

# SOLDIER FRITZ

## CHAPTER I

### THE PEDDLER'S VISIT

**I**T was a cold, bleak wintry day, late in the autumn of 1525, that a peddler was toiling with his pack up the steep hill leading to the castle of Thorn, near the eastern border of Germany. He walked as though he were weary and footsore, and the heavy pack upon his back made him stoop and lean heavily upon the stout stick he carried in his hand, for he was not a young man, and by the time the castle gate was reached he seemed quite exhausted. But he was almost sure to obtain rest and refreshment here, if

he did not sell any of his goods, for the servants would be glad to have a chat with him and hear the news of what was going on in other places beyond their own town. There were no newspapers in those days, and so the peddlers were welcome wherever they went for the news they brought with them.

Old Carl was well known to the warder who stood at the castle gate, and so he gained admittance without any difficulty, and made his way to the kitchen at once, where a little crowd soon gathered round him to see what his pack contained this time.

But the old peddler would neither tell them any news or show them any of his wares until he had finished the horn of ale that had been handed to him as he took his seat. They told him their mistress was at the castle now, but that Count Eric, their master, was away at the wars, and that the place was very dull for the poor Countess with only her two children.

“Then, maybe the lady will like to see the brave things I have got in my pack,” said the old man, looking up at a waiting-woman who had just come in.

“I will ask the Lady Elizabeth,” she said, “and it is possible you may be summoned to the great hall if you can tell aught of the wars.”

“Ah, that can I, for it is but a short while since I saw the great general himself,” said the peddler.

Off flew the waiting-maid to tell her mistress of the old peddler's arrival, and as she felt quite as curious as any of the kitchen servants to see the contents of the pack, she contrived to make her mistress believe that the man knew all about the war in which the Count was engaged.

She might have been willing to look at the man's pack without this extra inducement, for her children's birthdays were both at hand, and as there was no hope now of the

Count being back in time to bring them presents from the seat of war, she was glad of the opportunity of buying them something herself, and resolved that both Elsie and Fritz should have their choice of what the pack contained.

So the waiting-maid was sent to order the man to bring his pack into the great hall and open it, and then the lady went to fetch the little boy and girl from their play, and they went down the broad stone staircase into the dimly-lighted hall, hung round with its old-fashioned rusty suits of armour, boars' tusks, and deer's antlers, where the old man had spread some of his wares on an oaken table.

It was a miscellaneous collection of books, pieces of silk and taffetas, ribbons, beads, ornaments of various kinds, and tiny mirrors of Venetian glass.

Fritz glanced eagerly over the table, and then turned with a disappointed

look towards his mother. "There is not one sword," he said, "and I did so want a sword."

"An' it please you, my young master, I have a sword here that has but a short while been unsheathed by our great general," said the peddler, taking up a rather ponderous-looking volume.

"I said I wanted a sword," said Fritz, looking disdainfully at the book.

"And this is one 'quick and powerful,'<sup>1</sup> and used by brave and knightly hands in the present war," said the old peddler, opening it as he spoke.

"Go to war with books!" said Fritz, looking at the black-lettered volume.

"What is the book?" asked the lady.

"The Word of God, as translated by our brave and noble Dr. Luther," replied the peddler.

"Ah, this Dr. Luther is making a great stir in the world," said the lady, taking a seat

<sup>1</sup> HEBREWS 4:12

near the table, so as to be able to examine the wares at leisure.

“He is fighting the battle of light against darkness, and this is the weapon he is using,” said the old man, laying his hand on the Bible.

The little boy lifted his large blue eyes, and looked into the old man’s face. “My father is a soldier, and I want to be a soldier too,” he said. “Will you tell me how they fight with this?”

“By studying it first, my young master,” said the old man, with a pleasant smile at the boy’s earnestness; “but I’ve heard it said Dr. Luther generally fights on his knees.”

Fritz looked puzzled, while the lady said, “It is a strange weapon, and a strange warfare, methinks; but I have heard somewhat of it before, and that the Pope likes not this Luther.”

“No, it is against the Pope and all the evils of Popery and sin in men’s hearts and lives

that he is fighting;" and then, while Elsie was looking at a string of glittering beads, he told the lady, not only what was going on at Wittenburg and the country round, but the truths the Reformers were preaching and teaching.

Turning to Fritz, the old man went on to repeat to him some of the stirring narratives of the Bible, the story of Goliath the giant and "the good knight David," Daniel in the lions' den, the children of Israel at the Red Sea, and many other wonderful histories. The boy's colour went and came as he listened with breathless interest to these things so familiar to us, so new to him.

The lady was so interested that she quite forgot to look at the old man's wares until the gathering gloom of the hall warned her that it was getting late, and then she found Elsie had been unable to decide between the beads and a bright red ribbon for a sash. Fritz, however, had made his choice. He had

listened with so much attention to the old man's talk, that when he heard that the book would tell him more of these things, as well as what Dr. Luther taught, he resolved to fix upon this for a birthday present, and the price was soon transferred from the lady's pocket to the old man's leather bag.

She did not murmur at the price, although we should think it a large one to give for a plainly-bound, clumsily-printed Bible now, and money was of more value then; but, taking the book in her arms as if afraid to trust it even to Fritz, she said to the peddler, "You will stay at the castle tonight, old man, and tomorrow my little daughter shall choose her birthday present."

This arrangement appeared to suit old Carl, for he gathered up his possessions and put them into his pack, while a faint smile stole over his face as he bowed on the lady's departure, and then followed the servant through winding passages to the



kitchen premises, where in the servants' hall he would be sure to have to turn them all out again.

Books he had no hope of selling here, for few of even the upper servants could read; sometimes neither the master nor mistress of the castle could do so; and thus the old man felt that his work among them—the task he had set himself to perform of spreading the knowledge of Christ as an all-sufficient Saviour—could only be done by verbal teaching when they were all gathered round to hear the news in the evening.

The prospect of hearing what the peddler could tell was a pleasant one to all the servants, and they were delighted to hear that their mistress had given orders for him to stop all night, for they knew that old Carl would not stay without this permission.

So after the evening meal had been discussed the peddler got his pack and once more displayed his beads, ribbons,

and mirrors to the great admiration of the maids, and stout clasp-knives, hunting-horns, and buckles to tempt the men to lay out a little money with him and lighten his load before he took his departure.

When the various purchases were made and the pack strapped up again securely, old Carl drew a book from his pocket as they came round him to hear the news. "Now, my friends," he said, "we'll hear a little bit concerning the kingdom of heaven first," and he read the twenty-fifth chapter of St. Matthew. After the reading his hearers seemed more intent upon asking him where he had got the book and learned the wonderful truths he spoke of than the idle gossip of the day; and so it was Luther and his work of writing and teaching that came to be talked of more than anything else, though they listened eagerly and far on into the night to the news he had to tell them of the battles and the

sieges which were then laying Europe waste.

The next morning when the peddler awoke and looked out of the little narrow slit of a window in the turret chamber where he had slept, he saw that all the ground was covered with snow and large feathery flakes were still falling.

“Dear heart alive, how am I to get on my journey with the snow falling like this?” he exclaimed, and then checking himself for his momentary vexation, he added, “Ah, but our Father in heaven knows just when to send the snow, and He won’t forget the poor old peddler has many a mile to travel before he reaches home,” saying which the old man knelt down to thank God for the mercies of the past night and ask His guidance and protection during the coming day.

While the peddler was looking at the snow from one turret window, Fritz, who had just jumped out of bed, was looking

at it from another. He clapped his hands with delight as he watched the silent snowflakes fall that would soon blot out all the waymarks, fill up the cart-ruts, and quite alter the face of the country. "That old peddler will have to stay here till the snow has all gone," he said, "and it may be a month before the roads are clear now."

He dressed himself as quickly as possible and went to his sister's room, but she was not dressed, so he had to wait with what patience he could muster until summoned to his mother's presence.

He might have amused himself with his book if he had had it, but the Countess was to take charge of it until his birthday arrived, and so he could only sit and wish the horn would sound that called all the servants to breakfast, which likewise served as a bell to summon him and his sister to their mother.

The welcome sound was heard at last, and with a deferential bow Fritz entered her room. He was all impatience for her to speak to him, for children were not allowed to speak to their parents first in those days. The Countess probably saw her son's impatient manner, for she said, kindly beckoning him to come forward, "What is it, my son?"

"Do you see the snow, Mamma?" said Fritz, speaking very quickly.

The lady looked grave as she bowed her head. "I hope it will not last," she said, "or it will prevent your papa from coming home."

"Oh, Mamma, it will not last long enough for that, I am sure," said Fritz, "but I do want it to keep on snowing for a few days."

"For a few days, my boy," repeated the lady, "why the roads will all be blocked up then."

"Yes, Mamma, and Father Anselm will not be able to get back from the monastery,

and the old peddler will not be able to leave the castle," said Fritz, joyfully.

Despite her fears lest the snow should hinder the Count from coming home, the lady could not help smiling at the boy's eagerness as she said, "Why are you so anxious that Father Anselm should not return to the castle yet?"

"Because I want to hear more about this wonderful man Dr. Luther, and the book the old peddler has brought, and Father Anselm does not like Dr. Luther, I know."

"How do you know that, Fritz?" asked the lady, a faint colour stealing into her cheeks as she spoke.

"I heard him speak of him to Father Eustace when he came, and they said if he was allowed to publish the Bible and his books so that everybody could read them, there would soon be an end of all religion in Germany."

The lady looked gravely apprehensive as the boy said this. "An end of all religion,"

she said softly to herself, "and yet the book tells of the love of God and the death of the Lord Jesus Christ, although it says nothing about the worship of saints and the blessed Virgin, which the priests teach us is so important that God cannot forgive us without their help and intercession."

"Mamma, have you been reading my book?" asked Fritz, turning from the stove where he had stood warming his hands.

The colour deepened in the lady's face as she replied, "Yes, Fritz, I have read a good deal of it since last night."

"Then, Mamma, you will let the peddler stop here until the snow is over, and then he can tell us some more about this Dr. Luther and the battle he is fighting. I wish he would have me for one of his soldiers," he added.

"But the old man said Dr. Luther fought kneeling down. I suppose he meant he was praying to God," said Elsie, who had entered

the room and crept up to the stove almost unperceived.

Fritz shrugged his shoulders somewhat disdainfully. "Girls know nothing about such things," he said; "how should they know what soldiers do? Dr. Luther does not kneel down and count a long string of beads before the Virgin, I know," and he looked contemptuously at Elsie as he spoke.

"Come, come, children, Dr. Luther would not approve of little girls and boys quarrelling, I am sure," said the lady, and she led the way into the breakfast-room at once.

After breakfast the old peddler was summoned to the great hall again, that Elsie might choose a birthday present, and the Countess and Fritz listen to his talk about Luther and the truths he was teaching; not new truths, he said, but old truths brought to light again after being hidden by the devices and inventions of men. Fritz did not seem so delighted with the account he heard



of Luther this morning. It seemed that Elsie was nearer the truth than he was, for the peddler said Dr. Luther's fighting was praying after all, only with this difference, that he had cast aside the beads and did not seek the intercession of the Virgin Mary, only that of the Lord Jesus Christ Himself, when he prayed to God.

But this fact of praying at all betokened dependence and humility, and Fritz was very proud—proud of his birth and position—and to be a soldier upon such terms as these seemed to him impossible.