Tales of Gold Foil Figures

A Night to Remember

Branches hit her in the face, spider webs got caught and thorns tore her clothes, pricked her feet and hands. But she continued to creep through the night. Light shimmered faintly through the trees, sometimes flickering, leading her the way. Now she felt as if she could hear voices. She just had to know what was going on there in the clearing. Why did the adults always act so mysterious? And what was it about the wafer-thin gold plates, one of which she had found and pocketed that morning? She stepped deep into the woods, felt damp moss and leaves under her bare feet, smelled fresh woodruff. Then finally she had reached the big beech tree. She huddled close to the trunk between the thick roots. A tawny owl cried out directly above her. Now she had a good view through scrawny bushes.

In the clearing, some women and men from the village stood next to the fire. They had piled up the wood here over the last few days, rotten, dilapidated timbers from the old hall, which had to be abandoned after its roof collapsed in winter and was to be rebuilt this spring. The dry beams burned high and bright. Now she also recognised foreign men, in strange cloaks, draped in colourful jewellery that sparkled and flashed in the firelight. Girded swords they had, they carried lances in their hands, and on their heads two of them wore large shimmering helmets. But everything was peaceful. Then Ölrun, the old woman, stepped forward in her fine dragging robe, and she seemed to be chanting softly. Two more figures came to her side, a foreign young man and an old warrior from the village. Through the bushes it was not easy to make out the details. But it seemed as if each of them put their outstretched arms on the other's shoulders. A young girl jumped under this bridge, then turned around, grabbed the young man's wrist and pulled him away with her, towards Ölrun. The latter handed them both the precious transparent cup that the men had brought from a distant land some years ago, and they both drank from it. Then joyful shouts rang out, and suddenly there was glitter everywhere in the air: they had thrown up dozens of gold foil figures! Everyone immediately tried to catch one, but most of them fell to the ground and immediately disappeared among the leaves and branches. Men and women kept raising their arms, laughing and joking, they kissed each other and started singing songs: Such songs that are not meant for the ears of children...

She was very content – and infinitely tired. The owl cried out again. Carefully she got up and felt her way back through the darkness of the forest, a lone torch in the village pointing her in the right direction. The way home seemed very long to her. When she woke up the next morning, she was again lying in the corner of the house next to her six brothers and sisters, dozing for a while. Suddenly, however, a hot shock ran through her limbs: had she really seen all that – or was it just a weird dream?



Lament of a Solidus Coin

I saw the light of day after a well-aimed strike by a skilful master of the mint in the centre of civilisation, golden Constantinople. There I lay, radiant, freshly polished, bearing the proud marks of the emperor himself, his image and the genuine gold certificate. How people admired me! From then on, I wandered through several hands, all of them adorned with heavy rings and cared for. Not just anyone touched me in my youth, those good old days, a time of happiness and self-determination. I was laid to rest in finely studded boxes, wrapped in fine cloths, surrounded by other equally proud solidi. Perfect and highly esteemed!

But, completely unexpectedly for me, then came the incomprehensible moment, the turning point in my life. Together with some fellow sufferers, I was roughly picked out of my trunk and put into a sack. No one paid any attention to our integrity. For a long time the sack dangled with other stuff from a horse's saddle, then in a saddle bag, it was jolted and thrown, and we helpless solidi coins scratched and injured each other in the process. Slowly we realised the terrible truth: the barbarians had caught us! Horrible!! Such fierce scoundrels have little regard for our intrinsic value with the meaning of our wonderful marks and images. They respect neither emperor nor culture. Just blindly they grab whatever they can get. For weeks we were shaken back and forth so ruthlessly. Then finally someone threw us into a small wooden chest and closed the lid. It was and remained dark. For a long time. Only very rarely was the lid lifted, then we recognised two or three grinning faces bending over us, mean and frightening. We accepted it; what could we do?

But the worst was yet to come. Many, many years after our abduction, a hand suddenly slipped into the box and grabbed me out. Me, of all coins! Finally back in daylight, I found myself stranded in a sad hut settlement of wood and straw, poor-looking, with no solid roads, and completely lacking the fresh glow of the glorious Roman stone architecture I was used to. Barbarians everywhere, clad in what to my eyes were rags rather than real clothes; and yet partly draped in gold and thick jewellery, as if in mockery! I was taken to a dark house, a hole half in the ground, windowless. Barbaric conditions indeed. And then: intense pain, pain! A fire surrounded me, hot and hotter, fuelled by merciless bellows, I could not hold myself together – and was melted down. My markings and images, my form, melted away, and with them my sense and my whole old life.

What came next is only dimly in my memory. Clash! They poured me into an elongated form where I froze in fear. As if that wasn't enough, some brute started hitting me with a big hammer, over and over again. Already quite flat and mellow, I was held over the fire again, and then beaten again and again, and all this several times. Soon they cut me into pieces, the hammering and beating continued. Finally, there was nothing left of me but paper-thin memories of the gold I had once been. They then moved these sad remains of my self into a slightly larger wooden house with thick wooden posts, where peace surrounded us for the time being. But some time later, men and women dressed in white arrived. Torches and banners were waved: obviously it was a day of celebration. Two younger people picked us up one by one and pressed us onto metal moulds, pushing the metal into us and deforming us. We realised we were stamped with strange lines, perhaps representations of people – but these barbarians understood little of this, compared to the skill of the Constantinople artists. They then cut the stamped sheets into tiny rectangular pieces and collected them in a bowl. There we lay, battered, transformed into fragile picture plates. This humiliation! This shame! And what might be the point of these strange plates and their pictures? They are good for nothing. Can someone please explain this to me?

 