

Renatus

By A. C. Benson

Renatus was a Prince of Saxony that was but newly come to his principedom; his father had died while he was a boy, and the realm had been administered by his father's brother, a Duke of high courage and prudence. The Duke was deeply anxious for the fate of the principedom and his nephew's fortunes, for they lived in troubled times; the barons of the province were strong and haughty men, with little care for the Prince, and no thought of obedience; each of them lived in his castle, upon a small realm of his own; the people were much discontented with the rule of the barons, and the Duke saw plainly enough that if a prince could arise who could win the confidence of the people, the barons would have but little power left. Thus his care was so to bring up the Prince Renatus that he should understand how hard a task was before him; but the boy, though quick of apprehension, was fond of pleasure and amusement, and soon wearied of grave instructions; so the Duke did not persist overmuch, but strove to make the little Prince love him and confide in him, hoping that, when the day of trial came, he might be apt to ask advice rather than act hastily and perhaps foolishly; but yet in this the Duke had not perfectly succeeded, as he was by nature grave and austere, and even his face seemed to have in it a sort of rebuke for lively and light-minded persons. Still the Prince, though he was not at ease with the Duke, trusted him exceedingly, and thought him wise and good, even more than the Duke imagined.

The days had been full of feasting and pageants, and Renatus was greatly excited and eager at finding himself in so great a place. He had borne himself with much courtesy and dignity in his receiving of embassies and such compliments; he had, too, besides the sweet gifts of youth and beauty, a natural affectionateness, which led him to wish to please those about him; and the Duke's heart was full of love and admiration for the graceful boy, though there lay in the back of his mind a shadow of fear; and this grew very dark when he saw two of the most turbulent barons speaking together in a corner, with sidelong glances at the Prince, at one of the Court assemblies, and divined that they thought the boy would be but a pretty puppet in their hands.

The custom was that the Prince, on the eve of his enthroning, should watch for two hours alone in the chapel of the castle, from eleven to one at night, and should there consecrate himself to God; the guests of the evening were departed; and a few minutes before eleven the Duke sate with the Prince in a little room off the chapel, waiting till it was time for the Prince to enter the building. Renatus was in armour, as the custom was, with a white robe over all. He sate restlessly in a chair, and there was a mischievous and dancing light of pleasure in his eye, that made the Duke doubly grave. The Duke, after some discourse of other matters, made a pause; and then, saying that it was the last time that he should take the privilege of guardianship—to offer advice unless it were sought—said: “And now, Renatus, you know that I love you as a dear son; and I would have you remember that all these things are but shows, and that there sits behind them a grave and holy presence of duty; these pomps are but the signs that you are truly the Prince of this land; and you must use your power well, and to God's glory; for it is He that makes us to be what we are, and truly calls us thereto.” Renatus heard him with a sort of courteous impatience, and then, with a smile, said: “Yes, dear uncle, I know it; but the shows are very brave; and you will forgive me if my head is full of them just now. Presently, when the pageants are all over, I shall settle down to be a sober prince enough. I think you do not trust me wholly in the matter—

but I would not seem ungrateful," he added rather hastily, seeing the gravity in the Duke's face—"for indeed you have been as a true father to me."

The Duke said no more at that time, for he cared not to give untimely advice, and a moment after, a bell began to toll in the silence, and the chaplain came habited to conduct the Prince to his chapel. So they went the three of them together.

It was dark and still within the church; in front of the altar-steps were set a faldstool and a chair, where the Duke might pray, or sit if he were weary; two tall wax lights stood beside, and lit up the crimson cloth and the gold fringes, so that it seemed like a rare flower blossoming in the dark. A single light, in a silver lamp hung by a silver chain, burnt before the altar; all else was dim; but they could see the dark stalls of the choir, with their carven canopies, over which hung the banners of old knights, that moved softly to and fro; beyond were the pillars of the aisles, glimmering faintly in a row. The roof and windows were dark, save where here and there a rib of stone or a tracery stood out very rich and dim. All about there was a kind of holy smell, of wood and carven stone and incense-smoke.

The chaplain knelt beneath the altar; and the Prince knelt down at the faldstool, the Duke beside him on the floor. And just as the old bell of the castle tolled the hour, and died away in a soft hum of sound, as sweet as honey, the chaplain said an ancient prayer, the purport of which was that the Christian must watch and pray; that only the pure heart might see God; and asking that the Prince might be blest with wisdom, as the Emperor Solomon was, to do according to the will of the Father.

Then the chaplain and the Duke withdrew; but as the Duke rose up, he laid his hand on the Prince's head and said, "God be with you, dear son, and open your eyes." And Renatus looked up at him and smiled.

Then the Duke went back to the little room, and prayed abundantly. It was arranged that he should wait there until the Prince's vigil was over, when he would go to attend him forth; and so the Prince was left by himself.

For a time Renatus prayed, gathering up the strength of his mind to pray earnestly; but other thoughts kept creeping in, like children peeping and beckoning from a door. So he rose up after a little, and looked about him; and something of the solemnity of the night and the place came into his mind.

Then, after a while, he sate, his armour clinking lightly as he moved; and wrapping his robe about him—for it grew chill in the church—he thought of what had been and what should be. The time flew fast; and presently Renatus heard the great bell ring the hour of midnight; so he knelt and prayed again, with all his might, that God would bless him and open his eyes.

Then he rose again to his feet; and now the moon was risen and made a very pure and tender radiance through one of the high windows; and Renatus, looking about him, was conscious of a thrill of fear that passed through him, as though there were some great presence near him in the gloom; then his eyes fell on a little door on his right, opposite to the door by which they had entered, which he knew led out into the castle court; but underneath the door, between it and the sill, there gleamed a line of very golden light, such as might come from a fire without. The Prince had no foolish tenors, as he was by nature courageous, and the holy place that he was in made him feel secure. But the light, which now began to grow in clearness, and to stream, like a rippling flow of brightness, into the church, surprised him exceedingly. So he rose up and went to the little door, expecting that he would find it closed; but it opened to his hand.

He had thought to see the dark court of the castle as he had often seen it, with its tall chimneys and battlements, and with lights in the windows. But to his amazement he saw that he was on the

edge of a vast and dizzy space, so vast that he had not thought there could be anything in the world so great. The church and he seemed to float together in the space, for the solid earth was all gone—and it came into his head that the great building in which he stood, so fair and high, was no larger than a mote that swims in the strong beams of the sun. The space was all misty and dim at first, but over it hung a light like the light of dawn, that seemed to gush from a place in the cloud, near at hand and yet leagues away. Then as his sight became more used to the place, he saw that it was all sloping upwards and downwards, and built up of great steps or stairs, that ran across the space and were lost at last in cloud; and that the light came from the head of the steps. Then with a sudden shock of surprise he saw that there were persons kneeling on the steps; and every moment his sight became clearer and clearer, so that he could see the persons nearest to him, their robes and hands, and even the very lineaments of their faces.

Very near him there were three figures kneeling, not together in a group, but with some space between them. And, in some way that he could not explain, he felt that all the three were unconscious both of each other and of himself.

Looking intently upon them, he saw that they were kings, in royal robes. The nearest to him was an ancient man, with white hair; he knelt very upright and strong; his face was like parchment, with heavy lines, but his eyes glowed like a fire. Renatus thought he had never seen so proud a look. He had an air of command, and Renatus seemed to know that he had been a warrior in his youth. In his hands he held a crown of fine golden work, filled with jewels of great rarity and price; and the king held the crown as though he knew its worth; he seemed, as it were, to be proffering it, but as a gift of mighty value, the worthiest thing that he had to offer.

On a step below him at a little distance knelt the second; he was a younger man, in the prime of life; he had the look more of a student than a warrior, of one who was busied in many affairs, and who pondered earnestly over high matters of policy and state. He had a wiser face than the older man, but his brow was drawn by lines, as though he had often doubted of himself and others; and he had a crown in one hand, which he held a little irresolutely, as though he half loved it, and were yet half wearied of it; as though he was fain to lay it down, and yet not wholly glad to part with it.

Then Renatus turned a little to the third; and he was more richly appalled than the others; his hands were clasped in prayer; and by his knee there lay a splendid diadem, an Emperor's crown, with few jewels, but each the price of a kingdom. And Renatus saw that he was very young, scarce older than himself; and that he had the most beautiful face he had ever seen, with large soft eyes, clear-cut features, and a mouth that looked both pure and strong; but in his face there was such a passion of holiness and surrender, that Renatus fell to wondering what it was that a man could so adore. He was the only one of the three who looked, as it were, rapt out of himself; and the crown lay beside him as if he had forgotten its very existence.

Then there came upon the air a great sound of jubilant and tender music like the voice of silver trumpets—and the cloud began to lift and draw up on every side, and revealed at last, very far off and very high, yet strangely near and clear, a Throne at the head of the steps. But Renatus dared not look thereon, for he felt that the time was not come; but he saw, as it were reflected in the eyes of the kings, that they looked upon a sight of awful splendour and mystery. Then he saw that the two that still held their crowns laid them down upon the ground with a sort of fearful haste, as though they were constrained; but the youngest of the kings smiled, as though he were satisfied beyond his dearest wish.

Then Renatus felt that somewhat was to be done too bright and holy for a mortal eye to behold, and so he drew back and softly closed the door; and it was a pain to find himself within the dark

church again; it was as though he had lost the sight of something that a man might desire above all things to see—but he dared look no longer; and the music came again, but this time more urgently, in a storm of sound.

Then Renatus went back to his place, that seemed to him very small and humble beside what he had seen outside. And all the pride was emptied out of his heart, for he knew that he had looked upon the truth, and that it was wider than he had dreamed; and then he knelt and prayed that God would keep him humble and diligent and brave; but then he grew ashamed of his prayer, for he remembered that, after all, he was but still praying for himself; and he had a thought of the young Emperor's face, and he knew that there was something deeper and better still than humility and diligence and courage; what it was he knew not; but he thought that he had been, as it were, asking God for those fair things, like flower-blossoms or jewels, which a man may wear for his own pride; but that they must rather rise and blossom, like plants out of a rich soil. So he ended by praying that God would empty him of all unworthy thoughts, and fill him full of that good and great thing, which, in the Gospel story, Martha went near to miss, but Mary certainly divined.

That was a blessed hour, to the thought of which Renatus afterwards often turned in darker and more weary days. But it drew swiftly to an end, and as he knelt, the bell beat one, and his vigil was over.

Presently the Duke came to attend him back; and Renatus could not speak of the vision, but only told the Duke that he had seen a wonderful thing, and he added a few words of grateful love, holding the Duke's hand close in his own.

On the next day, before Renatus came to be enthroned, the barons came to do him homage; and Renatus, asking God to give him words that he might say what was in his heart, spoke to them, the Duke standing by; he said that he well knew that it appeared strange that one so young as himself should receive the homage of those who were older and wiser and more strong, adding:

“But I believe that I am truly called, under God, to rule this land for the welfare of all that dwell therein, and I will rule it with diligence. Nay—for it is not well that a land should have many masters—I purpose that none shall rule it but myself, under God.” And at that the barons looked upon one another, but Renatus, leaning a little forward, with his hand upon his sword-hilt, said: “I think, my Lords, that there be some here that are saying to themselves, *He hath learnt his lesson well*, and I hope that it may be seen that it is so—but it is God and not man who hath put it into my heart to say this; it is from Him that I receive this throne. Counsel will I ask, and that gladly; but remembering the account that I must one day make, I will rule this realm for the welfare of the people thereof, and I will have all men do their parts; so see that your homage be of the heart and not of the lips, for it is to God that you make it, and not to me, who am indeed unworthy; but He that hath set me in this place will strengthen my hands. I have spoken this,” he said, “not willingly; but I would have no one mistake my purpose in the matter.”

Then the barons came silently to do obeisance; and so Renatus came to his own; but more of him I must not here say, save that he ruled his realm wisely and well, and ever gave God the glory.