

Chapter Twelve

The best remedy for war is sought and found, but the worst is chosen

After each expressed the opinion that there would be a war between France and Holland, which might finally spread over all Europe, my company parted from me, and I pondered on the ways and means by which I might safely escape its dangerous currents. I had heard from a magician that at this time of our *saeculum* a war would begin in Germany and at last end in France, and that the Roman emperor would deal six hard blows to the Most Christian King; therefore I thought indeed, such a war would also affect the Roman Empire and thus my fatherland too; for which reason I was all the more worried and meditated how I might be able to bring together a considerable sum of money in diverse gold coins which can be packed up compactly and on which I might live, and to bring it together with myself and my family, to the safest possible place, which I also trusted I might also easily do by means of my invisibility; to this end I forthwith tried out my plan on a rich Portuguese Jew who, as it was generally believed, did not know himself the sum of his great wealth.

I made myself invisible and went into his house to sniff out therein where the best treasures lay, but nevertheless dared not be as loud there as if I had been at home there, so that my invisible presence might not be remarked and my plot thwarted. Even before I came to the house I heard someone singing the beginning of a little song which I held to be an infallible omen that war really must needs be at hand, and therefore I became all the more eager to fill my sacks betimes. The song began as follows:

Old Simplex and Hopalong too,
Neither fellow has a sou,
And no innkeep will pour them a drink,
So both live on poverty's brink.

O brothers, be of good cheer—
A change in your future is near.
You can tell by the way folks act
That war must soon be a fact.

The content of the following stanzas told of the godless life of all manner of people of rank, and finally came to the conclusion that without War, Pestilence and Famine the world might not be made better again; and although the simple artless rhymes were forged in the manner of Hans Sachs, the content was nevertheless so reasonable that I could not but take it to heart as an infallible prophecy, although I am otherwise not at all wont to be so superstitious.

Now, as I was sneaking about here and there in the house, which I can quite well call a palace, I found it stuffed with everything which rich people are wont to have; only the cash money, because it, together with many precious jewels, was kept in a vault and was protected by several locksmith's locks; and therefore I was obliged to consider getting my hands on the keys, to which end I sniffed through all the rooms and in one of them found a woman embroidering a sword belt with gold, silver and pearls, at whose incomparable beauty I was indeed astonished; for she was so uncommonly and indescribably beautiful that I can never more be persuaded or believe that a painter is to be found in the whole wide world who could paint a more beautiful picture. Her dark brown eyes so gleamed with lovely glances that they would have been sufficient to ignite the whole world with the flames of love, if only they had been cast on the eyes of men as well as on the beautiful pearl-work of her alabaster hands. For just

as she herself took joy and hearty pleasure in this excellent work, or rather work of art of hers, she cast upon it, as a thing which she dearly loved, with a smiling face, as it were, many tender glances, which were such that in a trice their power could not but go straight to the innermost heart through the eyes of those on whom they fall and place it in the bonds of love, even if they were of hard steel; indeed, even of cold crystal and diamond. When I saw straightway at first glance, just as she was immersed in this devotion towards her work and therefore was sitting stock still, how artfully and beautifully the pale white and the lovely rose color were mixed and distributed in her face, which was formed in a most exceedingly beautiful manner, and also saw that her lips shone forth as if painted with *vermilion d'Espagne*, I thought the entire picture might be some artful master's best work of art, such as those life-size statues carved of wax and splendidly clothed which they toured with in Germany and showed for money; but when she moved again and began to embroider, I was overcome with wonderment precisely as Pygmalion may perchance have been when a living soul was poured by Venus into the beautiful virginal statue which he himself had so industriously produced of ivory. I stood there completely enchanted, or, to say it closer to the truth, completely smitten, and was able neither to see my fill of this excessive beauty nor to wonder at it sufficiently. Nothing Jewish was I able to remark about her save a very little bit of her well-formed nose, which, however, in my eyes served her better as an excellent adornment than that it should have been deemed a signature of a Jewish physiognomy. The jewelry in her hair and around her neck, her earrings, her rings and bracelets were of great value; her slippers, like the sword belt which she was embroidering, and her dress were of such cloth as private persons of that sort are not wont to wear every day. Her sugar spheres she had pressed in carelessly, and therefore their rising and falling delighted me most of all when she

breathed; and as I gratified in this fashion the curiosity of my eyes, I quite unknowingly quaffed in deepest draughts the sweet poison of love, and did not become aware of this till I wished to go away and was yet almost unable to take my eyes off the uncommon beauty.

I was already married and had in my days served many a lady-love, which doings are commonly driven by the motivation of love, by virtue of which I too, because I had thus gone a-wooing, had had enough to do with it and its passions; but that seemed to me to be naught but jest and child's play compared to what I now was suffering. For after I had once seen this Jewish maiden, I had no peace any more, neither day nor night; no sleep came to my eyes; all the merry gatherings which I really sought out on purpose, were odious to me; all I did was to feed myself on pains, to drag about with melancholy thoughts, and to work myself sick with all manner of laments, vain effort, vexation, many sorts of profound reflections and otherwise with a thousand kinds of fantastic follies and foolish plans to enjoy the favors of my beloved. Otherwise I allowed all honorable business and my entire trade to go their merry way, and although my wit and mind hereby became dull and useless, my flesh, together with the powers of my body, also dissipated, just as if I had come down with consumption. Thus I learned only late what manner of nature a really violent love has, whereas I, as a married man, really should have needed the useful precept of Vergil, when he says

Vina sitim sedent, natis Venus alma creandis
 Serviat; hos fines transiluisse nocet.

That is

Venus for modesty, for thirst wine;
 He who goes to excess profits little.

This state I was in, which grew daily worse, would have been more than sufficient to little by little enervate me and finally even

bring about my death, but (so it seemed) I was not to get off so easily; the nature of my fate turned out to be much more cruel, and the insurmountable obstacles and vagaries which prevented me from fulfilling my desire were so powerful that they threatened to make me finally despair such that I began gradually to wish for my death, so that I was well able to lament with that Italian:

O notte, o cielo, o mare, o piaggie e monte,
Che si spresso m'udite chiamar morte!

In English:

O night, o mount, o sea, o hill and sky,
How oft you hear my wish to die!

Indeed, I did not leave matters thus, but rather seized the most extreme wish of angered and desperate lovers, namely that heaven and earth collapse, so that I might see an end to my misery, which wish Alphenus Perusinus expressed in Italian this way:

Piovan dal ciel con tempestosa furia
Folgari ardenti, che ciascun sommergano.

Contalicus translated it into Latin as follows:

Totum terribili quatiatur turbine coesium,
Cunctaque dispereant corpora fulminibus.

And in English:

Heav'n and earth alike collapse into a heap
So that no man may escape a fall into the deep.

To be sure, that my beloved was a Jewess caused me the least vexation and distress; for to such a conscience as has had the impudence to get back his money with the devil's help, 'tis all the same whether his bestial lusts are accomplished with a baptized or unbaptized piece of flesh. On the other hand, what gave my heart the greatest sorrow was that I knew how exactly and carefully the Jews are wont

to protect their women from a fall, and indeed especially those who are virgins. Secondly, it was not my slightest care that nothing could be accomplished in this instance with money and gifts, which otherwise generally prevail everywhere, make all mountains and valleys level, and carry the victory over every town, since it was common knowledge that her father had as much of it to throw away without particular diminution of his inestimable riches as I should be able to get together my whole life long. Thirdly, it was a sharp thorn in my side that the Jews, women as well as men, hate us Christians, by nature as it were, and esteem them to be not much better in their minds than dogs, in comparison to themselves, the issue of Abraham which still imagines itself to be God's chosen people and hopes sometime in the future to rule the world under their future Messiah. Fourthly, I got not a few gray hairs and hollow cheeks because I dared not gain access to this place through either pimps or panderesses, for which folk, with their famous cunning, crafty deceitfulness, and daily newly devised tricks, no virgin can be too chaste and proper, no widow too cautious, no married woman too shrewd, no resolve too firm, no intent too strong, and no continence too steadfast, and no stone so hard and fast that it cannot be moved by their continuing efforts, against which neither force nor guile, neither caution nor wisdom, neither celerity, art, nor adroitness can accomplish anything. Now the better these folks' dexterity was known to me, the more it pained me that I knew not how to make use of them on my behalf. Fifthly, I saw myself in a city wherein nothing could be accomplished by force, because the Jews live there under the most secure protection; and to attempt anything by intrigue seemed impossible to me because, as you have heard above, the Jews protect their womenfolk so well. To make myself known to her and to wait upon her as a *serviteur*, even if I were perchance able to secretly and unnoticed run my shuttle into her, seemed to me to be just as scornful as dangerous.

I believe that evil Satan has much more power to tempt with the greatest possible vexations those folk who have become accustomed to rolling from one sin to the other, and more brazenly attacks them than those who have zealously been on their guard against vices; for look you, 'twas without doubt from this arch-fiend's prompting that I got the thought to say to myself: How would it be if you had yourself circumcised, especially since in Amsterdam this is nothing new? But hardly had I had this thought when I saw also what a horrible abomination it was. No, said I, this idea and suggestion comes from the devil. You should rather die a thousand times than deny Christ as your Savior! Had I at that time had my reason still fresh and sound, I should have also thought and concluded that the love which I harbored toward this maiden could have its origins from none other than from the devil, in order to thereby deprive me of my Christianity and thus of eternal bliss. But alas! I let matters remain there and was of the opinion that I had done enough and a noble Christian deed when I was unwilling to deny Christ publicly, whereas on the other hand I felt no bad conscience at all about adoring the Jewess' image in my heart all the time and presenting her with many thousands of sighs of love.

The only comfort of my disconsolate and miserable life was that I went almost daily, invisibly, to see my dearest and to feast my eyes on her wondrously beautiful face. But why do I call this folly a comfort when it was really naught else but oil poured on my flames, which flames of love grew higher, the longer I looked? Thus I loved without hope of satisfaction and tormented myself by reflecting about whether it might not be possible to help myself out of my misery one way or the other. But no expedient was to be found there, unless I wished to hang or drown myself, which even at that time did not seem at all acceptable to me. Meanwhile I found out the name of the Jew and all who lived in his house, and became as well acquainted with all the

nooks and crannies in the house as if I had been born and raised in it. I also found the place where the Jew's cash, silver plate, and precious jewels were, which in truth was a treasure the likes of which were not to be found in the home of many a count in German and French lands. But I left it all untouched, because not rich Eliezar's gold, silver, and jewels, but his beautiful daughter Esther was for this time the treasure for which I yearned.

Once, on a Friday evening, I again found myself in Eliezar's domicile and watched as he, Eliezar, as the father of the family, after reciting many words of praise, which they call the *haudila* (which means "division, separation," namely of the Sabbath from the other non-holy days), in his damask sheepskin lined with marten, sprinkled a large gold-plated beaker full of wine throughout the entire house, saying as he did so: "May the prophet Elias, the prophet Elias, the prophet Elias soon come to us with Moschiah, God's and David's son; may the prophet Elias, etc.," which ceremonies gave me the reason and the opportunity to devise that plot which afterwards gave me the pleasure of my love.