long wailing.

“Now that is a pity,” thought Karl. “Some wee lamb has slipped off the cliff and fallen into the stream.”

He looked doubtfully at his burden, wondering what time it might take him to go to the rescue; but the little cry came again, so piteously that his soft heart would not let him wait longer. So, leaving the swords behind a boulder, he plunged in among the osiers; but he had gone but a step or two when he started back in dismay, for he had nearly trodden upon a yellow-haired babe who sat among the willows, looking up at him with great blue eyes in which the tears yet stood. Terror was in every line of the small face, but the baby made no further sound. He only looked earnestly up at the bearded, black-browed face bent over him, until he met the armorer's eyes. Then he reached up his arms, and Karl stooped and raised him to his broad chest.

“Now what foul work is here, do you suppose?” he muttered to himself. “This is no chick from the village, nor from the castle either, I'll be bound, or there'd have been hue and cry ere this.”

He pressed back the little face that had been buried against his neck, and surveyed it sharply. "What is thy name, little one?" he demanded at last.

At sound of the armorer's voice the child again looked at him, and seemed not to understand the question until Karl had several times repeated it, saying the words slowly and plainly, when at last the baby said, with a touch of impatience: "Wulf! Wulf!" adding plaintively: "Wulf hungry!"

Then he broke down and sobbed tiredly on Karl's big shoulder, so that the armorer was fain to hush him softly, comforting him with wonderful gentleness, while he drew from his own wallet a bit of coarse bread and gave it to the little fellow. The latter ate it with a sharp appetite, and afterward drank a deep draught from the leather cup which Karl filled from the stream. As he was drinking, a sound was heard as of some one passing on the road, whereupon the boy became suddenly still, looking at Karl in a way that made the armorer understand that for some reason it had been taught him that unknown sounds were a signal for silence.

"Ay?" thought Karl. "That's naught like a baby. He's been with hunted men, to learn that trick!"

When the child had eaten and drunk all he would, he settled down again in Karl's arms, asking no questions—if, indeed, he could talk enough to do so, a matter of which the armorer doubted, for the little chap was but three or four years old at most. He seemed, however, well wonted to strangers, and to being carried from place to place; for he took it kindly when Karl settled him against his shoulder, throwing over him a sort of short cloak of travel-stained red stuff, in which he had been wrapped as he lay among the osiers,

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