



The Mercenary: A Tale of the Thirty Years War

W.J. Eccott

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It was the evening of the second day of the sack of Magdeburg. Nigel Charteris, soldier of fortune by profession and in rank captain of musketeers, sought a certain house in the Kloster Strasse, if haply it were still standing.

It troubled the captain little that Magdeburg should be sacked. He was of the Catholic faith. And Magdeburg had proved herself malignantly Protestant. She had flouted the Edict of Restitution. The Emperor Ferdinand II., Habsburger by race, Catholic to the marrow, had proclaimed that the possessions, wrenched from the grasp of the Catholics a hundred years before by the Lutherans and Calvinists, should be restored to Catholic hands, that the mass bell should tinkle in every chancel, and all be as if that pestilent monk, that Junker Georg of the Wartburg, had never been. Rome had bided her time, as Rome can always bide her time, and seize her opportunity. The Emperor found himself with a right good flail and a stout husbandman, Count Tilly, to wield it. The husbandman with his flail had arrived before the threshing-floors of Magdeburg in bleak March. It had taken him to jocund May to force an entrance, and then the threshing and the winnowing began.

It was a question if the house in the Kloster Strasse still stood, for even before the turbulent entry of the Emperor's troops fires had broken out, and still burned furiously. It was a city of shards and carcasses. Here and there streets still stood, as a patch of corn stands, left for to-morrow's cutting, amid the prone swathes. Nigel wondered if he would be able to recognise the street that he had left as the dawn broke that morning. "This is the street, Captain. The spire's had a shake!" said Sergeant Blick.

Nigel nodded, and strode over the stones, and the sheet-lead, and the broken images of stone and of human flesh that lay in his path. But for the loss of its church-tower the street was still passably whole. Clambering over the barrier of ruins, a half company of musketeers followed in loose order, expectant of more plunder. All day they had spent in camp, and were now let out for their share in the ruthless harvesting. There was method too in their captain's gleaning...

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