

Their Silver Wedding Journey V3

by William Dean Howells

PART III.

XLVIII.

At the first station where the train stopped, a young German bowed himself into the compartment with the Marches, and so visibly resisted an impulse to smoke that March begged him to light his cigarette. In the talk which this friendly overture led to between them he explained that he was a railway architect, employed by the government on that line of road, and was travelling officially. March spoke of Nuremberg; he owned the sort of surfeit he had suffered from its excessive mediaevalism, and the young man said it was part of the new imperial patriotism to cherish the Gothic throughout Germany; no other sort of architecture was permitted in

Nuremberg. But they would find enough classicism at Ansbach, he promised them, and he entered with sympathetic intelligence into their wish to see this former capital when March told him they were going to stop there, in hopes of something typical of the old disjointed Germany of the petty principalities, the little paternal despotisms now extinct.

As they talked on, partly in German and partly in English, their purpose in visiting Ansbach appeared to the Marches more meditated than it was. In fact it was somewhat accidental; Ansbach was near Nuremberg; it was not much out of the way to Holland. They took more and more credit to themselves for a reasoned and definite motive, in the light of their companion's enthusiasm for the place, and its charm began for them with the drive from the station through streets whose sentiment was both Italian and French, and where there was a yellowish cast

in the gray of the architecture which was almost Mantuan. They rested their sensibilities, so bruised and fretted by Gothic angles and points, against the smooth surfaces of the prevailing classicistic facades of the houses as they passed, and when they arrived at their hotel, an old mansion of Versailles type, fronting on a long irregular square planted with pollard sycamores, they said that it might as well have been Lucca.

The archway and stairway of the hotel were draped with the Bavarian colors, and they were obscurely flattered to learn that Prince Leopold, the brother of the Prince-Regent of the kingdom, had taken rooms there, on his way to the manoeuvres at Nuremberg, and was momentarily expected with his suite. They realized that they were not of the princely party, however, when they were told that he had sole possession of the diningroom, and they went out to another hotel, and had their supper in keeping delightfully

native. People seemed to come there to write their letters and make up their accounts, as well as to eat their suppers; they called for stationery like characters in old comedy, and the clatter of crockery and the scratching of pens went on together; and fortune offered the Marches a delicate reparation for their exclusion from their own hotel in the cold popular reception of the prince which they got back just in time to witness. A very small group of people, mostly women and boys, had gathered to see him arrive, but there was no cheering or any sign of public interest. Perhaps he personally merited none; he looked a dull, sad man, with his plain, stubbed features; and after he had mounted to his apartment, the officers of his staff stood quite across the landing, and barred the passage of the Americans, ignoring even Mrs. March's presence, as they talked together.

"Well, my dear," said her husband, "here you have it at

last. This is what you've been living for, ever since we came to Germany. It's a great moment."

"Yes. What are you going to do?"

"Who? I? Oh, nothing! This is your affair; it's for you to act."

If she had been young, she might have withered them with a glance; she doubted now if her dim eyes would have any such power; but she advanced steadily upon them, and then the officers seemed aware of her, and stood aside.

March always insisted that they stood aside apologetically, but she held as firmly that they stood aside impertinently, or at least indifferently, and that the insult to her American womanhood was perfectly ideal. It is true that nothing of the kind happened again during their stay at the hotel; the

prince's officers were afterwards about in the corridors and on the stairs, but they offered no shadow of obstruction to her going and coming, and the landlord himself was not so preoccupied with his highhotes but he had time to express his grief that she had been obliged to go out for supper.

They satisfied the passion for the little obsolete capital which had been growing upon them by strolling past the old Resident at an hour so favorable for a first impression. It loomed in the gathering dusk even vaster than it was, and it was really vast enough for the pride of a King of France, much more a Margrave of Ansbach. Time had blackened and blotched its coarse limestone walls to one complexion with the statues swelling and strutting in the figure of Roman legionaries before it, and standing out against the evening sky along its balustraded roof, and had softened to the right tint the stretch of half a dozen houses

with mansard roofs and renaissance facades obsequiously in keeping with the Versailles ideal of a Resident. In the rear, and elsewhere at fit distance from its courts, a native architecture prevailed; and at no great remove the Marches found themselves in a simple German town again. There they stumbled upon a little bookseller's shop blinking in a quiet corner, and bought three or four guides and small histories of Ansbach, which they carried home, and studied between drowsing and waking. The wonderful German syntax seems at its most enigmatical in this sort of literature, and sometimes they lost themselves in its labyrinths completely, and only made their way perilously out with the help of cumulative declensions, past articles and adjectives blindly seeking their nouns, to long-procrastinated verbs dancing like swamp-fires in the distance. They emerged a little less ignorant than they went in, and better qualified than they would otherwise have been for their second visit to the Schloss, which they

paid early the next morning.

They were so early, indeed, that when they mounted from the great inner court, much too big for Ansbach, if not for the building, and rung the custodian's bell, a smiling maid who let them into an ante-room, where she kept on picking over vegetables for her dinner, said the custodian was busy, and could not be seen till ten o'clock. She seemed, in her nook of the pretentious pile, as innocently unconscious of its history as any hen-sparrow who had built her nest in some coign of its architecture; and her friendly, peaceful domesticity remained a wholesome human background to the tragedies and comedies of the past, and held them in a picturesque relief in which they were alike tolerable and even charming.

The history of Ansbach strikes its roots in the soil of fable, and above ground is a gnarled and twisted growth of good

and bad from the time of the Great Charles to the time of the Great Frederick. Between these times she had her various rulers, ecclesiastical and secular, in various forms of vassalage to the empire; but for nearly four centuries her sovereignty was in the hands of the margraves, who reigned in a constantly increasing splendor till the last sold her outright to the King of Prussia in 1791, and went to live in England on the proceeds. She had taken her part in the miseries and glories of the wars that desolated Germany, but after the Reformation, when she turned from the ancient faith to which she owed her cloistered origin under St. Gumpertus, her people had peace except when their last prince sold them to fight the battles of others. It is in this last transaction that her history, almost in the moment when she ceased to have a history of her own, links to that of the modern world, and that it came home to the Marches in their national character; for two thousand of those poor Ansbach mercenaries were

bought up by England and sent to put down a rebellion in her American colonies.

Humanly, they were more concerned for the Last Margrave, because of certain qualities which made him the Best Margrave, in spite of the defects of his qualities. He was the son of the Wild Margrave, equally known in the Ansbach annals, who may not have been the Worst Margrave, but who had certainly a bad trick of putting his subjects to death without trial, and in cases where there was special haste, with his own hand. He sent his son to the university at Utrecht because he believed that the republican influences in Holland would be wholesome for him, and then he sent him to travel in Italy; but when the boy came home looking frail and sick, the Wild Margrave charged his official travelling companion with neglect, and had the unhappy Hofrath Meyer hanged without process for this crime. One of the gentlemen of his

realm, for a pasquinade on the Margrave, was brought to the scaffold; he had, at various times, twenty-two of his soldiers shot with arrows and bullets or hanged for desertion, besides many whose penalties his clemency commuted to the loss of an ear or a nose; a Hungarian who killed his hunting-dog, he had broken alive on the wheel. A soldier's wife was hanged for complicity in a case of desertion; a young soldier who eloped with the girl he loved was brought to Ansbach from a neighboring town, and hanged with her on the same gallows. A sentry at the door of one of the Margrave's castles amiably complied with the Margrave's request to let him take his gun for a moment, on the pretence of wishing to look at it. For this breach of discipline the prince covered him with abuse and gave him over to his hussars, who bound him to a horse's tail and dragged him through the streets; he died of his injuries. The kennel-master who had charge of the Margrave's dogs was accused of neglecting them: without

further inquiry the Margrave rode to the man's house and shot him down on his own threshold. A shepherd who met the Margrave on a shying horse did not get his flock out of the way quickly enough; the Margrave demanded the pistols of a gentleman in his company, but he answered that they were not loaded, and the shepherd's life was saved. As they returned home the gentleman fired them off. "What does that mean?" cried the Margrave, furiously. "It means, gracious lord, that you will sleep sweeter tonight, for not having heard my pistols an hour sooner."

From this it appears that the gracious lord had his moments of regret; but perhaps it is not altogether strange that when he died, the whole population "stormed through the streets to meet his funeral train, not in awe-stricken silence to meditate on the fall of human grandeur, but to unite in an eager tumult of rejoicing, as if some cruel

brigand who had long held the city in terror were delivered over to them bound and in chains." For nearly thirty years this blood-stained miscreant had reigned over his hapless people in a sovereign plenitude of power, which by the theory of German imperialism in our day is still a divine right.

They called him the Wild Margrave, in their instinctive revolt from the belief that any man not untamably savage could be guilty of his atrocities; and they called his son the Last Margrave, with a touch of the poetry which perhaps records a regret for their extinction as a state. He did not harry them as his father had done; his mild rule was the effect partly of the indifference and distaste for his country bred, by his long sojourns abroad; but doubtless also it was the effect of a kindly nature. Even in the matter of selling a few thousands of them to fight the battles of a bad cause on the other side of the world, he

had the best of motives, and faithfully applied the proceeds to the payment of the state debt and the embellishment of the capital.

His mother was a younger sister of Frederick the Great, and was so constantly at war with her husband that probably she had nothing to do with the marriage which the Wild Margrave forced upon their son. Love certainly had nothing to do with it, and the Last Margrave early escaped from it to the society of Mlle. Clairon, the great French tragedienne, whom he met in Paris, and whom he persuaded to come and make her home with him in Ansbach. She lived there seventeen years, and though always an alien, she bore herself with kindness to all classes, and is still remembered there by the roll of butter which calls itself a Klarungswecke in its imperfect French.

No roll of butter records in faltering accents the name of

the brilliant and disdainful English lady who replaced this poor tragic muse in the Margrave's heart, though the lady herself lived to be the last Margravine of Ansbach, where everybody seems to have hated her with a passion which she doubtless knew how to return. She was the daughter of the Earl of Berkeley, and the wife of Lord Craven, a sufficiently unfaithful and unworthy nobleman by her account, from whom she was living apart when the Margrave asked her to his capital. There she set herself to oust Mlle. Clairon with sneers and jests for the theatrical style which the actress could not outlive. Lady Craven said she was sure Clairon's nightcap must be a crown of gilt paper; and when Clairon threatened to kill herself, and the Margrave was alarmed, "You forget," said Lady Craven, "that actresses only stab themselves under their sleeves."

She drove Clairon from Ansbach, and the great

tragedienne returned to Paris, where she remained true to her false friend, and from time to time wrote him letters full of magnanimous counsel and generous tenderness. But she could not have been so good company as Lady Craven, who was a very gifted person, and knew how to compose songs and sing them, and write comedies and play them, and who could keep the Margrave amused in many ways. When his loveless and childless wife died he married the English woman, but he grew more and more weary of his dull little court and his dull little country, and after a while, considering the uncertain tenure sovereigns had of their heads since the French King had lost his, and the fact that he had no heirs to follow him in his principality, he resolved to cede it for a certain sum to Prussia. To this end his new wife's urgency was perhaps not wanting. They went to England, where she outlived him ten years, and wrote her memoirs.