

The Bride from Byzantium

One hundred years after the death of Charles called the Great in the West because he succeeded in uniting their quarrelling tribes, a new ruler was born, in Sagittarius' sign, who aspired to rival him: Otto, of Saxon descent. With the single-mindedness of the „Children of Fire he pacified the empire inside, secured it outside, against the Slavs, the Hungarians, and when, in the middle of our century, the tenth after Christ was born, the Italian throne fell to a young widow, Otto conquered her as well with his determination. Following Charles' example he made his way to Rome, where the Pope anointed him as emperor.

Still, the yearning the constellation of the stars had infused in Otto at birth was not satisfied and although inferior to Charles in wisdom he excelled in ambition. Otto, whose forefathers had to be converted to Christianity by the sword, wanted to unite again the empire divided by Holy Constantine six hundred years ago. Thus, he sent a legation to our court to bid for an imperial daughter for his son, so that East and West might merge in the blood of his progeny.

Outraged by the lack of reverence of the first delegation, Emperor Nikephoros demanded Rome and Ravenna in exchange for a purple-born princess, knowing full well that the pearls amongst the Italian towns would not be surrendered to him and sent the petitioners home mortified and accused of spying. Nikephoros' successor, however, our Emperor Johannes, still new on the throne, saw in his double-faced mind of a Gemini in Otto's desire the possibility to defer the dispute in the South of Italy until he could tilt it to his advantage, and settled with the newly dispatched envoys.

This is how it came that in the year nine hundred and seventy two after the apparition of the Lord a small host of courtiers left Constantinople to accompany the niece of Emperor Johannes to the West. Otto, also called the Great now, was to betroth his son to a princess of our court, his most audacious arrow hitting its target. The sun was shining in the face of the marksman and he did not see the shadows gathering in his back. (p. 7-8)

In the camp

Outside Rome, at the beginning of April 972

For days after their arrival in the camp of the Franks Gero enters Thea's tent.

„The Emperor wishes to see you.

„The Emperor? She expected to be put in a carriage and sent back to Constantinople. Gero's expression is grave. Do they want to debase her, abuse her before her departure? Thea considers changing into a simpler dress, taking off the peacock earrings. Should she show herself humble? Even the emperor of the Franks will not revoke a decision once taken.

„I'm coming. Thea straightens the green silk dress, runs the ivory comb through her hair. Behind Gero she crosses the square to the tent of the emperor guarded by two sentinels. While Gero pulls back the canvas, Thea takes a breath and raises her head. „Never forget whence you came and who you are, her uncle said when she took her leave.

Otto stands beside his father. On his request he wears Saxon clothes, shirt and jerkin, leg bands and a cape held by a silver clasp on the right shoulder. Otto has cut himself while trying to shave off the stubble on his chin with his knife. With every move of his face he can feel the cut. Behind him, the members of the court have positioned themselves, the chancellor, the marshal, the chamberlain, chaplains, notaries, scribes.

Gero holds the canvas and Thea enters the tent. The floor is covered with brown carpets, arms are scattered on them, maps are spread on a table. In the centre between the tent poles stands the red-faced emperor in front of a group of people. This must be the imperial household. They wear short coats, cloth wrappings around their legs like farm labourers. Gero at her side says something that she does not understand. Thea glances over the faces of the people waiting – there: the black shock of hair.

Otto stares at the girl in the entrance of the tent. She wears a shining green dress and she has black hair – this is not the blond child in the golden frame ...

Thea walks towards the waiting group. The emperor says something in a gargling language. Why does his son not stand at his side but behind him between the other courtiers?

„The Emperor of the Franks bids you welcome, Gero translates. Thea bows three times as she is accustomed. „Also in the name of his son, Gero continues and the boy beside the emperor tilts his head. His chin is smudged with blood. Is this pale, red-haired knave the son of the emperor? Thea looks for the dark shock of hair in the crowd, but at this moment the canvas of the tent behind her is pulled open again. „The Empress, Gero whispers and steps aside. Thea turns around to face a tall woman. Her blond hair is gathered in a plain net, her dress too is unadorned, but her poise is that of a ruler – and she has the bluest eyes Thea ever saw. Thea bows involuntarily. The woman passes her by without a word and places herself beside the red-haired boy. She puts her arm around his shoulder, pulls him towards her.

Otto feels the heat in his cheeks. The arm of the mother rests like an iron ring around his shoulders. His father talks, Gero translates. The princess answers in Latin. Her mouth is strait not bent. His mother whispers something in his ear.

Thea feels the glance of the blue eyes while she answers the emperor. It never had occurred to her that her bridegroom could also have a mother. The woman is beautiful, but the way she hugs the red-haired boy arouses an unpleasant feeling in Thea as if she were watching something indecent.

After the emperor has finished talking Gero starts to introduce the members of the court to Thea, the chancellor, the marshal, the fat chamberlain. One after another, they step forward and bow. And there is the dark shock of hair. „Prince Otto, Gero says. The young man she met in the rose garden smiles at her. „A cousin of your bridegroom.

„Done! Otto throws himself unto the bed.

„And do you like her? His cousin takes a seat on the chest beside him.

„Well, yes, the son of the emperor feels his chin. „She is better than expected. He thinks of the child’s face in the golden frame.

Constantine slips into the tent and jumps onto the outstretched arm of Otto’s cousin.

„When did you return to Italy? Otto enquires.

„In any case your father seems to like her, his cousin adds without answering his question.

„Indeed. Otto grins. „My mother wanted to sent her back on the spot because she is the wrong one. And she shouted at him.

„Who? Your mother?

„No, the princess, Otto explains. „She shouted at my father and chased him out of her tent.

„Really? Now the cousin smirks too.

„She doesn’t know German, Otto worries after a pause.

„She will learn German. The cousin brushes his hair out of his face.

„I hope so. Otto sighs.

There is silence again. Constantine has settled on the shoulder of his master.

„What’s her name? Otto asks from the bed.

„Theophanu.,,

„Theophanu,,, he repeats.

„Thea,,, the other Otto says softly.

Thea cannot sleep. The emperor of the Franks has not sent her back to Constantinople. On Sunday after Easter she will be crowned and married to his son – despite not being purple-born. She should be pleased. But she will not be the only empress. Not a single look her future mother-in-law has exchanged with her. She only kept hold of her son, the pale boy with the cut chin and whispered in his ear. Thea understood but one word, the same that the soldiers shouted when she arrived in the camp: „The Greek. That is what she is called here. Does the young man from the rose garden also call her like that? Thea closes her eyes and tries to picture his face, the brown eyes. (Pages 50 – 54)

Warnings

St. Gallen and Reichenau, August 972

„The lion fell ill.

„He is the king of animals and all animals came to visit him.

„ – except for the fox.

„The bear accused the fox and the lion sentenced him to death.

„But the fox hears about it and thinks of a ruse.

„He arrives with a bundle of worn-out shoes making the lion laugh and explains that he has searched all over the world for the best of all doctors –

„ – and that this doctor told him, only the fur of the bear could heal the lion.

„The bear is skinned, the lion gets well and the fox mocks the bear without fur.

„Very good! Otto nods, the pupils beam at him.

„And what does the fable teach us? Geraldus, the schoolmaster who quickly dismounted from his high chair when Otto and Ekkehart entered the classroom, asks. The boys stare embarrassed at their desks. Geraldus reaches for the rod on his table.

„There will be no caning today, Otto declares and looks at the downcast heads.

„But my lord, how shall the boys learn? Geraldus protests.

„The cane is not the only schoolmaster, Ekkehart suggests. „When I was teaching at the Emperor’s court ...

„It is my wish that the pupils will not be beaten today, Otto interrupts him making it sound like an order.

Geraldus takes a little bow. „It will be an honour to comply with the wish of the young Emperor, he says submissively. Some of the boys lift their heads and Otto winks at them.

„What does the fable teach us? he now asks himself. The pupils remain silent. Otto reaches for the rod. „Who has written the fable?

„Paulus, it murmurs somewhere in the class.

„Paulus Diaconus, Otto confirms. „And who was Paulus Diaconus?

„A monk, one of the boys says.

„A teacher, another adds.

„A poet.

„And where did he live? continues Otto.

„In a monastery – „In Italy – „At the court of Pavia, the boys call out.

„Very good.

„Like your mother, one of the boys chips in cheekily.

„Correct. Otto smiles. He can figure out what Geraldus told the pupils about the emperor, his mother and himself before their arrival, and for a moment he is tempted to ask what the schoolmaster said about the young empress.

„Paulus Diaconus was also teacher at the court school of Charlemagne, Ekkehart interjects.

Otto pushes the thought of Thea aside. „And therefore he most certainly did not write the fable for fun, he continues. „So, what does he want to tell us?

The pupils have fallen silent again.

„Maybe that will help. Otto holds the rod with both hand and breaks it.

A whisper runs through the classroom, Geraldus catches his breath, some of the boys start giggling.

„That you loose your skin if you accuse others, the cheeky boy says.

Otto nods.

„That you can get out of a difficult situation by a ruse, another suggests.

„Or if you make people, I mean animals, laugh, explains the one beside him.

„And what about the lion? Otto looks around in the classroom.

Two boys push each other.

„What do you think? Otto points at one of them.

The boy turns red. „The lions does not realize that the fox pulls the wool over his eyes.

„And he punishes the bear although he didn't do anything wrong really, the boy beside him says.

„But he doesn't want to punish him, another pupil disagrees. „He wants to get well.

„He does get well. – „Although the fox made it up. The pupils talk.

Geraldus raises his hand in warning.

„And what does that tell us about the king of animals? Otto wants to know. For a moment there is silence.

„He is not very clever, one of the pupils says at last.

„The pupils will remember this lesson for the rest of their lives, Ekkehart smiles when they leave the schoolhouse. „You would have been a good teacher.

„I had good examples, Otto answers, noticing the face of the old monk lighting up.

„And you will be a good father, he says.

Otto shrugs his shoulders. Standing in the classroom he actually wondered how it would be if one of these boys were his son.

„The tanners, Ekkehart apologises when noticing the bad smell in the air. In front of the scriptorium there is a cart; novices unload bundles of vellum. The tannery where fat and remains of fur are scraped from the animal skins before they are buried with lime and dung is at the Western end of the monastic grounds beside the pigsties at the diverted arm of a stream. But the smell clings also to the cart, the frocks, the hair and skin of the men working there. Otto touches the white soft vellum still in the cart. How many hundreds of lambs have to be slaughtered for a single book?

„Come. Ekkehart leads him into the house. They pass the tables where the vellum is sanded again, measured, cut to size and lined. Otto looks at the clutter of quills, quill knives, eraser knives, ink pots on the desks of the monks. Where the painters sit there are brushes, small dishes with colour, mortars, cloths for cleaning, pumice stones. The originals to be copied are placed on stands beside the desks, so close that the painters hardly need to turn their heads, and beside them there are piles of books with script patterns, examples. Otto remembers how he passed the scriptorium as a small boy in awe; the writing men looked like wizards to him. The floor is covered with paper scraps on which the monks tried out scripts and colours, the shells of the eggs they use for binding the powdered dye and the tips and feathers they cut off their quills. Some of the scribes nod at Otto and Ekkehart, others are too engrossed in their work to notice the visitors. Except for the cutting and scratching of the quills there is not a sound. The best of the scribes and painters sit at the window, the younger, less experienced ones work in the middle of the room, where there is less light. Beside them sit the correctors who proofread the written pages and on some of their desks tallow candles are burning already.

„Up here, Ekkehart whispers. Otto would like to stay longer in the scriptorium. He likes the watchful silence in which everybody works for himself but all to the same purpose and he envies the men for their knowledge, their skill – they would never be fooled by a cunning fox. The stairs lead from the scriptorium to the library. The books are kept on the upper floor as it is drier there. At first Otto is overwhelmed by the long, densely filled shelves.

Years ago, when he was here with his father, the librarian showed them the bible Alkuin presented to Charles the Great, the Old and the New Testament in a single volume, on 836 pages. The ivory cover of another book is said to be used by Charlemagne as a tablet when he wanted to learn writing in old age. Sumptuously decorated books were shown to them, some from the time of Saint Gall who came with Columbanus from Ireland to convert the locals to Christianity. Otto remembers the page of a book divided in two by a broad bar of yellow and red ornaments; to the right there were short verses of text, to the left a web of lines flowed over the parchment. In it he detected feet, a belly, a head with an open mouth from which a tongue protruded, merging in loops and bends with the body of the animal. Only after being told by the librarian he realised that the bar and the body of the dragon together formed the letter q.

„Do you know that? Ekkehart pulls a small, well-thumbed volume from the shelf. *Ars grammatica* it says on the spine.

Otto smiles. „Of course. It was the first book he ever owned. In it two pupils discuss the rules of Latin grammar. Franco, the Frank, is younger, Saxo, the Anglo-Saxon, older, more learned, and if he is at a loss the master intervenes. As a boy Otto was taken aback at how quickly Franco understood everything. He himself needed to read Saxo's answers again and again to understand them.

„And this? Ekkehart shows Otto another volume. *Disputatio de rhetorica et de virtutibus* – a tract about rhetoric and virtue. In it Charlemagne asks Alkuin to instruct him in the art of eloquence, and at the end of the book the scholar explains to the emperor how it connects with the four cardinal virtues: wisdom, justice, courage and temperance. Each one of Otto's teachers worked through this chapter with him as a good ruler needed to have these qualities. For a time Otto knew whole passages by heart, now he cannot remember a single phrase. Beside the volume about rhetoric is the one about dialectic, the third pillar of the Trivium a pupil had to master in order to understand language.

„This too will be familiar to you, Ekkehart says and shows him a volume with Alkuin's writings about the Quadrivium treating the other four free arts.

Otto grimaces. „I never understood the riddles in it, he confesses.

„Me neither, Ekkehart muses and both break into laughter.

„So much I knew by heart and now all is gone, Otto deplores, getting serious again.

„Most of it is still in your head, the old teacher reassures him. „When you need it, it will reappear again.

„The only thing I kept from all the school lessons are the stories – how Aeneas carried his old father on his back out of burning Troy, how he loses his friends, conquers Italy, and wins Rome at the end.

„Maybe you yourself will make Rome your capital one day, Ekkehart remarks.

„And re-unite East and West? Otto smirks.

„Why not? Or your son will do it.

„If I ever have a son. Otto catches sight of a book bound in red with *Metamorphoseon* written on its spine.

„This one I remember too. Very well actually. Delighted, Otto pulls the red volume from the shelf and starts leafing through it.

„The *Transformations* by Ovid. Ekkehart nods.

„Jupiter taking the guise of a bull carrying Europa away. Self-seeking Narciss changing into a flower at a riverside. Echo, the chatty nymph, who falls in love with him and is nothing but a reverberation at the end.

„And Pygmalion whose statue becomes alive, Ekkehart adds.

Otto knows what the monk is hinting at. „Only thanks to the goddess Venus he argues.

„Thanks to love, his teacher corrects him and raises his index finger as he used to during class.

Otto sighs. How should he win the love of the princess?

„This is what I wanted to show you. Ekkehart takes a book from the table between the shelves. It seems to be new and the pages crackle a bit as Otto opens it. „One of our younger monks has written it, Ekkehart explains.

It is a psalter. Otto recognizes the Latin verses on the left hand side and to right – he tries to decipher the words.

„What is it?

„The psalms in Latin and German.

Otto pronounces the words on the right hand side; it really is German.

„And what should that be good for? he wonders.

„For all people who do not know Latin or who don't know it all that well anymore.

Otto compares the German verses with the ones in Latin. Of course: *montes* means mountain, *fulgora* bolts. Some of what he has learned really has remained in his head. „I thought it would be useful to you, and the young monk who wrote it certainly would be honoured to know the book in your possession. And then, Ekkehart reaches for another book on the table, „when you feel confident again in Latin you can try this one.

He opens the volume and Otto sees again two texts side by side. In elegant curls the Greek

letters follow each other. Ekkehart passes him the book and Otto cannot but take it. „Could I have this too? he asks after a pause pointing at Ovid’s Metamorphoses. „This is a very precious book, Ekkehart frowns, „but I think the abbot wanted to ask you a small favour while you are here and I guess he will agree to present you with the book if you oblige. Otto imagines how he will tell Irene of the vain Arachne shrivelling to a spider, the haughty Niobe freezing into a stone and of Venus who turns into the brightest star in the sky because she follows her love. (Pages 161- 169)

Secrets

Aachen, summer 973

They were seen to ride out of the town on this and other afternoons during this summer in Aachen. First it was the three of them, then a black-haired woman on a half-breed accompanied them: Irene. My informers did not miss much. Four young people enjoying themselves in the shadowy woods, mistress and maid, the emperor and a friend. One could not object even if during the time of Otto the Great it would not have happened. And Thea was happy for the first time.

The heat poured a sleepy tranquillity over the court. Adelheid and her women remained in their rooms. I dozed through the days in the coolness of the cellar, clambered to the roof of the Pfalz when it got dark. Mightily the dragon coiled in the Northern sky watching over the golden apples of the daughters of the Night. The shining Cassiopeia ascended, her arms raised in lamentation, followed by Andromeda, her innocent daughter, chained to the rock atoning for the boastfulness of the mother if Perseus, the snake-haired head of Medusa in hand, had not appeared in his winged shoes to save her from the mouth of the whale. With self-made dividers I started to re-invent the maps lost in the fire of Quedlinburg. Layer by layer I dug up what I once knew from my memory following the crawling Scorpio over the Southern horizon. All summer long I courted the stars for their lost friendship so that they may reveal the impending future again to me.

„But the jealous king buried his wife on one side of the church and her lover on the other. Yet ivy sprouted from both graves, climbed up the church and united on the roof.

They are sitting at the edge of the wood in the shadow of the trees.

„And therefore „, Irene ends, „ivy stands for fidelity and immortality.

From the branches above them a bird takes flight and Thea tries to imagine what it sees: a spread out blanket with cups, wine, bread, four people around it resting in the moss, the men in light shirts, the women with loose hair telling stories.

„And fern? Otto medius asks and touches one of the feathered leaves. Little Otto sits beside him.

„The fern is full of secrets, the maid explains. „It flowers only in St. John’s night and the one who succeeds in catching its seeds will be lucky in all his endeavours.

Thea feels a slight cramp in her body. The bleeding started later this time, she is not pregnant.

„How do you know all this? little Otto enquires. More and more he resembles Mathilde with his hair almost shoulder long, the brightness in his eyes.

„My mother told me, Irene confesses, a little embarrassed. Thea remembers the potter in her earth house.

„Besides, it is said fern lets you become invisible, Irene continues. She wears the silver chain Thea gave her in Ingelheim openly over her dress now.

„That could be very useful, Otto medius remarks. Thea glances at him but he looks into the distance. Now and then they manage to meet alone in the stables, to leave the others behind on their rides, for a kiss, an embrace, a stolen moment. At times Thea thinks Otto medius should find ways to be with her undisturbed, smart as he is in all other concerns. She notices the softness in little Ottos’s face when he looks at Irene. The woman with whom a man sleeps first keeps a hold over him, Irene’s mother said. Does he feel the same for the maid as she does for Otto medius? Would it be possible –

„And it shields us against the devil, Irene interrupts her dreaming.

„So we are quite safe here. Otto medius sprawls out in the fern. The shirt stretches over his body and Thea averts her eyes. For a while there is silence. The sun casts green shadows through the treetops.

„Nevertheless, little Otto says getting up with a jolt „we have to go back, because nobody shields us against our duties.

Irene starts to gather the bread they did not eat, pours the wine left in the cups back into the wine skins. At a whistle of Otto medius, Constantine appears from the undergrowth. Thea ponders what she has to do on their return to the Pfalz. Since Otto medius' arrival her life sparkles, everything comes easy to her.

„From Augsburg they write: 'To our ...'

„I can read myself. Otto takes the letter from Willigis. When he was six, having been crowned in Aachen, his mother insisted to assign him the right to issue documents independently from his father. For hours he listened to notaries reading letters to him as a child.

„I thought they wished Werinhar to be the successor of Ulrich? Ottos eyes glide over the lines.

„That does not seem to be the case, Willigis says. „They do not mention him at all.

Otto drops the letter. Was his mother right after all?

„What shall we do? He remembers the conversation with his cousin, the promise he made to let Augsburg have the bishop it wanted.

„It is not advisable to ignore the wishes of the town when electing a bishop, particularly not in Bavaria.

Otto remembers the negotiations about the replacement for the bishop of Regensburg. His father did not give in until they had found in Wolfgang a successor who was welcome in the town.

„Is the nomination already written? Otto asks.

„Yes.

„Then we have to change it, Otto decides.

„And this here? Thea pulls a parchment from the bundle on Willigis' desk. Since they ride out almost every day she does not visit the chancellery as regularly as she used to.

„This is a copy of the nomination of the successor of Ulrich of Augsburg, the chancellor explains.

Thea reads, stops: „I thought the abbot of Fulda would take over the post, not this ... Willigis shakes his head. „The Emperor has changed his mind prompted by the wish ...

Thea does not listen.

„Why did you give in to her?

„To whom? Little Otto sits in front of a chessboard facing his cousin.

„To your mother. Thea holds the copy of the document.

„To my mother? He does not look up from the board.

„For the nomination of the bishop of Augsburg.

„Mate! Little Otto laughs.

Otto medius leans back. „It's hopeless, he declares.

„I had to play so often with my father, little Otto explains.

Only when Thea angrily stamps her foot do the young men turn to her.

„What's about the new bishop, little Otto asks.

„You nominated this ...this ..., she looks at the copy, „Heinrich of Greisenhausen.

„No! Otto medius jumps up, the last pieces on the playing board topple over. „But you said – „ At once his face is grey.

„Augsburg wanted him, the young emperor defends himself. „ I cannot go against the wishes of the town, not in Bavaria ...

„Augsburg? But this is not true! Otto medius' voice trembles.

„It is ... Little Otto tries to remember the wording of the letter.

„In Augsburg they said you wanted Heinrich. Otto medius almost shouts. „This is why they sent me here.

„They sent you, Thea repeats in low voice.

Otto medius does not hear her. „But when you then said they would get the bishop they wished for, I thought you had changed your mind.

„I did, Otto falls silent.

„You nominated the wrong man, Thea says.

They are silent.

„When was the nomination issued? Otto medius asks.

Thea looks at the copy: „Six days ago. It is already in Augsburg.

„Then Augsburg has to be told that this is a misunderstanding, a mistake, Otto medius says in a

grave voice.

„The emperor does not make mistakes. The three turn around, Adelheid stand behind them with two of her ladies-in-waiting.

„But he was deceived, Thea counters.

„Who should deceive him? Adelheid asks coolly. The ladies-in-waiting sneer.

Thea feels the stare of the ice blue eyes. „His mother!

„How dare you, you snake. You could dupe the old emperor but not me. With your Greek slyness you got yourself a place at our court and now, you not even give birth to a son.

Little Otto looks at the chessboard.

„And you are untrue to your son, Thea says surprised by the own calmness. „If I had not asked Wolfgang of Regensburg to speak for him in Worms – „

Otto looks up.

„You will forbid your wife to mingle in the affairs of the court, Adelheid orders, her blue eyes pointing at Otto.

„The nomination – „ Otto medius starts.

„And you will kindly leave the nominations to the emperor, Adelheid interrupts him.

Little Otto opens his mouth but before he can say anything his mother continues: „The bishop of Augsburg is nominated. This is for sure, and with you, she turns to Thea, „I will deal in dues course.

Adelheid spins on her heels and disappears followed by the whispering ladies-in-waiting.

„Who is this Heinrich of Greisenhausen anyhow? Thea asks after a moment of silence.

„A nephew of Judith of Bavaria, Otto medius answers.

„A friend of Dietrich of Metz, little Otto adds.

„I don't know him, Thea wonders.

„I'm sure you noticed him, Otto medius explains. „He has red scars on his head. From a burn.

(Pages 299 – 305)