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A GERMAN POMPADOUR

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WILHELMINE REICHSGRÄFIN VON GRÄVENITZ.
From a Portrait in the collection of Frau Anna Remshardt at Heilbronn.

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A GERMAN POMPADOUR

Being the Extraordinary History of

WILHELMINE VON GRÄVENITZ

LANDHOFMEISTERIN OF WIRTEMBERG

**A NARRATIVE OF
THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY**

BY

MARIE HAY

AUTHOR OF 'DIANNE DE POYTIERS' AND
'AN UNREQUITED LOYALTY'

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THIS

BOOK OF MEMORIES

IS DEDICATED

TO

A MEMORY

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PREFACE

'The Past that is not overpast,
But present here.'

In a dusty, time-soiled packet of legal papers which had lain untouched for nigh upon two hundred years, the extraordinary history of Wilhelmine von Grävenitz is set forth in all the colourless reticence of official documents. And yet something of the thrill of the superstitious fear, and the virtuous disapproval of the lawyers who composed these writings, pierces through the stilted phrases. Like a faint fragrance of faded rose-leaves, a breath of this woman's charm seems to cling and elusively to peep out of the curt record of her crimes. Enough at least to incite the wanderer in History's byways to a further study of this potent German forerunner of the Pompadour.

To search through the Stuttgart archives, to ferret out forgotten books in dusty old book-shops, to fit together the links in the chain of events of the woman's story, to haunt the scenes of bygone splendour in deserted palace and castle, old-world garden and desolate mansion; such has been the delightful labour which has gone to the telling of the true history of the Grävenitz. The Land-despoiler the downtrodden peasantry and indignant burghers named her, for they hated her as their sort must ever hate the beautiful, elegant, haughty woman of the great world. They called her sinner, which she was; and she called them canaille, which they probably were.

And traces of all this linger in Württemberg.[1] They still deem the Countess Grävenitz a subject to be mentioned with bated breath—a thing too evil, too terrible, for polite conversation. The very guides at Ludwigsburg slur over her name, and if they go so far as to mention her, they say: 'Ja, das war aber eine schlimme Dame,' and turn the talk to something else. But her memory lives magnificently in the great palace built for her, in her little 'Château Joyeux' of La Favorite, and in

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the many beautiful properties which belonged to this extravagant Land-despoiler. She came to Württemberg when the country was at a low financial ebb. Louis XIV. had preyed upon the land for years. Robber raids they called these wars which he waged for trumped-up pretexts. After these invasions came the war of the Spanish succession, and Württemberg lying on the high-road from France to Austria, the belligerent armies swept over the Swabian land on their way to battle. The Duke of Württemberg, loyal to his Suzerain the Emperor at Vienna, joined in the fray and fought bravely at the side of Marlborough and Eugene of Savoy against the French terror. When Blenheim had been fought and won, the war-tide swept northwards to the Netherlands, leaving Southern Germany for the nonce at rest, and Eberhard Ludwig of Württemberg repaired to Stuttgart to attend to his Duchy's government. Now began the love-story of his life, the long-drawn episode which made his name a target for the gossip and scandal of early eighteenth-century Germany; the episode which changed the simple, stiff family life of the Württemberg ducal circle to a brilliant, festive court, which travellers tell us in their memoirs vied in magnificence with the glories of Versailles itself.

M. H.

STUTTGART, 1905.

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A GERMAN POMPADOUR

CHAPTER I

THE INTRIGUE

'Es ist eine Hofkabale.'—SCHILLER.

ON the outskirts of the village of Oberhausen in South Wirtemberg stands a deserted house. Rats are its only denizens now; rats and the 'poor ghosts,' so the peasants say. Two hundred years ago this eerie mansion was occupied by living men and women, perchance the ghosts of to-day. Who can tell? But I, who have grown to love them, having studied the depths of their hearts, I pray that they may rest them well in their graves, and that the Neuhaus ghosts be not my friends of 1705.

It was a fitting place for intrigues this Neuhaus, standing as it did so near in actual mileage to the court of Stuttgart, and hard by the Jesuit centre of Rottenburg. The high-road was close at hand, yet Neuhaus, shut off by peaceful fields, was hidden from the passer-by, and here began the great intrigue, as it was called then. Of a truth the plot, as it was conceived, was no mighty thing; it was designed, as many another gossamer web of court gallantry and petty pecuniary gain, for obscure individuals; but great it became through the potent will of a woman.

On a dreary November afternoon of the year 1705, a party of four was assembled in the Neuhaus, the seldom-used country mansion of Madame de Ruth, an important personage at Stuttgart's

court, and of Monsieur de Ruth, an undistinguished character, who played no rôle that we know of, save to bequeath his ancient name—and the Neuhaus—to his relict.

The house was a long, two-storied building, with large, black wooden beams showing quaintly outside against the white plastered walls; it was no imposing structure, but a certain air of [2] melancholy aloofness lent it distinction.

A high wall shut off the village street on the one side, while to the south and east the mansion was surrounded by a garden. A row of beech-trees grew close to the windows, a narrow pathway led from a side door across the garden to a vast orchard. It was doubtless a beautiful spot in spring or summer, but on this November afternoon it was inexpressibly dreary. The rain had beaten down the unkempt grass, which lay in draggled sheaves along the edges of the pathway. Brown, fallen beech leaves made a sodden carpet around the tree-roots; the trees themselves, bare and gaunt, lifted their grey, leafless branches towards the hurrying, wind-driven clouds. The wind moaned fitfully round the house; every now and then, as though in uncontrollable wrath, it broke forth into a whistling howl. At intervals bursts of rain were borne by the tempest against the windows, adding a hurried patter to the tapping of the long beech branches, which grew near enough to enable the wind to drive them against the window-panes, while the greater branches strained and creaked in the blast. Rain-laden clouds swept across the sky, hastening the darkness of approaching night. It seemed strange that on so desolate a gloaming the inmates of the Neuhaus had not drawn the curtains to shut out the sadness of the storm-ravaged garden. The windows remained like despairing, unblinking eyes gazing at the desolate scene without. The room wherein was assembled the small company was unlit, save from the glow from the embers in the stove. The upper grating had been opened, and in the furnace a handful of half-dry wood sputtered and crackled, rising sometimes to a momentary flame, in whose glow four persons threw strangely contorted shadows on the ceiling. But for this, and a faint, uncertain light which crept through the windows, the room was entirely dark. When the wood flared, a lady seated to the left of the stove cast a caricature-like shadow slantwise on the ceiling, her head seeming gigantic in its piled-up masses of elaborately dressed hair. In the middle of the room was a huddled figure bending over the centre table. It seemed to be a mere heap of dark garments. The firelight caught and illumined a white ruffle and large pale hand belonging to this figure, but as it [3] was flung out across the sombre covering of the table, the arm was invisible, and only the hand in the ruffled sleeve could be seen, and it seemed like some hideous dismembered thing. Outlined against the fading light stood a tall figure with an enormous ringleted wig falling far over the shoulders. When this being moved, his shadow, thrown upon the ceiling by the embers' glow, appeared to join in the wavering, dance-like movements of the other shadows, and seemed like some ungainly monster. One portion of the room was not reached either by light of fire or fading day, and out of this utter darkness came the sound of repressed sobbing, which alone revealed the presence of a fourth member of this lugubrious party. For many minutes the silence was unbroken save for the stealthy sobbing, the sough of the wind without, the pattering rain, and the tap-tap of the twigs on the windows, sounding for all the world like the fumbling of invisible fingers seeking for admittance. The man at the centre table broke silence at length.

'Impossible!' he said in a harsh voice. 'Madame la Baronne cannot imagine we can live in Stuttgart at the court,' this last pompously, in spite of the real distress of the voice. 'How can we? on five hundred gulden a year and debts to pay—alas! No! I must return to the army, only coming on leave once a year to fulfil my court appointment; and, Marie, you must live in Rottenburg with your mother while I am away.'

At this a figure moved out of the darkness behind the stove, and another fantastic shadow was cast upon the ceiling.

'Never, Friedrich! It is cruel to ask it. You know well enough that, if you did not gamble, we could live quite finely on what we have got. Your duties as Kammerjunker need not keep you for ever in Stuttgart; we might live in Rottenburg.' She clasped her hands, her voice trembled between tears and anger.

'Rottenburg——' The man's voice was full of scorn, vibrating with derision. 'Ah! yes!—Mass each morning, and——'

'Friedrich, I will never let you return to the army; rather would I humble myself before that wicked woman, Madame de Geyling, and beg her to influence Serenissimus to give you a higher [4] and better paid appointment. I tell you——'

'Madame,' broke in a deep voice, and the figure at the window moved forward, 'there are other ways of gaining gold at court; a beautiful woman need never be poor, I can vouch——'

'Monsieur de Stafforth!' almost shouted the first speaker, 'you address my wife! I am poor, but the honour of a wife of a Grävenitz shall not be smirched.'

'Your pardon, Kammerjunker, but we were discussing necessities, not ideals, and surely I proposed a great honour. Serenissimus is charming; besides, there are others——'

The hostess, whose shadow we have seen on the ceiling, rose and joined the three disputants.

'My friends, only fools end their conclaves with quarrels. We have been discussing ways and means for the continuance of our friends Monsieur and Madame de Grävenitz's court life, and finding no practical scheme, here is Grävenitz crying out that he will return to the army. Marie Grävenitz, after sobbing her heart out, flies into a rage and declares she will go whining to that

upstart Geyling! And you, Monsieur de Stafforth, Hofmarshall and successful courtier, propose terms to a young husband in so unpolished a fashion, that even a peasant would be obliged to retort with the old affectation of a wife's honour and purity. Now hear me; I know the court better than you do——' The darkness hid the meaning smiles which played over the lips of the others, for Frau von Ruth (Madame de Ruth as she was named at court, German being considered as a language only fitting for peasants' use) was well known to have a knowledge of court life not compatible with strictly decorous behaviour. 'Well! and I say to you, where there is a court there is always a way. And if you will so far honour me as to drink a bowl of punch to lighten our wits, we may find some solution of our friends' difficulties. First let me call for lights, and let me shut out this dreary evening. Courage, my friends! I warrant we shall smile some day at our present desperate straits, and meanwhile "to wait" is the verb we must conjugate.'

Madame de Ruth went to the door and called for light. A sullen-faced peasant boy appeared, carrying two silver candlesticks of a handsome old German design. He placed them on the middle [5] table, and the feeble yellow flame of the waxen tapers shed a flicker into the long, gloomy room. Then he stood idly staring, with the heavy dull-wittedness of the Swabian peasant. Madame de Ruth eyed him for a moment, with that half-humorous, half-pitying glance which she was wont to bestow on those she found stupid. She was an odd-tempered, free-mannered woman, deeply crafty, absolutely unmoral, and yet with a true kindliness of heart and a thorough understanding of human nature which, together with her ready laugh, her clever, indecorous anecdotes and sharp wit, made her attractive. For these traits people forgave her her ugly face and fifty years of a past even less reputable than was usual in the eighteenth century.

In her early youth, it was whispered, the Duke Wilhelm Ludwig, father of the reigning Duke of Wirtemberg, had initiated her into the ways of the world in general and of courts in particular; in gratitude wherefore she was reputed to have performed the same office, twenty years later, for his son Eberhard Ludwig. The Duke of Zollern, several Hohenlohes, and many Gemmingens had been her slaves; not to mention other less illustrious cavaliers to whom she had been rather more than kind. She was now a useful friend to princes, and new arrivals at court found her friendship indispensable, especially if the new arrival happened to be a lady with aspirations to royal favour and a career. Up to date these careers had been brilliant but short, and Madame de Ruth had generally played an important part in each.

'Ah! Dieu! ces paysans, quelles brutes!' she said, as she looked at her servant; and then speaking in the rough Wirtemberg dialect she continued: 'Heinrich, thy mother gave thee hands; God knows thy father did not forget thy big feet. Use both and bring the punch, as I told thee; or I will give thee hay for thy evening meal, as were fitting for an ass's feed!' This somewhat drastic speech seemed to please the lad and to stir up his slow wits, but the company looked surprised at the familiarity of the 'thou,' it being the general custom in those days for superiors to address their inferiors in the third person singular. Directly to address a serving-man or maid was deemed incorrect, for it would have betokened an unfitting equality. However, Madame de Ruth's [6] peasant lad responded with alacrity to his lady's homely speech, and in an astonishingly short time he reappeared with an enormous bowl of the steaming hot spirits—the punch, which Marlborough's army had brought into fashion on the Continent, and which the damp of South Germany in the autumn made a welcome beverage.

'Come, my friends, and drink to the sharpening of our wits, which are strangely dull this evening. I must announce to you that I await the visit to-night of the Duke of Zollern, but this cruel weather has proved, I fear, too much even for his youthful sixty years.'

'Madame,' said Monsieur de Stafforth, 'if the Duke of Zollern does not brave the elements, in order to visit you, he must indeed be feeling his sixty years.'

'Stafforth, do not natter me in that tone. I adore flattery, but a stupid compliment is worse than an insult. You know the Duke of Zollern and myself have long ceased incommoding ourselves for each other's sakes, with the consequence that we are really friends. He sees me when he wishes, and I see him when I feel inclined. After twenty years *nous avons fini nos simagrées*; but after all, listen, I think I hear wheels.' Her ugly old face flushed through the overlying paint and powder. In spite of her protest, Madame de Ruth had a remnant of her youth—a poor, faded flower of sentiment for this old man. A huge lumbering coach drew up at the door, and therefrom descended a small and shrunken figure, with a wrinkled, dried-up face. A voluminous peruke fell over the padded shoulders, rich lace ruffles adorned the sleeves of the brown satin longcoat, a waistcoat of heavily embroidered brocade reached far down, nearly to the shrunken knees, below which were a pair of calves thin as pipe-stems and adorned with brown silken hose; the shoes were of brown leather with high, red heels and enormous ribbon rosettes and diamond buckles. One withered hand held a cane with a china top, on which, could you have examined it, you would have found mythological subjects depicted with much delicacy of workmanship, but less delicacy of sentiment. A beau indeed, elegant, lavish, and with that air for the which Monsieur de [7] Stafforth, adventurer and burgher by birth, would have given many a year of his successful climbing career to have possessed even a shade,—the indescribable and inimitable air of the Grand Seigneur.

Madame de Ruth met this gentleman at the door of her abode, her peasant servant standing behind her, holding a flaring torch to light the entry of his Grace. She curtseyed deeply, and Monsieur de Zollern, having successfully hobbled from his coach, returned her salute with so tremendous a bow, that the long feather of his three-cornered hat swept the floor.

'I had almost given up the expectation of your visit, Monseigneur,' said the lady, 'but now you are

here, the pleasure is all the greater'; and as he bowed once more over her hand, she whispered: 'Pleasure you always gave me, dear friend.'

'Madame chère amie, those times are past, alas! Enfin! we can still laugh together.'

They passed on through the gloomy corridor, and Madame de Ruth herself threw open the door of the salon, crying as she did so: 'The Duke of Zollern and Punch together must make even a dark day bright!'

'Madame, in these days the last title might describe me perfectly,' he said. Then as he saw the inquiring look on the faces around him, he added: 'Autrefois j'étais polichon, aujourd'hui, hélas! ne suis-je qu'un vieux Polichinelle—"Punch" they call it in England.'

'Monseigneur, Punch must be a pretty wit indeed if he be like your Grace,' said Stafforth, with his usual desire to ingratiate himself with the great of the earth; but Monsieur de Zollern did not deign to answer. Like Madame de Ruth he preferred less directly expressed adulation. 'The fine flavour of flattery is delicious,' he was wont to aver, 'but like all else in life, to practise it requires an expert or a genius. Open compliments on any subject are like sausages, to be appreciated by peasants and our greasy friends the burghers, but for us—we cannot digest them!' So he looked away from Stafforth, giving his attention to the Grävenitz couple. 'Madame de Grävenitz,' he said, 'I observed you at Mass in the Cathedral of Rottenburg a few days since. God forgives the inattention at Mass of an old man when he sleeps; of a young man when he loves; and the [8] wandering attention of an *old* man blessed with a *young* heart the Almighty will surely pardon, for He Himself must admire beauty, since He made it.' Madame de Grävenitz looked perturbed. She was a good and conscientious Catholic, and this light way of speaking of things sacred seemed alarmingly daring to her; also, being rather stupid, it bewildered her, and she had no answer for the old courtier.

'Ah, Monsieur de Grävenitz,' continued Zollern, 'what news from Mecklemburg? Does not your heart smite you when you think of the country which gave you birth?'

'Monseigneur, it was the only gift Mecklemburg ever gave me, and indeed, to-night I am hardly grateful for the gift. What is the use of life when it is so fierce a struggle not to die of hunger?' he said, and drained his glass of punch. 'I have such simple tastes.—Madame de Ruth, may I drink another glass of your excellent punch?—I have such simple tastes, and even these I cannot satisfy!'

The Duke of Zollern watched him, and his fine smile was more of a commentary than many a spoken word. Grävenitz observing it broke into a laugh, which was echoed by the company.

'Monseigneur,' said Madame de Ruth, 'we have been sitting here in the dark for two hours discussing Grävenitz's future. I mean, of course, his fortune; we always say future when we mean fortune! He vows that if more gulden cannot be lured into his pocket, he must retire from court. We can find no way out of our friend's dilemma. Can you suggest some course?'

'Madame, to serve a friend of yours I am always ready! Surely Serenissimus will not willingly lose a courtier he has delighted in; but at this moment, I believe, Monsieur de Stafforth will bear me out when I say all the court charges are engaged; and Monsieur de Grävenitz, not being of the sex, cannot hold the most important charge of any court, for Madame de Geyling usurps that! So what can I suggest?'

Madame de Ruth was thoughtful for a moment; then, throwing up her hands, she exclaimed: 'And you call me a woman with wits? For two long hours have we deliberated and found nothing, and [9] it needed the punch-bowl to give me an idea! We want three things, nay, four: to help Grävenitz with funds; to dethrone that Geyling, whose airs and graces have become intolerable; Monsieur de Stafforth seeks a friend in the Duke's intimate, most intimate, council; and our Mother Church desires a friend there too.' She ticked off each succeeding clause on her much-beringed fingers.

'Monsieur de Grävenitz, you once told me you had a pretty sister wasting her charms at Güstrow. Let us put her in the Geyling's place! A few years of that envied position and we achieve our first two objects! Stafforth, my friend, you are the man to find means of gaining your aims thereby as well.' The adventurer smiled fatuously. 'And the Church—ah, we forget the Church!' At these words the mocking smile faded from Zollern's face; his expression was that of a man whose interest was stirred, as indeed it was; for though to Monseigneur de Zollern there was nothing sacred, and he subjected all things to his biting wit, he gave conscientious allegiance to the Church of Rome, which he regarded as the only faith fitted for a gentleman. He belonged to the political party desirous of governing Wirtemberg in conjunction with the Jesuits. No matter that the people were strict and bigoted Protestants, or that the adoption of Roman Catholicism would mean the revolt of half the population; he considered the religious beliefs of burghers to be but pawns in that vast political game which was being played at that time in Europe, and in Germany in particular, under the name of religion. Wirtemberg was governed by a Protestant ruler, the people regarded the Roman Faith as the religion of Antichrist, but the nobles were nearly all Catholics; and as long as Wirtemberg remained Protestant, they, naturally, played but small rôles in the government. The peasants of Wirtemberg had more freedom than any other people of the Empire. A heavy, stubborn race, these Wirtembergers, hating their French-speaking rulers and jealously safeguarding those ancient rights and liberties accorded to them by the testament of Eberhard der Greiner in 1514. This Magna Charta of Swabia granted the people a degree of freedom which was exceedingly irksome to the Dukes of Wirtemberg. The nobles of the land who [10] regarded themselves as too mighty to attend the petty court of Stuttgart, for the most part sulked

in their castles, or repaired to the imperial court in Vienna. The Dukes of Wirtemberg had perforce accepted this with as good grace as possible, but when Eberhard Ludwig attained his majority he welcomed foreigners from every part of Germany, forming from this band of usually noble, but invariably penniless, adventurers a court of a certain magnificence and brilliance. 'Here it is possible to enrich oneself; whereas in all other courts it is impossible not to be ruined,' Monsieur de Pöllnitz tells us of the Wirtemberg of Eberhard Ludwig's day.

It was in this wise that Stafforth, a man of little birth from Hanover, had succeeded in becoming an important person, and even pushed and intrigued himself into the high position of Oberhofmarshall.

Herr Friedrich Wilhelm von Grävenitz, another courtier and newcomer, was a gentleman of Mecklemburg. He had served in one of the Mecklemburg regiments attached to Marlborough's troops when that great general, with the Imperial Army, defended the banks of the Rhine from the invasion of Louis XIV.

Duke Eberhard Ludwig espoused the cause of his suzerain, the Austrian Emperor, and at the head of such troops as he could muster out of Wirtemberg joined the Allied Army serving under the Duke of Marlborough. On his return from the campaign he brought with him, on a visit to Stuttgart, several gentlemen, his comrades in arms, among whom was Grävenitz. This young soldier having little to gain by returning to Mecklemburg, and finding Stuttgart a pleasant abode, remained at Eberhard Ludwig's court; married a Fräulein von Stuben of Rottenburg on the Neckar, hard by Tübingen; was created Kammerjunker to the Duke, and, as we have just seen, felt himself in spite of this office but ill-rewarded for having taken domicile in Wirtemberg.

'The Church, Madame,' said the Duke of Zollern, 'is in so sorry a plight in this country, that she will certainly be ready to assist herself by the means you mention. But, in this case, we are not sure if the "means" be willing; for I fear Mademoiselle de Grävenitz, like her brother, is of the Protestant sect? Is that not so, Grävenitz?' [11]

'Monseigneur, my sister is not made of martyr stuff. I fancy that she would be willing to further the aims of the Church, were it in her power to do so, and if it were clearly to her advantage. We are talking openly,' he added with a slight flush, for he was still young, only four-and-twenty, and more used to the ruder if more honest code of the camp, than to court manners and customs.

'Now let us consider our strategics,' said Madame de Ruth. 'Bonté divine! How it refreshes one to have a scheme on hand! Stafforth, you say nothing? Marie, you are shocked; how foolish in this workaday world! Why, girl, each does what he can; and, believe me, it is not a lazy life I propose for your sister-in-law. God does not forgive the lazy—it is one of the deadly sins—especially at court. Allons! Let us consider: Monsieur de Stafforth remind us of the dates of the coming court festivities! A ball? No! A ball is useful during a well-started intrigue. I have it! there will be theatricals in the Lusthaus on the 29th of April. Three days? Perfect! And your sister sings? Grävenitz, how does she sing?'

'Well, Madame, divinely well; but her voice is deep, very low—a dark rich voice that mad old dreamer, the schoolmaster at Güstrow, calls it——' he began, but the garrulous lady interrupted eagerly:

'Heaven guard the boy for a simpleton! Do you not know the invincible thrill of the new, the unaccustomed? We are all sick to death of the Geyling's shrill pipe; your sister's voice would be invaluable, as a contrast.'

'When Madame de Ruth talks it is like the ripple of the brooks,' said Zollern laughing; 'your pardon, dear friend, that I interrupt! Your plan is admirable, but first let us get the lady here, see her, hear her, and then we shall know what to do. Meanwhile I must go homewards. Monsieur de Berga, my old friend, who bores me with his virtue but holds me by his well-tried affection, awaits me for supper, and I have a long road before me ere I get to my house.'

So saying, the Duke of Zollern rose to depart. 'Berga!' laughed Madame de Ruth, 'there is the very man we want for the end of our intrigue! When his Highness has plucked the flower and enjoyed its sweetness, we will give it to Berga to dry between the leaves of his Bible! He shall marry Mademoiselle de Grävenitz in a few years' time; it will be a pious act for him, and a small reward to us for having borne his lectures with such good grace this twenty years.' Zollern smiled. He knew his austere old friend too well, and he could not picture him in the ridiculous rôle of husband of a cast-off courtesan. With a profound salute the old beau took leave of the company, and followed his hostess into the ill-lit corridor. [12]

'A fine plan, dear friend, a very fine plan! By the way, let us hope this Grävenitz girl talks a little better French than does her sister-in-law. I verily believe Madame Friedrich de Grävenitz prefers peasant German to our own speech, and at court no word of that inelegant language could be tolerated.'

Once more he bent over Madame de Ruth's hand, murmuring, 'Merci de mes souvenirs, amie bien chère,' and then he climbed back into his heavy coach and drove out into the stormy darkness. Madame de Ruth watched the lights of the carriage disappearing, and with a sigh re-entered the salon, where she found Grävenitz writing a letter to his sister, helped by suggestions from Oberhofmarshall Stafforth.

FOOTNOTES:

[1] Württemberg was formerly and more correctly spelt Wirtemberg. This ancient spelling has been retained in the present work.

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CHAPTER II

THE AVE MARIA

A ROOM with rudely bulging plaster walls, once painted a harsh blue, now toned by time and damp to a hundred parti-coloured patches. A rough, uneven floor; for furniture a narrow, oaken bedstead, a heavy chair lamed by four legs of various heights, a rickety table steadied by a pad of rags beneath one foot, a long chest of painted wood: such was the sleeping-room of Wilhelmine von Grävenitz, in her mother's house at Güstrow in Mecklemburg. And here on a December morning of the year 1705 Wilhelmine sat disconsolately on the edge of the narrow bed. A feeble ray of winter sunshine crept through the small lattice window and made the dust twirl in a straight shaft of haze. The sunbeam kissed a cheerfulness into the dreary chamber, but the girl evidently felt no answering thrill of gladness, for she remained in her dejected attitude gloomily contemplating the dust dancing in the sunray. It was bitterly cold, and the feeble sun seemed only a teasing trick of nature, emphasising the general unfriendliness of the morning. Wilhelmine shivered in her thin bedgown, but she made no movement towards clothing herself; she was a prey to a mood of profound melancholy, and her expression was mournful, almost sinister. Though hers was a strangely haunting face, giving the impression of loveliness, yet, had one called this girl beautiful, it would have conveyed a totally erroneous picture of her, and but ill defined her subtle fascination. Her features were irregular, a trifle heavy perchance, with high cheek bones and massive square chin, with a cleft in the centre as though the Master Sculptor had said: 'This were too strong a face for a woman; I will give her a hint of tenderness to make her utterly irresistible,' and so He had planted a child's dimple in her chin and another near her [14] lips when she smiled. Wilhelmine was over-tall, lithe of limb, and spare as a Greek runner; then suddenly, unexpectedly, full breasted—surprising, when one considered the rest of her proportions. Her hair was deep brown, nearly black, save where the light showed a tinge of red, a glint of gold. It was almost too abundant; like a rich, virulent weed it grew triumphant. Her lips were thin yet perfectly modelled, a long gracious curve; the upper lip a trifle thicker and short below the sensitive, wide-open nostrils. The brow serene and white, heavy over the deep-set blue eyes. And the eyes! No one could ever describe Wilhelmine von Grävenitz's eyes, or no two persons could agree concerning them, which comes to the same thing. They were blue and deeply set, the lids heavy, the lashes short and thick, the eyebrows strongly marked, arched and almost joining over the nose. But these are mere outward presentments, and tell nothing of the spirit living in those marvellous eyes. This was a thing of vital force, for ever changeful. Even the colour of her eyes was varying, and yet there was a curious persistency of gaze, a power of fixing. The Güstrow citizens called Wilhelmine von Grävenitz witch and sorceress because of these strange eyes; they said she could freeze men with a look, that she had a serpent's gaze that grew cold and petrifying, when she chose, and yet those who loved her (they were not many) knew that her eyes could dance with laughter like a child's, that they could soften to tenderness, could glow with enthusiasm over a song or poem. But these softer moods were rare; in Wilhelmine's life there was little to call forth a gentle feeling. She lived alone with her mother in the small dark house, her brother Friedrich was away at the wars, her elder sister had married a middle-class personage of the name of Sittmann, a struggling Berlin merchant; and thus Wilhelmine led a dull life enough, for she despised the homely Güstrow citizens, who in return disliked and feared her and called her witch. Frau von Grävenitz was a talkative dame, who passed her days in gossip and in waiting for news of her son Friedrich—'my soldier son at the wars with our brave Mecklemburgians, who follow the allied army under the great Englishman Malbruck!' as she informed her neighbours a hundred times a day. Upon Wilhelmine she lavished little affection, [15] grudging her the scanty fare, and continually reminding her that she must marry. 'And who is more fitting a husband than Herr Pastor Müller?' she would add. 'Though,' she grumbled, 'he is not of noble birth, still he is a solid man; and really in these days, when all the country is upset and one never knows when the French King and his wickedness may come upon us; what with one thing and another, indeed, a maiden may be pleased to find even a plebeian protector.' Thus she rambled on in her sharp voice, yet there was cause for her anxiety, and truth lay beneath her cackle, but the wisdom of age is often obscured by its presentment.

Wilhelmine paid little heed to her mother's eloquence; though this morning, as she sat on the edge of her bed, it was of those daily tirades that she thought.

Frau von Grävenitz was a sore trial. The food in her house was poor and scanty. The house itself dirty and untidy, with one peasant girl to do all the work. Wilhelmine hated this misery. She dreamed of ease and plenty, of soft linen, of bright garments, of balls and masques, of gaiety and splendour.

Pastor Müller had none of these things to offer, she reflected; and she saw in prospect long years of dull sermons to be yawned through, stockings—thick, ugly stockings—to darn, stuffy respectability!—A timid knock came at the door, and Wilhelmine called the permission to enter, in a voice still clouded and harsh from her dreary reflections. The door opened, disclosing a

curious and pathetic figure wrapped in a tattered homespun cloak.

It seemed to be a child, for it had but childhood's growth; yet the body had the clumsy decrepitude of old age. The shoulders were high and pointed; the long, emaciated arms reached almost to the ground. Enormous hands hung on these poor limbs—hands for a very big woman, beautiful hands; for in spite of their huge size they were wonderfully modelled and imposingly strong, with the long, nervous fingers of the artist or the enthusiast. The head was grotesquely oversized, though essentially beautiful; but it seemed like some sculptor's masterpiece placed upon a ridiculous figure, or some fine boulder rock balanced absurdly on a narrow, crooked [16] flower-stem. The face arrested attention immediately; it was beautiful, finely chiselled and of classic line, without a hint of deformity or disease on its glowing health. The eyes were large, liquid, appealing, yet painfully watchful, as are the eyes of all the deformed. A yearning soul looked out of them, longing for sympathy, suspicious of pity—pity which is of all things most hateful to the cripple and the hunchback. As she stood in the doorway, there was a look of almost stern disapproval on her face, though the eyes softened with the tenderness of a woman watching the gracious naughtiness of a child.

'Wilhelmine,' she said, her grave glance meeting the other's angry frown, 'Wilhelmine, what is it now? Has the mother been singing her usual song of poverty and marriage? Come, beloved one, never frown at me so; you know it hurts me when you frown, more than the sneers and laughter which I always hear around me.—My friend! Nothing is worth a frown, though many things are worth tears.'

Wilhelmine turned away abruptly. Anna Reinhard was her friend, one of the few people in the world for whom she felt affection; but the pedantic words of the deformed girl often irritated her, and she found that spoken wisdom of Anna's infinitely wearisome, yet she was seldom querulous to her, partly because of the real affection she bore her, partly from a certain fear of the hunchback's quick wit and vehemence.

'No,' said Wilhelmine, 'it is not really the recollection of mother's lectures which disturbs me; but oh, Anna, this existence is becoming unbearable! It is all very well for you; you have your beloved books, and your religion to occupy you, but I have got nothing, and I want so much! Believe me, all those things you call amusement and luxury are necessities to me. I want to lie soft in sweet linen, to wear rich clothes, to dance, and—yes, Anna, don't look wise and solemn! I want admiration, applause, power. Anna, Anna, I wish I had been born like you' (the hunchback shuddered), 'yes, yes! You know what I mean! To like those things you like, all of which you can get——'

'What foolishness!' broke in Anna; 'content with what one can have is the only happiness. [17] Wilhelmine, some day perhaps you will have the things you pine for, far more perhaps, and then you will want others, always more!'

'Give me these things, and I will not ask for more!' burst out Wilhelmine.

'So you always say, Wilhelmine, and always will—even when——'

'Anna, you do not understand! how could you? I want life and all that life holds——' She opened her strange, grasping hands, and they closed over the other's wrists in a compelling grip.

At this moment a clatter arose in the narrow, ill-paved street, in which stood Frau von Grävenitz's house.

A man on a mud-bespattered horse cantered to the door of the Rathaus and pulled up with a flourish, blowing a shrill blast on a horn. He was accoutred in the blue and silver uniform which the Princes of Thurn and Taxis decreed to be worn by the Imperial Post.

The Taxis were Hereditary Grand Masters of the Imperial Post, which office they had found to be a valuable source of income, for the entire return of the exorbitant postal rates went into their pockets; still the people had cause for gratitude to the Taxis, as, at least, their care assured a tolerably safe carrying of letters, and, to a certain extent, a systematised postal service.

In those days the arrival of the mail was an important event. It awoke the small German town from its habitual slumberous dullness, and a letter caused its recipient to be regarded as a person of consequence.

A crowd of town cronies and gossips immediately formed round the horseman. They did not ask if he brought a letter; indeed, that was unlikely, but news! news of the war! What were the Frenchmen doing? had they gone back to their godless country?

The man answered these questions as best he might. He knew little, he said, for he only carried despatches from Schwerin. News of the war in the South? Well,—they said in Schwerin that Marshal Villars had left Wirtemberg with his army, but there was a letter in his bag from [18] Wirtemberg for the Fräulein von Grävenitz, and perchance she would be able to tell them. At mention of this a busybody ran up the narrow street, calling loudly: 'Fräulein Wilhelmine! Fräulein Wilhelmine! there is a letter from your brother! Come and tell us the news of the army. He may tell when to expect our soldiers' return.'

Wilhelmine, who had dressed hurriedly on hearing the post arrive, came slowly down the street. She looked angrily at the woman, for she hated the familiarity of the townsfolk and resented their open curiosity. Did they expect her to read her brother's letter aloud to a gaping group, as

though it were a public gazette? But she wanted the letter, and wished to get it before her mother, hearing the tumult, could come and snatch it from her. The people eyed the proud girl with no good will. She was reserved and haughty, and some said she had the evil eye.

The messenger handed her the letter and she walked quickly away, followed by many a disapproving grunt and sarcastic comment from the crowd. She gained the door of her mother's house and, springing up the creaking stair, went quickly into her room, shutting and bolting the door behind her.

'Dear Sister,'—she read—'Since last I wrote to thee, I have left my Lord of Marlborough's army, being invited to visit the court of my honoured brother in arms, Monseigneur le Duc de Wirtemberg. This happened six months since; meanwhile I have married Mademoiselle Marie von Stuben, a lady of Rottenburg (a small town on the borders of my Lord Duke's territory). I have been appointed Kammerjunker at court, and shall not be returning to Güstrow for some time. I write this news so that thou mayst break it gently to our mother, who, I fear, may be disappointed in that I do not return immediately to visit her. But assure her that I will ride North to see her whenever I can, and that shortly I hope to be in a position to offer her hospitality in Stuttgart.

'I am convinced that it would be to thine advantage, dear sister, if thou camest immediately to visit us. Tell our mother that I know many rich noblemen here, and that I will endeavour to arrange a marriage for thee, more fitting than the alliance of our sister Sittmann. The great thing is that thou shouldst set forth soon, for there will be court festivities in the spring. After which, there is usually little gaiety until the late autumn. [19]

'A good friend of mine, Madame de Ruth of Oberhausen, is willing to receive thee, and will arrange that thou shouldst take part in these court gaieties. A thousand greetings to our mother, and beg her, for my sake, to permit thee to travel southward without too much delay.—Thy brother,

'Freidrich Wilhelm von Grävenitz.
'Neuhaus, Oberhausen,
près Rottenburg sur le Neckar.
Wirtemberg.
Ce 29 *Nov.* 1705.

'I hope thy friend Monsieur Gabriel has really taught thee fine French, for no one speaks German here at court; it is considered as peasants' speech! As thou wilt see, I do not even write to thee in German! French talk, French manners, in spite of French battles!'

Wilhelmine sat motionless for a few moments after she had perused this effusion. In her mind she saw a succession of pictures of courtly splendour and graceful adventure—and in each she herself was the central figure. She looked around her bare room; the bulging walls, the rude furniture. Her eyes narrowed into that strange look of hers which the people of Güstrow declared was like a serpent's gaze, and could hold animals powerless as long as it was directed upon them. She was thinking deeply—swiftly—and perhaps it was at this moment that Wilhelmine von Grävenitz vowed her soul to worldly success; her indomitable will directed to the goal of worldly power at all costs and at all hazards. She rose shivering. It was cheerless and cold in her room; the momentary gleam of the winter sun had died away, and the sky was grey and heavy with coming snow. She unhooked her cloak from the peg, fastened it round her, and with her letter hidden away in the folds she stepped softly out and down the stair, throwing a quick backward glance to see if her mother followed or observed her. Noiselessly she lifted the latch of the house door and took her way up the narrow street. [20]

She passed the old Rathaus with the quaint fourteenth-century belfry, and the clock whence sprang out the brightly painted leaden figure of a knight, to smite the chime with his sword at each hour. In the market-place beneath, the weekly market was being held.

Many small booths had been erected, and the venders were expostulating with the citizens, who drove hard bargains with them. It was a picturesque scene enough, had Wilhelmine paused to watch—much colour in the peasants' dress, much variety in the women's headgear, and over all the wonderful old building, which would have delighted a painter's soul. That morning Wilhelmine noted nothing of all this, though on another occasion she would have taken pleasure in it, for like most sensuous natures she had a keen feeling for colour, and the grouping of a peasant crowd appealed to her artistic eye; but that day she was so absorbed in her own dreams that she did not even observe her mother walking towards her, an expression of annoyance on her sharp features. Wilhelmine started when Frau von Grävenitz, laying an ungentle hand on her shoulder, said close to her ear: 'And where may my fine daughter be going at so early an hour? Generally Miss Lie-abed is still reposing at nine of the clock!'

'O mother!' she answered, 'I am going to Monsieur Gabriel for my singing lesson. God knows, you cannot grudge me that, for he teaches me without payment.' Her quick wit told her that to draw her mother's attention to this fruitful source of complaint, her poverty, would ensure an escape

unquestioned. She reflected that she could tell of Friedrich's letter, pretending she had received it on her way home. Or, if her mother discovered the earlier delivery of the post, she would say the angry attack in the market-place had made her forget to mention it. This plan met with success, and Frau von Grävenitz remained in the pleasurable throes of a talkative woman with a grievance, holding forth to an appreciative audience composed of several of her gossips, who had gathered round as soon as they heard her shrill excited tones. A market-woman or two joined the group and stood with hands on hips, listening with open amusement, for the garrulous dame was [21] a well-known character in the country town.

As Wilhelmine gained the shelter of the dark street which ran from the Marktplatz to the cathedral, she saw Pastor Müller's fat form added to her mother's assemblage. How she hated that stout person, his pompous condescension to her, and his greasy face!

The Klosterstrasse seemed deliciously quiet after the noise of the Marktplatz, and before her, at the end of the street, she could see one tall buttress of the cathedral, and a corner of the graveyard. She walked up the pathway between the tombs and pushed open the heavy church door. The cathedral nave was dark. Wilhelmine peered about and, thinking there was no one in the church, turned to go, when from the organ, far away near the high altar (or where the high altar had been before Protestant fury had torn it down), came a whisper like the awakening of the cathedral's soul; a long-drawn note which grew stronger and fuller, filling the whole building with a pulse of sound.

Wilhelmine paused, then, turning silently to one of the oaken pews, sat down. A wondrous melody crept through the air, strong, noble, uncomplicated; then followed chords growing each moment more the expression of a soul on fire. They rose stronger, they swelled and strove and implored, they wailed with the passion of finite hearts that yearn infinitely; then suddenly sank back into the solemn major key whence they started. And it was as the renunciation of some terrible striving, as though the organ chanted the litany of some perfect calm reached through an agony of endeavour and suffering. Wilhelmine's eyes were wet, while she leaned her head against the back of the oaken pew. To her music was the only form of prayer, and it never failed to move her to a vague aspiration, she herself knew hardly what. Her dreams of the world faded, and she was only cognisant of the dim church and the inspired improvisation of her beloved Monsieur Gabriel. This was his answer to her as yet unasked question. She had come to him for guidance, to beg his counsel concerning her brother's letter, and he had told her in his music all that he knew of the world. He had shown her the cruel agony of the worldly life, the unrest, the bootless seeking, the [22] satiety of realised ambition, and the calmness, the peace of the renunciation of these things.

The organ was silent for a moment, and then through the stillness of the shadowy aisle floated the first notes of an 'Ave Maria,' which Wilhelmine knew well and had often sung when no disturbing element of disapproving Protestant burgherdom was near. Instinctively she came in at the appointed bar for the voice's commencement. 'Ave Maria gratia plena,' she sang, and her powerful notes echoed through the cathedral with all the sombre glory which lay in her great contralto voice. The player at the organ immediately softened his music to a mere accompanying whisper, which yet supported the voice, greeting it with the newly awakened soul of the organ. 'Ora pro nobis, peccatoribus,' she sang, and surely the Mother of God must have listened to so wonderful a tone prayer? 'Nunc et in hora mortis nostrae, Amen.' And the organ wandered on repeating the 'Amen' again and again in a solemn, dreamy deepening of chords, which the beautiful voice followed and answered with that certainty and ease which belong to a few of the world's singers when they sing to the accompaniment of one with whom they are in perfect musical and sympathetic understanding. The music came to an end and the church seemed doubly silent, with the painful stillness one sometimes feels when a song is ended; it is almost the same sudden forlorn feeling as when a beloved friend goes away, that sense of the departure of a beautiful presence, or it may be that our souls have returned to earth after soaring towards some beauteous mystic region. Wilhelmine passed up the nave, through a small door in the side of the carven wooden screen, and up a dark and narrow winding stair which led to the organ-loft. It was unusual to find an organ even in a cathedral in those days, but a pious Duke of Mecklemburg-Güstrow had given this one to the church as a thankoffering, and had caused it to be built by the famous organ-makers of Venice.

The organist's face and figure commanded attention. Tall and spare, with the scholar's stoop, a long narrow head broadening at the brow, a mass of iron-grey hair,—a thin, eager face lit by almost colourless eyes, which looked as though the blue of youth had been washed away by tears, or faded by vigils and patient suffering. This was the individual whom the townsfolk called the [23] 'mad French schoolmaster, Monsieur Gabriel,' and whose youth they whispered had been spent at the court of France, till Madame de Maintenon had set his enemies upon him, and he, being proved a heretic, had fled for his life across the frontier and wandered northwards. The course of his wanderings brought him to Mecklemburg where, hearing that the schoolmaster at Güstrow had died, he had sought the post and it had been granted him, because of his proved learning and his skill as a musician. This uneventful calling he had followed for many years, and the people had ceased to wonder at his eccentricities, his silence, and his friendlessness. The children loved him, and his school became famous through the countryside, and on Sundays and feast days the citizens flocked to hear his organ playing, and the performance of the choir of youths and maidens he had trained to sing so well.

Pastor Müller, according to his coarse nature, was jealous of him and insolent to him, yet he feared the mild gaze of those faded eyes and the imperturbable courtesy of the old Frenchman's manner. The pastor would often question the schoolmaster sharply concerning the music he

played. 'Chorales are all very fine,' he said, 'but surely oftentimes you play music from the abominable Mass, not fitting indeed in a holy place set apart for the worship of the Lord according to our pure faith?' 'Ah! Pastor, but the notes cannot contaminate,' Monsieur Gabriel would answer; 'Luther himself made use of the monk's melodies in his canticles.' And Pastor Müller retired to his dirty, airless house, feeling rebuked himself where he had wished to chide.

When Wilhelmine von Grävenitz appeared at the Güstrow school, a curly-haired child, Monsieur Gabriel had immediately fallen victim to her wayward charm, and had lavished much care on her studies. He taught her French thoroughly. 'I am told,' he was wont to say, 'that even in Germany no lady speaks aught save French, and you, my child, must be a great lady some day. Believe me, there is no more magnificent being than a true *grande dame*, and for this destiny the good God fashioned you.' He trained Wilhelmine in music, till thorough-bass, counterpoint, and the rest became to her an easy exercise. He read her of the history of France; taught her to know and [24] love the *Roman de la Rose*, and the poems of the singers of La Pleïade. Often he would quote Malherbes, saying with a smile and a sigh as he looked at her radiant youth: 'Et rose, elle a vécu ce que vivent les roses, l'espace d'un matin; for,' he said, 'the flowers of the world fade quickly, and thou art surely a flower, my little one.' He read her the works of Racine, Corneille, Molière, all of which learning she assimilated rapidly, and with an accuracy which delighted the old scholar. Sometimes, of an evening, he would keep her with him long after school hours, and one winter he took it into his head that she must learn to dance. He tied an inky tablecloth to her shoulders to serve as a sweeping garment. It was infinitely droll to see the two, mincing, bowing, and pirouetting in front of the mirror. 'You must *see* yourself curtsey,' he said, 'if you would learn the real movement.' He taught her the gavotte, the pavane, and many other dances, playing the measures on an old violin the while. The school desks served for dummy dancers, and were arranged to give her a notion of the ordering of the figures. The aged recluse, in his musty coat, seemed transformed into a very courtly gentleman, but Wilhelmine always fancied that his eyes were more melancholy than usual after these mimic courts. One day she asked him if it saddened him to revoke the past. 'Ah! mon enfant!' he replied, 'que voulez-vous? un cœur profondément blessé ne guérit jamais; and the melodies of these dances remind me of my wound, which I thought had healed in your peaceful northern land. Ah! little one, there is no sadder music to the old than the dance-music of a vanished youth.'

While Wilhelmine read her brother's letter on that cold December morning, it was to Monsieur Gabriel she at once decided to confide its surprising contents. Her mother, she knew, would raise a dozen difficulties, and it were best to talk with Monsieur Gabriel and devise some means of procuring sufficient money to pay the cost of her journey to Wirtemberg. Then, if they could hit upon a scheme to propose to Frau von Grävenitz, there was more likelihood of gaining her consent. But the music had changed Wilhelmine's mind, and as she climbed up to the organ-loft [25] she was almost prepared to abandon her intended journey.

'Monsieur Gabriel!' she said, 'I have great news, so strangely unexpected that I wonder if I am dreaming it! Read this letter of my brother's, and give me your advice.' The old man stretched out his left hand to take the paper, while his right hand remained on the organ keys, and as he read he played a few chords. 'Hélas!' he murmured as he refolded the letter, 'so the time has come when you must go forth into the world. Well, well—it is right; you are wasted here, though God knows it will be very dark without you.'

'But, Monsieur Gabriel,' she said, 'you talk as though I should start to-morrow! I have not told my mother yet, and I have come to you for advice. Where could I get the money to pay my journey? It will cost many gulden.'

The old man smiled. 'Money? your brother sends you none, of course? Your mother? she also has none. Does Friedrich think you can fly southward on a swallow's wing? And the swallows have gone to the south long ago,' he added dreamily.

'O Monsieur Gabriel,' cried Wilhelmine, 'help me!—you have always helped me! tell me where to get this money.'

'My child, I must think; do you know what the cost will be? No, nor I either; but let me see—how long has this letter been on the road?—sixteen days—and you could not travel so far without rest and refreshment. Well! you must have a hundred gulden. But, child, to what am I sending you?'

Wilhelmine started; she knew by his last words that he could procure the money.

'To success!' she answered in a low voice.

'Success? Yes, probably, but that is the greatest danger! We can most of us remain pure of heart, tender, generous while we are poor or sad, but it is when the world smiles that the heart so often grows cold and hard.'

Wilhelmine clambered on to the organ bench, pushing Monsieur Gabriel gently aside. She struck a chord, but the half-witted bellows-blower, whose presence they had forgotten, had ceased to pump air into the organ, and there came only a painful droning from the empty pipes. She called to him imperiously, and with a muttered grumble he resumed his pumping. [26]

'A bad omen,' said Wilhelmine; 'I strike a chord and I achieve dissonance and wailing.' She threw back her head and pressed her fingers on the keyboard: this time a thin flute-like chord came forth, and Wilhelmine lifted her voice and sang:

'Cher ami de ma jeunesse
Souriez à ma liesse—
Au Printemps chansons et fleurs!
Pour l'hiver gardons les pleurs.

Cher ami, la vieillesse
Est revêche à l'alégresse
Je cueillerai les douces fleurs
Pour l'hiver gardant mes pleurs.'

She managed the organ wonderfully, and succeeded so well in playing a light, graceful accompaniment to the old French melody, that Monsieur Gabriel, listening with a smile and nodding his head, whispered as though to some invisible confidant: 'I have made her a true artist! —no, God makes the artist, but those who love them teach them to give their genius to the world. Well, my child,' he continued, 'I will find the money for you, but leave me now. Be satisfied, your song has done its work; I will send you on your search for the flowers, and God grant you may not find the tears too soon!—I do not love that song with its refrain of fleurs et pleurs, it is so terribly true.' But Wilhelmine was not listening to his rambling talk; her strange eyes had lost the brightness which had been theirs while she sang the gay French song; they had narrowed to that hard, compelling gaze which, in truth, was curiously serpent-like in its cold fixity.

Monsieur Gabriel laid his hand on her shoulder, and together they went down into the silent nave of the church. They separated at the door; the old man going up the Klosterstrasse to the schoolhouse, while Wilhelmine walked rapidly away, through the graveyard, towards the bleak fields and the marshland which surrounded the dreary northern town.

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[27]

CHAPTER III

THE FIRST STEP

'Happy the nations of the moral North!
Where all is virtue, and the winter season
Sends sin, without a rag on, shivering forth.'

Don Juan, Canto II.

Wilhelmine walked on for some twenty minutes, the cold morning air bringing a bright colour to her cheeks and a sparkle to her eyes. Her gait was one of her greatest charms; it never seemed hurried, and yet the long, even steps carried her swiftly onwards. There was vigorous elasticity in her tread; she walked freely and with perfectly assured balance, her shoulders thrown back and head erect. It was in a measure this walk of hers which caused the townsfolk to call her 'the proud hussy,' though they were careful not to let her hear their disparaging remarks, for they feared the compelling power of her strange eyes. It was whispered that it was dangerous to offend her. 'Though, of course,' they declared, 'we do not really believe in witchcraft and such Popish abominations, still it is certainly true that Hans Frisch, the blacksmith's child, who threw a snowball at her last winter and had the misfortune to hit her on the face, went home, took to his bed, and nearly died of convulsions.' Of this talk Wilhelmine was unaware, though, knowing the effect of her eyes upon people, she would often voluntarily narrow her lids, causing the pupils to contract. She practised this feat before the mirror, but she was careful not to do so at night, for it gave her an uncanny feeling, and she sometimes succeeded in frightening herself, as she did others. That cold morning, while she walked, there was none of all this in her face; she was merely a gloriously healthy young being rejoicing simply and naturally in the morning freshness and in the pulsing of the blood in her veins. She was feeling the elation of health, and it chased [28] away her morbid fancies in spite of the dreariness of the wet fields around her. Indeed, it needed the buoyancy of youth to counteract the profound melancholy of the Mecklemburg lake-country in winter. The enormous flat fields stretching away in unbroken monotony, the road very straight, with a division of colour in the middle where the summer road marched with the winter road; the former merely a soaking mud-bog, the latter hard and stony. On each side of the highway a line of apple and pear trees lifted gaunt twisted arms to the leaden sky, as though in protest against the sullen aspect of the world. Wilhelmine paused and looked about her. The snow was surely coming; there was the hush in the air which precedes a snowstorm, and she was some distance from home. She strained her eyes westward and endeavoured to catch a glimpse of the lake towards which she was journeying, but she could see nothing save the drenched fields, and in the dim distance the dark line of fir woods. She turned her face homewards and began to walk with a quickened step. The cold air had made her hungry; she had only partaken of a lump of black bread and a glass of milk, and it was now late in the morning. She felt a soft cold touch on her cheek, the first snowflake of the gathering storm. At first the snowflakes only added to the slush on the road; they melted shudderingly and were devoured by the brown mud, but as the snow fell the mud was conquered and lay hidden beneath a dazzling white covering. Ever faster came the snow. It beat down on Wilhelmine, the large fleecy patches almost blinding her. She had walked farther than she had realised, and her feet sinking deep through the snow into the mud beneath, the high heels of her thin shoes stuck and impeded her progress. At length she reached the outskirts of the town, whose red roofs were already almost hidden by a white layer of snow. She hurried up the deserted street, past the cathedral. When she came to the corner of the market-

place she saw a dark figure in a cloak of peasant's frieze coming towards her, and with a feeling of annoyance she recognised Pastor Müller.

At that moment he too observed her, and hurried to meet her. 'Ah! Fräulein,' he said as he came up, 'I am grieved to see you exposed to this inclement weather. May I not offer you the hospitality [29] of my house?' He spoke in German with a careful affectation of correctness, though his accent was harsh and guttural from his native low German dialect. Wilhelmine particularly detested his speech, and it irritated her to be addressed as 'Fräulein,' as though she were a burgher's daughter, and not of sufficiently noble birth to be styled 'gracious lady.' Of a truth, the pastor was not a person to inspire either liking or respect. He was fat in body, with short plump legs whose common shape was exhibited to the fullest extent by tight knee-breeches and woollen stockings. His face was enormous, and though his jaw showed strength and decision, the weak mouth and large protuberant lips indicated that his senses ruled what he himself styled 'the fair habitation of an immortal soul.' His eyes were small, and seemed to express inordinate greed, when they were not, as was usually the case, lifted to the sky in pious self-assurance, yet with feigned humility. Pastor Müller was at once unctuous and insolent, a combination of contending characteristics which is often the possession of those who patronise God Almighty with their approval, and use His Name as a convenient adjunct in their homilies against all things human. His health, he was wont to declare, had suffered from his many vigils, and consequently he found himself forced to fortify his body with much nourishment, and with copious draughts of any wine which he could obtain. In spite of this, he dominated his congregation partly by reason of a certain eloquence which was at his command in the pulpit when dealing with theological questions, in which, indeed, he was deeply learned. He convinced by his uncompromising attitude towards the sinful members of his parish. In fact, the Güstrow citizens regarded him as a strong Christian, and rejoiced in his fervid biblical language. Many of the spinsters of his flock would gladly have become Frau Müller, but he paid no heed to their blandishments, and openly avowed his intention of making Wilhelmine the mistress of the Pfarrhaus, though she appeared strangely insensible to the glory of this prospect. In the first place, with the arrogance of youth, she regarded the pastor's forty years as old age, and treated his ponderous attempts at gallantry with levity. However, when she met him in the snow that morning she was cold and hungry, and the [30] prospect of probable warmth at his fireside, with a substantial meal provided, proved alluring; so it was with an unusually gracious manner that she accepted his offer of shelter. A few steps brought them to the door of his abode, and they passed into the small, dark corridor which led to his study. Here the stove sent forth a pleasant heat, and it was with a welcome sensation of returning warmth that Wilhelmine sank down in the large chair which the pastor drew up for her close to the stove. She had flung off her snow-covered cloak, and she sat there in her thin morning blouse, open at the neck and showing the contour of her white throat. Müller begged her to remove her soaking shoes, and, having done so, she leaned back, stretching out her feet towards the little door in the stove, which he had opened in order to permit the red embers to give forth their full heat. He pushed some logs through the aperture, and there was a delightful crackling and the busy burning of well-dried wood. Then he left Wilhelmine while he went to forage in the kitchen for food; his old house-keeper being at the market, or more probably sheltering from the storm and gossiping in some friendly booth. Wilhelmine reclined in the comfortable chair and surveyed the room. A number of theological works lay on the table in the centre of the apartment; and another large table which stood in the window was covered with papers, closely written sheets as her sharp eyes observed. The walls were bare and ugly, but the room had a decided air of comfort; the windows shut out the cold in a manner unknown in Frau von Grävenitz's dilapidated house; the chair she lay in was soft; and, above all, it was very warm in the room. She stretched herself and wondered if, after all, there would not be sufficient creature comforts to atone for the dullness of life as Frau Müller.

The pastor returned carrying a dish of cold meat, a loaf of home-baked bread, and under his arm a large bottle. Pushing some of the theological books aside, he set down the food on the middle table which he drew up near the stove beside Wilhelmine. Then again he disappeared to the kitchen, returning anon with plates, glasses, knives and forks. He placed himself opposite his guest, and turning his eyes towards the grimy ceiling, he folded his fat hands and recited a [31] prayer over the victuals.

'O Lord, who hath brought this female into mine house, send a blessing, I pray thee, upon the food which I set before her!' He paused, then added: 'May this be the first of many meals she shall partake of here in Christian humility and dutiful affection.' Wilhelmine laughed. At another time the pastor would have been rebuked sharply for a speech of this kind; but she was hungry, and it did not suit her to postpone her meal to the uncertain date of Frau von Grävenitz's dinner. The pastor helped her liberally to meat, and cut a large slice from the white loaf—a luxury for Wilhelmine, used to the heavy, sour, black bread, which was provided in her mother's house. He poured out a copious draught from the black bottle, and the smell of corn brandy filled the air. Wilhelmine ate hungrily, and drank the liquor with relish, the strong spirits coursing through her with a grateful, tingling feeling, for she was really in need of food.

'Dear lady,' said Müller, pouring a large quantity of the brandy into his own glass, 'I give you of my best; this excellent liquor was a present to me from the noble Herr von Maltzan. He is a generous friend to me. But truly, this beverage is not for those whom the Lord has blessed with health and strength, and I keep it for the use of the sick, though my own delicate constitution demands, at rare intervals, a small amount to strengthen me. Dear Fräulein, I give it gladly to you this morning, for it is cruelly cold, and you, my dear one, were exposed to the rigours of the storm.'

'I thank you, Herr Pastor; I feel truly better for your breakfast, though my head is going round a little, I must confess,' said Wilhelmine.

Müller looked at her curiously, then, rising, he walked to the window, and watched the driving snow. After a few moments he returned, and drawing up his chair near the stove he spread out his fat fingers, warming them at the fire. There was silence between them, only broken by the wind outside, which had risen and was whistling and howling, and driving the snow in clouds down the street. Suddenly the pastor bent down and laid his hand on her stockinged foot. 'Still [32] damp,' he said; 'it would be well if you took off your hose and dried them.' Wilhelmine smiled lazily.

'Good Herr Pastor,' she said, 'your plenteous meal has made me sleepy. I cannot take the trouble to take off my hose even though they may be a trifle wet.' She closed her eyes. The walk in the strong winter air, followed by the warmth of the room and the unaccustomed alcohol made her drowsy, and she wished to be undisturbed in her half dream. Müller's face flushed to a deep purple, then paled. He breathed heavily, and the veins stood out on his temples like cords.

'Wilhelmine,' he said in a hoarse, thick whisper, 'you shall indeed be my wife—I promise you—ah, you are fitted to adorn any position, Wilhelmine, my bride!' He bent and kissed her stockinged foot, and his coarse fingers pressed deep into her slight ankle.

'Your condescension amazes me, Herr Pastor,' she said mockingly, 'but I fear——'

'Nay, my dear, no maidenly modesty! Come, we are affianced now; let me give thee the lover's kiss!' He leaned over her. His breath was sour with the smell of corn brandy. His eyes were glassy, staring, and his fat face was livid, hideous. An overwhelming sense of repulsion came to her. She felt herself degraded by this man's admiration, smirched by his odious desire. The recollection flashed through her mind of a white flower she had seen—a gracious, delicate thing—and a huge, slimy, black slug had rested on the petals. She remembered how she had knocked the creature away, feeling that it defiled the flower.

'No, never! do you hear? Never! I will not marry you,' she broke out.

She struggled to remove Müller's hand from her ankle; but he gripped strongly, and her fingers seemed terribly impotent, childishly weak.

'How dare you! Let me go. I tell you I will never marry you,' she reiterated vehemently.

'Ah! you beautiful wild thing—but I will make you love me—you will see how you will love your husband. Come, no nonsense! I will soon show you how you love me.' He loosed his grip of her ankle and flung himself over her in the chair, endeavouring to press his thick lips to hers. She [33] struggled against him but he kept her down; with one hand on her forehead he pushed her back into the chair, while with the other he wrenched open the neck of her bodice, tearing it downward to her breast. Always a strong man he seemed now transformed into some ruthless, degraded, maddened animal. Apparently she was entirely at his mercy, but she was strong and young, and angry disgust gave her unusual strength. She caught the man's throat in both her hands, working her knuckles inwards on his windpipe with such force that he was almost choked, and instinctively put up his hands to hers endeavouring to remove her grip. But she held him, and, half-throttled, he sank down sideways on the arm of the chair. In an instant she dragged herself from him and was able to raise herself on one knee, still keeping her hold on his throat. He wrenched away her hands, his iron grip on both her wrists, but she was now able to dominate her aggressor from above and could hold him down with the full force of her arms. Face to face with her enemy, she recalled the potency of her witch-gaze. She narrowed her eyelids and directed her steely glance into the bloodshot eyes of her tormentor. During a few seconds they were thus: the girl half-standing, half-kneeling, rigid, tense, holding the man from her with all her strength. The man sprawling on his side in the chair—a huge, ridiculous being, panting, gasping, helpless, for he could not regain his balance unless he let go the woman's wrists. To Wilhelmine, in spite of her dauntless nature, these few seconds seemed endless. Fortunately for her, no misgivings as to the compelling power of her eyes crossed her mind, or probably her force might thereby have been diminished. At length she felt a slackening of the muscles of Müller's hands—his gaze faltered. Again he struggled frantically. She resolved to hazard everything, trusting entirely in her strange power. She bent slowly downwards, all the force of her will focused in her eyes. She felt as though each eye held a dagger wherewith she could stab her enemy's very consciousness. Another moment and the man's hands relaxed entirely and fell limp and inert from her wrists. She sprang up, catching her cloak in her hand as she fled. She reached the study door [34] before Müller moved. For the moment he seemed transfixed, but as she opened the door, to her horror she saw him rise, and as she rushed down the short passage she heard Müller's heavy step behind her. For the first time during the whole disgusting scene she felt afraid. Her knees seemed to fail, her feet to grow strangely heavy. She stumbled on till she gained the house door. She fumbled frantically at the latch; it was unfamiliar to her and she could not unfasten it. The pursuer was up to her now and his breath was on her cheek. Once more he threw his arms round her. She turned, like an animal at bay, and dealt Müller a blow full on the lips. He staggered for an instant, and she succeeded, at last, in wrenching open the door. He clutched at her skirt as she sprang out. It unbalanced her, and she fell forward on her face into the snow of the street.

The shock of the fall, following the excitement of her struggle with Müller, stunned Wilhelmine for a moment, and when she dragged herself up to a kneeling position and looked round, she found herself alone in the driving snow. Müller's door was shut, and the street absolutely

deserted. She rubbed the clinging snow off her face and ruefully considered the distance which lay between her and her mother's house. The snow had soaked through her thin stockings. She rose wearily, and drawing her cloak round her, and over her head, she hid both her torn bodice and her thick unbound hair, which had fallen over her shoulders during her struggle with Müller.

Then she started homewards through the fast-falling snow. As she passed the market-place, many faces peered out at her from the venders' booths, and one friendly peasant woman called to her to take shelter, but Wilhelmine shook her head and hastened onwards. She feared that her shoeless feet would awaken curiosity, and she dared not let the people see her torn garments as they assuredly would did she tarry in the booth, for in their homely kindness they would insist on removing her wet cloak.

The Rathaus clock chimed the hour, and Wilhelmine realised with a strange, dream-like feeling that but three hours had gone by since she passed that way to visit Monsieur Gabriel. Yet it [35] seemed to her as though days had elapsed since she sang the *Ave Maria* in the cathedral. At length she reached the door of her mother's house. She knocked loudly, wondering if Frau von Grävenitz had watched her from the windows of the upper story, which commanded a view of part of the market-place and the door of the Rathaus, where she had received her brother's letter that morning. She knocked again and tried to lift the latch, but it was secured within. She listened, but could hear no approaching footsteps in the corridor. She leaned against the portal, and wondered if it was her fate to remain in the snow for the rest of the day.

Suddenly a thought came to her, which sent the blood tingling in a hot wave to her cheeks: Where was her brother's letter? She felt for it in her bosom; it was not there, and she knew the precious missive must have fallen from her gown during the struggle at the Pfarrhaus. Could she go back and fetch it? she asked herself. No! that was out of the question.

At this moment the door was flung open and Frau von Grävenitz appeared. 'Lord God!' she said, when she saw Wilhelmine standing on the threshold, 'where have you been child? Surely your dear Monsieur Gabriel could keep you in the schoolhouse till this storm passed over, and not send you back to catch your death of cold or cost me an apothecary's fee!'

Wilhelmine pushed past her mother without a word, designing to gain her chamber before the old woman observed her torn garments and her lack of shoes; but Frau von Grävenitz clutched hold of the cloak and, giving it a vicious pull, exclaimed: 'No, no! I will not permit you to take your soaking clothes upstairs. Come in here and take them off.' She tugged at the heavy cloak with such vehemence that the clasp at her neck parted and the cape fell back, revealing Wilhelmine's loosened hair and her torn bodice. The old woman saw her daughter's shoeless feet. She looked at her searchingly, her face darkening and hardening from annoyance to real anger and distrust. 'Wilhelmine,' she said harshly, 'explain your extraordinary appearance. Where have you been, and why do you come home in this strange and unbecoming manner?'

'Mother,' answered the girl, 'let me take off my wet clothes and I will tell you everything.' She wished to gain time to concoct a plausible story, for she did not intend to mention Müller's [36] outbreak.

In the first place she was horribly ashamed, and knowing Frau von Grävenitz's garrulous tongue she feared to be made the subject of the citizens' gossip. But her mother was not to be put off so easily. She drew the girl into the kitchen, and after shutting the larder door in the servant-maid's astonished face, she planted herself firmly in front of Wilhelmine. 'Now,' she said, 'you will favour me with your story. It is strange to see a young maiden return in this state of disarray from an interview with a man, and I insist upon your clearing yourself immediately if you can.'

'Interview with a man, mother?' said Wilhelmine; 'what do you mean?' It flashed across her that Frau von Grävenitz must have seen her enter Müller's house.

'Yes; your fine Monsieur Gabriel, with his mincing airs and his high manners! You go to him for your studies, after two long hours you return looking as though——Good Lord! child! answer me —what has that evil old Frenchman done to you?'

Wilhelmine looked at her for a moment in silence; it had not struck her that this interpretation of her dishevelled appearance could be harboured even in her mother's suspicious mind. It filled her with indignation and dismay for her friend; yet she realised with surprise that, could such a thing have occurred as for Monsieur Gabriel to lose his self-control and offend as Müller had, it would not have disgusted her to the same extent. Somehow, she felt it would not have debased her and humiliated her as had the pastor's attack. For a moment she almost decided to let her mother suspect there had been some strange scene with the organist; anything better than own to the degradation of having suffered the insult of the greasy burgher. Then with a revulsion of feeling, her soul sickened at the injustice of letting Monsieur Gabriel pay the penalty of the pastor's wicked insolence, and she remembered that her friend would be exposed to the horrified reprobation of the sober townsfolk; nay, more, he might even be dismissed from his post.

'How can you think such a thing, mother?' she said angrily. 'I tell you Monsieur Gabriel knows nothing of all this, and as you put such an odious construction on my appearance, I shall not give [37] you the satisfaction of telling you how it came about.'

'As you wish,' the other replied icily; 'but it will be my duty to forbid any further visits to that Frenchman, and I shall inform Pastor Müller of the schoolmaster's real character.'

This was too much for Wilhelmine; her anger flamed, all her reticence vanished, and she poured forth the whole story. Her mother heard her to the end, and, shaking her head, she made answer: 'If this be true, Pastor Müller should be punished. But I cannot credit it; you are shielding Monsieur Gabriel. Now go to your room and reflect. You are a sinful woman, Wilhelmine, and a disgrace to your ancient name.'

The girl turned away. The excitement of the last hours had fatigued her, and she felt an unaccountable apathy. After all, what did it matter if her mother misjudged her? She would soon be far away; her present life and surroundings appeared to her to be absolutely detached from her real self. She went slowly up the creaking stair and into her garret, and flung herself down on the bed. She was asleep almost as soon as her head touched the pillow.

It was quite dark when Wilhelmine woke, and she wondered why she should awaken during the night; then, slowly, remembrance came to her, and she realised that she was still fully dressed. She lay quiet for some time, pondering on the events of the day. The Rathaus clock chimed eight slow notes, and she knew she had slept for nearly nine hours. She listened; there was some one moving downstairs in the kitchen, probably her mother preparing the meagre supper. Wilhelmine rose, groped her way to the door, and turned the handle. The door remained firmly closed. She shook it gently, pushed it—the doors in her mother's house often stuck fast; but this time it was no accidental adherence of ill-fitting hinges, the door was securely fastened from outside. Her mother had locked her in! To be locked into a room had always been a terrible thing to her. When she was a child, her brother had often teased her by pushing her into a dark cupboard and turning the key, and it was the only one of the many tricks he played her which had caused her real alarm. She hated the dark and always imagined she was stifling when she knew she was a [38] prisoner in an unlit place. The same feeling came over her now, and she beat her hands frantically against the door, calling her mother loudly the while. But no answer came. She groped her way across the room till she felt her hand touch the window. She found the fastening and, opening the casement, leaned far out into the still night air. From across the market-place came the sound of men's voices, and a glow of light shone beneath the hostelry door. An occasional burst of song and drunken laughter told her that the bad characters of the town were carousing, as usual, on a Saturday night. Otherwise the silence was intense and the darkness unbroken by moon or star. The calm air of the winter night soothed Wilhelmine, and she was ashamed of having knocked and called so wildly; but now a dull feeling of resentment rose in her against her mother for locking her into her room like a naughty child. She leaned her head against the window-frame and wondered if any one on earth had ever been as lonely and miserable as she. Her mother disliked her, her brother was too selfish to care for any one save himself. Anna, her friend, was something in her life; but it is small avail to be loved by those who manage to make their affection tiresome. Müller loved her! She smiled bitterly to herself; yes, that was a love which could give her happiness! That was what some people called love, she had been told. All at once a wonderful feeling came to her, a wave of infinite relief, like balsam to her wounded heart: it was the thought of Monsieur Gabriel's gentle friendship and trust in her. She saw his kind, dim eyes; the good, discriminating smile, and the thought was as though he laid his delicate, blue-veined hand on her head, soothing her unutterably. She heard a step coming on the stair, a flicker of light crept under her door, and some one fitted the key into the lock. 'Mother!' she called in a softened voice. When the door opened, she saw Frau von Grävenitz standing there, a rush-light in one hand and a plate of food balanced between her breast and the other hand, in which she held a pitcher of milk. The old woman's eyes were red with weeping, and vaguely Wilhelmine realised for the first time in her life that, in spite of grumbling, reproaches, and grudging meanness, her mother had for her a spark of that patient, yearning tenderness which is [39] maternal love.

'Here, my child,' she said gently, 'eat and drink, and forget the horrible things you have passed through to-day.' Wilhelmine slipped an arm round the old woman's neck, and kissed her as she had not done for many a long day, perhaps never since she had been a little child. For a moment she leaned her head against her mother's shoulder, and then taking the food she began to eat. Frau von Grävenitz stuck the rush-light up between a book which was lying on the table and the edge of the plate, then shutting the window she went out, closing and re-locking the door behind her.

On the following morning Wilhelmine woke early, and she was dressed when her mother came to the door and bade her descend and help with the housework. All traces of the unwonted tenderness in the old woman's face had vanished. She had, apparently, forgotten the circumstances of the previous day, or at any rate she made no allusion thereto, though her daughter fancied she watched her narrowly. When the morning's work was ended Wilhelmine returned to her chamber to dress for the church service. She was brushing her hair, when she heard a knock at the house door, followed by Frau von Grävenitz's shrill tones as she conversed in the corridor with some person. Then she heard her mother mounting the stairs and calling 'Wilhelmine!' in flustered tones. The girl hastened to the door of her room and stood on the landing waiting to hear the cause of her mother's summons.

'Your precious Monsieur Gabriel has gone off to Schwerin, it seems,' she said, eyeing Wilhelmine sharply. 'He has sent a message, saying that he prays you take his place at the organ this morning. He says he has urgent business at Schwerin, though what it can be I am sure I do not know! However, I suppose you will play the organ this morning, and I hope you will make your Monsieur Gabriel pay you in good silver coin for your trouble.' Wilhelmine's lip curled

contemptuously. 'We have never paid him a groschen for teaching me to play this same organ, mother,' she said. 'Of course I shall play this morning, but I shall persuade Anna to come to the organ-loft with me,' she added, as a vision flashed across her of Pastor Müller, and a possible [40] pursuit down the dark winding stair-way after the congregation had left the church. She dressed quickly, and wrapping her cloak round her went out into the crisp frosty morning air to fetch Anna. When she came to the dreary house in the Stiftstrasse where the deformed girl lived, she was annoyed to find that her friend had already started for church. It was Anna's habit to go to the cathedral before the appointed hour for the church service. She loved to sit in the dim aisle, watching the sunlight creeping through the ancient stained glass windows, while she waited for the first tone of the organ.

Wilhelmine considered for a moment. It was ridiculous to fear Müller; he would not dare to molest her in the precincts of the church; yet she hated to pass the sacristy door alone, for he could follow her, unseen from the rest of the building. She threw back her head with a defiant movement: was she becoming fearful, timid? Was this a frame of mind in which to face the adventurous life at a court? She turned away impatiently, and went swiftly down the Stiftstrasse to the market-place. The Rathaus clock rang out, and Wilhelmine realised that there was no time to be lost if she were to play the voluntary to the sound of which the worshippers were accustomed to take their places. She hastened across the market-place, down the Klosterstrasse and through the graveyard, where the old stone slabs on the graves were, for the most part, hidden beneath the frost-bound snow which glittered in the sun, though here and there an upright tombstone showed like a discoloured, jagged tooth in the midst of a white pall. She hurried on and entered the side door near the sacristy. As she lifted the latch of the entrance to the dark stair leading up to the organ-loft she heard a movement behind her, and, turning, she saw Müller's face peer at her from the sacristy. She paid no heed, and springing quickly up the steps gained the small platform, where the happiest hours of her life had been spent with the old musician. She peered down into the well-like space beneath the organ, where the bellows-blower laboured, pumping in the air for the pipes. He was at his post patiently waiting for the signal to commence his work. Wilhelmine signed to him to begin, and having assured herself that all was [41] in order, she glanced at the sheets of manuscript music. She found that Monsieur Gabriel had appointed hymns and canticles for the day, and she noticed that he had chosen the easiest and simplest, for though her skill almost equalled his own, he had evidently wished to spare her difficulty and trouble. She seated herself upon the high bench before the organ, arranging her skirts so that they should not balk her pedalling. At first she played softly—a wailing melody of her own devising; then, as though she gathered strength and assurance in her music, the chords boomed out, rich and deep, rolling down the church like the relentless waves of some elementary force. She played on and on, not hearing through the music the sound of the shuffling feet of the entering worshippers. It was with a feeling of alarm that she became aware of rows of honest burghers seated stolidly in their accustomed places. Pastor Müller was kneeling in the pulpit waiting for the music to cease ere he began the preliminary prayer. She softened the chords, till they faded and ceased entirely, then taking up a book of canticles, she studied the melodies and read their words, for she felt she could not listen to Müller's rasping voice exhorting his flock to holiness and purity of living.

The harsh tones fell unheeded on her ear for some time. A sudden cessation thereof roused her to attention, and she craned her neck over the side of the panelled wainscot which ran round the organ-loft. She saw the congregation attentively waiting for the pastor to give out the text of his sermon. Müller stood in the pulpit; an open Bible lay on the ledge beneath one of his strong, coarse hands; the other hand grasped the pulpit edge, and Wilhelmine could see his knuckles whitening with the force of his grip. His face was ashy, and the deep-set eyes moved incessantly; he was evidently in a state of that violent excitement which sometimes seized him when he preached, and which gave him a fervid emotional eloquence.

'For all flesh is as grass, and all the glory of man as the flower of grass. The grass withereth and the flower thereof falleth away. But the word of the Lord endureth for ever. And this is the word which by the Gospel is preached unto you.' He read his text in a husky, raucous voice, and [42] through the assemblage passed a wave of astonishment. This was surely no verse for a Sunday before Christmas; it was more fitted for a Lenten discourse! But Pastor Müller's sermons were the only theatrical performances given at Güstrow, and the citizens revelled in the often startlingly emotional character of his exhortations; so that day they settled down as usual to listen to his sermon with pleasurable curiosity.

'Brethren,' he began, 'O miserable sinners, who lightly look towards the season of Christ's birth as a time of rejoicing and merry-making, forgetting the load of iniquity which weighs you down—I call to you to pause! Tremble, ye righteous! Quake in fearful terror, ye wrong-doers! All joy is evil, and all things of the flesh accursed. Mourn, ye women! Cry out and weep, ye little children! for by lust ye were begot. Yea, sin walks abroad, and corruption liveth in the hearts of men. Boast not thyself of to-morrow, for thou knowest not what a day may bring forth. Repent, I command you, and scourge yourselves, for though it is true that the Lord Christ came into the world to save sinners, still the security you have made unto yourselves is a vain thing. Without repentance you cannot share in the benefit of the birth of Christ. Prepare for Christmas by much searching of heart and renunciation of the joys of the flesh, not by seeking fresh pleasures and carousing. For truly the grass withereth and the flower thereof passeth away!' He stood tense, one arm outstretched; he was moved by his own incoherent eloquence. The congregation listened spellbound; indeed, the man was an orator, and the very unexpectedness of his strange violence held his listeners enthralled. After a pause, during which the silence became nearly intolerable,

he continued his oration. His language had a Biblical flavour, and the passion of his utterance seemed like holy inspiration. Wilhelmine listened unmoved; she knew that the man laboured under an excitement of being, which had little or nothing to do with religious sincerity. It was merely his physical fury, dammed back from a more natural channel, which had caused this exaltation of mind. She watched him with a mocking smile as he poured forth a torrent of vehement words—denunciations of all things joyful, exhortations to repentance, and thunders of [43] prospective vengeance on sin. Even to her the sermon seemed a masterpiece of eloquence, and the artistic feeling in her rejoiced in the vigorous phrases and fervid declamation, though her whole being revolted against the hypocrite and fanatic who spoke, and she despised the crude bigotry of the actual matter of the peroration.

His words came ever faster and in ever growing violence, till with consummate skill he made another sudden pause; then, sinking his voice to a tone of grave warning, he ejaculated solemnly: 'O my brethren, men of the reformed faith, hearken unto me! Here, before the Face of God Almighty, I denounce the hellish instigators of all this abominable lust, the frail instruments of temptations—Women! These are the scourges of the world! accursed by reason of their vanity! condemned everlastingly by reason of their carnal desire and of their perpetual contamination of the pure heart of man!'

This was more than Wilhelmine could tolerate coming from the lips of the wretch who, but a few hours before, had proved himself to be a very beast. She would hear no more of his insolent diatribes! She gave the sign to the bellows-blower to commence his labours, and as she heard Müller's voice again rising in a burst of wild denunciation, she crashed both hands on the keys of the organ, drowning the preacher's words in a flood of magnificent sound. In a triumph song of the fullness of Earth's beauty and glory the giant chords rang out, and Wilhelmine laughed aloud under cover of the music. This was her answer to the hollowness of the hypocrite's denunciation of life and happiness; this was her confession of faith in the joy of living, and this was her revenge upon the man who had humiliated her. She remembered, however, that the congregation must be propitiated for the interruption, and sliding her strong fingers from note to note on the organ she modulated her triumphant rhapsody into the simple, restful C Major; then she played the first bar of the canticle which Monsieur Gabriel had given out to the singers; who, though sitting among the congregation during the services, were still a very compact and united choir carefully trained by him, for the most part, from childhood. As she expected, they answered immediately to the organ's command, and a hundred young voices sang Luther's grand old hymn— [44]

'Ein' feste Burg ist unser Gott.'

On the following afternoon Wilhelmine was sitting disconsolately in her attic. The book she was reading had fallen from her hands, and her eyes rested on the ugly blue walls of her room. She reviewed in her mind the events of the previous day; the scene in the church, and her subsequent departure therefrom, which she had managed so deftly that, though Müller was in the graveyard when she came out, she had evaded him, and joining Anna, who was waiting for her near the porch, she had succeeded in passing the pastor without staying to hear what he evidently wished to say. Frau von Grävenitz chid her sharply for interrupting the sermon, but she was silenced by Wilhelmine's angry retort and reminder of Müller's misdeeds. The Sunday afternoon and evening had passed without any unwonted occurrence. Wilhelmine was tortured by the fact that she had not told her mother of Friedrich's letter; she had not recovered it from Müller, though twice she had sent the servant-maid to demand its restitution.

She intended to reveal the whole story to her mother, when Monsieur Gabriel returned with the promised money; for she guessed that the object of his journey to Schwerin was the procuring of the sum. The light was failing rapidly, and Wilhelmine felt intensely dreary and sad. She turned over the leaves of the book which lay on her lap; it was a volume lent her by Monsieur Gabriel, a book written by Blaise Pascal. Her eye was caught by a sentence, and she read the wise words of the great thinker: 'Love hath its reasons which reason knoweth not.' Again her attention wandered from the page; her thoughts were busy with the possibilities of her destiny. With bitterness she realised that, for her, Love must be either a renunciation of ambition, a life passed with some simple countryman, or else a career, a profession, an abnegation of quiet days. Which should she strive for? 'What does it avail a man though he gain the whole world and lose his own soul?' The words came back to her; but no, she was not made for peaceful days, she would weary of them inevitably.

She heard a knock on the house door and, shaking off her unusual depression, she hurried [45] downstairs. Monsieur Gabriel stood in the corridor explaining in his scholarly foreign German to the servant-maid, that it was absolutely necessary for him to see Fräulein von Grävenitz, even if madame her mother could not receive him, as he had a matter of importance to communicate. He smiled when he saw Wilhelmine—that good smile of his, which was at once so kind, so bright, and yet so unutterably sad.

'Ah! dear child!' he said, in French, 'I bring you good news. I have procured the money.'

Wilhelmine went quickly up to him, and taking his hand in both of hers, she drew him into the prim little dwelling-room where Frau von Grävenitz received her rare guests. 'How can I ever thank you?' she said as she closed the door.

'By thinking of me when you are far away,' he answered, 'and sometimes by sending me a letter to lighten my gloom.'

'Yes!' she said eagerly; 'but tell me how you procured this great sum?'

'I had a few old trinkets,' he answered, 'which I had carried with me from France. They were hidden in my travelling chest, and I had not even looked at them these many years. They reminded me of another life, a life which has nothing to do with the old schoolmaster of Güstrow,' he added with a sigh. He laid a packet on the table, cut the string with his knife, and began to undo four long rolls within, disclosing the bright edges of twenty-five golden gulden in each roll. 'Twenty-five, fifty, seventy-five, a hundred,' he counted out.

Wilhelmine looked curiously at the coins; she had seldom seen gold pieces before, and never in a large quantity. She laid her hand on one of the rouleaux. 'Gold is power, they say,' she murmured.

'The getting of gold is pain,' the old man answered, and he took her hand in his, drawing hers away from the golden heap.

At that moment the door opened silently, and Frau von Grävenitz stood on the threshold. She looked from one to the other, she saw the money on the table, and Wilhelmine's sparkling eyes and flushed cheeks. Monsieur Gabriel's face she could not see, for it was turned away from her towards Wilhelmine; but she could see that he held her hand in his, and all her suspicions re-awoke.

'What is this?' she said: 'Monsieur Gabriel, why are you bringing money to my daughter?' Both [46]
Wilhelmine and her friend started. 'For her journey to Stuttgart, madame,' he answered. 'Her journey?' said the old woman, 'what journey? What do you mean?'

'Ah! Mademoiselle Wilhelmine has perhaps not had time to communicate her plans to you, madame,' he replied courteously. 'She told me of her brother's letter, and as I thought that madame had perhaps not got so large a sum of money at her disposal at the moment, I have ventured to make a little gift to my favourite pupil, to enable her to accept her brother's proposition. Believe me, madame, I esteem it an honour to be of service to one whose wonderful gift of music has made my poor life so much happier than it could have been otherwise.'

'Wilhelmine, what is the meaning of this?' cried Frau von Grävenitz in her sharpest tones. 'You have received a letter from my son, of which you have not informed me! You plan things with a stranger, and I am told nothing! You receive money from a man—what for, I should like to know? I dare not say what terrible thoughts all this awakens in me. Give me your brother's letter immediately!' Her voice had risen higher and higher, till she almost screamed the last words.

'I cannot give you the letter, mother,' Wilhelmine returned quietly, 'I have lost it.'

'Monsieur Gabriel,' said Frau von Grävenitz, 'perhaps you have got it? I command you to hand it over to me.'

'Madame, I am astounded! Indeed, I have not got the letter, though Mademoiselle Wilhelmine showed it to me on Saturday morning.'

'Yes! Saturday morning!' Frau von Grävenitz retorted with a sneer. 'Of a truth, you and my daughter have reason to remember that day. You are a corrupter of youth, and an evil man, Mr. Schoolmaster, and a purloiner of letters as well.'

Monsieur Gabriel looked from the irate lady to her daughter, in consternation and bewilderment. 'I fear, madame, that I do not understand you,' he said gently; 'you labour under a misapprehension. I have never had the letter in my possession. As for your other accusation, I think you are led away by your anger. Indeed, I do not know the meaning of your words, madame.' His calmness only served to madden Frau von Grävenitz further. She turned away from [47]
him, and seizing Wilhelmine roughly by the shoulder, she hissed in her ear: 'Give me the letter, you wanton!' Wilhelmine started violently, and Monsieur Gabriel made a step forward, as though to defend her; his face flushed deeply, and he said in a steady voice: 'Madame de Grävenitz, such an accusation, even from a mother's lips, is a thing to which no woman has the right to submit.' But Frau von Grävenitz was beyond hearing; her features were distorted by rage, and her mouth twitched convulsively. 'How dare you address me?' she screamed; 'you are my daughter's seducer—go—leave my house, and take the wages of my daughter's sin with you!' She came up to the table, and with a sweep of her arm scattered the gold to right and left.

'Mother!' cried Wilhelmine, 'you are mad!'

'Madame,' said Monsieur Gabriel, 'I can but obey your command to depart,' and with a profoundly respectful bow to Wilhelmine, he quitted the apartment with quiet dignity.

Frau von Grävenitz continued her fierce monologue for some time, without interruption. Wilhelmine stood watching her, till an involuntary breathless pause in her mother's torrent of words gave her the opportunity of speech. 'You have always been unjust to me, mother,' she said, in a hard, cold voice; 'and to-day you have insulted me, in the presence of one you called a stranger. Yes; Friedrich wrote, proposing that I should go and seek a more prosperous life in Wirtemberg. Yes; I told Monsieur Gabriel. Yes; he said he would give me the money for my journey. I warn you that I shall go, and it will be of no avail if you attempt to hinder me.'

'You will not go,' said Frau von Grävenitz harshly. 'The money you have earned by your dishonour I shall give to the poor.'

'It is not yours to give,' answered Wilhelmine coldly.

'We shall see,' replied her mother grimly, and commenced an undignified scramble beneath the table, as she gathered up the scattered gold pieces. When she had found all, and carefully counted it out, she placed it in an oaken cupboard, double locked the door thereof, and placed the key in her pocket, Wilhelmine watching her the while.

[48] The evening meal was eaten in utter silence. Frau von Grävenitz superintended the washing up of the plates, knives, and forks; then going to the house door she fastened it securely, taking the key with her. While the old woman was occupied at the house door, Wilhelmine slipped up the stairs, with the noiseless tread of a cat, and abstracted the key from her mother's bedroom door, then passing to her attic she undressed, and, wrapping her bedgown round her, lay down on her bed. The stolen key she tied firmly in a knot of her hair, close to her head, well hidden by her thick curls. Having accomplished this, she feigned sleep. As she expected, her mother soon discovered the absence of the key, and after a fruitless search in her own room she stormed into Wilhelmine's attic, and accused her of having removed it. The girl looked at her from sleepy eyes, and denied all knowledge of the missing article. Frau von Grävenitz searched the room, and then bidding her daughter rise, she felt beneath her mattress and pillow. Then she ran her hand over her daughter's body, but she never thought of examining the waves of hair, under which the key was safely hidden. At length, she was satisfied that it was not in her daughter's keeping, and she retired to bed grumbling.

Wilhelmine listened attentively for some half-hour, then gently pushed aside the covering and noiselessly unlatched the door. She crept towards her mother's door and listened. For some time she heard nothing, but at length her patience was rewarded by the sound of a long, even breath, and she knew her mother was asleep. Wilhelmine returned to her apartment. Slowly and silently she resumed her clothes. Fortunately there was a moon, and the room was flooded with pale light. She did not put on boots, skirt, or cloak, but deposited these in a heap on the corridor floor. Then she approached her mother's door, and listened once more; the regular breaths were quite audible now. Softly she lifted the latch, and passed into the room. The moon was hidden for a moment, and the room was in utter darkness. She crouched, and carefully drew the door to behind her; it creaked, and Frau von Grävenitz moved in her sleep. Wilhelmine crouched lower, and taking a kerchief from her breast pushed it beneath the door, to steady it. She waited [49] motionless till her mother's breathing told her that she was really asleep, and then, with noiseless tread, she approached the sleeper. The clouds shifted and the moon shone in, showing Frau von Grävenitz's face livid and deathlike in the luminous moonshine. The girl shuddered; it was like robbing a corpse, she thought. But her hesitation was momentary; she pushed her flexible hand beneath her mother's pillow, and her fingers closed on the cold iron of a key. She drew it out, but she felt rather than saw that it was not the one wanted. She was stretching out her hand to seek for the other key, when the sleeper stirred uneasily, murmuring some incomprehensible word, and Wilhelmine cowered down once more. The old woman turned round in bed, so that she faced the crouching girl; her face was now in shadow, and Wilhelmine could not see whether the eyes were open or shut. She waited for what seemed hours in that hunched-up position. After some time, the even breathing recommenced, and Wilhelmine ventured to kneel up beside the bed, but now a fresh difficulty confronted her: to reach the other key, provided it lay beneath the pillow, she must pass her hand under that portion of the pillow upon which Frau von Grävenitz's head rested. She wriggled her hand in, and the point of her fingers touched the key; but it was too far away for her to grasp it, and her efforts only pushed it further. She withdrew her hand, and waited till the clouds floated over the moon. When the welcome darkness came, she bent over her mother, and lifting the further edge of the pillow quickly found the key. Then she crept noiselessly to the threshold, took her kerchief, and shut the door silently. Safe in the corridor, she caught up her bundle of garments and groped her way down the stairs, which creaked under her, but she heard no movement in the house, though she listened attentively at the foot of the stairs. Swiftly she gained the dwelling-room, fitted the key into the oaken press, unlocked it, and took out the rolls of gold. In another moment she stood in the snow-covered street, the money for her journey safe in her hand.

Wilhelmine von Grävenitz had taken the first step of an extraordinary career.

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CHAPTER IV

THE JOURNEY

'When the meadow glows, and the orchard snows,
And the air's with love notes teeming,
When fancies break, and the senses wake,
O, life's a dream worth dreaming.'

W. E. Henley.

A heavy, leaden sky hung over the small town of Cannstatt, and the people looked with foreboding at the lowering black clouds, and the weather-wise foretold a furious thunder-storm. For many weeks the heavens had smiled as though summer had come, though in truth the spring was but just begun, and May counted but few days. The trees of the forest were donning their leafy garments, the orchards were white and pink with apple, pear, and cherry blossom, and the young

grass stood tall and feathery in an unusually early maturity. Of course the peasants grumbled, as peasants always do; they complained of the heat and shook their heads over a belated frost, which they declared must come to chastise the forwardness of the growing things; they demanded rain from the smiling blue heavens, and contemplated gloomily the tender, green shoots of the vines. But when, in answer to their prayers for rain, the sky lowered and the sun vanished, they grumbled again and spoke of the hailstones, which would come to dash the blossoms of the fruit-trees and break the young vines. All day the thunder had menaced but had not fulfilled the threat, and when evening fell the air was still heavily oppressive. A rumbling sound caused the people to run to their lattice windows and look up at the sky, wondering if the storm had come at last; but it was only the echo of carriage-wheels rolling through the mediæval archway, which led to the fields beyond the town. The diligence drew up ponderously at the door of the Hotel Zur Post, and the driver descended equally ponderously, demanding loudly a drink of [51] good Wirtemberg wine. Meanwhile an imperious voice from the conveyance could be heard inquiring whether they had arrived at Stuttgart, and if not, where they were. No one answering this query, a hand was visible thrust out of the clumsy diligence, in an attempt to unfasten the catch which held the door firm. A bystander came forward and undid the door, and a tall woman stood on the step of the coach looking around her. As she put her foot to the ground in her further descent, a brilliant flash of forked lightning, followed immediately by a tremendous detonation of thunder, announced the storm's advent.

Rain began to fall in torrents, as though the clouds were rent asunder and poured long pent-up anger upon the world. The lady hastened to the porch of the Gasthof to seek shelter, and the driver of the coach led his tired horses under cover of a shed in the courtyard. The chief room of the inn was a cheerless apartment, long and dark, with narrow, rough wooden tables fitted round the walls. A strong, stale smell greeted the nose disagreeably. One or two peasants sat at the far end of one of the tables; they stared rudely as the lady entered, and whispered remarks about her, grinning broadly the while. She glanced haughtily at them and called to the innkeeper, who had followed her from the courtyard, desiring him to bring her food and wine. He went slowly to a painted wooden cupboard, which stood against the wall at the back of the room, and returned with a lump of coarse bread and some raw ham which he set down on the dirty table. Taking an earthenware jug from before the group of peasants, he brought it to add to the lady's unappetising meal. 'Good wine last year here,' he said. 'Then, at least, something is good, Herr Wirth, in your inn!' she answered; 'but tell me,' she continued, with a smile which almost charmed even the boorish innkeeper, 'how far is it to Stuttgart, and what is the name of this village?' 'Village? Lady, it is a township, and much older than Stuttgart! It is Cannstatt, where the Romans have left a camp, but Stuttgart is the finer because the Duke's court is there. You have travelled far?' he added, his curiosity getting the better of the unfriendly distrust with which the [52] Wirtemberger regards all strangers. 'From the far north,' she answered shortly. 'You have never been in our country before?' he asked; 'well, you have an ill-omened day for your arrival; the storm greeted you!' The lady started. 'Thank you for reminding me,' she said, 'I dislike ill omens.' The man grinned: it delighted his honest soul to have succeeded in annoying a foreigner. 'You will reach Stuttgart to-night, for it is only half a league from here. Is Stuttgart your destination?' he asked. 'Perhaps,' she answered, and turned away; the man's curiosity was, evidently, little to her taste. However, another thought seemed to come to her, for she turned again towards him, and, with a smile of infinite sweetness, began to question him on the country, the people, and the court. At first he answered shortly enough, but the lady fixed her eyes upon him. Gradually he felt (he told the tale often in later days) a sort of dream-feeling creep over him, and he replied to all her questions fully, telling her everything he knew of the country gossip: how the Duke was heartily weary of his wife, Duchess Johanna Elizabetha; how she was eternally jealous of him; of how a Frau von Geyling held the Duke enthralled; that the Erbprinz was a sickly child of nine years old, who men said could not be long for this world. He told her of the people's hatred of a Herr von Stafforth, a foreigner, who had become very mighty in Stuttgart; in fact he gossiped freely, and perhaps, in his half-hour's talk, let her discover more of the people's thoughts, and the dangerously discontented state of the country, than was known to the ministers of Wirtemberg. At length the lady rose and requested him to see if the storm had sufficiently abated for the coach to continue its journey. The man went out rubbing his eyes; he felt as if he had been half asleep.

The storm was over, and only the rain fell quietly as the coach rumbled out of Cannstatt and across the bridge over the Neckar. The lady leaned back against the wooden side of the diligence and closed her eyes. She reflected that she must be near Stuttgart, and she wondered what her destiny would be in the town which she was nearing in the darkness. Gradually the monotonous creaking and the jolting of the heavy vehicle made her drowsy, also she felt the warmth of the potent Wirtemberg wine glow through her tired limbs. The coach passed through the outskirts of [53] Stuttgart, but Wilhelmine von Grävenitz, for it was she, slept and did not see the outlying houses of that town, where Fate willed she should play so important a part.

Wilhelmine had tarried in Berlin with her sister, Frau Sittmann, and the days of her visit had lengthened to weeks ere she had resumed her journey southwards, for she had been sick unto death with smallpox. When she recovered she had almost found it in her heart to return to Güstrow and hide her ravaged beauty; but in reality the fell disease had been very merciful, and though Wilhelmine's skin was slightly pock-marked, the bloom and colour of her magnificent health and forceful youth rendered the marks inoffensive. Thus, though long delayed, she had at last continued her adventurous quest.

The coach lumbered on, and Wilhelmine woke with a start as a more than usually violent jolt

flung her against the door. She peered out into the darkness but could see nothing, for the night was absolutely starless. The road was so steep that at moments the heavy carriage threatened to run backwards down the hill, in spite of the straining of the wretched horses that struggled onwards, slipping and floundering on the dripping road. At the top of the hill the driver pulled up to breathe the poor beasts; he came round to the back of the coach and called to Wilhelmine that if she leaned out of the window she would see the lights of the town of Stuttgart beneath her in the valley. She looked out, and far down she saw lights glittering through the night. There were only a few visible, for the windows of most of the houses were probably curtained to shut out the wet night. Wilhelmine drew back into the diligence with a sense of disappointment. She had dreamed of a splendid city, and this seemed like a village.

She slept again, and it was the morning sun shining on her face which roused her. She looked out of the window once more, and this time a smiling landscape met her eye. The route ran between green fields, and on each side of the road were huge, gnarled apple and pear trees, which spring had crowned with a glory of snowy blossom. In the near distance rose rounded, fir-clad hills, here and there the sombre colour broken by the delicate verdure of young beech leaves. A delicious [54] morning air kissed Wilhelmine's cheeks and lips as she leaned out of the window, wafting to her the faint, sweet breath of the fruit blossom mixed with the smell of the wet fields and woods. 'What a glorious country!' she said aloud, and she called to the driver to stop and let her rest her aching limbs in a few minutes' walk. The man opened the door and bade her 'Grüss Gott, Fräulein,' and even the surly tone in which the words were uttered could not spoil the beauty of the friendly South German greeting. 'All the fields and the woods say "Grüss Gott" to-day, I think!' she returned. The heavy Swabian peasant stared at her. 'What ridiculous things these foreigners say!' was written so clearly in his face, that Wilhelmine laughed outright.

'Where do we change horses next?' she queried. He told her at Tübingen in an hour's time, and that they would reach her destination, Rottenburg, about twelve of the clock. When they rattled in to the old town of Tübingen the driver informed her that they made an hour's halt there. 'Unless indeed,' he added, 'you choose to travel to Rottenburg by special post-chaise, at a cost of twelve gulden.'

But Wilhelmine had few gulden to spare, and she decided to wander about the town until the ordinary diligence started for Rottenburg. She climbed the steep road to the ancient castle. The moat was filled with flowers and shrubs. It surprised her to see this peaceful garrison of the fortifications of a stronghold so soon after the invasion of Wirtemberg by the troops of Louis XIV. She questioned a peasant who was loitering near the drawbridge. He laughed at her, and endeavoured to be witty at her expense, after the agreeable manner of the Swabian, who thinks himself entitled to poke clumsy fun at any questioner. He condescended, however, to inform her that in fertile Wirtemberg flowers and all growing things find a home each spring in any and every nook and cranny, careless that their forbears of a twelvemonth have been uprooted.

'A beautiful land,' she murmured, 'peopled by boors!' She turned away from her discourteous informant and contemplated the grey walls of the castle, so strong and grim, yet dressed with the [55] gracious flowers of a lavish spring. As she stood admiring the wonderful Renaissance gateway, one side of the huge door was pushed open and a young man in student's dress emerged. His face, though sickly and emaciated, interested her by reason of its vivid intelligence and a certain mocking look of eye and lip.

'Sir,' said Wilhelmine, as the youth approached over the drawbridge, 'could I see the castle, do you think? I am a stranger and have an hour to pass in Tübingen, and I would fain wile away the time of my stay here.' He told her she was at liberty to wander through the courtyard; he need but request the doorkeeper to admit her. 'I am a student in this university,' he explained, 'for though this castle is in reality a royal residence, the students occupy one side of the quadrangle; and, in truth, his Highness Eberhard Ludwig seldom visits his fortress of Tübingen.' She thanked him for his courtesy and would have passed on alone, but the student followed her through the peaceful courtyard, proudly pointing out to her the fine workmanship of the fountain. Then he made her peep through the windows of the library, which filled one side of the building. There she saw black-robed students poring over the books. 'Melanchthon lectured there,' he said; 'Erasmus was here, and the learned Dr. Faustus of Maulbronn came and studied here, so legend says.'

He took her up the moss-grown steps at the end of the courtyard, and out on to the rampart. A view of infinite beauty lay before her: a vast expanse of green fields through which the river Neckar flows gently, a smiling valley glittering in the morning sunshine and radiant with fruit blossom. In the middle distance were fir-clad hills, while behind them rose blue and misty mountains. The student pointed southwards. 'Over there is the ruined castle of Hohenzollern. If you have good eyes you can catch the sun glinting upon one of the few remaining towers. It is the ancient home of that strong race which rules Prussia. This Southern Germany is the birthland of great races. Hohenstauffen is another mountain in this range; but you cannot see it from here, it is too far.' The student spoke dreamily, as though the changing destinies of master races lay before him in a vision. Wilhelmine leant against the stone balustrade and gazed at the beautiful [56] country. She was interested in the scholar's talk, and she waited, hoping he would continue; but as he did not speak, she asked him whether the castle of the Hohenstauffens still existed. He told her that not one stone remained upon another. 'Vanished like the proud race which was called by its name, only a memory now to the few who love the past!' he said. 'All things vanish, Fräulein,' he continued, 'the good, the great, the wrong, the glory, and the tears; the wise man must carve his name on the *lives* of those around him if he would benefit by power. The noble deed carved on

stone raised to do us honour after death is almost mockery. Personal power during our lives, riches, enjoyment, all that dominion over others gives——' He paused and laughed harshly.

Wilhelmine looked at him. 'What power do you seek, Mr. Student?' she asked curiously.

'For myself, little! I wish for a sufficiency of money to be able to pursue my studies, that is all. I am a theologian, and shall be a pastor in a few months' time, and the occupation with the uninteresting peasant souls of a country parish is little to my taste.'

Wilhelmine observed him narrowly. This man might prove useful, she reflected, if she should desire a service, and if she were in a position to pay for it. 'Tell me your name,' she said. He told her—Otto Pfahler, and in return he begged her to tell him who she was; but she evaded the question, and asked him concerning the history of Tübingen. There is no being on earth more easy to manage than an historical enthusiast who has seldom the opportunity of expatiating on the legends which he loves; you have but to turn his mind to the past, he will wander off therein, and you need not even listen, provided you have the wit to nod in an interested way at intervals. Pfahler talked on as he accompanied Wilhelmine across the courtyard, and she was able to dismiss him with a bow and a word of thanks for his historic anecdotes, without divulging her identity.

When Wilhelmine regained the diligence, she found the horses already harnessed and the driver climbing upon the box. She took her place in the clumsy vehicle and recommenced her journey. [57]

The road from Tübingen to Rottenburg winds through the valley of the Neckar for some ten miles. It is the usual South German high-road, bordered by large fruit-trees; but to Wilhelmine, coming from the bleak northern winter, it seemed as though she had been set down in Fairyland. The white and pink blossoms of the fruit-trees, the strong high grass whitened by the luxuriant growth of the cow-parsley, touched here and there with the gold of the giant kingcups, and, as though the Master's palette had been robbed of all its colours to complete this radiant spring picture, the very earth of the vineyards below the fresh green of the vine sprouts shone with the rich red brown of the Wirtemberg soil, which is one more opulent charm added to the beauty of an indescribably lovely spring country. Rottenburg lies in the centre of this valley; the Neckar flows placidly half way round the small town. The diligence rolled over a mediæval bridge which spans the river, and Wilhelmine found herself at the end of her tedious, rattling journey. She stepped out of the coach and looked about her, expecting to see her brother.

The narrow street was empty, save for several black-gowned figures moving slowly towards an enormous building, which flanked one side of a square or market-place, at the end of the street.

As she stood a moment hesitating, she heard herself addressed from the door of the inn, before which the diligence had halted. Turning she saw a most suave personage bowing and smiling, and imploring her to enter the hostelry. Wilhelmine looked with interest at the man, evidently the innkeeper, yet of so clerical an appearance that she thought he must be a particularly prosperous priest. She entered the inn, and was ordering herself some slight refreshment from her obsequious host when bells from some neighbouring church rang out. The innkeeper crossed his brow and breast with the third finger of his right hand, while with his left hand he piously hid his eyes. He recited some prayers in a mumbling undertone, then crossing himself once more, he [58] turned with an oily smile to Wilhelmine. 'The Angelus,' he said; 'evidently Madame is not of the Faith. Here in Rottenburg we are all members of the true Church. We have had the privilege of having a Jesuit college here these many years.'

Wilhelmine made some appropriate answer, and noted for the first time in her personal experience the truth of a remark of Monsieur Gabriel's, that one of the strengths of the Catholic Church is the semi-clericalising of the laymen who live in or near any religious centre. It flatters the uneducated to feel themselves akin to their spiritual dictators, and it gives them a spurious refinement. Undoubtedly, the host of the Römischer Kaiser was an excellent specimen of this class.

Wilhelmine, having partaken of her breakfast, was setting out to walk towards the Neuhaus, where her brother had directed her to appear, when she saw Friedrich Grävenitz coming down the street. He greeted his sister hastily, and explained that the diligence had arrived before the usual hour. He apologised for not having been at the inn to welcome his sister on her arrival, but it struck Wilhelmine that though her brother had gained in polish of manner since he had become a courtier, he had lost the warmth and friendliness which had characterised him in earlier days. She felt chilled and saddened, and it was in silence that she walked beside him across the fields from Rottenburg to Madame de Ruth's house. A stout peasant followed them carrying her scanty baggage. Friedrich talked volubly to his unresponsive companion, and though he expressed the hope, with much politeness, that she was not fatigued by her journey, he did not listen to her reply, but plunged into an exact account of his own position at court and of his poverty and difficulties. His sister was weary, and an overpowering sense of loneliness possessed her; she had always known her brother to be an egoist, but a certain spontaneous, easy kindness had masked his self-love when he was in Mecklemburg.

They walked over the field before the house, passed through the tree-shaded garden, up the red-tiled garden-path to the side door of the Neuhaus, and Friedrich knocked loudly with the handle of his cane on the panel. Madame de Ruth's peasant servant admitted them, and led the way [59] through the dark corridor to the panelled room, where, three months earlier, it had been decided that Wilhelmine should be summoned to Wirtemberg to help fill her brother's purse.

The sunshine streamed down on the garden without, but the room was chilly, and Wilhelmine shivered a little as she stood waiting for her unknown hostess to appear. It could not be said that Wilhelmine was a timid woman, yet hers was one of those natures which, though ready to attempt many things, shrink unaccountably at any touch of dreariness, and almost dread meeting strangers. She looked at her brother, who stood with his back turned towards the room, gazing out at the sunlit garden. She noted his broad shoulders, the graceful pose of the body, the straight, shapely legs, and the slightness of hip which distinguished him from the usual heavily-built German. There was beauty in his lines, and yet a certain strangeness of proportion in the whole figure which puzzled her for a moment; then she noticed the extreme smallness of his head, and the curious absence of development in the back of the skull, which gave him a well-bred but foolish look. He was quite amiable, and meant kindly towards his sister, yet he was incapable of helping in what was for her a difficult moment; indeed, he added to her feeling of loneliness by his loud talk and patronising air. At length the door opened and Madame de Ruth appeared. She came forward with hands outstretched and a smile of welcome on her kind, ugly face, which became most genial when she saw her guest's undoubted beauty. 'A thousand pardons for keeping you waiting, my dear! I was not dressed, lazy old woman that I am! And how fatigued you must be, dear child; such a journey!—Grävenitz, have you not offered your sister some refreshment? Good Lord! what an idea! What? You say you have been talking? Yes, yes, I warrant you have!' Her sharp eyes had taken in the situation. Madame de Ruth, though she talked, as Zollern said, 'like a book,' had the faculty of talking and observing at the same time. People think that the talkers of the world are so occupied with their own prattle that their eyes [60] remain idle; whereas some of the most practised observers, especially those of the feminine sex, have learned that it is possible to extract more information from others by appearing to impart much, and that a flow of speech masks the observation to a great extent. The garrulous lady saw the brother's pompous attitude; she had caught the tones of his unmodulated voice before she entered, and she noticed immediately the shadow on the girl's face and guessed what the new arrival felt.

Wilhelmine responded readily to Madame de Ruth. Soon the girl felt as though she had known her for years. After a few minutes' conversation the two ladies left the formal living-room, and passed up a broad wooden stair to a room on the first floor, where Wilhelmine found her few belongings already set down. It was a pretty room for those days, though we should now consider it but insufficiently furnished. Bare, brown-stained boards, a narrow wooden bedstead, a couple of carved wooden chairs, a large carved cupboard, and a table, on which stood a tiny washing-basin and ewer of beautiful porcelain, completed the appointments. The hostess rattled on cheerfully while Wilhelmine divested herself of the cloak and hood. She realised that Madame de Ruth intended to remain, curious to see the contents of the travelling-basket; but this was precisely what the guest did not desire, for she had no wish to expose the scantiness of her wardrobe to her new friend. She sat down on one of the wooden chairs opposite her hostess, and listened to the voluble talk. Both women knew exactly what the other wanted, and both were equally determined not to be beaten; also both knew that the other knew what they each wanted. It was one of those small feminine conflicts which take place every day. The older woman's tongue ran on, while her sharp eyes noted every shade and change in her guest's face. Wilhelmine answered the many questions frankly enough, but Madame de Ruth observed with satisfaction that she told only such things as all the world might hear. There were no outbursts of girlish confidences, no indiscreet questions; she was mistress of the situation, and if she showed any shyness, it was never either awkward or foolish, but seemed merely a delightful youthful [61] attribute, an added charm. Her hostess felt a deepening interest. This girl would be a more potent factor in the intrigues for which they had destined her than they had dreamed. She watched Wilhelmine as a full-grown tigress might watch the play of a tiger cub, noting the promise of each movement, gauging the strength of the young animal, and calculating the fighting powers which it would develop. At length Madame de Ruth rose, and, drawing Wilhelmine to her, she kissed her affectionately. 'You have a future before you, my dear,' she said, and her fine smile lit her face. 'You have bewitched me, and you will bewitch others of more importance. Now, dress. We dine at three o'clock, and the Duke of Zollern will be with us.'

The Duke of Zollern was seated at Madame de Ruth's right hand; Monsieur de Stafforth, Oberhofmarshall of the court of Wirtemberg, was at her left; Madame Friedrich de Grävenitz sat beside the Duke to his right; beside her was the Freiherr von Reischach, a gentleman famous for his fine courtliness and his experience in war and love; Friedrich Grävenitz sat next to him, and then came Wilhelmine seated between her brother and Monsieur de Stafforth, opposite her hostess and the Duke of Zollern. Madame de Ruth sat with her back turned towards the light; she knew the value of shadow to an ageing face, and always declared that the glare hurt her eyes, though, God knows, these were neither weak nor easily dazzled. The Duke of Zollern, too, liked to have the light behind him. 'It is fitting for the old to turn their backs to the sunshine,' he had remarked as they took their places at the table, 'for, indeed, the light of youth is behind us, shining, alas! on the paths we have already traversed. For the young—let the sunshine lie before them, making their youth still more fair—if possible.' And he had bowed in his inimitable way to Wilhelmine, who delighted in this courteous speech, though she was perfectly aware that he and Madame de Ruth had placed her in the full light in order to study her the better. Of a truth, Wilhelmine looked wonderfully lovely that afternoon. Her luxuriant hair, innocent of powder, was piled high on her head, and turned back from off her white brow; the glow of perfect health was [62] in her cheeks, and her strange magnetic eyes were softened by shyness. She had fashioned herself a bodice out of the feast-day kerchiefs which Mecklemburg peasant women wear; cutting off the flowered borders, she had joined them together and made a deep hem which she had

sewn on her dark blue linen skirt. The corsage was cut down at the back, and the front she had cut out in a deep V shape, showing her creamy neck and the gentle rise of her breast. A poor garment indeed, but the kerchiefs had been carefully collected, and were all of the same delicate pink colour, and she had further softened the lines round the contour of her neck by a folded white kerchief. At her bosom she had fastened a spray of apple-blossom, and the petals leaning against her white skin were not more delicate, more divinely young than her breast. She looked like a blossom herself as the sunlight touched her, and the men round the dinner-table gazed so eagerly at her, that she knew she must be more beautiful than the ladies of the court, albeit their gowns were of silk.

No dinner could be dull if Madame de Ruth was there; and Zollern, with his courtly grace and witty talk, was a host in himself. Reischach was silent, but his openly admiring looks at Wilhelmine pleased her more than the phrases of a talkative gallant. As for Grävenitz, he talked loudly, according to his wont, paying but little heed to the random answers of Monsieur de Stafforth, who like Reischach was occupied with Wilhelmine. But, unlike Reischach, Stafforth's admiration, though not so open, had that touch of coarseness which is so often the mark of the bourgeois' approval. Madame de Grävenitz, it was evident, entirely disapproved of Wilhelmine. She was a pretty, colourless devotee, and she felt her sister-in-law's beauty and obvious fascination to be almost indecorous. Madame de Ruth chattered as usual, though at moments she paused to whisper a comment to Zollern, who answered in a low voice by some subtle irony which caused the lady much amusement. The dinner was very long, and it was with relief that Wilhelmine saw her hostess rise from the table. 'Coffee in the garden, mes amis! and then Mademoiselle de Grävenitz shall sing to us. There is a clavichord in the panelled room, and we [63] will leave the garden door open in order to hear the music. Come, Marie! what a gloomy face! Why must the pious be gloomy? Lord, girl! forget your sins for once, or you will exhaust the stock, and then there will be nothing to repent of. Think, my dear,' she said, turning to Wilhelmine, 'your sister-in-law is a saint. O Monseigneur, you shake a finger at me! Brook? Who talks of brooks? Ah, well, I talk too much!—well, well!—An account on the Last Day of my words? I pity the angel who adds up the sum! But come, coffee! and a moment's silence, my friends!'

They all laughed. Madame de Ruth's vivacity was infectious; and even Marie Grävenitz was smiling, as the party passed through the living-room and into the garden. They went down the red-tiled path, and, turning to the left, came to a stone bench before which, on a square table, the servant had placed the coffee and seven tiny porcelain cups. Madame de Ruth busied herself preparing the coffee for her guests, and Zollern watched her, seated near on the bench. Marie Grävenitz walked a short distance away, her demure figure harmonising well with the peace of the formal garden; Grävenitz leaned against the back of the bench and looked with complacency at the good brown coffee, which his hostess was pouring into the little cups. Coffee was expensive, and being regarded as a great luxury, was only dispensed in very small quantities. Reischach and Monsieur de Stafforth were dallying with Wilhelmine, who stood listening to their compliments with a smile on her lips.

'Mademoiselle,' Stafforth was saying, 'the court will rejoice in your presence. We crave for youth —more still, we crave for beauty! His Highness will welcome you, though, I trow, Madame the Duchess may not prove so gracious! But when will you come to Stuttgart? It will be my privilege to herald your arrival.'

'Monsieur, I am guided by my brother in these matters. He is my protector, as is fitting,' she said, a trifle haughtily. Monsieur de Stafforth's obsequious, yet patronising tone displeased her, and somehow she desired him to know that her brother stood at her side in the world.

'Mademoiselle is right,' said Reischach shortly, 'these things will be arranged. The coffee waits [64] you, Monsieur; it would be a pity should your portion get cold.' He spoke lightly, but Wilhelmine recognised the man of breeding in the covert hint to Stafforth. It pleased her, and she smiled at him. Stafforth, for his part, apparently paid no heed to the rebuff, though Wilhelmine surprised an ugly glance and a faint deepening of the hue of his coarsely chiselled, handsome face. At this moment Madame de Ruth called them, and they gathered round the table. They drank their coffee, listening to a highly coloured story of the wars which Friedrich Grävenitz was recounting. His Grace the Duke of Marlborough, the hero thereof, a sorry figure, as the reluctant victim of a lady of Ingolstadt, whose advances he refused, trembling lest his haughty Sarah should hear of it and give him a sound rating on his return to England. The anecdote was broad, to say the least, and sure it did not lose in the telling. 'A great captain, but sorely afraid of his lady!' finished Grävenitz with a loud laugh.

'It is the privilege of the truly brave to tremble before beauty and gentleness,' said Zollern sharply.

'The prerogative of fools to set them at naught,' he added in a low voice to Madame de Ruth. There was a pause. Grävenitz himself, who should have been uncomfortable, seemed to notice nothing, but the rest of the company felt the moment to be one of difficulty. Stafforth offered his arm to Wilhelmine and proposed a short stroll through the garden to the orchard; and the girl, glad to escape the spectacle of her brother's swaggering tactlessness, accepted, and they walked away together beneath the tender green of the beech-trees.

The orchard was an enchanted spot, such a marvel of blossom overhead, like rose-tinted foam, while under foot the grass was full of spring flowers, the cow-parsley sending up a delicious faint fragrance, mingled with the smell of the earth wet from the night's rain. Stafforth found a stack of orchard poles, and dragging from beneath the heap the dryest of them, he arranged a resting-

place for Wilhelmine. They sat down, and he recounted stories of court life in general and of Stuttgart in particular. He portrayed the Duchess Johanna Elizabetha, a Princess of Baden-Durlach by birth. He told of her good qualities, but also of her dullness; of her eternal jealousy of her husband, Eberhard Ludwig, Duke of Wirtemberg; of how the Duke sought entertainment with other ladies, but that the reign of each was short-lived, for the Duke really had a faithful soul and returned to his excellent, wearisome spouse. How a Madame de Geyling was queen of the present hour; that she was a foolish woman with a bad temper, who offended the courtiers and rated the Duke; of how the court expected an imminent change of affection, but that no one could imagine who the new favourite would be. He told her that the Duke was a brilliant soldier, the friend and companion-in-arms of his Grace of Marlborough, a polished courtier too, the finest dancer of his day, and a very Phæton with horses. Withal a man of learning and refinement, a passionate lover of music, a dreamer and a child of Nature, who loved to wander alone in the beautiful Wirtemberg forests, and often in the summer would stay in the woods all night, sleeping upon the soft, brown carpet of last year's leaves. Stafforth spoke of the perpetual intrigues of the Romish priests to convert the Duke and gain the country back to the Catholic Church; he told her stories of the French invasion of Wirtemberg, and how it was feared that the French would return to the attack, and that therefore the Duke was occupied in Stuttgart gathering a new army, though he masked those preparations by a series of brilliant court gaieties. 'There is to be a magnificent feast in a few weeks' time at Stuttgart, theatricals, a banquet, a stag-hunt, and a grand ball. Will you honour my wife and me by accepting our hospitality for that time? Your brother has rooms in the quarters set apart for the Kammerjunkers; Madame de Ruth also has but a small apartment in the castle, not large enough to entertain a guest. But I have a house with ample accommodation, and it would give me much pleasure if you would come. Madame de Stafforth too,' he added as an afterthought. [65]

Wilhelmine accepted. She felt that this was no sudden proposition but an organised scheme, probably of Madame de Ruth's.

'You must play a part in the theatricals, Mademoiselle. The rehearsals begin next week; will you come then?' [66]

'Let us go and consult Madame de Ruth,' she replied, rising.

They rejoined the group round the table, and Stafforth made his proposal as though it were a new idea which had come to him. Madame de Ruth feigned surprise; Grävenitz played the part of the grateful brother; Zollern acclaimed the notion as excellent. Wherefore all this comedy? thought Wilhelmine, for she realised that her programme had been fixed by these schemers, and that this was merely the first act. She looked round: ah, yes, Reischach! he was the audience for this play-acting. He was intended to remain ignorant. Wilhelmine smiled; she was in the presence of three practised intriguers—Zollern, Madame de Ruth, Stafforth. She herself was to be a tool, as her brother already was. Well, let their scheme carry her as far as it could; afterwards, she promised herself to go onward aided by her own ingenuity alone, once she knew her ground. At present she was not sure at whom the plot was aimed, though she had a suspicion that it was the Duke himself whom she was designed to capture, in order to further some unknown plans of her three protectors. She did not count her brother; she recognised him as a mere pawn in the game.

'Mademoiselle to take part in the theatricals?' Madame de Ruth was saying; 'delightful! but which part? You must sing, my dear. Your brother says your voice is wonderful! Let us hear you now. Come, mes amis! music!' Reischach led the newcomer to the clavichord in the panelled room, and the company gathered near the garden-door to listen.

Wilhelmine ran her fingers over the keyboard. The instrument was old, and though the notes rang true, they were faint and jingly. A lesser artist might have endeavoured to amplify the chords, but Wilhelmine played her accompaniment in thin arpeggios, making the clavichord sound like a stringed instrument, and achieving a charming effect. She sang a gay little sixteenth-century song, such a one as perchance Chastelard may have sung to Marie of Scots in their happy days in France—a light melody, with a sudden change to the minor in the refrain, like a sigh following laughter. Wilhelmine's hearers, who had expected a beautiful, untrained voice from this provincial lady, listened in unfeigned surprise, and when the song was ended they crowded round her with expressions of delight. [67]

'We have found a pearl!' declared Madame de Ruth. 'Stafforth, what is this play which they are going to act at Stuttgart? Who sings in it? Madame de Geyling?—of course! Well, and after?—no one? Well, then, Mademoiselle shall sing! Let it come as a surprise!'

Reischach approached.

'Monsieur de Reischach, I count you in our plot! We want our new friend to make a sensation in Stuttgart. We can rely on your discretion? Let her come as a surprise, I beg you! Remember that the lute of Orpheus itself could not have charmed the beasts had they been warned to expect too much.'

Reischach bowed. 'No word from me, Madame, to warn—the beasts!'

Madame de Ruth laughed. 'Do not apply my allegory literally,' she said.

The company broke up; the Duke of Zollern's coach was at the door. Also Monsieur de Stafforth took his leave, for he intended to ride to Stuttgart that evening.

As Zollern bade farewell to his hostess, she whispered, 'She will do admirably! she will go far.'

'Too far, perhaps, Madame,' he answered; 'too far for all our calculations, and for many people's comfort!'

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[68]

CHAPTER V

THE PLAY-ACTING

At eight of the clock on the evening of 15th May 1706, the main street of Stuttgart was crowded with a stream of coaches and foot-passengers. The cries of the running footmen: 'Make way there for his Highness the Duke of Zollern!' 'Room for the high and nobly born Freifrau von Geyling!' 'Let pass the coach of the gracious Countess Gemmingen!' 'Ho, there! for the Witgenstein's coach!' mixed with the comments of the rabble of sightseers, and the retorts of the substantial burghers who were piloting their wives and daughters through the mob. All these wayfarers were bound for the great dancing-hall in the Lusthaus, whither they were bidden by Serenissimus, the magnificent Duke Eberhard Ludwig of Wirtemberg, who had commanded a brilliant ball as commencement of a series of festivities. There was to be a grand hunt in the Red Wood, and finally court theatricals in his Highness's own playhouse. The beautiful castle gardens were illuminated with a myriad coloured lamps in the trees; the rose-garden had become an enchanted bower, with little lanterns twinkling in each rose-bush, and the fountain in the centre was so lit up with varied lights that the spray assumed a thousand hues. Hidden bands of musicians played in the garden, and, in fact, it was said that Stuttgart would never have witnessed such a brilliant festival. The Duke had travelled in many lands—to France, where the court had been so gay and fine before its King Louis xiv. became a death-fearing, trembling bigot, dragging out the last years of a dissipated life in terrified prayers. Poor Roi Soleil, become the creature of his mistress, Madame la Marquise de Maintenon! Still, though Eberhard Ludwig had not been in time to witness this first splendour, he had been able to learn in France of how fine feasts should be [69] ordered. He had been in England too, though he could not have seen much there in the dull days of William of Nassau, or of good, ponderous Queen Anne; yet all travel teaches, and evidently the Duke had learnt its pleasant lesson well.

Wilhelmine sat in Monsieur de Stafforth's fine coach with Madame de Stafforth—a gentle, silent lady, whom Stafforth had chosen for her noble birth and yielding ways. She was perfectly unimportant; Stafforth never considered her, and the only person who was known to notice her was her Highness Johanna Elizabetha, who was, indeed, something akin to her in nature. Madame de Stafforth sat meekly on the back seat of her husband's splendid coach, leaving the place of honour on the front seat to her husband and his guest, rewarded sufficiently for her diffidence by a smile which her handsome lord threw her, as he lay back on the yellow satin cushions of his over-decorated coach.

It was but a step to the castle gate, and as Oberhofmarshall Stafforth might have walked through the Duke's private garden and gained a side entrance to the castle, and thence traversed the short distance to the Lusthaus, but he chose rather to drive through the crowd in order to arrive with ostentatious flourish.

The coach drew up at the entrance, and many curious eyes were fixed upon the Oberhofmarshall as he led his guest through the throng to the door of the disrobing room. Madame de Stafforth followed, and, being unable to push her way so quickly past the people, it was a moment or two before she rejoined Wilhelmine, who was removing her wrap in a leisurely way while the other ladies there eyed her rudely. It was very like the advent of a strange bird into a cage of canaries; the indigenous birds were all prepared to peck at the intruder. How willingly would they have torn out the strange bird's feathers! Wilhelmine appeared unconscious of this unfriendly scrutiny, though, in reality, she was disagreeably aware of it. Madame de Stafforth had torn the hem of her skirt walking through the crowded antehall, and she begged the attendant to sew it for her. Wilhelmine was obliged to wait, and nearly all the company had streamed into the dancing-hall [70] before the two ladies were ready. Fate played Wilhelmine a nasty trick in this—a throw-back in fact; for when they reached the hall the effect of their entrance was hidden by the crowd, and his Highness Eberhard Ludwig had already left the daïs before which the courtiers passed and bowed. Only her Highness Johanna Elizabetha remained to receive the salutes of the late arrivals.

Stafforth had hurried away; the Duchess was so unimportant, poor soul! and he could make his bow to her later in the evening. Besides, he had his duties to attend to: he must glance at the long supper-tables in the apartment adjoining the dancing-hall, he must see that all the arrangements were perfect. So Madame de Stafforth presented Fräulein Wilhelmine von Grävenitz to her Highness Johanna Elizabetha, Duchess of Wirtemberg. The dull, amiable woman gave Wilhelmine her hand to kiss and turned away, indifferent, unconcerned. So little do we know when we first approach the enemies of our lives! With those we are to love it is often the same. We touch the hand which is fated to give life's gift of joy to us, and we pass on unconscious that Destiny has spoken. Sometimes we would barter a year of our life to recall that first touch.

Wilhelmine stood at the foot of the daïs before the Duchess, who was exchanging moth-dull confidences with Madame de Stafforth. The crowd moved before the girl's eyes, and she felt bewildered, dizzy, in a dream, for she was unaccustomed to crowds. At length she saw Stafforth coming towards her. He looked very fine in his court dress: the long, blue silk overcoat richly

embroidered in gold, the embroidered waistcoat of white satin, white silk hose, and blue satin shoes with high red heels and enormous diamond buckles. He carried the Oberhofmarshall's staff of office in his left hand, and on his breast shone the insignia of several high orders. His curled wig was much powdered, and his healthy, coarse face seemed to gain in refinement thereby, softened in outline by the white hair. Very fine was the bow he made as he said: 'Mademoiselle, may I entreat the honour of your hand for the pavane? Serenissimus dances in the same set. You know the pavane?' he added anxiously. 'His Highness is quicker to detect a fault in dancing than to pardon it.' [71]

Wilhelmine had danced the pavane with M. Gabriel in the schoolhouse at Güstrow, and he had told her that her dancing was perfect enough for the court of France itself; so she accepted Monsieur de Stafforth's hand without hesitation.

He led her to the middle of the dancing-hall, and stood beside her, waiting for the Duke to give the sign to the musicians to commence. It was scarcely correct for Wilhelmine to dance in the Duke's pavane before she had been presented to his Highness, but Stafforth told her that the Duke desired all presentations to be made in the pause after the figure dance, which was to take place later in the evening. Wilhelmine reflected that she would be at liberty to observe Eberhard Ludwig at her leisure during the dance. She looked round, but the Duke was not yet visible. Stafforth pointed to an alcove, telling her that his Highness was there talking to Madame de Geyling. At length the curtains of the recess were pushed aside and a tall figure appeared. Eberhard Ludwig, Duke of Wirtemberg, leading his favourite, Madame de Geyling, by the hand. A princely figure indeed, thought Wilhelmine, as she bent low in the elaborate courtesy with which the dancers greeted their Duke. He was tall and slight, dressed in ivory-coloured satin; his breast glittered with magnificent orders, the broad orange ribbon of the newly instituted Prussian order of the Black Eagle being the only variation in the uniform whiteness of his attire. He looked the very figure of a prince of romance, and the gentlemen who bowed before him seemed to be popinjays in their over-gorgeous clothes.

He stood for a moment, his blue eyes flashing round the circle of dancers, then he raised his hand in sign to the musicians to commence, and turning to Madame de Geyling bowed profoundly. The music rang out in the stately measure of the pavane, and the dance began: the ladies gliding, bowing, bending, their fans raised above their heads, then pressed to their bosoms as they bowed again; the cavaliers no whit behind them in elegance and grace. The court of Versailles itself had not danced better, for to dance badly meant disgrace with the Duke of Wirtemberg. [72]

The pavane ended, and Monsieur de Stafforth led Wilhelmine to a seat near the daïs, where she found Madame de Ruth resplendent in a green court dress. The two ladies settled down to await the beginning of the figure dance, in which the Duke himself was to take part. Madame de Ruth, voluble as usual, questioned Wilhelmine closely upon the events of the evening, and her face fell when she heard that the girl had not been presented to his Highness—nay, more, had danced near him without his deigning to notice her. 'Well, my dear, never mind,' said Madame de Ruth, 'the most victorious armies may suffer defeat at first.' As will be seen by this speech, the object of Wilhelmine's campaign was no longer a mystery, and the intriguers now spoke openly before their intended tool. She knew that her goal was Eberhard Ludwig himself, and the future seemed good to her since she had seen Eberhard Ludwig. Also it all spelt 'fine clothes, fine living, fine linen, gaiety, and perhaps power,' and as she had once said to her friend Anna Reinhard at Güstrow, without these she could not imagine happiness. 'Mon enfant, it is serious though,' Madame de Ruth was saying, 'the Duke never looked at you? you are sure? Ah! he was staring at that odious Geyling, I dare swear! Lord God! how I hate that woman! She once asked me if I had any children, and when I said "no," she inquired if I had any grandchildren!'

Wilhelmine laughed. 'She might have grandchildren herself, I think,' she said.

'Yes, my child, if you scraped the paint you might find the grandmother beneath. Indeed, the Geyling is nearly as old as I am,' laughed Madame de Ruth, delighted at Wilhelmine's judgment of the woman whom she hated. 'But see,' she continued, 'here comes the figure dance.' As she spoke the doors at the end of the dancing-hall opened, and the musicians in the gallery began to play a lilting strain. Quite slowly through the gilded doors came a tiny figure dressed in wreaths of leaves and flowers, a golden bow in his hand, and at his side a miniature quiver filled with paper arrows. 'The Geyling's nephew,' said Madame de Ruth, 'and the only good thing about her! A charmingly naughty child, who they hope, however, will play his Cupid's rôle to-night, though he is as likely as not to do exactly the reverse, for he is by nature a god of mischief!' [73]

The child walked solemnly to the centre of the hall, and there began to dance a rapid skipping measure, waving his bow over his head the while.

The onlookers burst into applause. Then the music softened to an accompaniment, and boys' voices from the musicians' loft sang in parts.

'Bad verses, my dear,' grunted Madame de Ruth, 'yet a pretty air. They say the Geyling wrote the rhymes—that explains it!' But her grumble was lost to Wilhelmine, who was observing the entry of four rather lightly clad nymphs, who came forward in a graceful swaying line, encircling the child, who stood stock-still in the midst wondering, poor mite, if this long game would soon be ended. At length the four nymphs sank to their knees before the boy, holding out their arms to him, while the voices in the gallery warbled with ever-increasing rapture.

The child ran from one kneeling figure to the other: first to Mademoiselle de Gemmingen, then to

Mademoiselle de Varnbüller, to Mademoiselle de Reischach, and before his aunt, Madame de Geyling, the little fellow stopped and took his aim, with his bow and paper arrows. Everything was going admirably, never had this Cupid behaved so exactly as arranged. Already the Geyling was feigning to fall backwards in affected alarm, when Cupid whipped round saying, in a high childish treble, 'Non, ma tante, je ne te choisis pas, tu es trop méchante!'

An audible titter went round the audience, for the Geyling was universally disliked. Cupid now thoroughly entering into the mischief of the game, ran round the group of nymphs calling out, 'Ni toi! Ni toi! Je cherche une vraie reine!' He paused irresolute for a moment, then, catching sight of Wilhelmine's smiling face, he made a dash for her, exclaiming loudly, 'Je te choisis, jolie dame!' and he shot his paper arrow straight at her breast. There was a pause of consternation among the dancers; this upset all the plans; and how could an untrained stranger execute the elaborate [74] step of the dance especially invented by his Highness's own dancing-master for this occasion?

There was commotion in the audience: men pressed forward to observe the scene, women fluttered their fans and whispered together, the three nymphs tittered weakly, while Madame de Geyling stood in the middle of the hall with heaving bosom and angry face. Madame de Ruth was laughing, and even the Duchess had risen from her chair and was leaning on Madame de Stafforth's shoulder, smiling and nodding. Wilhelmine had caught Cupid up in her arms, and he was laughing and shouting and sticking the little paper arrows in her hair. The musicians ceased playing, waiting for the chosen nymph to begin the 'Dance of Joy,' which preceded the entrance of the Duke in the character of Prince Charming.

Wilhelmine whispered to Madame de Ruth: 'What shall I do? I don't know the dance—the Duke would never forgive—advise me quickly!'

'Don't dance, but make the Duke notice you,' whispered the old woman.

The girl rose, Cupid still in her arms, and began to walk slowly across the hall towards the door whence the Duke must appear. The musicians, mistaking her for some personage of the masque, struck up the 'Dance of Joy.' Now Wilhelmine possessed immense dramatic perceptions, also she knew she could dance, so without hesitation she began to execute a long sliding measure in perfect harmony with the music, though it was, of course, an impromptu of her own. She danced half-way round the hall, holding Cupid high in the air in her strong arms. Meanwhile the Duke, all unknowing, appeared in the doorway in his appointed place. Wilhelmine glided up to him, and sinking on one knee with Cupid held up to his Highness, she said, 'Cupid has made a mistake, Monseigneur. He was always a blind god. Pardon, Monseigneur, and permit Sa Majesté l'Amour to choose again!' With that she set the child down and ran through the door past the Duke, who, astounded, remained standing holding Cupid by the hand. He heard the applause which had broken forth in the hall, and he saw the Geyling's furious face, and, realising that something [75] unexpected had occurred, he came forward quickly.

'A mistake, Madame,' he said shortly as he reached the Geyling. 'Let us endeavour to obliterate it by your grace!' And he commanded the musicians to play the new dance, but he danced unevenly, constantly glancing in the direction of the door where Wilhelmine had disappeared. Madame de Ruth watched for a moment, and then, with a nod to Stafforth who stood beside the daïs in evident perplexity, she turned and went to seek Wilhelmine.

The next day Stuttgart talked much of the handsome stranger whom Cupid had chosen to dance with the Duke, and conjecture was rife as to who she could be. Then it leaked out that she was to sing in the theatricals that night, and the curious, which means each person in or near a court, were on tiptoe with expectation.

Many looked for her at the stag-hunt in the Red Wood that day, and Madame de Ruth, who had the reputation of knowing everything, was fairly besieged by questioners. She told them so little, though in so many words, that they were all the more anxious to be informed further. But what part was the unknown to take in the theatricals? they asked among themselves. She had not been seen at the rehearsals—strange—but Madame de Ruth assured them that the mysterious one was indeed to sing that night.

The chosen piece was La Fontaine's *Coupe Enchantée*, a pretty thing, and even decorous enough for the hearing of Johanna Elizabetha; new too in Stuttgart, though Paris had already forgotten it.

You may imagine that the invited guests were in their places at the theatre in good time. Behind the scenes there was much bustle and confusion. His Highness Eberhard Ludwig, to say the least of it, was perturbed; he ran from dressing-room to dressing-room, knocking and inquiring if the players were there. When he came to the dressing-room set apart for Madame de Geyling the door was opened suddenly, almost knocking his Highness on the nose, and an angry face appeared through the door's aperture. One side of this face was painted for the stage, while the [76] other was only adorned with the pigments with which the Geyling was accustomed to hide her ageing features. The Duke smiled: I regret to say he actually laughed, and this laugh provoked a torrent of angry words from the lady. His Highness retired discomfited, and there were whispers behind the scenes of how this must be one of the closing dramas of this lady's reign.

The curtain parted and the comedy began. At first the audience paid but scant attention to the play, but soon a severe glance from the Duchess silenced the whispering crowd.

Madame de Ruth's laughter led the chorus of approval at each subtle speech, and they said 'Ah

oui! que c'est fin!' when she said it, for they did not trust their own judgment. The Duke of Zollern leaned his chin on the back of his hands, which he had crossed over the porcelain handle of his stick. He was not amused; he thought it dull, which it was. The Duchess paid no attention to the play; she was watching, in her ponderous way, the marked respect and affection which Eberhard Ludwig succeeded in showing Madame de Geyling even through his acting, and she suffered, this poor, dull woman. Madame de Stafforth sat near her, saying nothing as usual. Friedrich Grävenitz stood leaning against the pillar by the entrance to the parterre, looking handsome and sombre. *La Coupe Enchantée* went on its gay, subtle way, and was followed by an allegorical dance—a medley of gods and goddesses, of conventional shepherds and shepherdesses; a graceful enough conceit withal, but involved and not very amusing. At the end there came the only scene which appeared to interest her Highness Johanna Elizabetha: the little Erbprinz, her son, came on the stage dressed as Mars the God of War, and was greeted with homage from the other gods. Poor Johanna Elizabetha applauded and kissed her hands to him, while she recounted to Madame de Stafforth a hundred details of the child's health.

The curtain fell, and the audience prepared to depart. Disappointment was rife, for the stranger had failed to appear, and it seemed that the comedy was finished. The Duchess, who had been [77] seated in the foremost row of chairs, was already moving away followed by her suite, when the musicians recommenced to play, and it was whispered through the assemblage that the Envoi had yet to be performed. Very slowly the curtain was drawn aside and a darkened stage disclosed. For a moment the music ceased, then took up a haunting melody as a tall, white figure approached down the almost unlit stage. It was a young woman in flowing, classic draperies—a goddess she looked; and after the mincing shepherdesses and their artificial, conventional mannerisms, this woman came as a breath from Nature's grandeur, young, forceful, untrammelled. She came right down to the half-lit footlights, and stood motionless during a bar or two of the music. And then she sang, and the audience, tittering curiously before, remained spellbound, awe-struck, as the first notes of that matchless voice smote upon their hearing. She sang of the sadness of the ending of comedies, of the regret which lingers in the remembrance of past laughter. In a couplet of passionate melancholy she asked, where are the roses of yesterday? whither vanish the songs of to-day?

Changing verse and melody to a soft *récitatif*, she begged her hearers to give good favour to the evening's festivities. She reminded them that the merry company would soon disperse for many months; she wished them peace and happiness, and she prayed that another spring would find the company reunited once again. 'Mars, God of War, hold thy hand; touch not this fair country!'

In her singing she had struck that note of regret which never leaves an audience unmoved; she appealed to the sadness which lingers for ever in the heart of man, and, after the vapid brilliancies of La Fontaine's comedy, the strain had all the greater power to stir. Wilhelmine, an unseen spectator at many rehearsals of the theatricals, had calculated this to a nicety, with an artist's instinct for playing upon human nature and emotion.

There were women among the audience who knew that ere the following spring many of those they loved might be shot down by French bullets; there were men in the parterre who knew this, [78] and a wave of emotion swept over the whole audience. To the singer herself all this hardly mattered; the human hearts were merely instruments upon which she played a melody; yet her receptive, finely strung being thrilled in response to the feeling she evoked; a half-sob rose in her throat and flooded her flexible voice with a passion of sadness. When the song ended, there came a moment's breathless silence, then the applause broke forth, and Wilhelmine knew she had achieved a triumph.

In the banqueting-hall Duke Eberhard's guests were seated at a magnificent repast. Five hundred ladies and gentlemen at long tables on a raised platform, while in the lower portion of the hall the burghers of Stuttgart were regaled with wine and cake. Her Highness Johanna Elizabetha sat at one table with her retinue; Serenissimus at another with his suite and closest friends, at his right hand was Madame de Geyling. Stafforth was seated at this table, Madame de Ruth was there also, Monseigneur the Duke of Zollern, of course, and Prelate Osiander. The Geyling discussed the comedy. Lifting her glass she toasted Eberhard Ludwig: 'I drink to your Highness from la Coupe Enchantée,' she murmured; but the Duke answered absently, and Madame de Ruth smiled when he asked Stafforth, 'Where is the goddess of sound? Has she vanished with her divine song?' He was told that the lady had retired to rerobe herself. 'Robe herself, you mean!' said the Geyling sharply, 'she had, in truth, little to remove!' She spoke quickly to the Duke in an undertone, but his Highness turned away and commanded Stafforth to present the singer directly she appeared.

The Geyling bit her underlip—there was a pause in the talk at the Duke's table.

At length a door near the platform opened, and Wilhelmine appeared. No one noticed her at first, and she stood for a moment hesitating in the doorway; then Madame de Ruth espied her, and, craving the Duke's pardon, she rose and went to Wilhelmine and, taking her by the hand, led her towards the Duke. It was necessary to pass the Duchess's table; Wilhelmine immediately recognised her Highness, and as she passed she swept Johanna Elizabetha a deep courtesy. It [79] was gracefully done, and the neglected lady, unaccustomed to be treated with even ordinary consideration, responded by an amiable smile. As they approached the Duke, his Highness rose and came forward to meet them. He had seen Wilhelmine's spontaneous good manners and was gratified thereby. Nothing gratifies a grand seigneur more than the grand manner, and in return

to Wilhelmine's inclination his Highness bowed as though to a queen.

'Mademoiselle, I am deeply in your debt,' he said; 'it would be banal to thank you for your divine music, yet permit me to say that I would willingly keep you for ever as my creditor, if you would but promise to make my debt the greater by singing to me again—and soon.'

'Monseigneur, you do me too much honour,' she responded, sinking to the ground in another courtesy.

'To a feast of the gods you would be welcome, Mademoiselle; but as we are not in Olympus, let me, at least, lead the Goddess of Song to my poor table for refreshment.' So saying, his Highness offered his hand and led her to his table. He presented her to Madame de Geyling, who gave her a bitter-sweet smile and paid her the compliment of turning her back upon her. The Duke plied his guest with food and wine, declaring that ambrosia and nectar were better fitted for her; he toasted her; he praised her; he exhausted his knowledge of mythology in her honour, calling her Melpomene, the tragic Muse, for had she not made men weep with her song that very night? Song, did he say? nay, hymn it was! She was Polyhymnia, singer of sublimity. He named her Philomèle, and desired the lute of Orpheus that he might play an accompaniment to her wondrous singing. He asked her in which enchanted ocean she had lived. 'Mademoiselle Sirène, lurer of men's souls,' he called her.

Wilhelmine spoke little in answer to all this, but she acted her part well, smiling at him with glistening eyes. Indeed, she found no difficulty herein, for her heart had played a cleverer trick than ever her brain had devised—she was falling in love with Eberhard Ludwig of Wirtemberg. When supper was over the Duke rose, and, in defiance of etiquette, desired Stafforth to [80] accompany Madame de Geyling, while he himself led Mademoiselle de Grävenitz from the banqueting-hall. They passed on to the terrace, above the outer colonnade of the Lusthaus, and stood together looking down on the garden, and the strains from the instruments of the musicians hidden in the bowers floated up to them.

'I hardly dare propose it, Mademoiselle,' said the Duke after some moments' silence, 'but the garden is very fair to-night; would you honour me by accepting my arm and taking a short stroll towards the fountain? Only a few minutes, the night is so beautiful—come and look at the stars with me!'

She hesitated; but the man's face was so noble, so open. Why not? 'Monseigneur, I know not,' she whispered.

'Mademoiselle, I entreat. If you knew how I hate these crowded rooms. I am a soldier, and I love the memory of those nights encamped in the open, when I left my tent and wandered alone beneath the stars. Forstner—you know Forstner? No? Well—a good friend, yet always at my elbow with rebukes and etiquette! Well—old Forstner used to chide me, saying it was not fitting for a reigning Duke to wander alone "like a ridiculous poet-fellow philandering with the stars," as he called it. Ah! Mademoiselle, will you leave the Duke here on the balcony, and come and look at the stars with the ridiculous poet-fellow? will you?'

Who could resist him, this man with the pleading eyes and deep, strong voice? And Wilhelmine, coming from Mecklemburg to make a career, had begun it already, God knows! by falling in love with the Duke. They went down the steps leading to the garden, and in silence walked along the path towards the fountain. The moon played white over the flowers, and the sound of the violins, harps, and zithers faded away in the distance. They reached an old stone seat beneath a beech-tree and sat down. Before them the fountain rose, like some shimmering witch in the moonlight.

'Sing me a snatch of some song, Mademoiselle,' said Eberhard Ludwig. 'There is no one near; sing to me once, to *me alone*—to the silly poet-fellow!'

'Nay, Monseigneur,' she answered tremulously, 'I cannot sing—my heart is beating in my throat somehow.'

He looked at her in the moonlight. [81]

'Mademoiselle de Grävenitz,' he said, 'I have never been so happy, yet so unutterably sad, as at this moment. I—I—Mademoiselle——' and his voice broke. He took her hand in his and, raising it to his lips, kissed it once, twice, then in a husky voice he said, 'We must go back.' He rose from the seat, offering her his arm. He led her up the dark garden-path and into the glitter of lights in the ante-hall of the Lusthaus, where Madame de Stafforth stood ready to depart, waiting for Wilhelmine. The Duke sent Stafforth for Mademoiselle's cloak, and when he brought it, his Highness himself wrapped it round her. As he did so, his hand involuntarily touched the soft skin of her shoulder, and Eberhard Ludwig flushed to the edge of his white curled peruke as he murmured: 'Au revoir, Philomèle!' and Wilhelmine daringly whispered back: 'Au revoir, gentil poète.'

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[82]

CHAPTER VI

LOVE'S SPRINGTIDE

'A queenly rose of sound, with tune for scent;

A pause of shadow in a day of heat;
A voice to make God weak as man,
And at its pleadings take away the ban
'Neath which so long our spirits have been bent—
A voice to make death tender and life sweet!'

PHILIP BOURKE MARSTON.

THE Hofmarshall's house stood in the 'Graben,' a broad road which ran proudly past the old town ending at the ducal gardens on the west, while to the east began the fields and vineyards leading up to the royal hunting forest, the Rothwald. Stafforth's house was a fine stone building decorated with rococo masks. To the back lay a beautiful garden laid out on a plan of M. Lenôtre's, from whose book of *Jardins Mignons* Stafforth had selected it. On the morning after the theatricals Wilhelmine was seated on one of the garden benches, and though her eyes were fixed on the pages of a French translation of Barclay's satirical novel *Argenis*, her thoughts were busy with the events of the previous evening. Her reverie was interrupted by Madame de Ruth who arrived, as usual, in a cloud of her own words. She embraced Wilhelmine affectionately, exclaiming: 'Never was there so great a victory! One battle and the country is ours! The hero at your feet, my dear! Did I not say that you had a great future before you? Ah! the Geyling! Ha! ha! ha! what a face she made when his Highness led you out on to the balcony, and I asked her if she thought it convenable for you! Ha! ha! ha! she looked sour indeed, and she screeched at me in her peahen voice: "Mademoiselle de Grävenitz seems to be a lady of experience; she can guard her own young virtue, I suppose!" "'Tis not her virtue, Madame," I said, with a surprised look and [83] the prim manner of a Pietist, "I know *that* is safe with so devoted a husband as Serenissimus, but I fear for her reputation! Ah! Madame, the evil tongues of older women! and already no one here to-night can speak of ought save Mademoiselle. But I assure you the theatricals are not even mentioned, Madame! They can remember nothing save the Envoi and its singer." O Wilhelmine! if you could have seen her face! I suffer, I expire with laughter, when I think of it.' And Madame de Ruth laughed till she really was almost suffocated, and was obliged to hold her hands over her heaving sides.

Wilhelmine leaned her head on her hands. 'Poor Madame de Geyling!' she said in a musing tone.

Madame de Ruth ceased laughing and looked at her piercingly. 'Poor Madame de Geyling?' she exclaimed. 'But, my child! Ah!' and she caught Wilhelmine by the wrist; 'you pity her? because she has lost the Duke's affection? Why?' She paused a moment—reflected. 'Girl! you have fallen in love with Serenissimus,' she whispered.

Wilhelmine sprang up—her cheeks aflame. It was true, and she knew it herself then for the first time. She was angry, and yet there was an immense gladness in her heart. Her eyes were wet, and she felt the pulses throbbing in her temples. She was ashamed and yet gloriously proud.

Madame de Ruth watched her; at first, with smiling curiosity, then the old woman's face softened, she took Wilhelmine's hand and said gently: 'God give you joy, my child. There, there—I am a foolish old woman—you make me weep.—Lord God! but hearts are the great intriguers, not brains!'

Wilhelmine turned to her and, bending, kissed the old courtesan on the brow.

'Madame,' she said, 'Madame, be my friend; I shall need one in the days to come.'

Madame de Ruth drew the girl down beside her on the bench, her face had grown suddenly old and infinitely sad. 'Yes,' she answered, 'I will be your friend. Do you know that I had a little girl twenty years ago? She would have been just your age now, had she lived, and perhaps I should [84] have been a different woman. Well, well—no sentiment, my dear; it is so unsuitable, isn't it? but I will be your friend.'

She kissed the young woman, and, rising hastily, took her way towards the house.

The days dragged slowly on in Stuttgart for Wilhelmine, and there came no message from his Highness, who had gone to Urach, they told her, to hunt. Though the court remained nominally in Stuttgart while her Highness Johanna Elizabetha resided at the castle, most of the courtiers had retired to the country and Stuttgart was more than usually dull. Stafforth had accompanied the Duke to Urach, so Wilhelmine remained alone with Madame de Stafforth. The heat was terrible in the town, which lay encircled by the vine-clad hills, as in a great caldron. The Stuttgarters told her that such heat was unusual at that time of year, but there was little consolation for her in that.

To some natures dullness becomes an insupportable suffering. Loneliness, all you will, they can bear, for they draw occupation and joy from the depth of their own souls; but that dreariness, which has been called dullness, is an almost tangible presence at moments, and seems to blight the beauty of all things. This Wilhelmine felt in those stifling days at Stuttgart. Madame de Stafforth's moth-like personality wearied her. Madame de Ruth, who had returned to Rottenburg, wrote constantly imploring her friend to visit her; yet something seemed to hold the girl, some mysterious sentiment, that if she left Stuttgart she would turn her back on her life.

Once or twice Wilhelmine accompanied Madame de Stafforth to the castle. The Duchess received her with amiable indifference, and the young woman stood silently by while the two dull women

discussed their habitual uninteresting topics.

It was perfectly unreasonable, but she felt a hatred growing in her heart for the wife of Eberhard Ludwig.

One morning towards the end of June, Wilhelmine awoke to find the grey dawn creeping in at her window; she rose and opened the casement and leaned out. Her room looked on the formal [85] garden. There was a solemn hush in the air, and she realised that even the birds were asleep. Far in the east, over the top of the one beech-tree which still stood in the garden in spite of M. Lenôtre, the rising sun was tingeing the horizon with a delicate rosy glow. A bird stirred—twittered—finally a clear note of welcome to the day rang out, and the world was awake. The radiance in the east grew brighter, long streaks of glorious colour invaded the soft grey of dawn. From the distant field roads came the rumble of a peasant's cart. Wilhelmine dressed herself hurriedly and tiptoed down the dark stair to the house door. The broad street, the Graben, was deserted and silent, save for an occasional rattle in the direction of the market-place, where the peasants were arriving from the country with their carts heaped up with fresh fruit and vegetables. She walked up the street, delighting in the coolness and the scent of the morning air after the long days of oppressive heat which she had endured. A fancy took her to wander in the Rothwald, and she walked briskly along, up the dusty country path which led to the wood on the hill. The sun had risen, and even at that early hour the heat was so great that once or twice Wilhelmine almost turned homewards; however, the thought of the cool shade of the beech-trees in the forest drew her, and she pressed onward. At length she reached the edge of the wood, and, turning, she contemplated the steep hill which she had climbed from the town. The rough country road wound like some white riband through the green vineyards which lay between Stuttgart and the Rothwald. A light breeze sprang up and stirred the long, lush grass of the field which bordered the shadow of the trees. There is no part of a forest more beautiful than the line where wood begins and meadow ends; it is as the lip of the forest breathing forth in a fragrant kiss of poesy some mystery of silent dells and fairy's haunts, which it hints of but does not quite betray. Wilhelmine mused on this; she was gifted with a delicate appreciation of each beauty-forming detail, and the accurate observation without which the enjoyment of beauty is a mere sensuous mood. She paused a while, drinking in the freshness and revelling in the solitude; then she [86] entered the wood and walked onward, her feet sinking deep into the rich moss. She inhaled the delicious smell of the beech-trees, that light odour of the northern forest which is almost imperceptible, and yet so fresh, so pungent. It is made up of the smell of earth, of moss, of fern, of grass and leaves, and the resinous health of young pine. As Wilhelmine walked, she whispered a melody half in greeting to the trees, half mechanically. She found a shallow bank, and, seating herself on the ground, she supported her shoulders against the slope. She leaned her head back and gazed up into Spring's wonderful tracery in the myriad beech-leaves, and the cool green fell like balsam on her eyes. A breeze stirred the tree-tops, and for a moment they swayed and leaned together whisperingly, then, like little children playing at some gentle teasing game, they drew back as the breeze passed.

Wilhelmine's thoughts wandered to Eberhard Ludwig; of a truth they knew the way, for how often had they sought his memory since that night in the castle garden? She pondered how she had been told his Highness loved to sleep in the forest. 'Ridiculous poet-fellow' he had called himself. She drew a deep breath. 'Au revoir, Philomèle,' he had said. Ah! but he had forgotten her! Madame de Ruth had been mistaken! The campaign was not won. Wilhelmine's cheeks glowed suddenly, she crushed a leaf of an overhanging beech-branch; it was intolerable. All those people would ridicule her! Leaning her head in her hand, she pressed her fingers against her eyes to shut out the sunlight, but it lingered in her eyeballs, and against the blackness she saw dancing rays of blinding light. A feeling of delightful drowsiness was coming over her—a far-away feeling. Presently she raised her head from her hands, and once more contemplated the peaceful wood. What did she care for those people who would mock her? She would return their malevolent stares with her evil look, which she knew would be eminently disagreeable to them. Her thoughts turned back to Güstrow now—Güstrow and Monsieur Gabriel. Almost unconsciously, as she thought of her old friend, she found herself humming an air. At first she but whispered it under her breath, then she was gradually carried away by the physical enjoyment of letting forth her [87] powerful voice, and she burst into full song:

'Bois épais redouble ton ombre,
Tu ne saurais être assez sombre.
Tu ne peux trop cacher
Mon malheureux amour!
Je sens un désespoir,
Dont l'horreur est extrême.
Je ne dois plus voir
Ce que j'aime—
Je ne veux plus souffrir le jour!'

She sang the old French melody out into the trees, and the great notes thrilled and echoed through the wood till it was as though they had become an integrant part of the forest. Her voice was truly a woman's voice in the ineffable tenderness and the grand passion of it, but there lay in its tones a depth of strong uncompromising nobility which lives in an organ's notes or in the rich low chords of a violoncello. Truly, as Monsieur Gabriel had said, her voice belonged by right to the shadowy cathedrals, for each note seemed a sacred thing, a homage to God, and itself deserving to be worshipped in reverent devotion. During the song Wilhelmine had not heard the

sound of approaching footsteps, nor did she observe how a hand pushed aside some branches not far from where she sat, and a man's head and shoulders appeared. She leaned back on the moss for a moment's rest, and then springing up recommenced to sing. She stood very straight and tall, her hands locked together behind her, like a schoolgirl reciting a lesson; somehow this childlike attitude added by its simplicity to the woman's dignity. Her head was held a little back, chin tilted upwards, and the eyes looked far away as though they beheld a whole world of dreams and lovely melody beyond all save the singer's ken. As she sang the colour mounted slowly to her cheeks, flooding her face with a divine flush; perhaps her very heart's blood rushed to adore the tones which fell from her lips. The man watching held his breath. She finished her song on a clear high note, and as she gave it forth, she flung back her head in an impulsive gesture, glorying in an ecstasy of sound, a magnificence of accomplishment.

When the echo of the last ringing note faded, the man sprang forward, and, throwing himself impetuously on his knees before Wilhelmine, he raised the hem of her gown to his lips in a passionate gesture, though with the adoring reverence that all poets give to great singers. [88]

'Philomèle!' he murmured. 'Ah! Philomèle! Beloved!'

She looked down at him. How strangely natural, necessary, unsurprising it seemed to her that he should be kneeling there, and yet she thought herself in some oft-remembered dream.

'Gentil poète,' she whispered back, and her hand fell on his shoulder. His hand sought hers, he caught it and kissed it with a sort of piety.

'I love you.' He spoke the words like a prayer. She drew away from him.

'Monseigneur,' she said, 'I thought you had forgotten me!' He started at her gesture of repulsion and at the formal word.

'You are a woman no man can forget,' he answered. Then he told her how that evening in the castle garden he had known he loved her; how he had dreaded giving himself up to a passion which he divined would prove so absorbing as to turn him from his cherished military ambition. He poured out to her his life's history, all his dreams of brilliant feats of arms, the raising of his duchy to a kingdom; he told her of his bitter disappointment when he found these ambitions were incomprehensible to the Duchess Johanna Elizabetha; of how, gradually, he had awakened to the fact that he was tied to a woman who utterly lacked in sympathy, and thus wearied him and drove him to seek consolation and amusement in the light loves and fancies of court gallantry, and then how each lady's charms had palled inevitably.

'And now,' he paused, 'now I feel that all my life began when first I heard your voice! I have been fighting with my thoughts ever since. Beloved! I have nothing to offer you—you are too pure to take the only position I could give you—and I love you too well to ask you.'

She looked at him, and a smile touched her lips and vanished almost before it was born.

'Mon poète,' she whispered, and stretched out both hands to him; he took them in his, and drew her towards him. One thick curl of hair had fallen forward on her neck, he lifted it and buried his face in it, kissing it wildly, breathing in its fragrance. [89]

'I love you,' he said again, and drew her, unresisting, into his arms. 'Philomèle! Ah!' and his lips met hers.

Overhead a bird burst forth into a rhapsody of song.

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[90]

CHAPTER VII

THE FULFILMENT

Now began for Wilhelmine a time of strangely mixed and contending emotions. She loved Eberhard Ludwig with all that fervour and lavish freshness which we give to our first love; she longed to surrender to his passion, yet she held back with a modesty of maidenly reserve which her many jealous enemies ascribed to calculation, or else entirely denied, alleging that she was a mere adventuress plying her illicit trade according to her habit. Of a truth, there may have been a shade of strategy in her virtuous hesitation, for Madame de Ruth, who had returned to Stuttgart post-haste on hearing of his Highness's advent, constantly counselled her to hold back. Wilhelmine herself realised that a battle's importance is generally gauged by its difficulty, and the ultimate victory more highly prized if hardly won. Sometimes she wondered why she knew these things, and laughingly she told Madame de Ruth of this.

'Dear child,' said the old woman with her thin, satirical smile, 'we women come into the world knowing such things; whereas men—poor, beloved fools!—need experience, philosophy, and the Lord knows what, to teach them. Alas! by the time they have learned they no longer need their knowledge, for by that time cruel old age has got them in its grey, dull clutches.'

Another factor in Wilhelmine's life at that time was the Duke's friend Baron Forstner, a man of excellent and sterling qualities, but one of those unfortunate mortals cursed with a lugubrious manner which makes their goodness seem to be but one more irritating characteristic of a tiresome personality. Forstner was genuinely devoted to the Duke; he had been the companion of

the Prince's childhood, had shared his studies, and had followed him on his travels to the various European courts and in the campaigns where Eberhard Ludwig had so mightily distinguished himself. How cruel it is that devotion may be so entirely masked by some wearisome trait, as to turn the whole affection into a source of irritation to its object! Forstner perpetually reminded his Highness of his duty. [91]

Now Eberhard Ludwig was possessed of a high regard for that stern code of life which is called Duty; he had all a soldier's respect for rule, for obedience, all a gentleman's reverence for honour and truth; yet these things, as presented by Forstner, were to him odious, and his first impulse was to go counter to any advice proffered in the drab-coloured guise of Forstner's counsel, and by his deep, dreary voice.

'L'osseux,' the Bony One, Madame de Ruth dubbed him; and truly the sobriquet was justified, for the man was so long and thin as to give the impression of bones strung on strings. He walked in jerks: his flat, narrow feet posed precisely, the head held forward, like some gaunt bird seeking with its lengthy beak for any meagre grain which might chance in its way. Somehow one felt the grain he sought must be meagre. 'The good God wills that Forstner lives,' said Madame de Ruth, 'and God knows he lives according to God's rules; but oh! how more than usually tiresome he makes those rules, poor Bony One!'

Forstner naturally disapproved of Wilhelmine, and the two were for ever contradicting each other; but she often endeavoured to propitiate him, for she loathed disapproval, and preferred the open hostility of a real enemy to the presence of any merely disapproving person. Eberhard Ludwig suffered intensely in those weeks at Stuttgart; he was fiercely irritable to Forstner, resenting his comments on Wilhelmine, though he longed childishly for some appreciation of a new and much-prized toy.

Stafforth, who had returned with the Duke, assisted the intrigue to the best of his ability by constantly arranging meetings, feasts, picnics in the forest, music in the evenings, followed by gay suppers. But he offended Wilhelmine deeply, though she gave no sign thereof, for he treated the whole situation as an ordinary court intrigue, which indeed it was, though both people concerned were earnestly and deeply engaged in the one great love of their lives. Forstner sat like a grim, polite skeleton at these feasts, and Wilhelmine grew to hate him in those summer days. Her hatred was destined to wreak a terrible vengeance against him. Friedrich Grävenitz had also returned to Stuttgart, leaving his wife in Rottenburg awaiting the birth of their first child. [92]

Duchess Johanna Elizabetha continued to reside at the castle, torturing herself with jealous fears. She appeared before the Duke with eyes reddened by sleepless nights and bitter tears, and her habitual dreariness of being was doubled.

Eberhard Ludwig himself, intent upon his love, gave the poor woman scarce a thought, though when he saw her he noted her tear-stained eyelids and her woebegone, reproachful ways with an irritation which, though it could not pierce the studied courtesy of his manner, made itself felt, and further wounded the unhappy woman. Madame de Stafforth was constantly with the Duchess, and thus her Highness was perfectly informed of the Duke's daily visits at the Stafforth house.

The days dragged on, and the heat grew to be almost unbearable. Each day the sun shone more gloriously, and the Duchess longed for one grey, overcast day. To her the sun seemed pitiless and cruel, the summer's amplitude seemed to mock her in her misery.

Each evening, at set of sun, she heard the rattle and rumble of Eberhard Ludwig's coach, which he drove himself with eight magnificent spirited horses. True, his Highness never failed to send his consort a courteous invitation to join the feast at some Jagd Schloss in the forest; but she invariably refused, alleging that she was weary, that her head ached, or that she would fain rest, for she guessed that Wilhelmine would be there.

Unrest was in Wilhelmine's heart also. She still held back from giving herself to Eberhard Ludwig, and the future seemed to her dark and difficult. She knew she loved his Highness, but both her sincere love and her indomitable pride revolted at the thought of becoming a mere toy, a mistress to be thrown aside whenever the Duke's whim dictated. A thousand times she told herself that this would never happen, that Eberhard Ludwig loved her with a true and lasting passion, yet a wave of haughty doubt swept over her and kept her back. One day it was announced from the castle that her Highness had commanded a famous troupe of Italian musicians to perform a series of madrigals before the court. The Duchess caused a summons to be issued to members of the court at Stuttgart, adding, however, that no foreign visitors could be invited, the concert being strictly private. This was a direct insult to Wilhelmine, for she was the only foreign visitor in Stuttgart. Stafforth announced this news to his Highness, Madame de Ruth, and Wilhelmine as they sat at supper beneath the beech-tree in the Stafforth garden. A silence fell upon the party. Madame de Ruth leaned back in her chair, fanning herself gently; Eberhard Ludwig turned to Wilhelmine, his face had flushed deeply, and it was with an unsteady voice that he said: [93]

'Mademoiselle, I formally invite you to hear the music to-morrow evening at my castle of Stuttgart. Her Highness, my honoured wife, will gladly make an exception in her arrangements for so famous a musician as yourself.'

'Monseigneur,' broke in Stafforth hurriedly, 'I fear your Highness cannot——'

Eberhard Ludwig silenced him with a look, and turning to Wilhelmine he said, almost sternly: 'I await the honour, Mademoiselle, of your answer, which I shall carry myself to her Highness.'

Wilhelmine rose.

'Monseigneur,' she said, and her voice had a ring which caused Madame de Ruth to start, —'Monseigneur, I can refuse you nothing. To-morrow I will do as you desire.' The rich blood mantled to her cheeks. Eberhard Ludwig caught her hand; raising it to his lips he murmured 'To-morrow!' and turning quickly left the garden with hasty strides. Wilhelmine walked away down the garden-path, desiring apparently to commune with herself. Stafforth remained standing. Observing Madame de Ruth, who was laughing quietly to herself—

'Madame,' he said angrily, 'I see nothing to laugh at! This will be going too far. It is an insult to her Highness, and we shall have the whole court against us! She must *not* go to this madrigal singing, I tell you!' [94]

'Dear friend,' Madame answered, 'I am not laughing at that. I laugh because I see once more that a man may plead till his heart breaks, it is when a woman sees another woman absolutely denied for her sake, that she knows she is loved as she approves; *then* she capitulates and whispers—to-morrow!' The old woman laughed again.

'Well, Madame!' replied Stafforth, 'you will see what this "to-morrow" means!'

The Italian musicians were grouped together at one end of her Highness's own reception-room in the castle of Stuttgart. The invited audience was small, for only such ladies and gentlemen as were actually obliged, by the holding of important court charges, remained in the town during the hot summer months; thus it had been deemed more fitting for the madrigals to be performed in the castle itself instead of in the fine hall of the Lusthaus where the court festivities usually took place. Her Highness's reception-room gave out on to the Renaissance gallery of the inner courtyard. The room was hung with sombre tapestries heavy with the dust of centuries; a number of waxen tapers flamed in silver candlesticks; rows of seats were arranged in a half-circle behind the high gilt chairs placed for his Highness Eberhard Ludwig and his consort her Highness Johanna Elizabetha.

The musicians turned over the leaves of the manuscript music on the desks before them; sometimes the sound of a violin chord, struck to prove its correctness, broke on the air. The swish of silken skirts on the wooden floor of the gallery without announced the advent of the first guests, and gradually the room was filled by richly clad ladies and finely attired gentlemen.

The appointed hour was long passed for the music's commencement, but neither the Duke nor the Duchess had left their apartments, and the courtiers whispered that their Highnesses were closeted together, and that angry voices had been heard by one of the pages attendant in the antehall. The clock of the Stiftskirche tolled out nine strokes, and the courtiers murmured angrily that they had been waiting an entire hour. [95]

At length the door leading to her Highness's apartment was flung open, and Monsieur de Gemmingen, Controller of the Duchess's household, appeared, bowing deeply as Johanna Elizabetha entered, followed by Madame de Stafforth, who was in attendance on her Highness in the absence of Mademoiselle de Münsingen, the lady-in-waiting. The audience rose to greet the Duchess, and at that moment his Highness Eberhard Ludwig appeared from another door followed by Oberhofmarshall Stafforth, Reischach, and other gentlemen of the suite.

Her Highness bowed to right and left. Her face was deadly white and her eyes swollen with weeping; even her usual colourless amiability seemed to have deserted her, for, after the generally inclusive salute to the entire company, she swept towards her gilded chair without a word of direct greeting to any individual. Eberhard Ludwig, on the contrary, assumed an air of gaiety, as with his habitual grace of manner he passed down the lines of guests, finding a courteous word for each and all. Yet the courtiers remarked that his Highness's face was flushed, and that his eyes held a glitter of angry defiance; but he gave no other sign of disturbance, and did not respond to Stafforth's whispered inquiry if his Highness had heard news of serious import.

Johanna Elizabetha summoned the Oberhofmarshall and desired him to command the musicians to commence, and the courtiers watched how Eberhard Ludwig, seating himself beside her Highness, seemed to fix his mind upon the music. It was a matter of comment that Monsieur and Madame de Stafforth were present at the concert without their guest Mademoiselle de Grävenitz; and the well informed, delighted with their superior knowledge, whispered that the decree 'No Foreigners' was levelled at this lady alone. Under cover of the music the audience gossiped in whispers, while they noted the Duchess Johanna Elizabetha's demeanour with interest.

Her Highness sat beside the Duke in that attitude which, translated from court to market-place parlance, would have been 'turning her back upon him'; in more polite circles this attitude becomes a mere inclination of the shoulder. It is less satisfactory to the offended, though certainly not less abashing to the offender, than the ruder, more frankly human market-place manner. And it seemed as though his Highness felt it to be so, for he repeatedly endeavoured to address his spouse over this battlemented shoulder; but her Highness answered shortly, if at all, and the shoulder became each time more aggressively pointed. [96]

The musicians meanwhile performed a series of madrigals accompanied by viole d'amore, violins,

and viole da gamba. The candles flickered in the draught from the open windows. Madame de Ruth sat resignedly beside Monseigneur de Zollern, whose fine head had dropped forward on his breast. He was asleep; and Madame de Ruth realised, with a sigh, that her beloved had grown old; that her youth had vanished too, and even the joy of observing the tragi-comedy of human nature palled for her at that moment, and she felt herself to be old and lonely. At length the music ceased, and was followed by that insolent, half-hearted applause which it is the privilege of the truly cultured audience to offer to musicians or actors.

Her Highness intimated her approval, and desired the performers to rest a little after their exertions. At this moment a door, directly to the left of her Highness's seat, was flung open, and a bewildering vision of beauty stood framed in the doorway. It was Wilhelmine von Grävenitz, the expressly excluded foreign visitor. Johanna Elizabetha threw a glance towards this apparition and hastily averted her eyes, her face flaming from throat to brow.

His Highness half rose from his seat, but sinking back he endeavoured to attract the Duchess's attention to the late arrival, who stood on the threshold awaiting her Highness's greeting, without which it was impossible for her to join the court circle, as having entered by the wrong door, she must of necessity pass the Duchess in order to gain the ranks of the audience. There was a moment of intense embarrassment; Wilhelmine was as firmly fixed to her place in the doorway as though nails had been fastened through her satin-slippered feet to the boards [97] beneath; for etiquette forbade her to advance without her Highness's greeting, and fear of ridicule barred her way back through the door. The Duchess remained immovable, her eyes upon the group of musicians; the Duke endeavoured nervously to draw her Highness's attention to Wilhelmine; the audience had fallen into one of those painful silences, with which an assembly invariably adds to the awkward moments of social life. Partly it is that curiosity rules all men and most women; partly that, however cultured and refined the individuals may be, a *mass* of human beings is like some wild animal—awkward, ungainly, horribly cruel, ready to gloat over the discomfiture of friend or foe.

The flickering of the candles in the silver candlesticks seemed to become a noisy flaring, and through the large room the falling of a waxen flake on the polished table rang out distinctly; the string of a violin broke, and it sounded like a pistol-shot in the stillness. Her Highness remained unmoved, with eyes fixed upon the musicians. The tension was almost intolerable. The victory seemed to belong to the stern hostess, and yet it was upon Wilhelmine standing in the doorway that every eye was fixed. She stood perfectly motionless, one hand upon the lintel of the door, the other holding her fan; her head was poised imperiously, chin tilted as when she sang; her lips were parted in a half-smile, and her eyes were fixed upon her Highness with her strange compelling look. Was the Duchess victorious? surely not—the homage of the whole company was to the beauty of the woman on the threshold.

At length the Duke, in desperation, boldly touched her Highness's shoulder. 'Your Highness has not observed your Highness's newly appointed lady-in-waiting!'

He spoke so clearly that the audience heard each carefully pronounced syllable.

'Your Highness will remember summoning Mademoiselle de Grävenitz to attend upon your Highness this evening for the first time in her new capacity?'

Johanna Elizabetha turned. For a tick of the clock she deliberately measured her adversary with her protuberant eyes, then slowly she bent her head in formal greeting. Wilhelmine stepped [98] forward, then sank to the ground in the elaborate court courtesy; rising, she walked a few steps, and again swept her Highness the usual obeisance, and calmly assumed her appointed place as lady-in-waiting behind the Duchess's chair.

The musicians recommenced to play; her Highness stared stonily before her; the Duke leaned back drumming with nervous fingers on the gilt arm of his chair; the audience murmured together conjectures and remarks. Wilhelmine was almost as motionless as her Highness; her eyes were fixed upon the musicians, and her face was inscrutable. The concert came to an end, and the Duchess rose; she turned towards Madame de Stafforth, summoning her as lady-in-waiting-extraordinary to accompany her, thereby entirely ignoring Wilhelmine, the newly appointed lady-in-waiting, whose office it should have been to attend her Highness. After saluting her guests collectively by one sweeping courtesy, Johanna Elizabetha walked towards her apartments. Eberhard Ludwig made a movement forward as though to stay the Duchess; but he stopped short, and turned to Wilhelmine, who was standing behind the Duchess's empty chair, uncertain whether to follow her Highness or no.

'Mademoiselle de Grävenitz,' he said, 'the Duchess is evidently indisposed, and thus will not be present at the supper this evening, therefore I take it your services as lady-in-waiting will be dispensed with. May I have the honour of leading you to supper?' and he offered Wilhelmine his hand in the graceful fashion of those days. The last thing her Highness Johanna Elizabetha saw, as once more she paused to bow from the doorway to her guests, was the Duke leading her new lady-in-waiting towards the supper-room.

The Duchess Johanna Elizabetha's guests were leaving the castle: a constant stream of coaches drew up, one by one, in the courtyard, and having taken up their owners rumbled away through the heavy archway and across the moat towards the town. Only Oberhofmarshall Stafforth, Madame de Ruth, his Grace of Zollern, and Friedrich Grävenitz lingered in the supper-room by [99] his Highness's command. Stafforth was anxious and silent; Zollern sleepy; the voluble Madame

de Ruth was talking rapidly, with the evident intention of making the scene appear unimportant to the flunkeys in attendance. Friedrich Grävenitz said nothing, but looked pompous, and drank ostentatiously with rounded forearm, showing off his fine muscles, in spite of the fact that no one paid any heed to him. He had been invaluable during supper itself, for he had roared out stories, under cover of whose noise those who had real things to discuss had been enabled to talk, while the outsiders imagined that his Highness's circle listened to the Kammerjunker. But now he had been silenced by a peremptory word from the Duke, and he was thus relegated to the position of onlooker, though, in truth, he evidently believed all eyes to be upon him, for he looked sulkily self-conscious and perfectly foolish.

At one of the windows stood Eberhard Ludwig, beside him Wilhelmine. They were speaking together in an undertone. Madame de Ruth sometimes cast an anxious glance towards them. She wished the conversation would end; already the servants must have made comment upon so long an interview, and though the opinion of menials was a matter of little importance, the wily dame did not desire Wilhelmine's business to become the talk of the town until the intrigue was fully developed.

'Monseigneur,' she whispered to Monsieur de Zollern, 'this must end. Believe me, her Highness has many virtue-loving spies who will report to her with the exaggeration of the respectable foul-minded, and we shall be accused of having had a nocturnal carousal.'

Monsieur de Zollern rose and hobbled across to the pair at the window. He had just reached them when the door opened, and Baron Forstner appeared on the threshold.

'Ah! Serenissimus!' exclaimed Zollern, 'that is indeed an excellent story! Your Highness must pardon an old invalid if he retires with the memory of that witty tale in his mind as a bonne bouche.' He bowed and took his leave, while Forstner, who had arrived on the scene hoping to find the lovers alone together, was entirely put off the scent; Zollern's quick ruse having made it [100] appear as though the conversation had been general.

The company now took leave, Zollern offering Forstner a seat in his coach, which was accepted; thus the 'Representative of all the virtues' (another of Madame de Ruth's names for 'L'osseux') was safely removed from the scene, leaving Kammerjunker Grävenitz to attend his Highness. Madame de Ruth retired to her rooms in the castle. Stafforth escorted Wilhelmine to his coach, which waited to convey her to the house in the Graben. As he bowed gallantly over her hand he felt her fingers press a paper into his palm. She must have penned it ere she came to the concert, he reflected, for she could have found no opportunity for writing since. When he reached the deserted corridor outside the antehall, where two tall gentlemen-at-arms guarded the door of his Highness's sleeping apartment, he held the missive up to the light of one of the flickering wall-lamps: 'For his Highness's own hand alone,' he read.

'Ah——!' he murmured. Passing through the antehall, he gained admission to Eberhard Ludwig's apartment.

'Stafforth, my friend!' cried the Duke, when the Oberhofmarshall appeared, 'this is much courtesy,—you attend me with zeal!' and he laughed gaily.

Stafforth looked fixedly at him; he wished to convey to his Highness his desire to speak with him alone; but Friedrich Grävenitz also, unfortunately, had this impression, and being at once the most suspicious and the most tactless of mortals, he had evidently made up his mind to remain in attendance, as was indeed officially correct, though it was usual for the subordinate official to retire courteously when a person holding a superior court charge was present at the Duke's disrobing. It was impossible for Stafforth to give his Highness Wilhelmine's missive in her brother's presence, for the conspirators had long discovered that Friedrich Grävenitz either lost his temper and blustered, if he felt himself excluded from full knowledge of anything concerning his sister's affairs; or else, were he taken into their confidence, he compromised the situation by some gross tactlessness the which he himself considered, and represented, to be a master-stroke of diplomacy.

After some moments' conversation, Stafforth hit on a plan. He walked across the room and [101] leaned out of the open window. 'What a glorious night!' he exclaimed. 'Ah, Monseigneur! I understand your Highness's love for the silent woods at night; even here, in the town, the summer night is full of mysterious poetry! Grävenitz, if his Highness permit you, come and look at the beauty of the far-off stars. You also have a vein of poetry in your soldier-nature.' This being exactly what Friedrich Grävenitz entirely lacked, it flattered him extremely to be credited with the quality. He craved his Highness's permission to look at the glorious night scenery, and repairing to the window leaned out beside Stafforth. The Oberhofmarshall immediately pressed close against him and encircled his shoulders with one arm, holding the dupe firmly away from the interior of the room; meanwhile Stafforth's other arm was round his own back, with Wilhelmine's letter held out in that hand towards the Duke. He remained thus expatiating on the beauty of the night, till he felt the Duke withdraw the missive from him. Having assured himself by hearing a faint rustle of paper that Eberhard Ludwig had read the missive, he finished his oration, and removed his strong arm from Grävenitz's shoulder.

Now it was the Duke who leaned out of the window. 'O Stafforth!' he cried, 'the night is too beautiful to sleep through! Gentlemen, I invite you to hunt with me to-morrow at break of day! We will meet at the edge of the Rothwald and follow the stag. Till dawn, then, farewell! I shall wander in the wood till then.'

His Highness dismissed Stafforth and Grävenitz. As the door closed upon the two courtiers, Eberhard Ludwig snatched a crumpled paper from his breast. It was the Duchess Johanna Elizabetha's formal command to her guests to appear at her private concert of madrigals:—

'Le Chambellan de
Son Altesse
Madame la Duchesse de Wirtemberg
a l'honneur d'inviter Madame de Stafforth ce Lundi
25 Juin à 8 heures du soir.
Je regrette de ne pas pouvoir inviter des voyageurs étrangers.—J. E.'

Signed and annotated, you will see, by her Highness's own hand. Beneath which, in strong, manlike characters, was written— [102]

'Ce soir à onzes heures.—Philomèle.'

And it is a matter of history that his Highness Eberhard Ludwig of Wirtemberg did *not* keep his tryst at dawn with Oberhofmarshall Stafforth and Friedrich Grävenitz in the Rothwald.

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[103]

CHAPTER VIII

THE GHETTO

The new lady-in-waiting was installed in two rooms in the castle, very near the roof and hard by Madame de Ruth's apartment. Wilhelmine received a small income, also her food and the services of a waiting-woman of the ducal household. This person was a large, fair-skinned Swabian—a peasant, simple yet suspicious, loud-voiced, rough in manner, very tender of heart. During the first days of her service she feared and disliked her 'foreign' mistress, but, like every one whom Wilhelmine chose to charm, Maria adored her before the week was out with that whole-hearted devotion which servants sometimes give their employers, and which is often so unequal a bargain. But it was not to prove so in this case, for Wilhelmine responded readily to any genuine affection, and, proud as she was, she was too proud to imagine that her freedom of speech and her easy laughter could be met with undue familiarity, which indeed, as is usual with the woman of true breeding, it never was. Maria remained devoted and free spoken, though absolutely respectful. To her the 'Grävenitzin,' as people began to call Wilhelmine, poured out the story of the numerous petty annoyances which disturbed her, and the peasant girl learned to regard her as a persecuted angel. Though her mistress's violent temper flamed forth if the smallest detail of the toilet went amiss, and often, indeed, for no apparent cause, the next moment the impression was erased and the waiting-maid's heart soothed by some affectionate word or hasty, almost childlike, apology. Few know the extraordinary loyalty, the silence and forbearing, which many servants exercise; but those who do, and can prize it truly, have an added power in their hands and an immense aid to their ambition. Maria, while absolutely silent regarding her mistress's [104] affairs, was fully informed concerning the rest of the inhabitants of the Stuttgart castle and of their various opinions of Wilhelmine, and all this she communicated while the latter lay abed drinking her chocolate of a morning. In this manner Wilhelmine learned many things of which she would otherwise have been ignorant.

One morning, about a month after the commencement of Wilhelmine's sojourn at the castle, she was dressing at her leisure, her Highness having commanded her presence at a later hour than usual. The window stood open, and she could hear the whirl of wings as the doves flew about from the roof of the inner courtyard or alighted on the stone balustrade below her window. The heat had abated, and a faint sighing breeze was wafted through the window. Maria had gone to the town to purchase a ribbon for Madame de Ruth's spaniel, and the Grävenitzin remained alone. She leaned back in a tall, carved chair, listening to the million sounds of silence. Ah! Silence!—quiet! how she loved it! With yearning she realised how she longed for the stillness of some deep wood or of some fragrant garden, with Eberhard Ludwig at her side. True, she saw him daily at court; drove with him on his fine coach drawn by eight horses; supped with him, sang to him, knew herself to be his acknowledged mistress. There were stolen interviews in her little room, moments of wondrous rapture and thrilling, passionate surrender. Yet, somehow, she never had the sensation of being entirely undisturbed, of enjoying the delight of solitude with him, safe from possible interruption. She knew that her genuine passion for the Duke was regarded by the court as an ordinary gallant adventure; her relation with him classed among the unlovely liaisons of princes; and, like each woman who considers her personal conduct, she imagined her own love to be a thing utterly different to the passions of other women—infinitely purer, absolutely apart. Also, she hated disapproval; it had the power to vilify her, drawing out the worst in her nature. Then the Duchess, who was possessed of all the harsh cruelty of the untempted virtuous woman, constantly slighted the lady-in-waiting, whose presence she, [105] perforce, endured, while it afforded her a decided relief to vent her jealous, agonised spleen in the privacy of her apartment upon her victorious rival of public society. She little knew, poor soul, what a sinister list of 'affronts to be avenged' was being written in Wilhelmine's mind, nor could she gauge, she of the moth-coloured spite, the evil, relentless hatred which she was daily fostering in a heart strong to love and strong to hate.

Even Madame de Ruth was appalled at the dimensions of the affair which she herself had aided in creating. Wilhelmine fascinated her still, but she began to fear her, and though she laughed at

those who murmured that 'the Grävenitzin had the evil eye,' a certain disquiet peeped into her mind at times. Wilhelmine had heard, through the maid Maria, that there were whispers of her being possessed of the evil eye; and it amused her to confront those who offended or irritated her with that strange look which she could command at will. Certainly she had a vast will-power, and the Duke was subjugated, not alone by love but by that marvellous dominion of mind which is exercised by certain beings over others. He told her often that she was a witch; being doubly a poet since he loved, he raved of the witchery of his mistress; yet had he dreamed for one moment that there could be anything mysterious in her fascination he would have been appalled. He was of his day, and could not explain glibly the mysteries and marvels of personal attraction and repulsion, of will-power and dominion, by the easy word magnetism. He would have called it 'witchcraft, magic, devilry,' and he did later on, and trembled. But all this was only beginning when Wilhelmine sat listening to the silence that summer morning. A heavy footfall on the balcony without aroused her from her reverie, and her window was darkened for a flash by a passing form. A rough knock came on her door, and she heard a voice informing her the Altesse Sérénissime the Duchess desired her presence immediately.

She sprang up. 'Tell her Highness I will come immediately; but that, as I was not commanded for so early an hour, I am unfortunately not quite ready,' she called after the lackey's retreating form. She flung off her morning gown and began hastily to don a silken bodice, but it took her [106] longer to dress without Maria's help, and it was some time before she stood at the door of her Highness's anteroom. She was met by one of the tiring-women whom she particularly disliked, and whose mulish face and impertinent manners had often irritated her.

'Her Highness is waiting, Fräuleinle von Grävenitz,' said this person, while she treated Wilhelmine to an insolent stare.

'That has nothing to do with you,' answered Wilhelmine haughtily, her ready anger flaring at the covert insolence of the woman's manner and the familiar use of the word 'Fräuleinle.' As she passed she caught a grin of amusement on the woman's face. Ridicule from any one, but especially from the 'canaille,' as she termed most of the inmates of this world, was a thing which always raised the slumbering devil in Wilhelmine. She turned abruptly, confronting the tiring-woman with that fixed evil glance of hers. The smile died on the woman's lips, and she shrank back muttering.

'You will regret your insolence,' said Wilhelmine, thereby forging another link in that chain of the witchcraft theory which was destined to have such strange developments in her life and fate.

'I am accustomed to being attended immediately, Mademoiselle, when I send for my ladies,' said the Duchess icily as Wilhelmine entered.

'Your Highness will pardon me; it was an unexpected summons, and I was not dressed.'

'Ah! I suppose the so evidently recent attack of smallpox makes Mademoiselle a little delicate still?' replied Johanna Elizabetha, with a spiteful smile, and looking pointedly at her lady-in-waiting's face.

At this taunt, once more, though this time involuntarily, the snake look came into Wilhelmine's eyes. Her Highness did not shrink, but returned the gaze fully with a glance of quiet animosity. Johanna Elizabetha was a brave woman, of good blood, and it is remarkable that, through all her dealings with the Grävenitz, she never showed any of that fear, which to arouse was one of this mysterious woman's most potent weapons. 'Would it please you were I to give you permission to [107] retire from court for a few months, Mademoiselle, in order to recoup your damaged—er—health?' She paused before the last word, and her adversary knew what she would have said. The lady-in-waiting still had the strength to command the wave of bitter anger which was surging within her, and she answered calmly:

'I thank your Highness for the offer; but,' here a note of insolent triumph pierced through the studied courtesy of her manner, 'but I find the climate of Stuttgart agrees vastly well with me, and I need no change. Your Highness must remember how much I am in the open air.'

This allusion to the constant drives with Eberhard Ludwig goaded Johanna Elizabetha past endurance.

'You will not be able to be abroad so much in future, Mademoiselle de Grävenitz,' she answered grimly; 'I intend to commence a large piece of embroidery, and the work will keep me more in the house. I shall require your services to read to me while I am working.'

Wilhelmine bowed.

'Fetch me that embroidery frame and the silks, Mademoiselle,' the Duchess said, in a tone of such imperious command that the other felt an angry blush flame in her cheeks; but she walked quietly across the room and brought the frame to her Highness, who at once busied herself in matching the coloured silks on the design. Seating herself near the window, and settling the frame on a small table before her, she worked steadily for some time in silence, Wilhelmine standing near, not having been granted permission to be seated. The silence became horrible, tense, gloomy; the air seemed quivering with the hatred which both women felt. At length the Duchess laid aside her work and, turning, faced her lady-in-waiting directly.

'Mademoiselle Wilhelmine von Grävenitz,' she said slowly, 'I will give you one chance of becoming an honest woman. You are unnecessary to me in your present capacity, and I have

decided to remove you from my service.' She rose with the dignity she could assume at times. 'The reasons for my decision you know well enough, and, indeed, it were not fitting for me to discuss them with you. If you will resign your charge, and leave the country to-day, promising never to return, I will announce that, to my regret, you have been called back to your home. As I know you came here penniless, I offer you a free present of ten thousand gulden, under the conditions I have named. If you will not accept this I shall have you driven from my house, and I shall command that no one in Wirtemberg shall shelter you under pain of loss of entry at court.' [108]

Johanna Elizabetha was really impressive and dignified, infinitely pathetic too; for it was a futile assumption of an authority hers by right, and, in fact, absolutely non-existent. 'I await your answer,' she added, a little tremulously.

'And I give you my answer, here and now, for to-day and for as long as I choose. And my answer is—No!' She said it boldly, but her heart was beating violently; after all, she too was fighting for her life, for all she had found beautiful, for the man she loved, and for the ease and charm of existence, the 'fine linen and fair raiment, honour and power,' without which she could and would not live.

The Duchess looked at her curiously. Certainly she was very beautiful, standing straight, tall, and strong; radiant with health, magnificent in her proud decision of being; with head thrown back, hands clasped behind her like a child saying a lesson—the singing attitude, which the Duchess had often seen before with angry, grudging admiration.

'Is this your decision?' Johanna Elizabetha asked once more. 'God in Heaven! why did you come here? I offer you wealth and peace; cannot you go and leave me what is mine?'

'Yours?' broke out Wilhelmine impetuously. 'Yours? You know what you say is untrue! Yours!'

Such an accent of scorn, such an intolerable ridicule of the unbeautiful woman lay in Wilhelmine's voice, that the Duchess drew back as from a blow; she shrank, feeling herself thrust into the chill dreariness of the world of unloved, unlovable, undesired, undesirable women. Then the pride of race reasserted itself; after all, she was the mistress, and this, her tormentor, was her servant. For once, goaded out of her measured correctness, the Duchess became vital, vehement, agonisedly energetic and passionate. She swept past Wilhelmine to the door of her [109] apartment; she flung it open, and called loudly to the sentry who stood below in the courtyard, bidding him summon the captain of the guard and a detachment of men-at-arms. The man's hurried steps rang out as he clattered across the courtyard. Then the silence was only broken by the heavy breathing of the maddened woman at the door, and once more Wilhelmine heard the swish and whirl of the wings as the doves flew about the balustrade. Then came the even tramp of men, and a captain of the guard, with drawn sword, stood in the doorway before her Highness, the yellow and silver of the men's uniforms making a picture of gay colours framed in the grey stonework of the balcony beyond.

'Remove that woman! She has insulted me! Take her across the moat, and close the castle door upon her. She shall not enter here again!' The Duchess's voice came short and sharp.

'But, your Highness——' began the captain.

'Do as I command!' broke in Johanna Elizabetha; and never had man or woman heard the 'Dull Duchess' speak in so proud a tone.

The captain approached Wilhelmine; he feared her and dreaded the Duke's indignation.

'Mademoiselle de Grävenitz,' he said hesitatingly, 'I must obey; believe me, I do not understand ——'

'Nor need you,' answered Wilhelmine haughtily; 'I am ready to follow you. Your Highness,' and she bent in the usual courtesy; but the poor Duchess could not see it, for she had hidden her face in her hands, and, with convulsive sobs, she wept in a painful reaction of weakness after her outburst of passionate decision.

Wilhelmine found herself standing beyond the moat, with the iron gate leading to the castle courtyard grimly closed upon her. It was a perplexing moment; she knew not whither she might seek shelter, and she wished to avoid scandal as far as possible. The Duke had gone to Urach to inspect the coverts for the autumn hunting, and he would not return for several days. Madame de [110] Ruth was in the castle, unconscious of the stirring events of the morning. Stafforth had accompanied the Duke, and she knew Madame de Stafforth would not receive her if she made known the cause of her departure from the castle. She realised, with dismay, that when she went to the Duchess she had, naturally, not taken money with her, so that she could not even seek the shelter of an inn. It was an awkward predicament, and yet so ridiculous to this woman, certain of the Duke-ruler's homage, that she laughed gently to herself as she walked slowly away through the castle gardens towards the town. The air was still and heavy, and the sound of cries and traffic from the market-place came to her distinctly. To her right lay the Duke's Jägerhaus and the kennels, from whence came an occasional bark from some of Eberhard Ludwig's numerous hounds.

Where should she go? The question was becoming urgent, for the heat of midday approached and already her head ached dully. She walked on, hardly noticing that she had passed beyond the garden gate, and it was with a start that she suddenly realised she had wandered to an unfamiliar

part of the town. She was in a narrow street, where the overhanging higher stories of the houses approached each other so closely that the sky between them seemed to be but a distant blue streak. Instinctively she had turned into this shaded gangway to escape from the burning sun. To her horror she felt a curious weakness creeping over her, a booming sounded in her ears, and the veins of her throat seemed to have swelled as though the blood would burst through the skin. She put up her hand to the velvet ribbon which she wore round her neck, and her fingers pulled awkwardly, impatiently, impotently at it. She felt as if her eyeballs were pushed violently outwards by clumsy, heavy finger-tips. She leaned against the wall of one of the houses, and, with the idea of avoidance of scandal still working numbly in her brain, she turned her head this way and that to see if there were any observers of her pitiful plight; but the street lay to right and left, sordid, silent, and deserted. She reflected that, of course, the inhabitants must be sheltering from the heat—sleeping, perhaps—Ah! sleeping!—and she was so tired, so deathly weary—and her feet were so heavy—so far away—and heavy——

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Surely Monsieur Gabriel would be pleased with that melody? Wilhelmine turned towards him, then half-consciousness returning told her she was not in Güstrow. Where was she? She moved, tried to sit up; on her brow a hand, cool and soothing, pressed her backwards, closing her aching eyes. Once more her thoughts sank downwards—flickered, as it were. What did it signify where she was, after all? Everything was far off. What scent was that? Wonderful! She drew it in to her lungs, and it seemed to fill her breast with fragrant freshness. With a sigh, she came back from some dim world and opened her eyes. A strange face bent over her and she stared wonderingly at it. Surely she was dreaming still, for it was the face of a picture she knew. Remembrance came, ere full consciousness grasped sway of her—Savonarola, the Monk of San Marco. She had seen a wood-cut portrait of the inspired fanatic in a book of Eberhard Ludwig's library. She lay, scarcely returned from her unconsciousness, gazing at this face. Yes, Savonarola! The powerful, broken brow, the small, piercing eyes, the rugged cheeks, the whole face dominated by the huge nose. Then full consciousness returned to her, and she saw that this was no fanatic genius, no monk of Italy, but an old woman with an extraordinary physiognomy, who was watching her with patient, kindly eyes. Wilhelmine sat up, pushing from her brow a cloth soaked in some essence, from whence came the delicious pungent scent which had recalled her from her trance.

'Where am I?' she asked.

'You are safe, and, I pray you, rest,' answered a hoarse, weak voice.

'I thank you,' Wilhelmine said, 'I will rest; but, at least, tell me where I am and who you are?'

'I am the widow of Ishakar Ben Hazzim, and you fainted at my door, so I took you in.'

'A very Christian action from a Jew, and I thank you,' replied Wilhelmine haughtily. All the unreasoning hatred of the Jewish race lay in her withdrawal from even ordinary gratitude towards the woman who had rescued her.

The face above her darkened, and the kind eyes changed to flickering pin-points of anger.

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'Christian? Nay, girl; it is Christian to be cruel! Christian? God of my fathers! it is Christian to murder and oppress! Did you not hear that I told you I am the widow of Ishakar Ben Hazzim, the son of Israel? and in my house, when I have anointed your head with rare essences to cool you from your sun-faint, you insult me, and you owe me no affront!' There was a pride in the woman's manner which appealed to Wilhelmine.

'Indeed, I meant none, and I thank you for your courtesy,' she said, and smiled.

'Well, rest you then,' replied the Jewess in a mollified tone; and again silence fell between the two women.

'Why do Jews hate the Christians?' Wilhelmine asked, after some time. She was interested, for this was a new and surprising view; partly, too, she asked the question from lazy curiosity.

'Hate them? Would not you?' returned the woman harshly.

'Why should you?' the girl asked.

'Do you know anything of the story of our race, you who ask? No? Well, I will tell you. For centuries we have been outcasts, treated like beggars, like scum; for ages we have suffered for the acts of our ancestors of hundreds of generations past, and always the Christian has sought to profit by our misfortunes; and have we been credulous of their promises, they have returned us jibes and disdain.'

'But the Jews committed a terrible wrong,' Wilhelmine interrupted; 'they crucified the——'

'Crucified! crucified!' broke in the Jewess angrily, 'we are weary of the very word! We crucified Him as you hang rebels, and He happened to be a Charmer who inspired a new religion—yours! and for ever since you Christians who rant of pardon, tenderness, moderation, love of all the world—you have oppressed us with a vengeance so terrible, so relentless, that we in our turn have learnt to hate and contrive vengeance.'

'But can you?' Wilhelmine smiled mockingly.

'Ah! but wait! Some day we, who have no heritage—we shall inherit the earth!' The old Jewess's voice trailed, and into its muttered tones thrilled the accent of the mystic belief of race destiny

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which lives so strongly in the children of Israel. Wilhelmine, upon whom no hint of power, of fate, or of belief in the unknown, ever failed to work, listened with growing interest. She questioned the old crone, and succeeded in drawing from her a long and impassioned tirade upon the wrongs of the race of Israel.

No one could charm people as could Wilhelmine; her vitality, her sonorous voice, the quick sympathy which drew confidences from the most reserved—in fine, her magnetic force, made her, when she chose, the most irresistible of beings. And she exerted herself to exercise her attraction upon the Jewess, for her curiosity was thoroughly aroused, and also with her strange instinct for power she scented a possible use to her, if she could count upon the adherence of a silent, secret force like the Jews. The old Jewess told how her people were constantly in communication with their fellow Jews of every land; she said that one who did a service to a Jew was always sure of finding support from the whole race; and Wilhelmine's quick brain and vivid imagination wove a romantic web, herself the centre thereof, holding in one hand the power of Wirtemberg's court, and in the other the secret thread commanding the commercial enterprises undertaken by freed and grateful Israelites. Romantic certainly, but very lucrative to the heroine of this self-woven romance!

'Well, Widow Hazzim,' she said at length, 'destiny has brought me to you. Some day I may have power to help your race, will you vouch me gratitude and support in return?' She spoke lightly, but her eyes were serious and watchful, and her hands gripped the essence-soaked kerchief which she had taken from her brow.

The Jewess laughed. 'Do us a service and you will see!' she answered.

At this moment the door, which led to some inner room, opened, and a boy appeared on the threshold.

'My great-nephew, lady,' said the Jewess; 'his mother is my niece. He can sing like the heavenly seraphim, and great beauty of body is his as well.' She whispered the last statement in that fatal whisper wherewith the aged often give conceited self-consciousness to children. [114]

The boy advanced: graceful, perfect in line, glowing in his Jewish youthful beauty, which is usually over-bold, a trifle insolent and hard. He approached Wilhelmine, and bent before her in a salute so ceremonious that it was at once strangely appealing from a child, and yet unctuous and unnatural. Wilhelmine gave him her hand and inquired his name.

'Joseph Süss Oppenheimer, musician,' he replied gravely.

'Indeed? Musician!' she said, laughing. 'Thy profession already fixed and entitled.'

'My father is a musician; he sings before courts, and I shall do the same,' he added proudly.

Wilhelmine laughed. The boy's calm assurance of success pleased her, and his unusual beauty attracted her, as all personal comeliness invariably did.

'He knows what he wants, this Joseph Süss,' she said; 'and to know what one wants, to know it decidedly, is the first step to achievement. Grasp success firmly and it is yours!'

The boy looked at her, fascinated by her loveliness, dominated by her voice and the creed which she enunciated. The old Jewess sent the boy to fetch his guitar, and when he returned she desired him to sing for her guest's entertainment.

Joseph Süss, with the too precocious manner of the Jewish child, inquired with another elaborate bow if Wilhelmine would care to hear his voice. She begged him to let her hear the seraphim sing. The boy caught the note of irony in her phrase; flushing deeply, he laid aside his guitar and would have run away had not Wilhelmine, with her easy self-indulgent kindness of heart to those who did not get in her way, called him back and propitiated him with smiling reassurances. The boy seated himself near her and sang. His voice was deliciously fresh and clear, and Wilhelmine, delightedly, made him sing again and again till the child's repertory was exhausted. She praised him and fondled him, and taking from her breast a small jewelled pin, engraved with her initials, [115] she fastened it in his coat.

'A remembrance, dear musician,' she said laughing. She was destined to see that jewel again after long years, when humiliation and defeat came to her, striking her down at the zenith of her brilliant career.

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CHAPTER IX

'SHE COMES TO STAY THIS TIME'

Eberhard Ludwig stood before his dull Duchess, his eyes fixed on her heavy, handsome face with a look of such stern anger, that the unhappy woman felt herself to be a criminal before some harsh, implacable judge. The phrases she had prepared in her mind during the two days since she had expelled her rival from the castle faded away, and seemed to falter from proud statements to a mere apology, an anxious pleading.

The Duke remained standing, one hand leant upon the back of a chair, the other hung at his side, and Johanna Elizabetha could see that his fingers were clenched and reclenched with such force

that the knuckles showed bluey white; otherwise the man might have been made of stone and his eyes of metal, so motionless and rigid was the whole figure. He had entered her apartment, and had demanded in a voice of controlled passion, deep with the effort he made to render it cold and courteous, 'Madame, where is your Highness's lady-in-waiting?'

She met the question with a tremulous torrent of words. 'I have dismissed Mademoiselle de Grävenitz. I required her services no longer; she did not please me; she has left the castle, probably the town. I do not know where she is.'

'I ask again, Madame la Duchesse, whither you have sent Mademoiselle de Grävenitz? You must have been aware of her destination before you permitted a young lady to leave the shelter of our castle,' he said. And the Duchess replied by an angry outburst, a hailstorm of reproaches, before which Eberhard Ludwig remained silent, cold, rigidly self-contained. The Duchess paused; it was like beating one's hand against some adamantine barrier. She had the sensation that all she said, felt, suffered, passed unnoticed; the man before her was waiting for information, that was all. It [117] was intolerable, and the hopelessness of any pleading came to her.

'My husband,' she said in another tone, calm and cold as his, 'I have endured enough. I have the right to dismiss my lady-in-waiting if I think fit. I have done so, and the lady will not enter my apartments again, nor will she be admitted to any court festivities wherein I take part.' She turned away; her despairing consciousness of ultimate humiliation seemed to choke her, though her very defeat was transformed to a moral victory by her resigned dignity. The Duke moved forward. 'At least tell me what has occurred,' he said hurriedly. 'When I left you three days ago there was no word of any dispute. I thought I left peace,' he added in a puzzled tone.

The Duchess came towards him. She held out her hands in a gesture of appeal: 'Eberhard, be just to me! I bore it as long as I could, but that woman's presence was a daily torture to me. Have a mistress, if need be,' this last bitterly, 'but at least do not cause her to be my companion. It is not fitting.' The blood rushed to the Duke's face. 'Mademoiselle de Grävenitz is fit to be the companion of saints, of angels!' he retorted angrily. 'She will return to court, I warn your Highness.' He turned abruptly and left the Duchess's apartment.

If the Duke, with the blindness of the enamoured, really had imagined peace to reign in his palace prior to his sojourn at Urach, on his return even love and anxiety could not hide the excitement and unrest which the departure of the favourite had caused in the castle of Stuttgart. Madame de Ruth, flinging etiquette to the winds, had met his Highness in the courtyard when he rode in from Urach, and had greeted him with the news of Wilhelmine's flight. The good lady was genuinely distressed, and had made unceasing search in the town, but naturally no one had thought of seeking in the Judengasse behind the Leonards Kirche. Wilhelmine seemed to have vanished off the face of the earth, and there were not wanting murmurers among the Duchess's servitors who averred that witches had ever been able to vanish at will, and that probably 'the Grävenitzin' would return in the form of a black cat or a serpent, and suddenly change into a woman again when it suited her. They were all in a flutter of superstitious excitement; and Maria [118] the maid, who loved Wilhelmine, went about with reddened eyes, and was much questioned below stairs.

The Duke, on hearing the news from Madame de Ruth, had repaired immediately to the Duchess, but, as we have seen, he had extracted no information from the lady, she having none to give. When his Highness left the Duchess's apartment he stormed up to Madame de Ruth's dwelling-room, and after some deliberation summoned Forstner and charged him with the unpleasant duty of leading a search party which was supplied with a ducal warrant to enter all houses of every grade in Stuttgart. Forstner, of course, urged patience; the missing one would return or communicate, he said; but the Duke greeted the word patience with such an outburst of anger that the 'Bony One' retired discomfited and gave orders for the search with apparent zeal.

Evening fell on the sun-baked streets of Stuttgart, and a faint breeze wafted a recollection of field and wood through the open windows of the castle. Eberhard Ludwig paced up and down, near the fountain in the castle gardens, where he had been with Wilhelmine on the moonlit night of the theatricals three months ago. He flung himself down upon the stone bench where they had sat together. He covered his eyes with his hands, he was tortured with memories, thrilled again to past raptures; his desire was aroused, increased a hundred-fold by the anguish of absence. Could it be true that such passion's enchantments were never to be his again? he asked himself. His memory conjured up a thousand charms of his beloved, her voice, her laugh, her touch. 'Wilhelmine, Wilhelmine!'

He sprang up. 'God! it is awful! Wilhelmine, my love, my mistress!' he said aloud. Ridiculous poet-fellow! he listened as though he expected an answer.

In the distance there was a rumble of thunder, and the restless breeze rioted suddenly in the tree-branches for a moment, passed onward, then swept back again rustling, then came a roll of thunder closer than the last. Another pause—fateful it seemed, as though the garden trembled before the coming storm. A white flash played intermittently upon the fountain, followed by a [119] thunderclap directly overhead, and a torrent of rain poured down. The Duke stood still a moment, the rain beating upon him. The storm delighted him, it answered to his tempestuous mood. He turned away from the castle and walked in the direction of the garden boundary on the south side, passing the drawbridge over the disused and flower-filled moat of the castle wall. What would have been his emotions had he known that his fancy led him to wander whither Wilhelmine had passed but three days before? He came to the garden's limit and stood looking towards the

dimly discernible openings of several narrow streets, the oldest and most ill-famed gangways of the town. Of a sudden he descried a small form muffled in a sombre cloak. The street was utterly deserted save for Eberhard Ludwig himself and this forlorn little figure, and the Duke's attention was thus arrested. The pouring rain had not extinguished the light of the two dilapidated hanging lamps, which were fixed upon the walls of the street from whence had issued the diminutive night-wanderer, whom the Duke saw was now making for the castle.

The true Wirtemberger vanishes like smoke before the first drop of rain, and the Duke therefore concluded that any errand undertaken, and continued, in a downpour must be for a purpose of paramount importance. So he watched with curiosity the approaching figure, observing with surprise that it was a child of some ten years old.

'Ha, young person,' called the Duke, as the child reached him; 'whither away so fast, and what may he want in the castle gardens at this time of night?'

Thus apostrophised, the figure hesitated; then apparently alarmed by the sight of the Duke's military cloak, and probably taking him for a sentry or a garden guard, the child ducked forward and would have made a bolt past his interrogator. But the Duke, who was amused and half-suspicious of the boy's errand, caught the figure by his heavy cloak, and dragged him, a trifle roughly, under the light of the lantern at the opposite street corner.

'Now he shall tell me where he was going,' Serenissimus said laughing. The disdainful use of the third person singular seemed to anger the boy, who stood silent and sullen, with bent head. 'But he *shall* tell me,' repeated the Duke, enforcing his command by a rough shake. [120]

'I will not tell you! What concern is it of yours?' the boy replied at length.

The Duke bent a puzzled look upon his prisoner, whose voice was refined, and whose German was guiltless of the rude Swabian accent. He did not speak like a gutter child, and the face which he turned upon Eberhard was startlingly beautiful. Still the Duke was suspicious. Why should this boy be slinking to the castle by night? His Highness disliked mysteries, or thought he did; though, as a matter of fact, he was always attracted by the mysterious, afraid of it, yet anxious to unravel. He gave the boy another shake. It was a physical relief to shake some one after the long hours of anxiety, and the control he had been forced to exercise upon his longing to shake the Duchess—no new wish on his part, and the only desire that estimable lady had inspired in his breast for many years. So the Duke shook his little prisoner again and again.

The boy remained passive; he was breathless, but he met the Duke's half-laughing, half-angry eyes with a bold look of defiance.

His Highness ceased shaking the child, feeling distinctly ashamed. 'Will he tell me now?' he asked more gently.

As he said the words, something caught the uncertain light of the lamps—a little jewel which glittered in the boy's coat. It was exposed to view by the disarrangement of the cloak caused by the rough handling.

'Lord God!' exclaimed the Duke, catching the boy by the arm once more, 'where in the devil's name did you get that?'

The boy clasped his free hand over the jewel, and proceeded to kick Eberhard Ludwig's shins with all the violence he could muster. 'A lady gave it to me, and you shall never have it! I will kill you sooner!' he cried grandiloquently.

'Be quiet, boy. I am a friend; tell me your errand. If it concerns the lady who gave you that jewel, I alone can be of assistance.' In his voice lay so pure a note of truth that the boy instinctively turned to him trustfully. [121]

'I have a message for the Duke from the lady. If you are a friend to her, you can tell me how to find him. The lady says I am to go to the castle and ask for Madame de Ruth, who will take me to his Highness if he has come back from hunting; then she said all would be well.'

To the boy's astonishment his big questioner suddenly let go his arm, and, leaning against the house wall, covered his face with his hands, shivered as though from an ague fit. When the man took his hands from before his face, the child saw that his eyes were full of tears. The boy wondered why so many grown-up people were so foolish.

'Quick, boy! take me to her!' he cried.

'No; that is just what I am not to do,' was the reply. 'I am to tell her where the Duke will meet her to-morrow morning early.'

'To-morrow morning! A million leaden moments! a century to pass! No! Boy, take me to her! I am the Duke; take me to her, I order you.'

'No; you may be the Duke, but she has given me her commands, and they mean more to me than yours.' The boy threw up his head proudly. Even in his passionate impatience Serenissimus was struck by the boy's manner, amused by this small gentleman.

'Preux Chevalier!' he said laughing; then bowing gravely to the little muffled figure, 'you are perfectly correct, and I stand reproved; but at least do me the honour to carry this ring to the lady, and tell her that I await either her or her sovereign commands.'

The boy took the ring and vanished into the blackness of the side street. Eberhard Ludwig remained looking after him into the gloom. A bitter thought came to him of the superiority of this child of the back streets over the Erbprinz of Wirtemberg—that poor, sickly, excitable boy, whose disappointing personality was a source of constant irritation and humiliation to his father. Eberhard Ludwig loved personal vitality, and that vigorous manliness which he himself possessed, and which he saw daily in the sons of his poorest subjects; and he suffered intensely [122] when he was brought into contact with his puny, unwholesome son. The Duchess's passionate spoiling and injudicious love made matters worse; the boy's health was in nowise benefited thereby, and it but served to accentuate the fact that his father had little else save impatient pity to bestow upon his disappointing offspring. This was in Eberhard Ludwig's mind as his eyes rested absently upon the street opening whither had vanished the erect little form of Joseph Süss —'preux chevalier,' as the Duke had dubbed him. The summer storm had passed, leaving a delicious freshness in the air and a fragrance which penetrated from the gardens to the Duke. Eberhard Ludwig stood waiting near the entrance to the narrow street or gangway, where the overhanging roofs dripped large splashing drops upon the unpaved earth below. Now that realisation was in all probability so near, his wild desire for Wilhelmine seemed to have passed; a curious anxiety had taken its place. How strange, the Duke reflected, that loss or absence should enhance the value of the beloved. He tried to conjure up his agony of longing for his mistress. What mad rapture, could he have clasped her at the moment of tremendous desire which had been his half an hour earlier in the castle garden! Are we really only children crying for the moon? and if the moon were given to us, should we but throw it away into the nearest ditch—merely another broken toy? he thought. These moods of Eberhard Ludwig's were frequent. Like all poets, he had a vein of melancholy, a tendency to indulge himself in a half-sensuous sadness, and these dreamings of his, which had never been received with ought save uncomprehending impatience by the Duchess, Wilhelmine had known so well how to assuage—not entirely to dissipate, for she would have robbed him of a certain joy had she done so; but she humoured him, understood him, wandered with him in the paths of his enchanted melancholy, then suddenly brought him back to gaiety by some witty word, some tender pleasantry. It was part of her immense power over him, and indeed, it was no thing of the senses, but rather her womanly genius, her innate knowledge of loving. As he stood awaiting her, his heart cried for her; he was [123] no longer stirred by physical desire, but he craved the consolation of her presence as a child wearies for its mother's love. Indeed, in most passions which have outlasted the flash of sheer animal attraction, there has ever been that touch of mother-love in the affection given by the woman to the man. And it is this which eternally makes the entirely desirable woman older than the man she loves.

The minutes passed slowly as Eberhard Ludwig stood waiting for some sign from Wilhelmine. At length his Highness heard an approaching footstep. He turned quickly, in his excitement not noting that the steps came from the direction of the castle garden. He started forward with outstretched arms. Forstner stood before him, a ridiculous figure as usual; his large, tiresome nose shadowed on the wall by the uncertain light of the hanging lanterns.

'Really, Monsieur de Forstner!' broke out the Duke angrily, 'it is intolerable to be thus followed! Am I not at liberty to take a stroll unquestioned?'

The astonished courtier attempted to explain that he had not known his Highness to be wandering near the Judengasse, but Eberhard Ludwig cut him short and desired him to go on his way. Forstner begged to be permitted to accompany his Highness. 'This is not a part of the town where it is fitting your Highness should be alone at night.' The reproving tone of the schoolmaster (that inextinguishable dweller of the innermost which abides for ever in the breast of every honest German) crept into the words, and Eberhard Ludwig's irritation was the more aroused.

'Will you go and leave me to myself, Forstner, you insufferable ass!' The words broke forth half fiercely, half humorously.

Forstner drew himself up with a certain stiff dignity. 'Were that term applied to me by any but my Prince, I should answer with the sword,' he said.

The Duke laughed impatiently. 'I retract—I apologise—I beg your forgiveness; you are an excellent fellow, a dear friend—only for God's sake, man, go away!'

'But your Highness—I beg you to consider——' the other began.

'Look here, Forstner,' the Duke interrupted, 'if you don't go—now, at once, and leave me alone, [124] upon my soul I will run you through!' He half-drew his sword.

'Really, Monseigneur,' replied Forstner, 'I am ready to obey your Highness, but——'

'Well, then, *go*!' The Duke was getting beyond himself; each moment he feared Wilhelmine would appear, and Forstner was not a person he desired as witness either to his meeting with his beloved, or to her advent from the lowest part of the town.

The estimable Forstner had at length commenced his departure, but he was distant only a few paces when the Duke heard a laugh coming from the gloom of the shadowed Judengasse. It was a laugh which, though low-pitched and quiet, had a resonant distinctness which caused it to carry a long way.

'Wait, for Heaven's sake, till he is gone,' his Highness whispered over his shoulder into the

darkness, observing to his dismay that Forstner had halted.

'Did your Highness call me?' asked the too-devoted friend, and made as though to return.

'No; I coughed. Do go away!' shouted the Duke in return, and set himself to cough vigorously, for behind him from the darkened street there came the unmistakable sound of Wilhelmine's irrepressible laughter.

At length the angular figure vanished, and the Duke sprang round with arms outstretched, and into them he received the stately form of his mistress, who lay upon his breast; for once unresponsive to his passionate kisses, while she laughed in a very agony of mirth.

'Forgive me, Monseigneur,' she said at last, her voice still shaking with laughter; 'but you know the scene was really beyond me. I heard all, and oh! Forstner was so droll, and you too.' She began to laugh again. 'Oh, how delightfully undignified, mon Prince—when you coughed to hide my laughter.'

Once more she leaned against Eberhard Ludwig's shoulder and rocked with merriment. The Duke also laughed, but a trifle ruefully; that meddler Forstner had destroyed the rapture of his meeting [125] with Wilhelmine, had broken the charm of his pensive mood; and besides, the Duke knew from experience that when Wilhelmine began to laugh like that he would probably hear no serious word from her during the evening. Even in their passion's transports he had known his mistress suddenly go off into a series of 'fous rires,' and no man enjoys the most harmless laughter at such moments.

'Wilhelmine, for God's sake stop laughing, and tell me where you have been since the Duchess—since the Duchess——' he hesitated, not knowing how to express the summary ejection from the castle.

'Since her Highness had the goodness to turn me out.' Wilhelmine was serious now, though her lips still twitched with mirth, and her eyes were mischievous and teasing. 'Nay, your Highness, that is my secret. I have always a hiding-place whither I can vanish when you are not good to me. Shall I disappear again? I have but to say a mystic word and your Highness will clasp empty air.' She was play-acting, as she often did, and she looked up at him with such dazzling eyes that he caught her to him with masterful passion.

'Witch! enchantress!' he murmured. 'What matters it where you were; you are here now with me, and never to part again!'

'Till death us do part,' she answered. 'Nay, those are the words men say to their wives, not to their——' A note of bitterness pierced the mockery of her tone.

'Ah! heart of mine,' he broke in vehemently, 'would that I could make you Duchess! You are my wife by all laws of fairest nature and love! This is a more holy thing than marriage—nay, this is true marriage!' It was the eternal lie of lovers: the old futile, pathetic, impossible pleading of those whose love cannot be sanctioned by law. Wilhelmine's face darkened.

'Monseigneur, if you could make Forstner and his sort believe that, I should not be taunted and insulted. But come, now, we cannot discuss this here. Will you tell me where you propose to lodge me this night, or shall I vanish again?' Her gaiety had returned.

'I must ask you to accept the hospitality of my roof to-night,' he said gravely; 'to-morrow I will [126] seek a fitting abode for you.'

'Ah! a mistress's separate establishment.' Her voice was bitter again. Was there ever such a difficult woman for lover to deal with? But that was half her charm.

'Wilhelmine, do not torture me. I will do all I can, and I pray you, never call your house a mistress's establishment—call it rather the palace of my heart's queen.'

'Prettily put, and meaning exactly the same!'

She was laughing once more; she loved when Eberhard Ludwig spoke in this chivalrous tone, as every woman does, thinking it a tribute to her own especial dignity when it is often only a deft trick of speech. Laughing and talking and teasing her beloved, she allowed him to lead her away through the gardens.

Within the castle commotion prevailed. Serving-men and maids ran hither and thither in an excited and aimless fashion; they started back in surprise and dismay when they perceived Wilhelmine's tall figure beside the Duke, but neither his Highness nor the lady stopped to question the servants on the cause of the disturbance. When they reached the first floor, where dwelt the Duchess Johanna Elizabetha, and would have passed on to gain Wilhelmine's apartments, they found themselves confronted by a group of persons talking in excited whispers. Prelate Osiander, certainly not one whom Eberhard Ludwig desired as a witness to Wilhelmine's re-entry; Madame de Stafforth, the Countess Gemmingen, one of the Duchess's ladies; Dr. Mürger, second court physician; two of her Highness's waiting-women. Madame de Ruth was also there, and it struck Wilhelmine as ominous that the lady of many words and ready wit stood silent and constrained.

'What is this?' queried Eberhard Ludwig angrily in a loud tone. The assembled persons turned in startled surprise. Osiander came forward.

'Your Highness's wife, the Duchess Johanna Elizabetha, is sick unto death, and your Highness was not to be found for all our search,' he said sternly, and without deigning to cast a glance upon Wilhelmine.

'What ails the Duchess?' asked Eberhard Ludwig, turning to Dr. Mürger. [127]

'It would seem to be a stroke of blood to the brain, your Highness—a dangerous thing to one of the Duchess's robust physique. Dr. Schubart is occupied in bleeding her Highness. My assistance was dispensed with,' he added in an offended tone.

At this moment the door of the Duchess's chamber opened, and Monsieur le Docteur Schubart, first doctor to the court and a very pompous person, appeared.

'I am relieved to be able to declare her Highness the Duchess to be returned from her strange swoon. I have the honour to announce that her Highness's cherished life will be spared to her devoted subjects.'

The man was odiously unctuous and self-satisfied. Madame de Stafforth burst into weak weeping, while Osiander gravely offered his congratulations to Eberhard Ludwig upon the recovery of 'his noble and devoted wife.' There lay something of true dignity and sober goodness in the Prelate's whole being which never failed to impress Wilhelmine, and she felt his entire ignoring of her to be a heavy public reproof from a competent judge. There was a moment's awkward silence when the Prelate ceased speaking, and every eye was turned to the pair of handsome lovers as they stood side by side, framed in the oaken panelling of the doorway leading to the stairs. Madame de Ruth, who hated pauses, came forward and held out her hand to Wilhelmine.

'My dear, I am glad to see you,' she said kindly.

Wilhelmine, whom Osiander's disapproval had irritated, replied calmly: 'Yes, I have returned, and to stay this time!' It was said defiantly.

Now it is well known that love makes the wisest of mankind foolish, and that the poet in love is a perfectly unaccountable being. Eberhard Ludwig was poet and lover, and he lost his head on this occasion.

'Returned to stay, dear lady, as long as my poor court can harbour and amuse so fair a visitant!' he said; then, turning to Madame de Ruth, he added in a lower tone, which was yet perfectly audible to most of the assembled company: 'The rain-cloud brought back sunshine to us. A flash [128] of lightning carried her from Elysium to earth once more. A mysterious Black Cupid led her to me! but we must be very careful, for she can vanish at will, this beautiful enchantress.'

It was said in extravagant homage, half in pleasantry, but several of those present, and notably the Duchess's waiting-women, heard the unwise words. When Wilhelmine swept past them on her way to her chamber they drew back in superstitious awe, and she heard them murmur, 'Witch and sorceress! we must not offend her.'

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[129]

CHAPTER X

THE ATTACK IN THE GROTTO

The court of Stuttgart soon saw to its cost that Wilhelmine had of a truth 'come to stay this time,' as she herself had announced on the evening of her return from the Judengasse. After a few days spent in her old quarters in the castle, she removed to a hastily improvised abode on the first floor of the Duke's Jägerhaus. Here had been the official residence of his Highness's Grand Maître de la Meute, and this personage, who was relegated to a small and inconvenient dwelling-place, naturally resented his eviction. Public disapproval was excited by the summary commandeering of a well-known official residence; and when, following upon their keeper's ejection, the stag-hounds and hare-coursers were removed from the Jägerhaus, the Stuttgarters murmured ominously. It had long been a highly prized privilege of the townsfolk to repair, each Sunday and Feast-day, to view the hounds—in fact, this custom had become one of their social entertainments. The burghers and their families were wont to meet together in the stretch of garden which bordered the open rails of the enclosure, where the hounds took their afternoon airing on idle, non-hunting days. The citizens loved to watch the dogs' antics, and regarded it as their recognised Sunday afternoon amusement. In the Graben, or disused town moat, turned road, stood the Jägerhaus—a long, barn-like building, the entire ground-floor whereof was occupied by the dog-kennels, which opened to the back on paddocks. On the first floor were many spacious apartments, hitherto used for the administration of the affairs of his Highness's hunt, and for lodging the Jägermasters of distant posts in the forests, who came to Stuttgart on [130] official business; and here, too, was the residence of the Grand Master of the Hunt and hounds. On the third floor, beneath the high sloping roof, were a few garrets and several large lofts filled with the straw destined for the dog-kennels. The mingled odours of hounds and straw displeased Wilhelmine's acute sense of smell, and one of her first commands upon entering her new abode was that hounds and straw should be removed instantly. She declared that therefrom the whole house was infested with fleas, and when the Duke, wishful to propitiate the angry lady, proposed to send for the late occupant of the Jägerhaus to inquire if he had been aware of his neighbours, the fleas, she remarked angrily that fleas were dainty feeders and, like Jews, were not in the habit of selecting pigskin for food. This remark was evidently heard by some unfriendly person,

for on the morrow it was the common talk of the town. A few days later the hounds were seen progressing through Stuttgart on their way to temporary kennels hastily arranged in the Rothwald. The populace followed this cortège shouting, 'They are taking away our beautiful hounds, and leaving an accursed bitch in the old kennels!' And that day when Serenissimus drove out, accompanied as usual by Wilhelmine, he was met by an angry murmuring crowd. Here was the beginning of that unpopularity of Wilhelmine's which gave the lie to the devotion of her friends, and notably her personal attendants and servants. This unpopularity which had so terrible an effect on her character, hardening her heart, accentuating the underlying cruelty, the indifference to aught save her own pleasure and power. Feeling herself accounted evil, she became so. It was this, taken together with her magnificent success and her extraordinary prosperity, which caused her to become a cruel and self-seeking woman. Monsieur Gabriel, in the far-off days at Güstrow, had feared this development, had trembled before the world-hardness which would mar the being he loved. How many have trembled at the same thought, and in sadness and loneliness have realised that their dread has become a cruel reality! We can face Death for those we love, mourning them in agony and tears, but we can find no beauty in that [131] bitter and hideous grief which comes to us when those we loved, we trusted, we admired, change to us—worst of all, change in themselves. This is the inexorable Death in Life, and in this Death we cannot dream of a fair consoling Hereafter. The thing we loved has not only perished—alas! we realise that it has never existed! What we worshipped was the shadow of our own making, a mirage conjured up by our heart's desire. To those who love most, love best, this tragedy comes.

Wilhelmine, who arrived in Wirtemberg a strong, passionate creature, generous, vital, was too responsive to remain unaltered by the alchemising touch of the world. Had she been met with tenderness and purity, and by noble men and women, she might have become a power for good; as it was, she was received by intrigue, contending interests, disapproval, distrust, the lust of love. As a good woman there was no place for her at Wirtemberg's court, so all the evil, lying dormant in every human heart, rose up in her, and she became a Queen of Wickedness. Monsieur Gabriel would have mourned another lost illusion, had not Death taken him from this world a few months after Wilhelmine's departure from Güstrow. He bequeathed to her his well-worn books, *Les Pensées de Pascal*, *Le Roman de la Rose*, the poems of the singers of La Pleïade, and the few other volumes wherefrom he had instructed his beloved pupil. He left, besides, a little sealed packet, in which she was surprised to find several beautiful jewels, among them a white enamel cross, in the centre whereof was the image of a dove with outspread wings.

Eberhard Ludwig told her these were the insignia of a high order in France, and she was thereby confirmed in her notion that her beloved old schoolmaster's great air and immense refinement were those of a grand seigneur. She often pondered on why a Huguenot had been permitted to bear the holy order of the St. Esprit upon his breast, but she remembered that Monsieur Gabriel had spoken of the court festivities with that sure accent which told that he had been of the caste which took part in those scenes. She never learnt his secret; to her credit, she never sought to unravel it. The Grävenitz was what the world calls wicked, but vulgarity and vulgarity's [132] attendant, curiosity, could not touch her, and she respected the silence of her friends, though she ever spied upon her enemies. The news of Monsieur Gabriel's death was brought to Wilhelmine soon after her advent at the Jägerhaus, and for many days the favourite refused to see any one save Eberhard Ludwig. She mourned her old friend sincerely, and wept bitterly when she saw the worn volumes he had bequeathed to her. The cross she fastened round her neck on a thin gold chain, and this badge of a sacred order rested for many years on the heart of the strange, evil woman. You can see the tiny line of this chain in the few known portraits of Wilhelmine von Grävenitz. These pictures are very rare, Time and Hatred have hidden them but too well. Indeed, it is as though all the Swabian virtue had conspired together to obliterate the memory, with the portraits, of the abhorred 'Grävenitzin.'

For the nonce, life was very peaceful for Wilhelmine in the Jägerhaus; and the Duke, entirely enthralled by his mistress, humoured her every whim. Madame de Ruth said mockingly to Zollern that a more exemplary young married couple than 'Monsieur et Madame Eberhard Ludwig' she had never seen. But the feeling against the favourite in Stuttgart grew each day, and the fact that his Highness had caused much that was of beauty and value in the castle to be removed to the Jägerhaus gave umbrage to the courtiers. Even Zollern remonstrated, but in vain. Meanwhile the Jägerhaus had become a splendid abode: rich yellow silken hangings hid the bare whitewashed walls of the chamber Wilhelmine had selected for her reception-room; the old wooden floors had been polished till they appeared to be the finest parquet; gilt chairs deeply cushioned, and also of that delicate yellow colour which the favourite loved, had been brought from Paris; a spinet with a beautifully painted case stood near the window; a quaint sixteenth-century stove which had been in the state room at the castle had been chosen by her as harmonising well with the yellow hangings, being made of light blue tiles. In an alcove, especially constructed by grumbling, slow-handed Stuttgart workmen for the 'Duke's Witch,' was the pick of the ducal library. The court [133] ladies heard with jealous rage, that the Grävenitzin had a dressing-room entirely panelled with mirrors, that her bed was hung with light blue silk, that she had a silver bath surrounded by mirror screens. How had the Mecklemburg Fräulein learnt such things? they asked. How indeed, but in her inborn genius for luxury! The favourite's servants were magnificently attired in ducal liveries. The lady had her own carriage with painted panels and yellow satin cushions. She gave rich entertainments, and the invitations were coveted, of course, by the good people who were so horrified at their hostess. The Duchess Johanna Elizabetha would not be present at a court feast where the Grävenitz appeared? Very well! there *were* no court feasts! All the gaiety of the autumn of 1706 and the winter of 1707 took place at the Jägerhaus.

The Duchess-mother, from her dower-house of Stetten, descended periodically upon Stuttgart, rated her son, condoled with Johanna Elizabetha, and returned utterly unsuccessful to Stetten.

Forstner's warning voice was never silent. Osiander failed to return Wilhelmine's salutation when she encountered him in the Lustgarten. It was open war between virtue and the Grävenitz.

Stuttgart in the winter is a vastly different place to the smiling, gay Stuttgart of spring and summer days, and Wilhelmine often wondered whither had vanished the charm, the delight of Southern Germany. That winter there fell but little snow, a cruel black frost was over the whole valley; sometimes the frost relaxed his iron grip, and then came torrents of rain. The frost returned when the rain ceased, and taking the wet earth into his gaunt hands turned everything into dirty sheet ice. In Wilhelmine's yellow room at the Jägerhaus the blue stove radiated a pleasant warmth, and, if a feeble sunray struggled through the gloomy, leaden sky, the yellow hangings caught it like a lover, and seemed to treasure it, filling the whole room with a hint of spring sunshine. In the castle the Duchess sat in her sombre apartments which she had made as dull, as dreary, as charmless as herself. Eberhard Ludwig seldom visited her, and she spent her [134] time in cosseting the sickly Erbprinz, or bemoaning her fate to Madame de Stafforth.

Slowly the winter left the land, but the spring that year was a meagre starveling, niggardly of smiles. He seemed to have borrowed winter's breath, and the pale young leaves shuddered in the unfriendly blasts. The fruit blossom struggled into a nipped existence, and fell like thin snow to the ground. An eerie spring, and men said there was a spell upon the country, and looked towards the Jägerhaus as they spoke.

During the winter the French army under Maréchal Villars had again threatened Wirtemberg. On a cheerless day towards the end of April Eberhard Ludwig arrived as usual in the early morning to visit his beloved at the Jägerhaus. For several days she had noticed a cloud upon his brow, he had answered her absently, and she knew instinctively that there was something on his mind, which he desired to tell her. Too wise to question him, she watched him closely. When he entered the yellow-hung salon that cheerless April morning, he greeted her almost coldly, and began to play roughly with his huge black wolf-hound, Mélac. This animal was the Duke's constant companion—an extraordinarily sagacious beast, whom Wilhelmine declared to be a hater of dullness because he had ever been surly towards Johanna Elizabetha. For the favourite the dog had a marked affection; he would lie near her with his large head resting on her foot, while his patient eyes looked up at her with that strange, unblinking gaze which is characteristic of the wolf-hound.

There was something brutal in the way Eberhard Ludwig teased the dog that morning; he hurt the poor brute, pulling his short, sensitive ears, drawing Mélac roughly back then flinging him away. It was a cruel game, more like a combat between man and hound; and Mélac, good, generous beast though he was, began to get angry. The Duke's hand had been scratched by the dog's sharp teeth, and the wolf-hound tasting blood, grew ferocious. With a growl Mélac suddenly reared up on his hind legs and placed his front paws on the Duke's breast, his teeth bared in an ugly snarl. Eberhard Ludwig laughed, but the dog's fangs were dangerously near his Highness's [135] throat; and indeed it was no laughing matter, for a wolf-hound, once his teeth are fastened in a man's throat, does not leave his prey alive. It was a grim comedy. Wilhelmine rose from her chair near the window and came forward.

'Leave him to me!' shouted the Duke, at length aware of his danger. He gripped Mélac by the ears and held the beast from him; but the hound was thoroughly aroused, and Eberhard Ludwig felt that it was an unequal contest in spite of his strength.

Wilhelmine advanced fearlessly, and laying her hand upon the dog's head, she leaned round till she faced the snarling brute.

'What are you doing, Wilhelmine?' panted the Duke. 'For God's sake do not put your face so close to his teeth!'

'I know what I am doing, mon Prince,' she said calmly.

As at Güstrow, when Müller had attacked her, she now narrowed her lids and forced her will into her eyes. Gradually she felt her mastery working on Mélac; his jaws dropped, no longer fiercely baring the teeth but as though he had run a long distance, the whole mouth became weak, the red tongue protruding. With a whine the dog fell, his front paws slipping from the Duke's shoulders. Shuddering, the great animal crouched on the floor, his eyes still resting on Wilhelmine with an expression of abject terror.

'Lie quiet, Mélac! There—good dog!' She stroked his head, and the hound fawned upon her, dragging himself round her feet, crawling, abased.

Eberhard Ludwig caught her hand, and his own trembled a little. 'What an extraordinary thing! Did you put a spell upon Mélac? I have never seen him thus cowed! Beloved, I believe I owe my life to you this morning,' he said.

Wilhelmine passed her hand across her eyes. 'So may all your enemies be defeated!' she said, laughing.

'Could you make me tremble like that with your wonderful eyes?' he asked. He was fascinated, yet there was something terrible to him in this woman's power.

'Mon Prince, you are my master always,' she returned; and the subtle flattery of being the avowed ruler of so potent a being delighted him, as it pleases all men, who are obviously slaves, to be called master by the woman who controls them. [136]

'Alas! but I am not the master of destiny,' he said sadly, 'and I come this morning to prove it. Wilhelmine, beloved, I must return to the army. We have information that Villars is to invade Wirtemberg once more, and I must be with the forces.'

'Is our happiness over then?' she queried.

'Ah! no, no, beloved of my life! You will wait for me here, I shall return in a few months.'

'Months! Months of Stuttgart without you? Ah! Eberhard, you cannot ask it!' She pleaded long, but for once the Duke was obdurate: he must go, he said; honour demanded it.

On the day fixed for Eberhard Ludwig's departure there was much stir in Stuttgart, and the people crowded the streets to show honour to their Duke, whose popularity was suddenly reawakened by his reassumption of the rôle of military hero. Johanna Elizabetha was to accompany the Duke out of the town; once again she was to be permitted to play her part as wife and Duchess. Forstner had achieved this, with the help of Osiander, who was to pronounce a blessing on the Duke and his body-guard on the market-place ere they set forth. The Prelate declared he would refuse his benediction were the Duchess not accorded her fitting place in the ceremony. Wilhelmine was enraged. It is hard for a woman to see another recognised as the beloved's wife, besides she regarded this as a slight to herself. It was terrible to her, and she stormed and raged and reproached the Duke, demanding what was to be her place in the ceremony. Then, in tears, she caressed him.

Of course, the Duke blamed Johanna Elizabetha for this scene. When do we ever blame the right person for the disagreeable happenings of our lives?

At length Serenissimus tore himself away from his mistress, carrying in his heart her picture in her yellow, sunlit room, crying bitterly with face hidden in her hands. He hated tears, but Wilhelmine's weeping was so different from that of other women, he reflected, as he wended his way through the gardens towards the castle to mount his charger and head the procession to the market-place, and thence away to the French frontier. He had taken leave of Johanna Elizabetha that morning, for though she was to assist in the ceremony of departure, he had granted her request for a previous farewell in private. The Duchess had met him with tear-swollen lids, and had wept incessantly during the short interview. The poor soul had shown her grief in a most unbecoming way; her mouth grimaced ridiculously when she cried, 'like a squalling brat's,' his Highness had reflected bitterly. [137]

Ah! the difference when Wilhelmine wept—her head bowed down with sadness, her face hidden. It was so graceful, so poetic; of course the secret was, that when she wept she hid her face. A really clever woman of the world would never show the grimace of sorrow: she may weep, but she hides her face, well knowing that a weeping woman is a hideous sight; but all this Eberhard Ludwig did not know.

Meanwhile Wilhelmine sat in her yellow salon listening to the sounds from the market-place which floated to her across the gardens behind the Jägerhaus. She heard the flare of trumpets which greeted the Duke, the roar of the enthusiastic people acclaiming their warlike sovereign; then followed silence, Osiander must be pronouncing his benediction, she thought. Again a flourish of trumpets, men shouting, and then she heard the grand hymn, 'Ein' Feste Burg ist unser Gott,' sung by thousands of voices and brayed out by the brass instruments. The sound came nearer: she could hear the tramp of feet, the clatter of horses, the cries of the people. The musicians played a march: it seemed to Wilhelmine that it became more triumphant, more blatant, as the cortège passed near the Jägerhaus; yet the boisterous military music held a note of pathos, something infinitely moving at this terrible farewell hour, and the listening woman wept bitterly, and, God knows! she forgot to hide her sorrow-distorted mouth at that moment.

The days dragged on. May came cold and unfriendly, as April had been, and Wilhelmine thought that all the warmth of the world must have departed when Eberhard Ludwig went to the frontier to do battle. The lilacs came to a tardy bloom, and even on the cold ungenial air there floated a divine fragrance. News came from the Duke—dull news, all detail of the organising and improvement of troops. Passionate words intermingled in these letters to Wilhelmine, old faded yellow curiosities now. Madame de Ruth, Zollern, and Stafforth often visited the favourite at the Jägerhaus, and Wilhelmine's innate desire to please—that impulse which must ever belong to the 'charmeurs' and especially to the 'charmeuses' of the world—taught her to forget her sadness when she was with her friends, and thus some brighter hours were passed. She sang, and if her singing were more truthfully passionate and more sad than of yore, it was surely love which had taught her greater depth. Only Madame de Ruth, the old courtesan, realised that not love but love's sadness had given that tone to the glorious voice; and Madame de Ruth looked at Zollern, her eyes full of tears, but Zollern leaned his chin on the mythologically ornamented china handle of his stick and revelled in a thrill, a spark of youth's desire, which the younger woman's voice had rekindled. Men are promiscuous to the end of their lives. Why blame them? God made them so. [138]

Towards the beginning of May, shortly after his Highness's departure, Madame de Ruth arrived one morning at the Jägerhaus brimming over with words and gossip. 'Imagine, ma chère,' she

cried, as she rustled into Wilhelmine's yellow salon, 'Osiander is in disgrace with the Duchess! I heard it was coming, but did not believe it. As you know, her Highness has given orders that, being in spiritual mourning in the absence of her dear spouse at the war, she will see none save her personal attendants and Madame de Stafforth. Well, well, it is quite contrary to every etiquette; but, indeed, the court of Stuttgart has ceased to exist nowadays, and her Highness can do as she likes.'

'Yes, yes; I know all that. Tell me what the news is!' broke in Wilhelmine impatiently. The Duchess's entire seclusion was well known to her, she heard it discussed by her friends daily.

'Let me tell you my story in my own way, or I shall not tell it at all! Well, I live in the castle.'—'I know that too,' said Wilhelmine, laughing.—'Certainly you do—I live in the castle, and really it is [139] ridiculous if I never see the Duchess, considering that I am her resident Maîtresse du Palais; so at last I wrote to the Duchess saying I begged an audience, as really being of no use to her Highness I wished for leave of absence, but must crave a moment's conversation with her before I left.'

'Are you going to leave?' said Wilhelmine anxiously.

'Jamais de la vie, ma chère! but I wanted to see the Duchess, and this was the only way. Well, she consented to see me, so I went to her yesterday evening, found her with la Stafforth sewing shirts for the poor—very estimable! She was far from amiable to me; asked me if I meant to cease being Maîtresse du Palais, and become Dame de Déshonneur to Fräulein von Grävenitz. Upon my word, I had not credited her with wit enough for so cutting a saying; then I told her I should be obliged to resign, and had written to Serenissimus saying her Highness's refusals to see me made my position ridiculous. She replied that I could do as I wished, and just as I was preparing to take leave of her Highness, Osiander was announced. It amused me to hear, so I drew back into the shadow—you know the Duchess's rooms have always much shadow. Well, Osiander declared he had given his best attention to her Highness's demand, but regretted to be unable to accede to her request. The Duchess seemed much annoyed, and said that in this case she would invite the Pietist to preach to her in the castle itself. Osiander told her that this, of course, was as her Highness willed, but that Pietists being members of a sect not recognised by the State, he could not permit a sermon to be preached in the Duke's chapel or in the Stiftskirche by a travelling Pietist preacher. The Duchess bowed to him in dismissal, and remarked that this Müller was a saint she had heard, and inspired by God——'

'Müller?' cried Wilhelmine—'Müller? a preacher? Where does he come from?'

'My dear, that is just the strange thing. Of course, directly Osiander departed, I made my courtesy to her Highness—she didn't try to keep me, you may be sure!—and I hurried after the Prelate. I found him on the stairs in great distress, poor man, for it appears her Highness has tried to have some of these Pietists to preach in church before. She is filled with curiosity, which [140] she calls sympathy with the simple, stern religion; and this Müller, who goes about preaching, is now at Tübingen. La Stafforth heard about him from some servant, and has filled her Highness's head with foolish notions, amongst others, that he is sent by God to console her!

'It appears, my dear, and this is the disagreeable part, that he preaches directly against you—naming you by name, and saying you are a walking contamination; that you are a witch, and that in Mecklemburg it was well known! He can vouch for it, as he was pastor at Güstrow before God called him—which means before he became a wandering Pietist preacher. All this Osiander told me, and, to do him justice, he was horrified at the whole thing and very angry with her Highness. I suppose Müller is a madman, a fanatic; but, Wilhelmine, I think we had best journey to the Neuhaus together and stay there till the Duke's return, for I do not trust the people here. There is a strong feeling against you, and if they are to be stirred up by this preaching rascal, it might really be disagreeable.' She paused breathless.

'He is a terrible man, a devil, and I am convinced he has followed me to Wirtemberg for revenge,' said Wilhelmine; and then she told Madame de Ruth of Müller's behaviour at Güstrow, and of how she had interrupted his sermon. Madame de Ruth laughed, though she was anxious and distressed that this dangerous enemy was working against Wilhelmine in the Duke's absence, especially when she heard that Müller was a powerful preacher gifted with the fanatic's vivid eloquence.

'One thing perplexes me,' said the Grävenitz, 'why does Osiander oppose this man? Surely to harm me any means would be welcome!'

'Yes, doubtless!' replied Madame de Ruth, 'but of the two evils in the land he considers you the lesser; for you, my dear, are frankly of the devil, and the Church can abhor you, but Pietism is a wolf in sheep's clothing which might eat up the Church! All these Churchmen fear that the Pietists should get hold of the people—above all, in this case, of the Duchess and her tiresome court. It is simply, as usual, one faction against the other. Though, of course, Osiander as a [141] gentleman and a scholar is naturally opposed to ranting preachers and religion vulgarised.'

It was settled that Madame de Ruth and Wilhelmine were to start for the Neuhaus as soon as fitting arrangements could be made, and the Grävenitz looked forward with pleasure to the quiet summer hours she would spend reading beneath the beech-trees of the Neuhaus garden. But Fate was too strong for her; the very morning fixed for their departure Madame de Ruth slipped upon the castle staircase and broke her ankle.

Wilhelmine was informed of the accident by Zollern, who was both distressed for the sake of his old friend's pain, and much disturbed that the projected departure could not take place, for he did not consider Wilhelmine safe in Stuttgart. He knew that the feeling against her increased each day, owing chiefly to the gossip concerning her witch practices. It was her habit to read late at night, and the people believed she was occupied in brewing magic philters and composing incantations. They vowed they had seen two shadows on her window-blinds, which of a truth they may have seen, for often old Frau Hazzim came to visit her secretly at night. The Jewess was entirely under the spell of Wilhelmine's attraction, and the Grävenitz was learning many things from her nocturnal visitor, who had a vast knowledge of herbs and medicaments, the traditional code of doctoring handed down in her family. Strict Jewess though she was, she had many receipts for love potions, and she knew much of various poisons. Thus the Stuttgarters were not mistaken when they averred they had seen a second shadow on the blind, and considering Frau Hazzim's grotesque features, it is hardly surprising that the superstitious and fearful observers believed that this second shadow was the witch's familiar spirit.

Wilhelmine's servants were questioned at the market, and they replied that their mistress received no visitors in the dead of night, for Wilhelmine was naturally careful that even her servants should not be aware of Frau Hazzim's visits, which, considering the ill fame of the Jews in those days, was absolutely necessary. She therefore was wont herself to admit her visitor by a small door which opened on to the garden at the back of the Jägerhaus. So the terrified, [142]
fascinated watchers saw, with horror, this mysterious second shadow on the closed blind, and it was said that by incantations the witch summoned this evil being, for her own servants must know had any person from the mortal world been in the house!

Of this story Zollern was not aware, but he knew enough to recognise the dangerous reputation which his friend enjoyed. Wilhelmine herself was perfectly conscious that there was an element of danger for her, and she was disturbed that by Madame de Ruth's untoward accident she was obliged to remain in Stuttgart. That she was a reputed witch she knew, but far from being alarmed she was slightly flattered and amused at the notion, and deeming herself secure in the Duke's powerful protection she had no fear of any serious annoyance. Her only apprehension was that some murderous attack might be made upon her when she drove out, so she remained more than ever secluded and hidden in the Jägerhaus and the walled-in Lustgarten, her one amusement being Frau Hazzim's nightly visits.

Wilhelmine was half dupe of her own magical practices, and she was arduous in her studies of old black-letter books on the subject of spirit-raising, love potions, spells, and the rest of those meddlings with the unknown forces which have fascinated mankind for countless ages under various forms.

Towards the end of May the weather changed, and sultry heat reigned over Wirtemberg. Stuttgart lies deep in a valley, sheltered by hills, and the heat in the town is often terrible. The sudden change from the chill spring to glowing summer was unbearable to Wilhelmine, immured in the Jägerhaus, and she longed for the cool freshness of the Rothwald where she had been accustomed to drive, but Zollern so strongly advised her not to show herself in the town, that she consented to forego this pleasure while Müller was in Stuttgart. He had preached before the Duchess, upon whom his passionate eloquence, the Biblical turn of his phrases, and his denunciations of all things joyful, had made a deep and pleasing impression. She caused the Pietist to visit her daily and instruct her in the stern belief. Müller told her Highness the story of [143]
his conversion: how he had been a worldly, but he hoped a pure, pastor of the State religion; how that an evil and lustful woman had sought to seduce him, and he mentioned Güstrow as the place where his temptation had been offered him. The stroke told: her Highness started visibly. He continued by indicating that this abandoned woman was a witch, and finally let the Duchess understand that, having triumphantly resisted the temptress's sinful wiles, he had sought and found strength in the Pietist movement. Even a slower intellect than that of Johanna Elizabetha could not have failed to associate Wilhelmine von Grävenitz with the temptress of Güstrow; and when in answer to her Highness's query, whether the evil woman had been punished for her wickedness, Müller threw himself at the Duchess's feet and told her openly that the contaminating female was the Grävenitz, whom he had followed from Güstrow—he, the poor instrument of God's righteous wrath, her Highness indeed felt that here was the vengeance of the Almighty coming upon her enemy. Müller was sincere enough in his abhorrence of the woman who had resisted and then insulted him. The fanatical practices of the Pietists had inflamed his mind, and he really believed God had chosen him to humble the wanton. Old Frau von Grävenitz had talked freely of the favours and honours showered upon her daughter at Stuttgart, and Müller's mad physical jealousy was aroused, for he at once realised that Wilhelmine had become Eberhard Ludwig's mistress. This, together with his fierce fanatical Pietism, had sufficed to turn the man's brain. Thus mixed and contending motives, as is so often the case, formed a fixed and single purpose, and Müller had preached his way to Stuttgart, where he meant to accomplish his object of vengeance upon Wilhelmine or die in the attempt. He knew that to gain an extensive hearing from the crowd in Stuttgart he must earn a reputation as preacher in the neighbourhood, so he began his campaign by lecturing in the open air at many towns and villages of Wirtemberg. Pietism was rife all over the country, and the preacher was received with enthusiasm, and his fame, as we have seen, spread rapidly, even reaching at length the Duchess. Müller had never [144]
dreamed of gaining so great a personage as her Highness, and he was astounded when he received her command to preach at the castle; but this gave him renewed confidence in himself, and it seemed to his half-crazy mind to be a confirmation of his divine mission of revenge on the sinful. At present he had formed no definite plan as to how his vengeance was to be

accomplished; he merely meant, if possible, to inflame public opinion against Wilhelmine to such an extent as to cause her to be driven from Wirtemberg. With unfailing energy Müller preached sometimes four or five sermons daily, whenever and wherever he managed to attract a crowd. At first he contented himself with pronouncing violent diatribes against sin: the term conveyed to him only one species of human weakness, and all his sermons were on the subject of bodily lust. He had named Wilhelmine 'a sinner, an instigator of wickedness,' at Tübingen, and he had quickly noted the approval on his hearers' faces. Now in Stuttgart he went further, and actually accused her of witchcraft as well. His zeal grew, each day increased by his own words, till he preached openly a religious crusade against her. Osiander, informed of these sayings, caused him to be warned that the Church could not countenance a religious preacher who thus instigated the people to revolutionary acts. The better sort of Pietists—sober burghers, for the most part—deserted their idol, and his congregations were now chiefly composed of the worst characters of the town. It certainly was unfortunate that the Grävenitz had been unable to seek the shelter of Neuhaus, yet Zollern and Stafforth reflected there could be little actual danger if she remained at the Jägerhaus, only taking the air in the walled-in Lustgarten; but they urged her not to venture out of this shelter for a few weeks, after the expiration of which time they argued the popular excitement would have died out, or if it had not, they would make arrangements for her residence in some safe place across the frontier of Switzerland. Neuhaus they considered to be too near to Tübingen, where, they heard, there was much hostility against Wilhelmine.

Meanwhile each day the heat became more intense, and the Favourite grew more impatient of being forbidden to drive out. One evening, as she sat disconsolately in her salon, a faint, fresh breeze floated in through the open window. It was fragrant and delightful after the long, stifling hours, and it seemed to her like an invitation from the outer world, that world of tree and flower for which she yearned. How she longed to drive away out of the reeking, low-lying town, and wander in the cool Red Wood! Still the Lustgarten was a resource, and its quaint sixteenth- and seventeenth-century embellishments delighted her. She rose, and taking a lace mantilla, arranged it round her head. She passed out of the small door at the back of the Jägerhaus, and strolled slowly along in the direction of the grotto. As she passed the gates leading from the garden to the high-road, she called to the sentry, telling him that should Monseigneur de Zollern seek her before she returned, he should be informed that she had gone to the Duke Christopher's Grotto. At first the soldier pretended not to hear, and the Grävenitz was obliged to approach him and give her message. [145]

She asked, angrily, if he was deaf, and was informed in the usual peasant idiom that he 'could hear as well as another.'

'Well, give my message to any one who inquires for me,' she said haughtily, and walked on.

The man frowned evilly at her, and she recollected that the maid Maria, once when she had accompanied her mistress on a stroll in the Lustgarten, and they had passed the same sentry, had told her that he was the lover of Johanna Elizabetha's waiting-maid, the woman who had always been so insolent to Wilhelmine at the castle. 'He would do me harm, that lout, if he could,' Wilhelmine reflected as she walked on, and the man's frowning face haunted her for a time, but soon the freshness of the evening breeze and the garden's beauty drove all unquiet thoughts from her mind.

She wandered slowly through the trees of the pheasant garden, pausing a moment to look at the gorgeous plumage of the birds in their gilded cages. Then she came to the rosery shut off from the rest of the garden by tall beech-trees, where splashed the fountain near the marble seat on which the lovers had sat together after the theatricals, and where Eberhard Ludwig had agonised when she was hidden in the Judengasse. She passed the new Lusthaus, and looked up with a sigh at the balcony where Serenissimus and she had stood together, and he had told her Forstner called him a ridiculous poet fellow, because he loved the starlit woods at night. She came to the famous fourteenth-century maze, where the cypress-trees had grown so high and dense that it was really a place to lose oneself in, did one not possess the clue to the intricate windings. She walked outside the maze, breathing in the fragrance of the sun-kissed cypress, and turned into the orangery, and here she lingered a while in the alleys of formally cut trees. Then she walked on, and finally gained the wilderness which surrounded the famous grotto; this was a long construction of rocks and shells, very quaint, no doubt, in the days when it was built, yet Time had further enchanted it, adding melancholy and mystery to the half-ruined place. There was a deep, stagnant tank before the grotto, covered with weeds and growing things. In the centre of this tank, among lusty nymphs and playful dolphins, a huge Triton sat on his rocky throne, and from his trident a few drops of water still oozed slowly. [146]

The elaborate waterworks and strange devices could not be quite unhinged, Wilhelmine reflected idly. She recollected how Eberhard Ludwig had shown her the grotto's marvellous springs and tricks; she recalled how, after much heaving and turning at an iron lever, the whole grotto had suddenly been converted into a place of living waters. She wondered if the works were still more rusty now; how sad a waste that this curious old-world pleasantry should be allowed to rust to destruction. Wilhelmine fell into a dream: if she were Duchess, she would have the grotto repaired, not Time's handiwork disturbed; the ferns, the lichen, the twining ivy should remain; the wilderness should not be formalised; only the waterworks should be renewed, and the old devices made perfect. There should be water-fêtes by moonlight, with lamps shimmering through the playing fountains, and music, faint and fitful, from unseen players. And she would be mistress of all this.

She was resting on a moss-grown seat, and the gentle breeze played over her brow. She almost slept for a moment. What was that? A discordant note smote disagreeably on her hearing. Why must the canaille make so hideous a noise when it amuses itself? she reflected; probably some ridiculous popular jaunt, some people's gathering. Her lip curled contemptuously. Were she Duchess she would teach the canaille what was fitting for it! [147]

Again the sound disturbed her; it seemed to be coming nearer—probably along the Bergstrasse from Cannstatt. What could it be? She could hear the hoarse roar of many voices; it was terrifying somehow. She sprang up. God in Heaven! could it be a mob incited by Müller to stone her house? But no, the sound was not in that direction; surely it came from beyond the eastern wall of the Lustgarten. Impossible! But it sounded as though the crowd made its way towards the grotto. The sound increased each breathless moment; she could hear some of the rabble singing hymns. To her horror she realised that they must have passed the Lustgarten walls, that they were actually nearing her. Could she gain the shelter of the Jägerhaus? She had a vision of a pursuit through the gardens. No! she must hide—the mob must go past her, that was her only hope. Instinct told her that she was the crowd's quarry. Hide? But where? Ah, the grotto. She fled round the water-tank and gained the humid darkness of the grotto. She rushed on, her feet slipping on the slimy stones of the entrance-chamber. If she could only gain the higher gallery she might hide in some dark corner. Ah! here were the steps. She clambered up; the yelling crowd must be close behind now, for she could hear their words: 'Rat out the witch!' 'Death to the sinner!' 'Die Hexe! die verdammte Hexe!'—then some coarse witticisms shouted in Swabian dialect, rude laughter, whoops and curses, groans and whistles, all a mob's animal-like ejaculations.

The Grävenitz shuddered. Would they pass her? They were beneath the grotto now; she could hear their words distinctly: 'To the grotto! the grotto! the witch is there! He told us she was going there!' Merciful Heaven! they knew then—the sentry had told them! The Grävenitz felt that all was lost now. They *must* find her. She crouched down against the wall. Listen! What was that? [148] 'The grotto is haunted; the white lady walks there,' some one said. They hesitated. She knew no one had entered the grotto yet. 'Nothing worse than a little water haunts the place, comrades,' she heard a voice say, then laughter. A little water? What had Eberhard Ludwig said? 'One might stand a siege here if one turned the waters on from inside; I don't believe anything but a sea-serpent could enter!'—idle words spoken in jest. Was there a chance left? If she could find the lever—but it would not turn—the hinges must be locked with rust. She was seeking wildly along the wall now, her hands rasped and bleeding with scraping against the rough surface. She remembered Eberhard Ludwig had said, 'The trick of it is on the left side of this gallery.' How the words came back to her!—the left side. Yes! But which was the left side of the grotto? She had lost her bearings in the darkness. Ah, could this be it? She grasped it with both hands; it gave slightly; she wrenched at it, throwing all her weight against it. It resisted, and she felt as though her spine must crack with the immense strain; the veins of her temples seemed bursting, the tips of her fingers as though the blood must gush out. Still the heavy, rusty iron bar only gave a little. She could hear the noise outside, but it sounded faint to her, for her entire bodily power was concentrated, and her ears only registered the surging of her own blood. With a sudden wrench the bar flew round in her hands, and she fell forward on her knees, flung with her own impetus. Would the aged mechanism respond? Was there more rust on the inner wheels and springs? Ah! she could hear a gurgling and a whirling of wheels. Yes! there came the water; she heard the trickle, the splashing; then the whole grotto seemed alive. She ran to a broken place in the outer wall of the shell-and-stucco building; she crumbled off a shell which impeded her vision. Now she could see the mob below, though the rushing of the water deadened the voices, and she could not distinguish the words. She saw two men come tumbling out of the grotto, drenched and dripping objects. She saw them gesticulating wildly, and guessed that they were describing their reception in the water-cave. Even through the noise of the water she heard a roar of laughter go up from [149] those who had not penetrated the grotto. The crowd's humour seemed changed; the men were no longer fierce, they were amused, laughing. All crowds are curiously fickle, easily aroused, easily appeased, and the Swabian especially loves to be overreached by a joke. She saw that the mob's attention was diverted from her, and she knew that the danger was passed for the moment.

Would Zollern have been to the Jägerhaus, have heard the shouting, realised, and called out the guard to rescue her? Would the waterworks fail and the rabble catch her, after all? Or would the people grow bolder, face the water, and hunt her out of her hiding-place? She listened intently, but even if a detachment of cavalry had been on the way, she could have heard nothing save the noisy merriment below her and the splashing water in the cave. Was that a sword-blade flashing in the distance? Yes, thank God! she could see the outer rows of rioters looking anxiously towards where she had seen the glint of steel through the trees. The crowd suddenly dispersed for the most part, men ran hither and thither aimlessly, but a knot of several hundreds remained together, grown hostile again at the approach of hostility. Sitting stiffly on his horse was Zollern, riding at the head of the cavalry beside the captain of the Silver Guard. Monsieur de Zollern reined in his horse before the mob, commanding silence with a wave of his hand. The crowd toned down, though there were still a few angry murmurs.

'What do you in his Highness's Lustgarten?' said Zollern in a stern, clear voice, strangely unlike his usual quiet and courtly tones. A confused murmur ran through the crowd. 'Answer, or we shall ride you down,' he said.

A few voices responded sullenly: 'We seek a witch,' and again an ominous growl went up from the crowd.

'Learn that the Duke's Lustgarten is no place for you to seek a witch,' thundered the old man. 'There are no witches here or in any of his Highness's domains. And if you dare to molest a friend of the Duke's, you shall be massacred without mercy! I give you time to remove yourselves from this garden, while I count ten; one, two,' he counted. At the word 'ten' the guard charged upon the wavering mass of humanity, which fled before the troopers' swords. [150]

'Y êtes-vous vraiment, Mademoiselle?' he called, but the Grävenitz from the gallery's higher level could see that the mob was not yet entirely driven from the garden, and she dared not reply.

Zollern guessed that were she in truth hidden in the grotto, she would prefer to postpone her exit until she could appear without being seen by the soldiers, who were returning from chasing the intruders. When the captain of the guard rode up to Zollern he requested him to withdraw his men, adding that it was unprecedented insolence for the rabble to have dared to break into his Highness's Lustgarten. It struck the old courtier that the captain's answer was but half-hearted. Was even the guard infected with hostility against the Grävenitz?

'The insolence to dare seek a witch here!' said Zollern, scrutinising the captain's face closely.

'Witchcraft should be punished wherever it hides, Monseigneur,' returned the captain gravely.

'Yes, indeed, if it *exists*, M. le Capitaine,' replied Zollern; 'but I beg you draw off your men; I will remain here and rest.'

At this moment Zollern realised that the Grävenitz must be conveyed out of the country immediately; the guard itself was not trustworthy where she was concerned. He watched the soldiers till they passed out of sight, and then he reapproached the grotto.

'Answer me now if you are indeed there, Mademoiselle; I am alone,' he called, and he heard Wilhelmine's voice from within, but owing to the rushing waters her words were indistinguishable.

Meanwhile Wilhelmine was struggling to draw back the lever, for she could not leave the grotto before the water subsided. It was no easy matter to turn the heavy bar, though the resistance was not so great as when she had turned on the defending streams, still it lasted several minutes ere she accomplished her task and heard the splashing and gurgling of the water subside. Thus Zollern concluded he had been mistaken when he had fancied he heard her voice within, and when Wilhelmine reached the doorway of the grotto he was preparing to depart. [151]

She called him softly: 'Oh, my friend, help me home,' and there was a tone of appeal in her voice. Zollern came to her quickly, and raising her torn and bleeding hands to his lips, kissed them tenderly. 'Guard me, protect me, Monseigneur. I am very lonely,' she said.

'Until death takes me I will be your friend,' he replied, and Madame de Ruth would have suffered a jealous pang had she heard.

With a feeling of unreality, as though she were just awakened from an evil dream, Wilhelmine found herself once more in her pretty yellow-hung saloon. Maria, the maid, kneeled beside her, bathing the wounds in her palms made by the rough surface of the grotto walls. Slime from the moss-grown stones was on Wilhelmine's dress, and deep red marks of rust from the waterworks' lever had stained the breast of her gown where she had pressed on the bar.

Zollern stood before her. He was urging her immediate departure from Stuttgart; the place was unsafe for her in the Duke's absence, he averred. The Grävenitz responded wearily. She was willing to depart—indeed it was impossible for her to remain—but whither? Güstrow? Zollern reflected. He owned a small castle at Schaffhausen in Switzerland, and he begged her to accept it as a refuge. 'And I pray you,' he added, 'keep it always if it pleases you; we never know when a humble refuge may not be welcome.' And so it was decided that Wilhelmine was to depart immediately, accompanied to the frontier by a hundred guards commanded by a certain Captain Schrader, whom Zollern knew he could trust, because this officer was anxious to make his way at court by pleasing the Duke.

The dawn was breaking through the deep blue of the night sky when Wilhelmine started on her journey to Schaffhausen. The cavalcade rattled down the Graben, Wilhelmine's heavy coach in the midst of the famous Silver Guard. They passed out of the town-gate and gained the open country, where the fields sent forth a fragrant breath, and the woods were pungent, sweet, and fresh from the cool night. It reminded Wilhelmine of that May morning a twelvemonth since, when she had entered Wirtemberg, and yet, though Nature smiled then as on that day, how different it had seemed to her. Then everything had been radiant with Spring happiness, and her heart had responded gladly, though she was but a solitary stranger venturing into an unknown country. Now she felt half angry with the woods and fields for their peaceful joyousness, and her soul gave forth no answering note of gladness, though she rode at ease in a fine coach surrounded by a brilliant escort as though she were a queen. Her thoughts were bitter, poisoned with disgust, for she realised that, in spite of her great prosperity, she was in truth a fugitive before 'la canaille,' and, as she journeyed, she took no pleasure in the gracious loveliness around her. Her mind was busy with plans for revenge upon the brutal mob and the hostile burghers who thus drove her forth, and she vowed to herself that her enemies should repent their insolence, that the canaille should weep tears of blood and tremble before her they had insulted. [152]

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CHAPTER XI

THE MOCK MARRIAGE

Maréchal le Duc de Villars was no brilliant, victorious hero, judged by the standard of a century which had seen such military geniuses as Turenne, as the great Condé, as Marlborough and Eugene of Savoy. Villars was essentially a wily tactician, and his exploits were useful, but he lacked the dash, the verve which characterise the great commanders of that epoch. It was his system to overrun an invaded country, skilfully avoiding actual combat with the defending army, which pursued him impotently along the ghastly trail of ravage. Thus Villars, with no loss to his troops, spread famine through the land, for he plundered and devastated wherever he passed. He conducted the brief invasion of Wirtemberg in 1707 on these lines. Crossing the Rhine during the night of May 21st, he plunged unopposed into the very heart of the Swabian land. Eberhard Ludwig, who, along with the Elector of Hanover, commanded one portion of the Imperial army, executed a turning movement mighty like a retreat, but Villars had so overpowering a majority of men that an attack upon their united strength would have been more than hazardous. Thus the whole country lay at the Frenchmen's mercy, and they swarmed over town, village, and farm, harrying, burning, pillaging, and always disappearing ere the would-be defenders came up. Eberhard Ludwig followed hotly, hoping to engage separate columns of the huge army, but it was too late, and after a futile pursuit round the entire country, he had the chagrin of seeing the French enter Stuttgart. Here Villars remained but a few days. Wilhelmine said afterwards that 'l'ennui de Stuttgard' had proved a greater defence than the entire Imperial army! Be this as it may, Villars evacuated Stuttgart in an amazingly short time, and retired eastwards to the ancient [154] town of Schorndorf. Now the Duchess-mother emerged from her dower-house at Stetten, and craved a meeting with the Duc de Villars, who, as a gentleman, could not refuse the ancient dame's request.

There is a popular tradition that they met in a field between Schorndorf and Stetten, neither being willing to accept the hospitality of the other, and that here they discussed and settled the terms of the evacuation of Wirtemberg and the sum of the indemnity, all of which was afterwards solemnly ratified by the Geheimraths of Stuttgart, who, willingly, permitted the Duchess-mother to bear nearly the entire cost of the indemnity, a matter of some two hundred thousand gulden. Villars, upon payment of this sum, half of which he is reported by German historians to have retained for his own uses, now left Wirtemberg, and marched towards the French frontier, leaving, however, six thousand men under General Vivant in the country.

The Imperial army under command of the Elector of Hanover was at Heilbronn in Wirtemberg, a mediæval Imperial free town. Eberhard Ludwig, in command of the Wirtemberg contingent, was with the army. His Highness had taken up his quarters in the ancient Abbey of Maulbronn, between which and Heilbronn spread the encampment of the Imperial army. Eberhard Ludwig had chosen Maulbronn for his quarters, thinking that the peace of the Monastery, with its shadowy, highly vaulted cloisters, and its old-world garden, might soothe the restlessness which had devoured his being since his absence from Wilhelmine. In Maulbronn's garden stands the haunted tower where legend says that Doctor Faustus, the frenzied searcher for the elixir of eternal life, bartered his soul to Satan in return for a span of youth and love. The Faust tower faces the great cloister, and they say the Doctor, when sealing his pact with the devil, was disturbed by the monks' chanting.

Eberhard Ludwig revelled in the garden and its fantastic legends, but his yearning for Wilhelmine only grew the stronger. Why was she not with him to dream in the cool silence of the cloister? How she would love the garden with its luxuriance of old-world flowers—the fragrant [155] roses planted by some long-dead monk—the huge tree-peonies. The very breezes seemed legend-laden. Wilhelmine! beloved! It was a futile thing indeed for this poet-prince to endeavour to forget the woman he loved! In a garden so wondrous beautiful, in this place of dreaming, he could but dream the more. So, when the news came that Villars had retired, his Highness decided he must follow Wilhelmine to Switzerland forthwith. Forstner was summoned, and the Wirtemberg troops placed under his command. Of course he protested he was not efficient, but, as usual, Eberhard Ludwig the impetuous overruled him.

The news of his Highness's departure caused angry consternation in Stuttgart. Johanna Elizabetha wept, but the Duchess-mother raged. She had fancied that her son, deeply obliged to her for her generous action of the war indemnity, would listen to her reasonable voice as a reward.

'Ridiculous!' *he* argued. 'I never asked her to pay the indemnity; if she chooses to do so, well and good, but it does not bind me to obedience.'

There is a pathetic letter from the Duchess-mother to her son, a dignified epistle with a very human postscriptum, wherein bubbles over a mother's hatred for her son's seducer, the honest woman's furious disdain of the triumphant charm of an adventuress.

> 'Mon Fils,—Si j'ai délivré le pays du fléau françois j'attends que vous délivriez la Cour du fléau de votre péché. Revenez à Stuttgard et faites votre devoir de mari, de père, de fils et de Prince Chrétien. Vous redonnerez la paix à votre mère,
>
> 'Magdalène Sybille, Princesse de Hesse Darmstadt,
> 'Duchesse Douairière de Wirtemberg.

'Cette Grävenitz est une p——! J'aurois des preuves si je voulois les donner; je vous prie de me croire qu'elle ne mérite pas votre faveur!'

Possibly, had the Duchess-mother denied herself the satisfaction of writing this postscriptum, Eberhard Ludwig might indeed have returned to Stuttgart for a time, and who can tell how a man's fancy may vary in a few months? But being a lover and a chivalrous gentleman, the [156] unfortunate paragraph roused him to a white heat of championship for his mistress. What! she 'une p——?' Ah! how evil was the world! No man, and, above all, no woman, could understand Wilhelmine. She was grossly misjudged, cruelly persecuted. Thus, when he read this letter from his mother (which reached him when he was starting for Switzerland), he only shrugged his shoulders angrily, and crushing the missive into his saddle holster, spurred his horse forward, and galloped southward to the calumniated lady of his heart.

Wilhelmine had passed a solitary two months at Schaffhausen. Zollern's castle stood on the left bank of the Rhine, overlooking the great waterfall, whose delicious thunder had soothed her to calmer thoughts. She passed the long hours in reading and making music, and the peaceful days had added brilliancy to her splendid healthfulness. Thus, when Eberhard Ludwig came to Schaffhausen, he found her an even more forceful, vital, fresh-skinned woman than had been the beautiful girl he left at Stuttgart.

She met him with passionate happiness, and for a few days their intercourse was a prolonged rhapsody of the senses. At length, however, their dream was broken by the unwelcome advent of a messenger with despatches from Vienna to Field-Marshal of the Imperial Army, Commander of the Swabian Army Corps, Monseigneur le Duc de Wirtemberg. His Highness was furious, also anxious. Why had the fool Forstner not attended to these despatches? They were important commands concerning the army, and needed immediate attention, and now, having been all the way to Heilbronn, here they were sent to Switzerland! His Highness fumed, cursed Forstner; it was exceedingly awkward, orders from Vienna, and Eberhard Ludwig in Switzerland. He had given full power to Forstner to transact all business in his name.

'Of course, a plot,' said Wilhelmine, 'a plot to separate us again!'

His Highness was anxious, but she soothed him as usual, and he sent the despatches back with orders to Forstner to attend to the business. Peace again for a day or so, then Forstner arrived at Schaffhausen.

'Why in hell's name do you follow me, M. de Forstner?' was the Duke's greeting. [157]

'I come because it is my duty, Monseigneur!'

'Your duty? Let me remind you that your duty lies where I left you—with the army. But now that you have come, kindly tell me your errand.' It was harshly said, and Forstner was deeply wounded. Could this be the noble, courteous prince he had served for many years, the friend of his childhood, the gallant companion in arms? Poor Forstner, he had yet to discover that the tiresome friend is always ill-treated eventually.

'My errand, Monseigneur, will be unwelcome to you, I know, for I have come to urge you to return to the army immediately. The Elector of Hanover is furious at your Highness's sudden departure. He says openly that it is contrary to both military discipline and, I regret, mon Prince, to honour. He says if all his generals permitted themselves to run after their mistresses when it suited them, the army would be in a parlous state.' Indeed the Elector of Hanover had expressed himself in less measured words.

'I am a Prince commanding my own troops allied with the Imperial army, and I am at liberty to go and come without permission from M. l'Electeur,' said Eberhard Ludwig haughtily.

'I implore your Highness to listen to reason,' cried Forstner; 'you are jeopardising your reputation as a soldier for the sake of a ——'

The epithet he used was forcible, and Eberhard Ludwig started forward angrily.

'Yes, it is the task of a true friend to speak the truth without reserve' (alas, Forstner!), 'and Mademoiselle de Grävenitz is an abandoned woman.' As he uttered these words Wilhelmine entered the apartment.

'Mon Prince, is it thus you permit your friends to speak of me?' she said in a low voice.

'A thousand times no!' cried his Highness. 'Forstner, you leave my service for ever. Go!' He pointed dramatically to the door, but Forstner had not concluded his peroration, and he had no intention of being silenced this time; he was a diligent, persistent friend, poor soul.

'Mademoiselle de Grävenitz, I appeal to you; his Highness is playing a ridiculous rôle in the sight [158] of Europe! Give him up, send him back to duty, to honour, to his great military career!'

'Monsieur, you come here to dictate to his Highness, it seems! Since when is that your right?' She spoke sneeringly, and Eberhard Ludwig felt that her taunt was directed in part at himself. She did not deem him capable of resisting Forstner, perhaps? she considered him as a being whose conduct could be dictated.

'I know my duty, sir,' he said; 'you have no need to teach it me.'

'Indeed, Monseigneur, you have forgotten it since yonder lady's advent!' Forstner was getting

beyond himself.

'I have not forgotten how to defend from insult the lady whom I love and honour,' said Eberhard Ludwig coldly, 'and I request you, Forstner, to withdraw immediately.'

'Mademoiselle de Grävenitz, you have ruined his Highness!' shouted Forstner; 'he is untrue to all his vows: you are a ——'; but his words are unrepeatable, even Wilhelmine shrank back. Eberhard Ludwig drew his sword and forced his over-zealous friend through the door.

A moment afterwards his Highness returned and, flinging himself upon his knees before the Grävenitz, poured forth a torrent of adoring words, but the lady remained impervious to his pleading.

'I cannot suffer such treatment,' she answered; 'I can but beg your Highness to depart from me for ever. I shall reside here, drag out a solitary existence in this refuge which my friend Monseigneur de Zollern has given me! Your Highness cannot defend me from insult, and I do not choose to be flaunted as a wanton.'

'Alas, what can I do? I will give you all, but I have not the power to legalise your position.'

'So I see, Monseigneur, and therefore I beg you to depart.'

'Wilhelmine, do you love me? Alas! alas!'

'I love you, mon Prince, but these taunts are unbearable. I have no one to protect me—you cannot, for you yourself are the cause of all the indignities heaped upon me.'

'Ah, would that I could make you Duchess, my wife, safe from insult!' [159]

'You dare not, though other princes have had the courage thus to shield those they loved.'

'I dare not? I? God! who shall tell me that I dare not?' he cried.

'You dare not,' she answered, and again as she swept from the room, over her shoulder she flung scornfully: 'You dare not!'

In the panelled living-room of the Neuhaus, on the morning of the 29th July 1707, Madame de Ruth and her peasant servant were busying themselves with a large table and a heap of silken hangings. The lady was draping the table with these, and her efforts had caused her highly piled-up head-dress to become deranged; the elaborate structure leaned on one side and scattered a shower of powder over Madame de Ruth's shoulders. The servant interrupted his work of hammering nails into the draped silk on the table; he stared at his mistress and grinned. 'Go on, stupid head, and never mind an old woman's hairdress,' she said good-humouredly. 'I shall be fine enough this afternoon, and so wilt thou, for I shall give thee a new coat.' She rose from her knees and surveyed her handiwork. Taking a large bowl filled with roses, she placed it upon the table, then she went to a cupboard and began to hunt through its varied contents. She sought a Bible, and indeed it was the first time in her life that she had searched the Scriptures, as she reflected grimly. She had a dim recollection of having seen a worn Bible consorting oddly with the other books in that cupboard. After some time she found the Bible and placed it upon the silk-draped table. She stood a moment absent-mindedly, gazing from the window at the sunlight playing through the delicate tracery in the beech branches without, her hands mechanically turning over the leaves of the Bible. Suddenly her fingers touched something between the pages, something that crumbled away beneath her touch, a withered flower, the faded, brittle ghost of some vanished summer day. She drew away her hand quickly as though the flower stung her. It had conjured up the long-past loss and sorrow of a day when she had given birth to a child and Death [160] came hurrying to gather the little life. Madame de Ruth remembered how eagerly she had read in the Book of Life during the sad hours of her recovery, seeking wildly, miserably for consolation, and she recalled how the kind old peasant woman, who nursed and mourned with her for the baby's loss, had brought her a flower which bloomed near the piteously small mound beneath which the little one slept for ever. And Madame de Ruth had laid the blossom tenderly between the Bible's pages, and now, after long years of forgetful gaiety and dissipation, the yearning, unsatisfied motherhood welled up in her heart and she wept again.

Once more we are in the panelled room at Neuhaus, and again is assembled the company which on that portentous November evening of the preceding year had discussed the plan of summoning Wilhelmine von Grävenitz, she who was to be their tool in an ordinary court intrigue. Madame de Ruth, the hostess; Monseigneur de Zollern; Friedrich Grävenitz, since a few days become Count of the Empire; Marie Grävenitz, his bigoted Catholic wife; Monsieur the Hofmarshal Stafforth.

'It is madness, rank lunacy!' Stafforth was saying vehemently. 'Illegal and impossible, it will spell disgrace and misfortune to us all. The Emperor will interfere, for this is going too far. We must hinder this farcical ceremony; his Highness cannot marry two wives! It will be Mömpelgard over again! Think how absurd, Grävenitz! Cannot you see that this farce is bigamy?'

Count Grävenitz held his hands over his brow. 'I agree with you, Monsieur de Stafforth. My sister goes too far. It is very hard on me; I advised her to be satisfied with a settled annuity, and to live peacefully with me, her brother, the head of her house. His Highness can always visit her—a great honour indeed——' He broke off, seeing the sneer on Monseigneur de Zollern's face.

'I wash my hands of the whole affair!' cried Grävenitz distractedly.

'Ce cher Pilate,' murmured Zollern. Madame de Ruth laughed. [161]

'Grävenitz, your sister will be Duchess, never fear! Marie, she will befriend the Holy Church in Wirtemberg.' Madame de Ruth addressed herself to Marie Grävenitz, but it was Zollern whom she observed as she spoke. 'Stafforth, you will become a Count; and for myself, I shall see the last of her Dull Highness from Baden. That is *my* reward.' She laughed, but no responsive gaiety came from the rest of the company. Indeed, the intrigue had assumed proportions which alarmed Wilhelmine's allies. Her brother had learned to fear her—he was jealous of her now. Stafforth, having been foolish enough to incur her displeasure by tactless amorous advances, feared that once her position became unassailable she would cause him to be dismissed from court. Marie Grävenitz was horrified at the idea of her sister-in-law's great success; she said it was sinful. Poor soul, she was very jealous. Zollern, however, regarded the strange marriage with favour. He foresaw the complications ahead, and intended to steer for a happy landing of the Prince and his new bride on the eternal shores of Roman Catholicism. The Pope would declare Eberhard Ludwig's former alliance with Johanna Elizabetha to be null and void, and, in return, the Duchy of Wirtemberg would be gathered back to the Holy Church.

Madame de Ruth alone rejoiced honestly in the brilliant ending of the 'great intrigue,' and if there was another thought in her mind, it was delight at the discomfiture of the dull Duchess; but chiefly the old courtesan was happy that this honour befell her friend. She had conceived a real affection for Wilhelmine.

Zollern tapped his cane on the parquet floor, rhythmically, persistently. To Madame de Ruth the tapping sound seemed to beat on her brain, and she put out her hand imploring silence. 'How gay, my friends!' she exclaimed; 'really, we owe our friend a little merriment on her wedding day!'

'I do not think I can permit my sister to go through this marriage ceremony. It would show a nicer spirit towards me, the head of her house, if she considered the difficulties she may land me in——' [162]

'Bonté divine! Grävenitz, what foolishness!' said Madame de Ruth sharply. 'If you could manage to forget your own important existence for a time——' She was interrupted by the entry of a personage of clerical appearance. Madame de Ruth rose to greet the new arrival. 'Hochwürden,' she said in German, 'you received my letter? and you are ready to do as I require—ask no questions and marry a couple, you may know who, but on that head silence until your testimony is necessary; and then you are prepared to swear you have married them in all legal and religious form? In return a hundred gulden, and I undertake also to have the Pfarrhaus repaired. Is that well? yes?—well, let me present you: Monseigneur de Zollern you have the honour to know already; M. le Comte de Grävenitz, Madame la Comtesse, M. de Stafforth, may I present to you Herr Pfahler, Pastor of the Lutheran Church at Aalendorf?'

The man bowed deeply to each in turn. Marie Grävenitz scarcely acknowledged his salute for fear of endangering her Catholic soul by intercourse with a Protestant pastor.

'Now, Herr Pastor, are those arrangements complete? See here, I have draped you an altar. Oh! unnecessary, you say, for a Lutheran marriage? I regret, enfin—so much prettier, hein? Well, you can stand before it to marry our friends, it will not affect you! Then, here are two cushions for them to kneel on; a Bible, pen, and paper for the legal documents. Yes, is that all? Well, I may now call our friends,' and she rustled out of the room.

A constrained silence fell on the four occupants of the apartment. The Pastor who had followed after Madame de Ruth to don his black 'talar,' the clerical gown of the Lutheran divine, returned and took up his position before the altar table. He busied himself turning over the leaves of the Bible, and the faded flower fluttered out and fell on to one of the cushions prepared for the bride and bridegroom. The door opened and Eberhard Ludwig, Duke of Wirtemberg, entered the room. He bowed gravely to the assembled company, then moved forward and stood facing Pfahler [163] before the improvised altar. The guests had risen at his Highness's entry. The silence was intense. Of a sudden a huge black form bounded through the window. Marie Grävenitz screamed shrilly, and the Herr Pastor started violently.

'It is only my dog, Madame,' said his Highness. 'He has found me after all. I left him locked up in my sleeping-room. Here, Mélac, lie down! quiet! good dog!' he called, and the wolf-hound obediently stretched himself beside the Duke.

'I thought it was the devil,' Marie Grävenitz whimpered.

'The devil, Madame, come to attend these espousals,' remarked Stafforth with a sneer.

'Silence, Monsieur,' said his Highness haughtily; and once more a brooding stillness fell on the company, broken only by Mélac's heavy breathing, and the flutter of the Bible's pages between the Pastor's nervous fingers. Would the bride never come? this waiting was intolerable. Eberhard Ludwig stood stern and silent, his hand resting on his rapier's hilt. At length there came the swish of silken garments rasping over the rough wooden boards of the corridor floor. Once more the door was flung open, and Wilhelmine von Grävenitz stood on the threshold. She looked like some lavish flower of a tropic clime, a gorgeous white blossom, surrounded by rich golden outer petals. Her gown was of the delicate yellow colour which she loved, and her bare breast was

creamy white, and showing the blue tracery of the veins through the fine skin. From her shoulders fell a heavy white brocade cloak, trimmed with ermine like the coronation robe of a queen. Her hair was powdered and piled high on her head, the towering masses adding height to her great stature. She looked a queen among women, a glorious figure of youth and majesty, and it was little wonder that Eberhard Ludwig was enthralled.

'Dressed as a royal princess already!' spitefully whispered Stafforth to Marie Grävenitz, who looked at her radiant sister-in-law with envy written on her narrow face.

Eberhard Ludwig came forward, bowed profoundly before his bride, and led her towards the altar. The Pastor stared in astonishment when he saw the woman he had undertaken to marry to [164] his Prince, for he recognised the traveller he had met at Tübingen. The stranger's face had haunted his dreams.

And now the brief ceremony commenced. The Pastor, evidently nervous, mumbled his words indistinctly; and of a truth, no one of the assembled company paid much heed to the sermon and prayers, for each was busy with thoughts of personal ambition and intrigue, excepting Marie Grävenitz, whose lips moved rapidly in prayer that she might be forgiven for taking part in an heretical rite. Madame de Ruth watched Wilhelmine with adoring eyes; perchance she dreamed this beautiful woman to be her child returned to her. Poor mite, who slept forgotten in its tiny grave——!

'May the blessing of God rest upon you, and may God enable you to keep sacred the vows you have made this day,' concluded the Pastor, and the bride and bridegroom rose from their knees.

'I have the honour to present to you Madame la Comtesse d'Urach, which title I hereby confer upon my beloved wife, pending the bestowal of the first title of my Dukedom, which I shall hope to be able to offer to my wife in a few months' time. Meanwhile, I beg you, my friends, of your good feeling, to pay the same respects and courtesies to the Countess of Urach as you, so kindly, pay to myself.'

Up jumped Madame de Ruth and kissed Wilhelmine on both cheeks, then sank to the ground before her in a deep courtesy; but the other friends hung back, save Zollern, who came forward and, bowing over the bride's hand, remarked: 'To every beautiful woman should be rendered homage.' It was an adroit compromise, half reminder, half graceful, tactful compliment, for naturally a Prince of his house could not be expected to pay royal honours to any Countess of Urach—or even Duchess of Wirtemberg, save from courtesy or worldly wisdom. Stafforth, the adventurer, had an ugly sneer on his countenance, and was evidently embarrassed, so took refuge in the frequent attitude of the vulgar when ill at ease—a noisy jocularity.

'Ha! ha!' he laughed boisterously, 'and now for the wedding feast! Bride and bridegroom, come along—and we'll have a song to cheer us!'

Friedrich Grävenitz, full of fictitious emotion, was kissing his sister's hand repeatedly, and [165] making little speeches to her, the beauty of which moved him almost to tears; though when he saw no one was admiring him, he retired in aggrieved silence, thinking 'What a bad spirit these people show towards me!'

Marie Grävenitz stiffly congratulated her sister-in-law, and pressed a meagre cheekbone against Wilhelmine's glowing face; she called this a kiss. Pfahler bowed before the bride: 'I have had the honour to meet your Highness,'—Wilhelmine started, Zollern tapped with his stick impatiently —'to meet your Highness before—one day at Tübingen; but your Highness could not recollect. I had no idea then that I was speaking with so exalted a lady.'

'Nor were you then,' said Wilhelmine with that bright humorous smile of hers; 'but indeed, Hochwürden, I do remember, and I recollect how you told me of the history of master races cradled in the Swabian hills.'

'I have assisted to-day at a great historic scene. May a new race of strong men and princes arise herefrom!' said Pfahler, the historic dreamer.

'Umph! ces bourgeois hérétiques ne savent jamais trouver le juste milieu,' growled Zollern to Madame de Ruth.

Now his Highness became impatient, the embarrassment of the scene seemed to grow each moment. 'A thousand thanks, dear friend,' he said, turning to Madame de Ruth, 'a thousand thanks for all you have done for us, but we must leave you now. Come, bid us God-speed!' He led the way from the panelled room to the house door, before which stood a chaise de poste with six horses, which the three postillions restrained with difficulty. Dressed in his fine new coat, the peasant servant of Neuhaus stood grinning in the background.

'Come, Madame!' called his Highness. Wilhelmine sprang into the chaise, and Madame de Ruth, perilously balanced on the step, wrapped a white lace mantilla round the bride. The horses bounded forward, and, urged by the postillions, raced away at a hand gallop.

This was the first of that furious driving with which the favourite, in after years, habitually [166] dashed through the country. It was one of the causes of her unpopularity with the peasants; they cursed her and her wild horses. 'Why such haste to do the devil's work?' they muttered; and they cursed the dust which the chariot left, as the hated Grävenitzin thundered through the villages.

CHAPTER XII

[167]

THE MOCK COURT

'The very substance of the ambitious is merely the shadow
of a dream.

Hamlet.

AFTER their marriage his Highness and the Countess of Urach took up their residence in the castle of Hohen-Tübingen, where Wilhelmine had wandered, a lonely stranger, on the morning of her arrival in Wirtemberg. Now she was the queen of the grim fortress, and, looking upon the fair valley and the distant hills, she would often ponder on the marvellous workings of her destiny.

The court of Wirtemberg naturally held aloof from the unlawful magnificence at Tübingen, and her Ladyship of Urach realised that she must form a circle of her own, so she summoned her family from the north.

Her sister, Emma Sittmann, came from Berlin accompanied by her husband, the merchant's warehouse clerk, who it was said, had been at one time hairdresser to a Countess of Wartensleben, and had been dismissed for his insolence. A cousin came with the Sittmanns, Schütz by name, a shady attorney who had been discredited for sharp practices in various towns, including Vienna, where, however, he still retained business relations of a mysterious and probably reprehensible character. A number of friends and relations, both of Schütz's and Sittmann's, also hastened to Tübingen. Sittmann had been married once before he took Wilhelmine's sister to wife, and of this former union he had two gawky sons, who accompanied their father and stepmother to this land of promise.

Old Frau von Grävenitz was invited by her successful daughter to repair to Wirtemberg but the harsh old lady responded by a bluff refusal and a command to Wilhelmine to return to virtue. She [168] never visited Wirtemberg, and though she condescended to receive small sums from Friedrich Grävenitz, regardless of the fact that the money actually came from Wilhelmine, she remained sternly disapproving to the end of her days.

It was but a small court, and Wilhelmine found it all insufficient, so she selected from among the Tübingen students half a dozen youths of undistinguished birth but undoubted intelligence, and caused them to be given minor court appointments. Stafforth was dismissed; his wife was Johanna Elizabetha's friend, and the Countess disliked him. Knowing him for an unscrupulous adventurer himself, she judged him capable of gauging the small social standing and slightly veneered vulgarity of Sittmann, Schütz and company. So Stafforth's Oberhofmarshall's baton was conferred on Friedrich Grävenitz, together with a considerable income. Sittmann was made a baron (of Wirtemberg, not of the Empire); Schütz became Geheimrath and personal secretary to his Highness; Madame de Ruth was Oberhofmeisterin—'Dame de Déshonneur,' Wilhelmine called her in private—and the two ladies laughed much at the recollection of this, poor Johanna Elizabetha's solitary witticism. The Sittmann was Dame du Palais, her stepsons were Kammerjunker (equerries) to the Duke. Pages were chosen from among the younger Tübingen students, and any chance visitor was given a high-sounding title and a sham office. The only work of the whole heterogeneous collection was to be gorgeously attired; but this was easy, as the Duke paid all expenses; to be young and gay, or you were even permitted to be old, could you be witty; and before every other duty came the obligation of treating the Countess of Urach with all the ceremony and adulation which the world is accustomed to offer to queens.

The Duke's own guard was commanded to Tübingen, and so much silver was added to their uniforms that the regiment now thoroughly earned its appellation of Silver Guard. Many Tübingen students were enrolled in the corps; indeed, it was imperative there should be a leaven of Wilhelmine's adherents in the troop, for Zollern said that he did not trust the old guard where [169] she was concerned.

An erstwhile strolling company of Italian comedians was installed as court play-actors; a number of French fiddlers and singers arrived, and were officially entitled 'The Countess of Urach's Musicians.'

It was all very absurd, without doubt; a mock court, but gay, brilliant, lavish, and gradually various members of the legitimate court filtered in to Tübingen and were swept into the festive stream.

Eberhard Ludwig was supremely happy. If at moments he shrank a little from the Sittmanns, or Schütz plebeian airs and insolences, still he was really entertained and amused. Never a hint of dullness at Wilhelmine's court. The witticisms were atrocious, the comedies lewd, the dancing a trifle indecorous perhaps, but her real gaiety, her innate knowledge of limits, and above all, her unfailing admiration for her 'husband,' made life delightful at Tübingen. Towards the beginning of September the 'court' moved to Urach, where the Duke wished to enjoy some shooting and stag-hunting.

There was but one small cloud on Wilhelmine's sky at this time, and this was the silence maintained by the Emperor and his advisers. Eberhard Ludwig had informed his Majesty of his marriage, craving his suzerain to ratify its legality, and permit him to raise the Countess of Urach

to the rank of Duchess of Wirtemberg. He set forth that, during ten years, his former wife Johanna Elizabetha had been sterile, and therefore, as reigning Prince, he was at liberty to declare that alliance null, and for the good of his country take to wife another woman capable of bearing children. He undertook to provide for Johanna Elizabetha according to her royal position, and declared he would accord her all honours due to an ex-Duchess of Wirtemberg, viz. residence, monies, guards, privileges, titles, etc. The Duke's epistle was an astounding document enough, especially coming from a Prince whose repudiated wife had presented him with an heir, albeit that heir, the Erbprinz Friedrich Ludwig, was but a sickly specimen of mankind—a youth unlikely to live long enough to succeed his father or to provide successors to his House. In this [170] imperial silence lay the opportunity of Zollern and the Catholic party, who believed that if the Emperor proved obdurate, it would be possible to obtain from Rome a decree of annulment of Johanna Elizabetha's marriage, on the pretext of State necessity. Of course, the price of this papal concession was Eberhard Ludwig's conversion to the Roman faith, and the reinstalment of Catholicism as the State religion of Wirtemberg.

Zollern fully realised that Wilhelmine was playing a dangerous game; he knew that any day an imperial edict might crush her, branding her as a bigamist. The brunt would fall on *her*, for Eberhard Ludwig, as reigning Prince and valuable ally of Imperial Vienna, would escape with a reprimand. But for her an Austrian prison was on the cards, or at best perpetual exile and outlawry, which would make it difficult for any State to befriend her. He bethought him of his kinsman, Frederick I. of Prussia, an amiable monarch, and Zollern's personal friend and cousin. If Austria proved obdurate, and Rome objected to entering into a dispute with Vienna, at least Wilhelmine could find powerful protection at Berlin. Zollern wrote to his cousin of Prussia, praying him to grant the Countess of Grävenitz, Countess of Urach, a perpetual Schutzbrief, or Lettre de Sauvegarde—an official document binding the King of Prussia to protect the lady and her property, if she appealed for aid. Frederick I. granted this without ado.

Still the imperial answer tarried. It behoved Eberhard Ludwig to announce his marriage formally to the officials at Stuttgart. Wilhelmine enjoying the prospect of the scene urged Serenissimus to summon his Geheimräthe, or Privy Councillors, to Urach immediately. They were to arrive at the castle in the afternoon, she decided; the marriage was to be announced, then a State banquet was to take place in the ancient tilting-hall beneath the castle. This latter, of course, she would not attend; but it would be followed by a grand ball in the Golden Hall, where all should greet her as Queen of the Revels, as legal wife of their Duke, as Countess of Urach and future Duchess of Wirtemberg.

Thus it befell that on the 15th of September 1707, eight pompous gentlemen, Geheimräthe of the [171] Dukedom, arrived at the castle of Urach. They were met with much ceremony at the gate and conducted to the Golden Hall. A delightful quaint place this: picture to yourself a large apartment, three sides of which open out in lattice windows through which, if your eye wanders, you see the rounded Swabian hills densely clad in beech and pine. On the summit of one of the nearest of these hills stands the grim fortress of Hohen-Urach, an impregnable stronghold of mediæval days turned prison in the eighteenth century. The Golden Hall is decorated, as its name portends, with gilded devices on the wall, with stately golden pilasters and formal green-painted trees, whose branches meander quaintly over one entire wall of the room, that wall unbroken by the windows. Over the two heavily carved doors the tree-branches twine and twist into the word 'ATTEMPTO,' the proud motto of Count Eberhard 'the Bearded,' a great gentleman of the Cinque cento, whose nuptials with a Princess of Mantua were celebrated in the same Golden Hall. In memory whereof their nuptial bed still stood in the hall where Eberhard Ludwig assembled his Privy Council for the announcement of his marriage with Wilhelmine von Grävenitz, the Mecklemburg adventuress. The councillors kept waiting in the Golden Hall guessed the preposterous demand their Duke would make to them. They were in a fine quandary. What to say to a Prince who answered questions of legal right by: 'I am above the law, alter the petty phrase in your code-book.' A Prince, mark you, who could punish resistance with death. And yet at Vienna was a suzerain who might chastise the official participators in a crime against the Empire's laws.

So the eight councillors stood moodily waiting for their Prince to appear, and contemplating with anger the elaborate preparations for the evening's feast. Such flowers, such rich hangings, and what were those two fine chairs?

The Duke was coming; they heard a woman's voice in the corridor, a woman's laugh—most unseemly.

His Highness greeted them ceremoniously, and then:

'My honourable council, I have summoned you to announce my marriage to the Reichsgräfin Wilhelmine von Grävenitz, Countess of Urach, which was solemnised privately, though in all legal [172] and religious form, a year ago.'

No one has ever known why his Highness told this useless untruth anent the date of his mock marriage, for he must have known that none would believe that, at least; besides, why tell an unnecessary lie?

'It is convenient to me to declare publicly my new alliance at this time, and I desire that the news shall be received by you and all my subjects in Wirtemberg, not only without comment, but with fitting expressions of content and with feasting and rejoicing. My late wife, the Princess Johanna Elizabetha of Baden-Durlach, I direct shall receive the honours and respect due to a Princess

Dowager of Wirtemberg, and I appoint you to arrange with her Highness where she shall reside, provided it is not in or near my city of Stuttgart. The appanage I concede to the Princess Dowager Johanna Elizabetha is ten thousand gulden a year beside her own small marriage dowry. To my present legal wife, the Countess of Urach, I appoint royal honours and the castle of Urach as residence, in addition to such lodgings as it may please her to occupy in any other of my castles. She will receive an appanage of twenty-five thousand gulden a year. Gentlemen, you will take part in the festivities here to-day, and to-morrow I charge you to repair to Stuttgart and to acquaint the Duchess——' he corrected himself hastily, 'Princess Johanna Elizabetha with these facts.'

There was a moment's pause. The Geheimräthe looked at one another in consternation; this was an even more astounding declaration than they had dreamed his Highness could venture to make. Geheimrath von Hespen, a devoted adherent of the Duchess Johanna Elizabetha, came forward.

'Your Highness, I speak in the name of my colleagues. This thing you ask is impossible: law, religion, usage forbid. I solemnly adjure your Highness to refrain from——'

'Herr von Hespen, I have given you my commands. It remains for me to inform you of the penalty I impose upon such as are disobedient to me. All who refuse to carry out my instructions cease to be members of my Privy Council; those who venture to speak against me or my wife are guilty of [173] treason. As I think you are aware, the punishment of treason is death.'

'Monseigneur the Prelate Osiander,' announced the page-in-waiting as he flung open the door of the Golden Hall. Eberhard Ludwig turned excitedly to greet the Prelate.

'Osiander,' he cried, 'you have come in time.'

'God grant I have, Serenissimus,' returned Osiander sternly.

'As a priest of God I pray you to tell these gentlemen that those whom God has joined together no man's power can put asunder!' cried his Highness.

'That is exactly what I have the duty to remind your Highness,' returned the Prelate. 'The Duchess Johanna Elizabetha, your wife——' Eberhard Ludwig started violently; he saw that he had blundered.

'I do not speak of my *late* wife, Monsieur le Prélat. She is no longer my wife! She who holds that position is Wilhelmine, Countess of Urach.'

'Impossible, Serenissimus, as long as the Duchess Johanna Elizabetha lives,' replied Osiander.

'By all the rites of the Church, by the law of God and man, I am truly wedded to the Countess of Urach!' the Duke answered passionately.

'As long as your Highness lives in mortal sin the Church denies you the Sacraments. I am the representative of the Church, your Highness, and in the presence of your Privy Council I pronounce this ban upon you,' said the Churchman severely.

'Let me remind you that there is another Church. Remember I am Pope in my land! If you of the Lutheran confession will not serve me, I will seek consolation in an older faith!' cried Eberhard Ludwig.

The Geheimräthe, huddled together in a whispering, wavering, frightened group, had listened to Osiander's grave words in silence, but at this speech of his Highness's they broke into agitated exclamations:

'His Highness does not know what he says! Roman idolatry! Ah! Monseigneur! It is contrary to the testament of Eberhard the Ancient and the true laws of Wirtemberg!'

Eberhard Ludwig paid no heed to these varied ejaculations of his Privy Councillors. He was [174] watching Osiander's stern face, and his own expression was as unrelenting as the Prelate's.

'Is this your last word, Monsieur Osiander?' he said quietly.

'Yes, Monseigneur, my last word, and the decision of the Church which I represent.'

'Then, sir, I can dispense with your presence in my castle of Urach,' replied the Duke haughtily.

The Prelate withdrew without a word. Eberhard Ludwig waited till Osiander passed out of the Golden Hall, then: 'Gentlemen, you have heard. Now I require you to sign this document. Those who do not sign, cease to be members of my Privy Council.' He drew a large folded paper from his breast, and laying it open upon the table desired one of the Geheimräthe to read it aloud. It was a repetition in formal legal terms of his Highness's speech to the Council, and had been drawn up and cleverly worded by Schütz, the fraudulent attorney of Vienna.

'Your Highness takes the entire responsibility of this act?' questioned one of the councillors.

'Yes, noble sirs, and I have but to add that such of you as do not sign will be arrested immediately.' He moved back a few paces, and pushing open the door revealed to the councillors a detachment of Silver Guards stationed in the corridor without. Seven Geheimräthe approached the table and without more ado affixed their signatures to the document. Only Herr von Hespen remained.

'I await your decision, sir,' said Serenissimus harshly.

'I shall not sign,' replied Hespen.

'Arrest this gentleman!' called the Prince; 'and now, sirs, we will repair to the tilting-hall and our banquet.'

The small town of Urach was in a state of such commotion as it had not known since the far-off day when Count Eberhard the Bearded received his Mantuan bride at the castle. All day coaches rolled into the courtyard of the old inn, and the narrow streets were filled with servants anxiously seeking lodgings for their masters. At every moment coaches drew up in the courtyard of the small hostelry and companies of fine gentlemen rode in. Every one demanded accommodation, [175] and quarrels and protestations filled the air. In the streets hawkers called their wares, ribbons, laces, patches. A strolling vender of reputed wonder-working balsams and philtres attracted a laughing crowd; itinerant musicians arrived on the scene and added the strains of stringed instruments and the choruses of gay songs to the general clamour. Urach, the quiet hill-town, where many quaint fountains murmur ceaselessly, seemed turned into a place of carnival. Near the castle gate the crowd of peasants and burghers was dense, every one inquisitive to catch a glimpse of the gay doings within, but the sentries kept the people back and only the foremost watchers could see the interior of the courtyard. Here too was festive bustle, for his Highness sat at the grand banquet in the tilting-hall, and serving-men ran hurriedly across the courtyard bearing steaming viands from the kitchen or laden with platters of delicious cakes. The Duke's Cellar-master appeared in the gateway and, addressing the expectant mob, shouted the welcome statement that his Highness desired his friends of Urach to drink to his health. Barrels of wine were rolled across to the castle gate and the onlookers served with copious draughts. Then the Cellar-master called for silence, and, striking an attitude, he spoke:

'His Highness prays you to drink long life and happiness to his noble bride, the Countess of Urach. Come—Hoch! and again—Hoch!'

'Bride, indeed!' roared the crowd; 'harlot, you mean!' some said, but they drank greedily all the same.

Wilhelmine was waiting in the Golden Hall, and through the open casement she heard the comments of the rabble. 'Harlot, adulteress, witch,' she repeated slowly, as she listened to these epithets used by the men while they drank her health. She raged. 'Ah, you canaille!' she whispered, 'it was *I* ordered you that good red wine! Blood I will give you to drink another time, blood to choke you.' She drew back from her place near the window. 'But your hatred shall not mar my triumph to-night. God's curse on you, my husband's people!'

The Golden Hall was decked in white flowers, and at one end of the large room, twined and garlanded with roses, a daïs had been raised, and two huge gilt chairs, the only ones in the [176] apartment, had been placed on this platform. It looked like a throne of King and Queen, and Eberhard Ludwig himself had protested at this uncustomary assumption of a regal superiority over his guests. But Wilhelmine had silenced him with a look. She had pointed to Duke Eberhard's motto.

'Attempto,' she whispered; 'Prussia is a kingdom now, why not Wirtemberg?'

Now Prussia's advancement was an eyesore to South Germany, and Eberhard Ludwig's envious ambition was stirred.

'Attempto,' he murmured as he went to prepare to meet his Geheimräthe. The success of this séance we already know.

The moments dragged. From the window of the Golden Hall Wilhelmine could see the church clock's slow finger lagging from point to point. Below, the crowd was still drinking and shouting, and the hated woman shuddered when she thought what would be her fate were she at the mercy of that throng which celebrated her wedding festivities.

Coaches rumbled into the courtyard. Soon the Countess heard voices in the White Hall or music-room, where the guests had been requested to assemble, pending the reception in the Golden Hall by his Highness.

Wilhelmine hurried away to complete her preparations for what she intended to be one of the hours of triumph in her career.

She found Madame de Ruth and the maid Maria polishing the jewels she was to wear.

'Quick!' she cried, 'the guests arrive!'

'Yes, my dear,' said Madame de Ruth dryly, 'all Stuttgart is coming here, I am told. The virtuous indignation was not strong enough. Curiosity has brought every one to see what you do.'

'Give me *all* the jewels, Maria,' was Wilhelmine's only reply.

'Monseigneur le Duc de Wirtemberg et Madame la Comtesse d'Urach!' called Oberhofmarshall Count Grävenitz, striking his marshal's staff heavily upon the wooden floor of the corridor outside [177] the Golden Hall. Then the doors flew open, and the new Oberhofmarshall proceeded to the middle of the hall where he repeated his staff-tapping and loud announcement. The guests drew

back. 'Really! is she to come in procession like a queen?' 'Upon my soul, this is too much to swallow!' 'Quelle insolence!' One could hear these murmurs run through the assemblage; nevertheless the guests fell back obediently, making room for the solemn entry of his Highness.

'Is she beautiful, at least?' queried a gentleman who, having but recently returned from the army, had not yet seen the famous Grävenitzin.

'Pockmarked, and as tall as a grenadier,' said a spiteful voice—a woman's.

'She sings divinely,' said another voice.

'Her notes are very strong, if you mean that! She nearly breaks your ears,' replied the same voice.

Now the musicians struck up a stately measure, and two pages, of the Sittmann family, of course, appeared in the doorway walking backwards. Hofmarshall Grävenitz thundered with his baton upon the ground; it must be conceded he seemed to take fondly to the exercise of his new duties. And now Eberhard Ludwig was seen in the doorway. His Highness wore a magnificent costume of white brocade, relieved only by the broad ribands of several high orders, and on his breast the chain of Austria's Golden Fleece. Of a truth, Serenissimus looked a fine Prince, but all eyes were upon the tall figure beside him—the Mecklemburg Fräulein, the Countess of Urach. Her underskirt was made of cloth of gold, rich and heavy; her huge paniers were of embroidered satin of the Grävenitz yellow, as it came to be called in after years; her corsage was yellow also, and from her shoulders fell the white brocade cloak lined and trimmed with ermine, which she had worn on the day of her secret marriage at the Neuhaus. Her breast was literally ablaze with jewels, and the pearls of Wirtemberg, which two hundred years before the Mantuan princess had brought as marriage dowry, hung in ropes round the favourite's neck. So splendid a vision had [178] never met the eyes of the assembled company. The Duchess Johanna Elizabetha had worn these jewels, but they had somehow seemed to disappear in the awkward masses of her ill-chosen garments. You may imagine, however, that her Highness had given the gems unwillingly to Eberhard Ludwig's messenger charged to bring them forthwith to Urach.

Wilhelmine advanced slowly, led by his Highness. She bowed gravely to right and left. The guests were astounded, struck dumb by the huge presumption of the woman; some few returned her salute, others, bewildered and indignant, stared her blankly in the face. Serenissimus led her to the daïs, and as she took her seat bowed profoundly over her hand. The pages gathered round the steps of the daïs. Madame de Ruth took up her position beside this pseudo-Duchess's chair. Oberhofmarshall Grävenitz stood to the Duke's right, the Sittmann family ranged themselves in a circle near this mock throne. Schütz, the fraudulent attorney, mighty fine in brown satin and gaily embroidered waistcoat, took a patronising and curious air as though, accustomed as he was to the ceremony of Vienna's court, he found himself much diverted by this provincial gathering.

Formal presentations began. The Countess of Urach had a gracious smile for each and all, and the guests found themselves in an unpleasant dilemma. It is so difficult to be disagreeable to a smiling woman without actually insulting her; and that would have been dangerous, for who could tell what the future might bring forth?

Thus the ball progressed right merrily, and Wilhelmine's triumph was complete. The formality of the entertainment wore off a little, and the company danced gaily. Wilhelmine did not dance after the first gavotte, whose stately measure she trod with Monseigneur de Zollern, but this was a solemn ceremony. For the rest, the Countess of Urach sat in her gilded chair and conversed with chosen courtiers who were led up to her by the Oberhofmarshall or by Madame de Ruth. It was noticeable how the men lingered near her, and the ladies' angry spite was increased thereby. His Highness danced much and often. He was justly celebrated as the finest, most graceful, most [179] precise dancer of his day, and Stafforth—who compiled a ponderous, pompous memoir of Eberhard Ludwig's journey to England to the court of Queen Anne, and also to the court of France—has left it on record that 'they all stood surprised before my Prince's great agility and marvellous skill.'

So pavane followed gavotte and sarabande and the more modern minuet, and the ball was very brilliant and gay.

Late in the evening Schütz, his Highness's own secretary, was called away.

'Affairs of State!' he said airily, but so loudly that many should hear him. A sudden presentiment knocked at Wilhelmine's heart: could this be some disastrous happening come to mar her triumph? She signed to Madame de Ruth.

'A cruel foreboding is over me, dear friend,' she whispered.

'Tut! child, what should it be? Come, forget it, enjoy your hour.'

'Alas! the best hours are always pursued by evil things!' replied Wilhelmine sadly. She turned to Reischach, who stood near her. 'Come and tell me a story of some gallant adventure, Baron! Now let us hear—you and a princess let it be, for I love the stories to which I am accustomed!' She smiled maliciously, but the laughter froze on her lips, for Schütz was making his way towards her, and there was a look on his face which told her the foreboding had not erred.

'News from Vienna, Madame,' he said in a low voice when he reached her side.

'Tell me quickly what it is,' she whispered back.

'Imperial mandate to his Highness. I know no more; but the messengers are of rank, and have the Emperor's commands to read the decree to his Highness in person. I fear it is very serious for you.'

Eberhard Ludwig came up gaily. 'Come, Madame ma femme—come and tread a measure with me!' Wilhelmine rose obediently.

'Have the messengers shut into the White Hall, make no disturbance here,' she murmured as she passed Schütz.

With smiling face and merry jest she danced the sarabande.

'And now, Monseigneur!' she cried in a ringing voice, when the dance concluded, 'let us end these revels, it grows late! I pray you command the lackeys to bring the Tokay that we may drink our loving-cup with our guests!' [180]

The wine was brought and quickly given round.

'My gentle ladies and noble sirs!' called his Highness, 'I drink to your happiness; I pray you drink to mine!'

The guests raised their glasses, and it was only as they drank that they saw Eberhard Ludwig bowing before Wilhelmine, and they realised with dismay that they had toasted her under the title of 'his Highness's happiness.'

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[181]

CHAPTER XIII

THE DUCHESS'S BLACK ROOMS

'In God's hands are all things. It is blasphemy to fear.'

THE Imperial decree was uncompromising: 'She leaves your court, this adventuress, or ill betide her. If you take a mistress, well and good—that is not in the power of Emperor to forbid; but you have infringed the Empire's laws by bigamy, Serenissimus, and this we will not tolerate. The lady must depart; if she goes not, the rigours of the law will crush her. No more of your mock marriage, no more of your sorry, sham court.'

Thus the gist of the document which shattered Wilhelmine's hopes and interrupted her triumph at Urach. But to relinquish her ambition thus easily, instantly to render obedience to Father Vienna, this was not to be expected from so potent a lady, nor indeed from Eberhard Ludwig, who, besides being deeply enamoured, judged his prerogative as an independent reigning Prince to be threatened by this summary command. Then, too, all the parasites of the mock court advised resistance; urged it in every way, for their own existence depended upon the Countess of Urach and the continuance of her royal retinue.

His Highness penned a private letter to the Emperor, in which he set forth many arguments and added passionate entreaties. In his reasoning he quoted historical examples of a Prince's right to discard a wife for causes of State necessity or convenience. Even Henry VIII. of England was held up as a pattern in this! One wonders whether the Emperor had sufficient historical learning to smile at this unfortunate reference.

Schütz was despatched with this private missive and other intricate legal documents. [182]

Meanwhile the life at Urach went its usual course: hunts, feasts, music, cards, love and laughter. Naturally those few members of the former Wirtemberg court who had suffered themselves to be drawn into the vortex of gaiety, now withdrew, and the Grävenitz circle grew to be more and more the refuge of the brilliant disreputable. Adventurers flocked in from all sides and, were they but entertaining, immediately became bright satellites revolving round the sun of Wilhelmine's magnificence. Of course, these personages were not welcomed by the older stars—the Sittmanns and company; but the favourite waxed more overbearing, more autocratic each day, and she permitted no censure of her will.

The Duchess Johanna Elizabetha was not idle; she had summoned her family from Baden-Durlach, and they were moving heaven and earth, or rather Vienna, in her cause.

Schütz wrote that things were going badly for the Grävenitz: the Emperor was obdurate, the Privy Council was stern, and public opinion strong against the double marriage.

Johanna Elizabetha at this crisis fell ill—'of a colic,' said the court of Urach scornfully; 'of poison,' said Stuttgart, Baden-Durlach, finally Vienna. This was serious, wrote Schütz. There were not wanting persons who hinted that other inconvenient wives had died of this same class of colic, and that the illness had been caused by the rival mistress. Eberhard Ludwig raged, Wilhelmine laughed, but Zollern looked grave, and spoke of the Prussian letter of royal protection, and of the beauty and safety of Schaffhausen.

Anger gave place to anxiety, when a private letter from the Emperor to Eberhard Ludwig arrived. It was really an unpleasant letter, and the court, to whom its contents were communicated, felt

that it was the beginning of the end. His Majesty wrote that he gave Serenissimus one last chance of saving the lady of his heart. She must yield at once, or the law would proceed against her ruthlessly. The Emperor added that he had commissioned the Electors of Brunswick, Brunswick-Wolfenbüttel, and Hesse-Cassel to act as intermediaries in the matter. They were empowered to settle the dispute in his Majesty's name and in the interests of virtue, law, and [183] order. Serenissimus was overwhelmed. He vowed he would abjure his allegiance to Austria, and as for the Protestant Church which had proved so inconveniently honest, that could go by the board and he would go over to Rome.

The Pope Clement XI. was unfriendly to Austria politically, and his Holiness would welcome the Duke of Wirtemberg to the fold. For the rest, Eberhard Ludwig talked wildly of approaching Louis XIV. and throwing in his lot and his army with his old adversaries. The Pope was indeed informed of the whole tangle, and had entered into secret negotiations with Zollern on the subject.

Hereupon Forstner reappeared, and by his reproaches, his tediousness, and his tactlessness nearly confirmed Serenissimus in his frantic decision. Then arrived Osiander. He was a man of great strength of character and intellect, and he succeeded in demonstrating to the Duke the dishonourable nature of his intentions. Also he induced his Highness to comprehend that the Pope, though ready to gather all men, and especially princes, into the maw of Rome, could not make a double marriage legal where there was no feasible plea for annulment of the first union. To be politically hostile to Austria was one thing, to enter into open combat with her another. Wirtemberg was not a large enough bribe in any case.

At this juncture arrived the Electorial ambassadors, and lengthy, tedious negotiations commenced. The deliberations seemed endless. Did the ambassadors believe their task to be nearing completion, the other side had always a fresh plea, a new quibble; and the winter was far advanced before these unfortunate envoys declared that they could do no more.

'We have proved the so-called marriage to be illegal,' they wrote to the Emperor; 'we have offered lands and moneys to the favourite; we have been conciliatory, then threatening, but Serenissimus is as one blinded, and the woman remains in her preposterous position. We can do no more, save humbly to recommend your Majesty to enforce the rigours of the law against this bigamous female.' So Brunswick Brunswick-Wolfenbüttel, and Hesse-Cassel retired discomfited. [184]

On the other side, Schütz in Vienna had made no headway. The mock court continued as before, sometimes at Urach, sometimes at Tübingen or Wildbad. Stuttgart was deserted, save for the mournful presence of the unhappy Duchess.

The Countess of Urach's circle widened considerably, constantly enlarged by inquisitive travellers, and it was marvellous how many of these persons lingered and took root in the easy, evil soil of this unhallowed, unlawful court. The very servants were for the most part of doubtful character, and it is remarkable how successfully the Grävenitz ruled her strangely composed household. She had the power to win hearts when she chose, and she did choose where her domestics were concerned. Her method was based on the human point of view. 'If I take this rascal into my service and treat him well, he will respond by gratitude. At least, he will be bound to me and to my interests. Should he betray me I can punish him; but he is too disreputable for any one else to defend, therefore he is mine, my creature.' These theories she expounded to Madame de Ruth, never to Serenissimus. He, poor deluded one, thought his mistress a very charitable lady, and loved her the more for her kindness to sinners. Among this motley crew of her choosing was an Italian of the name of Ferrari, who had come to Tübingen with a troupe of strolling actors.

In Tübingen the man had fallen ill, and Wilhelmine, hearing through the maid Maria of the Italian's misery, caused him to be nursed back to life. Then, when the grateful rascal came to thank his benefactress, she took him into her service. The man proved himself useful; he was quick and intelligent, and conceived a dog-like affection for the Grävenitz, who rewarded him by employing him in any secret message she desired to be conveyed. He it was who procured for her the various ingredients she used in her magic brewings. He who spied upon the Duchess, for Wilhelmine had a morbid curiosity to know each action of the woman she injured. The people whispered that Ferrari instructed the Grävenitz in the mysterious and terrible secrets of Italian poisons. This gossip reached the ears of Johanna Elizabetha and she trembled, fearing poison in [185] all she ate, in all she touched, in the petals of the roses of the castle garden, in the dust which lay on the road.

An ugly story leaked out. The Duchess's head cook, Glaser by name, recounted how Ferrari had visited him and offered him a purse of gold and a little phial which contained a greyish white powder. This, Ferrari had told him, was a rare medicine known in Italy alone; it would cause a barren woman to become fruitful. The Italian told Glaser that this precious physic was sent for her Highness Johanna Elizabetha by one who loved her well and would fain serve her. Glaser was desired to sprinkle it on the Duchess's food, but her Highness must be unaware of its presence, for such knowledge would destroy the medicine's efficacy. Glaser replied that he would willingly serve so noble and unfortunate a lady as Johanna Elizabetha, but he refused to take the responsibility of administering the powder. If, however, Ferrari first showed it to the court doctor, Schubart, Glaser would undertake to mix the stuff into some dish for her Highness. At mention of the physician, Ferrari disappeared and did not return. Then Glaser averred he had been set upon near the Judengasse one dark night, soon after Ferrari's visit. Two masked bravos attacked him from behind, and it was only by the chance passing of the town guard that he had

escaped with his life. Her Highness heard this story and she smiled bitterly, knowing that her barren state proceeded from a very important omission, and that no powder could be efficacious. And who should know this better than the Grävenitz? the sender of this absurd powder, as the Duchess surmised. 'Poison!' said the Duchess, and despatched a broken-hearted letter to Vienna telling of her bodily peril.

The days lengthened, bright April came with the calling and rustling of Spring in all the air. There were mighty gay doings again at Urach, but Stuttgart held aloof. Things had gone too far; the story of the white powder had played the Grävenitz an evil turn, and people were genuinely horrified at her wickedness. Not a jot cared Wilhelmine. 'The Stuttgarters were such provincials, [186] such shabby, heavy, rude louts,' said the lady from Güstrow. There were no festivities at the castle in Stuttgart. How should there be with the agonised, deserted woman as hostess?

It was her Highness's custom to pray and meditate in solitude for an hour when the day waned. She led a busy, if sedentary, life; sewing her eternal garments of coarse flannel for the poor while Madame de Stafforth read aloud from books of piety. A number of poor people came to the castle, and her Highness was ever ready—nay, eager, to listen to their tales of misery and to distribute alms to these her only courtiers. Then there were the legal reports of the learned doctors-at-law engaged upon her matrimonial business. Johanna Elizabetha welcomed the twilight hour's solitary musing. Poor soul! often she spent this hour on her knees, mourning her sorrow before God.

One evening towards the middle of April, the Duchess had withdrawn as usual to her own apartments leaving Madame de Stafforth in the chief salon reading a sermon by an eminent Swiss divine. The two ladies had felt strangely nervous and anxious during the afternoon, and several times it had seemed to her Highness that she heard stealthy footsteps on the inner gallery of the courtyard, but when she questioned the page-in-waiting whose duty it was to watch at the door of the ante-hall leading to her Highness's rooms, the youth replied that he had seen and heard nothing. The Duchess told herself she was becoming a fearsome, anxious old woman, and she endeavoured to smile down the haunting feeling of some unseen, creeping presence. Still it was with a sense of trepidation that she entered the small room where she was wont to meditate each evening when the day's wearisome, self-imposed labours were ended. This room lay beyond her Highness's sleeping chamber and had a small balcony looking over the Lustgarten.

This apartment was plainly furnished, almost monastic in its simplicity: one chair, a small bureau, a table on which lay a few books of sermons and volumes of theological treatises, and a praying-stool stood against the wall. The only thing recalling the vanities of the world was a mirror let into the panel above the praying-stool. Indeed, this mirror was a relic of one of poor Johanna [187] Elizabetha's few happy hours. Eberhard Ludwig had ordered the whole room to be panelled with mirrors, having seen some such conceit in a château in France during his travels. He had thought to please her Highness by this attention, but the dull, awkward woman had forbidden the completion of the plan: it was a wrongful waste of money, she averred, and a French vanity! So Eberhard Ludwig had angrily commanded the workmen to desist, and, wounded and offended, he had reflected on his wife's lack of appreciation of the little elegancies of life. True, she had seemed pleased by his thought of her, she had thanked him—but she had declined his present!

The only alteration in the castle which Johanna Elizabetha had ever been known to order had been done, to the surprise of all, some time after the Duke's desertion of his wife and son. The entire suite of apartments which her Highness occupied had been redecorated. The panelling, which was of time-mellowed oak, the Duchess had caused to be painted black, the chairs and tables of her rooms were covered with black brocade, and the window curtains were fashioned of the same sombre material. It was a strange fancy, the exaggeration of a brain strung up, taut and strained to a quivering line on the border of insanity. Yet the Duchess was not mad, only sad to desperation, utterly humiliated, shuddering with despair and shame. Possibly the unhappy woman, shut into the silence of her dumb personality, had here sought to give expression to her voiceless agony.

The effect of these black walls, black furniture, black hangings, was odiously funereal. Some one said that her Highness should complete the picture of mourning by donning the sinister trappings of the Swabian widow—the bound brow, the nunlike hood, the swathing band with which South German widows of mediæval times hid their lips from the sight of all men, in token of their bereavement and enforced chastity.

Her Highness looked anxiously round her sleeping apartment as she passed through. To her overstrung nerves each darker shadow held an evil menace. A breeze crept in through the open [188] casement, and swayed the heavy black curtains round her Highness's bed, and she started back, thinking that some hostile hand had moved the folds. In vain she told herself how baseless were her fears. She chid herself for a craven, but her heart still fluttered fearfully, and her lips were a-tremble when she reached the little room. She sank down in her chair with a sigh of relief. Here in this little room, she reasoned, there could be nothing to fear; here were no shadowy corners where a lurking enemy might hide.

'O God! O God!' she wailed suddenly aloud, 'am I going mad that I should tremble at a gust of wind, that I should suffer this insane consciousness of some haunting presence near me when I know I am, in truth, alone and safe?' She covered her face with her hands.

'Your Highness,' came a voice, and the unhappy woman started to her feet in renewed alarm

—'Your Highness, have I permission to depart now? Monsieur de Stafforth wishes me to assist at a supper he gives this evening. As your Highness knows, my husband is very harsh to me since the Duke dismissed him, and indeed I dare not be late.'

It was Madame de Stafforth who, having finished reading, had come to take leave of the Duchess.

'Alas!' said her Highness sadly, 'I am not permitted to bear my sorrow alone; my friends must suffer also.'

'Ah! Madame,' said the little moth-coloured woman tenderly, 'we would all suffer joyfully, could we ease your Highness; but think, Madame! you, at least, have one great happiness: to all women it is not given to bear a son, and the Erbprinz grows stronger each day.'

Poor little Madame de Stafforth! The tragedy of her life lay in her words. She was childless; and Stafforth reproached her—nay, taunted her daily with this, for he desired an heir to carry on his new nobility.

'Forgive me, dear friend; indeed I am blessed. And my son grows stronger, you really think?'

Johanna Elizabeth's face lit with a mother's tenderness, and the two ladies plunged into a detailed discourse on the Erbprinz's health. At length Madame de Stafforth took her leave. [189]

'Shall I send any one to your Highness?' she asked as she reached the door.

The Duchess's terrors had been allayed by the familiar discussion of the Erbprinz's ailments, but a thrill of nameless fear passed through her when she remembered she would be alone again in her sombre apartment. But this was weakness! What had she read in the Swiss sermon? 'In the hands of God are all things. It is blasphemy to fear darkness, solitude, or the evil machinations of men. All is in the Great Grasp, and each happening is made and directed by God.' The solemn words came back to her now.

'Dear Madame de Stafforth, I can ring when I wish for any one. Good night, and God bless you!' she said, and laid her hand upon the small silver hand-bell which was on the bureau near her.

When the sound of Madame de Stafforth's footsteps ceased, her Highness turned to the books on the table and sought the volume of Swiss sermons; but it was not there; evidently Madame de Stafforth had forgotten to bring it from the salon. The Duchess decided to fetch it, but she lingered a moment, for it was unaccountably disagreeable to her to pass through the half-light of her sleeping apartment.

'In the hands of God are all things!' she murmured, and with firm step she moved towards the sombre chamber. Once more she thought she saw the bed-curtains sway; she fancied she heard a movement behind her. 'It is blasphemy to fear,' she said, but she felt her brow moisten with the sweat of terror.

She found the book, and resolutely re-entered the sleeping-room. She would not allow her eyes to wander to the bed-hangings, nor to search the dusky corners of the chamber. She passed on, and, gaining the little study, laid the book open on the table, and, leaning her head on her hands, began to read; but she could not fix her attention on the page before her. She was tortured by faint stirrings, by scarcely perceptible sounds, by an eerie feeling of some lurking presence always behind her.

At length she could bear it no longer. She closed the book and rose, intending to ring the hand-bell and summon her attendants, but the words of the sermon echoed in her brain: 'It is blasphemy to fear,' and she felt ashamed of her impulse. She turned, and, going to the praying-stool, kneeled in prayer. [190]

'Give me strength, O God! to resist this baseless terror,' she prayed. 'In thy hands are all things!' Yet her anxiety was unsoothed, and the dread of madness came to her, but with it grew a brave defiance: she would not go mad, she would not! She saw herself a prisoner in some castle, kept alive and well treated, perhaps, but a piteous object, a thing for all to point at—'the mad Duchess!' And the Grävenitz at Stuttgart a legal Duchess. She believed a Prince could put away an insane wife. 'Not madness, kind Jesus!' she prayed. Her heart was wrung in agony as she pictured her son, the Erbprinz, taunted perhaps by the mention of his mother's madness. 'All is in the Great Grasp, and each happening is made and directed by God.' 'O Christ,' she prayed, 'I believe, I trust, I will not blaspheme by fear; no madness can strike me down while I believe and pray.' She lifted her hot face from her hands, calmed, soothed, brave once more. She was rising from her knees, and the movement brought her eyes on a level with the mirror panel. As one turned to stone, she stood looking into the mirror, for it reflected one corner of her bed in the next room, and the fading light fell on something white which pushed aside the black brocade bed-curtain—a large yellow-white hand holding a small gleaming knife. The Duchess, still with the dread of insanity upon her, told herself that it was an hallucination, a delusion, the frenzied working of her overwrought brain. She gathered her courage and fixed her eyes on the mirror, which showed her what she conceived to be a phantom. The hand was large, with hair growing hideously over it, and jagged, bitten nails—she could see this distinctly, for the light fell from the window full on the black curtain, and showed up the yellow hand. Fascinated, she gazed into the mirror, wondering the while why, now that the horror actually confronted her, she felt so little fear, whereas before she had started and trembled at each gust of wind. Now the hand emerged [191] further from out the hangings. An arm in a brown sleeve appeared. Then the curtains parted, and her Highness saw a ferret-like face appear. She knew that this was no phantom. Swiftly she

calculated the distance between her and the hand-bell. She remembered that only her tiring-maid would come in answer to the usual daily summons. If this man was indeed an assassin, he would do his work immediately; kill her ere the woman could come, and the unsuspecting maid herself might easily be silenced with one stab from that pointed dagger. All this the Duchess realised in a flash. She had never thought so rapidly in her life. No! she must not ring; she must dupe the murderer! Her eyes met the assassin's in the mirror, but she had the strength to return the gaze in an abstracted fashion, so that the man should be uncertain whether she had seen him, or whether the mirror had failed, by some strange chance, to transmit his reflection. Instinctively she felt that her death-warrant would be signed did the man know her to be aware of his presence. She moved towards the table; thus she was out of the mirror's range, and she therefore could not see what the man was doing in the adjoining apartment. 'Dupe him! escape by ruse! get out of the rooms to the ante-hall, let him think I am coming back!' Dully this thought struggled in her mind. With extraordinary calmness she commenced to move the books on the table, purposely rustling the pages. Then suddenly she knew her only way of escape.

'Curious!' she said aloud; 'I thought my other book was here. I have left it next door. I must find it and return to read and rest.' As she said the words she walked into the sleeping-room. 'God give me strength not to look towards the bed,' she prayed silently. 'Lord, in thy hands are all things. It is blasphemy to fear.'

Now she was in the shadowy bedroom; she moved slowly across, saying again aloud: 'I will fetch the volume and return.' As the words left her lips she realised she had spoken in French; her ruse was useless then! The murderer was probably some illiterate scoundrel; how should he comprehend? But her dogged, methodical nature stood her in good stead. If Johanna Elizabetha began anything, she invariably completed her task; so although she imagined her strategy spoiled [192] through her use of the French language, she kept steadily moving across the large dark room. As she gained the door leading to the audience-chamber she heard the man's bitten, jagged nails scrape the silk brocade of the hangings. He had pushed aside the curtains, then—he was following her! 'God give me strength,' she prayed again. With unhurried step she passed across the whole length of the long audience-chamber, and gently opened the door of the ante-hall. The page-in-waiting, a slight child of fourteen years, sprang to his feet, bowing deeply, as her Highness entered.

'Are you alone?' said the Duchess quietly. 'Is no lackey in waiting?'

'No, your Highness; I have had the honour to guard your Highness alone for the last few minutes. There is no one else at all,' the boy replied, proud of the trust reposed in him.

'I cannot give up this child to the assassin's dagger,' thought the Duchess.

To her strained hearing there seemed to be a creeping movement behind her. Quickly she pulled the key from the lock on the inner door of the audience-chamber, and with trembling hand fitted it into the keyhole on the ante-hall side.

'Quick, boy! fasten the other door leading to my apartment!' she whispered.

The youth ran forward to do her bidding, and as she heard the bolt fall under his hand she succeeded in turning the key in the lock noiselessly.

'Call the guard! Quick! quick!'

Instantly the page rushed off, and once more Johanna Elizabetha was alone with the owner of that yellow, hairy hand, but with a bolted door between her and death this time. Still she held the door-handle firmly, and she felt it being gently tried from inside. Then she heard distinctly stealthy footsteps stealing away across the audience-chamber.

The guard clattered into the ante-hall—fifty men in yellow and silver uniforms, with drawn swords, and pistols showing grimly at their sides. The captain of the guard inquired her [193] Highness's pleasure. The page had summoned him, saying her Highness was in danger of her life.

'Yes,' said Johanna Elizabetha shortly, 'assassination. Search my apartments, the doors are locked.'

The men poured in: some straight through the audience-chamber, others through the narrow corridor leading round at the back of the Duchess's sleeping apartment. In a short time the captain returned.

'We have found no one, your Highness; yet I have left my men to search again, though in truth we have inspected every inch of all the rooms.'

He looked at Johanna Elizabetha curiously as he spoke. Did he guess her mad? She felt guilty, suspected. Could that horrid vision, that creeping, lurking man, have been a phantom? A thing, then, of her own creation, not a ghost of the castle—no, a spectre of her own!

'You cannot have searched everywhere,' she said. 'There are no ghosts in the castle save the White Lady, and I saw a man skulking in my apartments.'

'Your Highness, the search has——,' he began.

'I will direct your men, Monsieur,' she interrupted hurriedly, and entered the audience-chamber. Carefully the soldiers went through the rooms again, probing each dark corner and under the

hangings with their swords, but no one was to be found. The sweat stood on her Highness's brow. She knew she would give all she possessed for the man to be discovered. If he were not, she knew that she must become insane—nay, she would be proved already mad to her own knowledge.

Suddenly a shout went up from the soldiers who had penetrated to her Highness's praying-room, which, owing to its bareness and small size, had received at first but a cursory glance from the searchers.

Against the balustrade in the angle of the small balcony the murderer crouched. The soldiers dragged him forward and flung him, an unresisting, trembling heap, on to the middle of the floor. Her Highness hearing the commotion hurried forward.

'You have found him, then? Oh, thank God!' she cried.

'Pardon, pardon, by your mother's heart, I implore!' moaned the miserable wretch, dragging himself like a crawling, wriggling animal towards the Duchess. He was immediately hauled back by the soldiers. [194]

'Stand up, you worm, and give account of yourself,' said the captain sternly, bestowing a kick on the man's ribs.

'I meant no harm! By Christ! I meant no harm!' the prisoner wailed.

'How came you in her Highness's apartments? Speak!'

'I am a stranger in Stuttgart,' replied the man.

'Here's a lie for you,' broke in a trooper; 'he's the Grävenitz's private servant. I have often seen him at Tübingen.'

'Yes! yes! yes! I am the Comtesse d'Urach's secretary; but I return to Italy soon, and I wished to see the Duchess's famous black rooms before I left! Curiosity has been my undoing! Pardon! pardon!'

'If you only wanted to see my rooms,' said her Highness gently, 'why did you hide from me beneath the hangings? Why had you a poignard in your hand?'

'I had no poignard! By the Mother of God! I had no poignard,' he whined.

'It is in his girdle, your Highness,' said the trooper, drawing forth the dagger from the man's belt.

'I had a poignard in my girdle, but I meant no harm! I meant no harm! Madame, you cannot think I would have hurt you? Oh, mercy! mercy!' Once more he threw himself at the Duchess's feet. 'I hid indeed. O Madame! I feared your displeasure. Have mercy on me! I only wished to see your beautiful black rooms before I went back to Italy. When your Highness spoke of fetching the book ——' The Duchess started. Of course the man was an Italian, and he understood French; that was how her plan had not miscarried, as she feared it had, when she thought her adversary was some local cut-throat—'when your Highness spoke, I thought I might escape while your Highness was away, and then the doors were bolted and the guard came. Oh, mercy!'

'Poor soul, let him go,' said Johanna Elizabetha gently.

'Your Highness, he shall go—to prison, till he is hanged. My man here tells me he is the person who gave poison to Kitchenmaster Glaser to sprinkle in your Highness's food,' the captain answered. [195]

'Alas! how evil are men's hearts,' sighed the Duchess. 'Take him, then, but treat him gently. He says he meant no harm.'

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[196]

CHAPTER XIV

THE SECOND MARRIAGE

The news of the discovery of Ferrari in her Highness's apartments spread through Stuttgart during the evening, and there arose a wave of intense indignation. The Grävenitz was loudly denounced as the instigator of the attempted crime, and a mob gathered before the Jägerhaus, clamouring in their fierce, blind rage to destroy the house where the hated woman had resided. The riot grew so serious that it was necessary to call out the town guard, and though the knot of violent rioters was easily dispersed by the soldiers, still during the whole night Stuttgart continued in an uproar, and fears of a dangerous disturbance were entertained.

Messengers sped away to Urach, carrying the news of Ferrari's attempt and exaggerated reports of the unquiet state of the town.

Early on the following morning Forstner, who resided for the most part at Stuttgart, finding the Grävenitz court little to his liking, arrived at Urach, and pleading urgent private business was immediately admitted to his Highness's audience-chamber.

Wilhelmine from her powdering-closet could hear Forstner's deep voice, but, though she much

desired it, she could not distinguish the words. Once she caught the name 'Ferrari,' and then again 'her Highness.' Could it be the old story of Glaser and the white powder? she wondered. Impatiently she tapped her foot on the ground. She called Maria and inquired if Ferrari was in the castle. She was told he had left Urach early on the preceding morning and had not been seen since. Wilhelmine grew anxious at this. It struck her disagreeably that the absent Italian should be the subject of Forstner's early visit. Ferrari had been strangely gloomy and preoccupied of late, she had remarked. Indeed, he had brooded in this fashion ever since the Glaser affair. True, Wilhelmine had taunted him cruelly with his failure, and the man always took her lightest word to heart. He had conceived an affection for her which was a trifle inconvenient—a jealous, fierce affection made grotesque by his ugly, undersized person. [197]

Eberhard Ludwig entered the powdering closet. His face was deadly pale, and his eyes held a look of horror and disgust which warned Wilhelmine of some grave occurrence.

'I have news of serious import, Madame,' he said coldly; 'kindly dismiss your serving-woman. I wish to speak to you in private.'

Maria left the room with a sniff; she was accustomed to better treatment. In fact, she bade fair to become a tyrant to her lenient mistress.

'Mon Prince!' cried Wilhelmine as the woman disappeared, 'whatever the news, you seem to show me an ugly frown. I, at least, cannot have displeased my beloved master, for I have not left his side, and our commune together cannot have given him offence.' She spoke lightly, but she watched his Highness's stern face anxiously. It softened at her words.

'Ah, Wilhelmine, beloved, a terrible thing has happened! And you are gravely accused.' Then he poured forth the whole story of Ferrari's attempt. Wilhelmine listened in silence; she knew that his accusation was extremely serious, and the facts most difficult to explain away. To her consternation she saw that his Highness himself half suspected her of having a hand in the matter.

'Every criminal is allowed to answer his accuser,' she said, when Eberhard Ludwig finished his narration. He started forward.

'Accuser! Wilhelmine, am I your accuser? Do you think I doubt you? but, O God! the facts are black against you.'

'Your words do not accuse me, Eberhard,' she answered; 'but your eyes and the stern soul behind them accuse me. Nay, listen; how often have you praised me, calling me a woman of much intelligence? Now, I ask you, consider for a moment how a woman, gifted with even a spark of this same intelligence, could act so foolishly as to have her declared enemy, the obstacle to her happiness, removed by the poignard of a servant well known to be in her employ? That is one plea I would put forward, Monseigneur. Then again, should I select the moment to contrive her Highness's death when the world is ringing with that preposterous Glaser story? I am branded as a bigamist,' she added bitterly; 'do you fancy I wish to add the title murderess to my name?' [198]

'But explain the circumstance of your servant being discovered, poignard in hand, lurking in the Princess Johanna Elizabetha's rooms. And oh! Wilhelmine, forgive me; but this preposterous Glaser story, as you call it, has never been properly explained. You have laughed, and I have put the matter out of my thoughts; but now—O beloved! it is so terrible to doubt you, but——'

Wilhelmine was unprepared for this retrospective attack. She hesitated, and his Highness's face grew dark.

'I really must ask you to explain,' he said harshly, moving away from her.

'Eberhard,' she said brokenly, 'I sent the powder to the Duchess.'

Serenissimus started forward. 'You confess? O my God!' he cried.

'Yes; I will tell you. The powder was a harmless philtre. I brewed a magic draught which causes whoever drinks it to forget the being they love, and become enamoured of the first person they see. O Eberhard, believe me!'

'Fairy tales!' he almost laughed. 'But why given in secret? why given at all?' he demanded.

'If she forgot you, forgot your charm, beloved, she would be happy again. I had pity on her!'

It was poison she had sent, and even to herself her story seemed too extravagant for credence. To her surprise, however, his Highness believed her in this.

'Well, and for the rest? for Ferrari's being hidden in the castle?' he questioned.

'Call Maria and ask her if I was aware that the madman had left Urach. She can vouch that I thought him to be here.'

'Why did he do this thing?' said the Duke.

'What explanation did he offer?' she queried hurriedly. [199]

'That he wished to see the black rooms!' he replied.

'Well, but surely that is explanation enough? You know the man's extraordinary love of beauty,

his curious seeking for unusual furniture. He is mad, Eberhard; I tell you he is mad! We must save him from prison and send him back to Italy.' She spoke so naturally, so easily, that his Highness felt that sense of the unaccustomed, the unknown evil, the grim suspicion of crime fall away, and an immense relief take its place.

'Of course, of course!' he said hurriedly; 'I was frightened by that fool Forstner. Forgive me for my insane suspicion.' And he hastened away to assure Forstner of the sheer absurdity of this accusation.

Perhaps he would have been a trifle shaken in his confidence had he seen Wilhelmine fall back in her chair, breathing hard like some wild animal who had escaped the hunter's knife by a hair's-breadth.

If Serenissimus was thus easily appeased, the authorities and citizens of Stuttgart were not to be put off with a mere tale. Also Johanna Elizabetha's friends and partisans were loud in their accusations of the Grävenitz. Ferrari had been released from prison by the Duke's command. The man was mad, his Highness averred, and it was but merciful to send him back to Italy. It leaked out that the Italian had left Wirtemberg, but it was whispered that he carried a large sum of gold with him.

'Blood money,' said the Stuttgarters, and their indignation grew apace. Schütz wrote from Vienna that things were going badly for the Grävenitz. The Emperor had been informed of the Ferrari affair, and was reported to have expressed his opinion in no measured terms. In fact, Schütz strongly advised the Countess of Urach to leave Wirtemberg for a time, but the lady remained firm. 'Go, I will not, until I am obliged, and that is not yet,' she declared.

So the days passed as usual at Urach, outwardly. The Duke shot roebuck daily in the early morning, the Countess often accompanying him. Later, Serenissimus would ride young and fiery horses; but in this the Countess did not take part, she was but a poor horsewoman. Then came a delicious banquet, with the Countess of Urach's musicians in attendance discoursing fair melodies. [200]

During the afternoon his Highness drove eight, ten, and sometimes twelve horses together, thundering through the country, and the peasants soon learnt to associate their heretofore beloved ruler with clouds of dust and ruthless speed. A demon driver rushing past, who, they said, would crush them were they not quick to fly to safety in their houses or fields.

A demon driver with a beautiful, haughty-faced woman beside him. Verily an appalling picture to the sleepy Swabian peasant accustomed to the heavy swaying motion of quiet oxen or laborious cart-horses.

Each evening at the castle of Urach there were merry doings: dancing, cards, and music. It all seemed gay and secure enough, but there was unrest beneath this outward peace, an anxious feeling in the revellers' hearts. Madame de Ruth chattered wittily; Zollern, gallant and wise, made subtle ironic speeches; Wilhelmine sang, Serenissimus adored, the Sittmanns and the parasites were chorus to this—a chorus a little out of tune at times, perchance, but passable.

At length the imperial ultimatum arrived, and, like a card house blown by a strong man's breath, the sham court fell, and the Queen of Hearts knew that the game was played out.

'Wilhelmine, Countess Grävenitz, masquerading under the title of Countess of Urach, is hereby declared an exile from all countries under our suzerainty, nor can she hold property in these aforementioned countries, nor call for the law's protection. From the date of this writing she is given six days wherein to leave Wirtemberg. After the expiration of this term she must, an she remaineth in the land, stand her trial for bigamy, treason, and implication in attempted murder.'—Signed and sealed by the Emperor this.

There was no possible gainsaying; already the time allotted to her for flight was exceeded, and at any moment she might be arrested by the imperial order.

She fled to Schaffhausen once more, and in Stuttgart there was great rejoicing; but the joy was dashed to the ground when the news came that Serenissimus had also disappeared. Had he fled with his evil mistress, then? It was positively averred, however, that she had gone alone with Madame de Ruth. Witchcraft, of course! The Grävenitzin had bewitched herself once before when she had disappeared for three days from the old castle. His Highness himself had said openly that she had returned to him in a flash of lightning. What more likely than that she should have spirited Serenissimus away with her to Switzerland? [201]

'Nonsense,' said the Duchess-mother at Stetten; 'Eberhard is roaming in the woods, crying to the trees that he is a broken-hearted martyr!' And she hurried to Urach, taking up her abode in the very apartments which Wilhelmine had just vacated. It is on record that her maternal Highness caused the rooms to be swept and garnished, ere she entered, as though they were infected with the pest. 'So they are,' quoth this plain-speaking dame, 'with the pest of vice!'

It is to be supposed that the Duchess-mother was right in her surmise regarding her son's forest wanderings, for a messenger arrived from Urach saying Serenissimus would re-enter Stuttgart with his mother in a few days' time; which he did, and was solemnly and publicly reconciled to the Duchess Johanna Elizabetha. The grateful burghers voted their Duke a free present of forty thousand gulden on his return, and to his Duchess ten thousand gulden.

The Duchess-mother is reported to have remarked that, of a truth, it had been fitting had they paid her back a portion of the war indemnity. 'But it does not matter,' she said, 'so long as that absurd boy, my son Eberhard, remains at his duties in future.' Dear, proud, sensible old lady! God rest her well! To her mother's heart, the thirty-seven-year-old Duke of Wirtemberg, hero, traveller, incidentally bigamist, remained eternally 'that absurd boy, my son.'

It was with mingled feelings that Wilhelmine at Schaffhausen heard of Eberhard Ludwig's reconciliation with his wife. Anger and scorn of the man's weakness predominated, but despair and humiliation tortured her as well, and a profound discouragement, which the sound of the [202] rushing, foaming Rhine falls had no power to sooth this time. The enforced inaction was terrible to her. It was her strategy to leave his Highness's passionate letters of excuse and explanation unanswered, and thus she had little wherewith to fill the long summer days. Madame de Ruth was a delightful companion, but Wilhelmine was unresponsive and seemed absorbed in some intricate calculation. She would sit for hours, brooding sombrely. Her eyes, narrowed and serpent-like, gazed at the rushing waters, but when Madame de Ruth remarked on the beauty of the scene she would answer irritably that she was occupied, and only begged for quiet in which to think. Towards the middle of August Schütz arrived from Vienna. He brought with him a document which he prayed Wilhelmine to consider, and to sign if she approved. It was entitled 'Revers de Wilhelmine, Comtesse Grävenitz,' and set forth that she undertook to relinquish all claims upon the Duke of Wirtemberg and his heirs forever. That she recognised any child, born of her relationship to his Highness, to be a bastard, and that she undertook never to return to the court of Wirtemberg. If she bound herself to these conditions, the Emperor, in return, promised to cancel her exile from his fiefs with the sole exception of Wirtemberg. The right to hold property would be given back to her, and she would be released from suspicion of murderous intent. His Majesty even promised her twenty thousand gulden as compensation for any wrong done to her in Wirtemberg.

Wilhelmine hesitated, pondered, and finally despatched Schütz to Stuttgart with a copy of the imperial document. He laid it before the Privy Council, and stated that his client, the Countess Grävenitz, was prepared to accept these proposals, on the condition that Wirtemberg paid her a further sum in compensation for her loss of honour, property, and prospects.

The Privy Council fell into the trap. Anything to be finally rid of the dangerous woman, done with the whole noisome story. They had the example of Mömpelgard before them, and they feared for Wirtemberg to be involved in a similar tangle.

Now Mömpelgard, or Montbéliard, as the French-speaking court named it, was a small [203] principality ruled by Eberhard Ludwig's cousin, Duke Leopold Eberhard of Wirtemberg, a liegeman of Louis XIV. of France, and a man of strange notions. He had been reared in the religion of Mahomet, and with the faith he held the customs of Islam. Thus he had married three women at once, legally, as he averred; and in any case, the three wives lived in splendour at Mömpelgard's castle. These ladies had had issue, and the succession to the Mömpelgard honours was complicated.

Naturally Stuttgart's Geheimräthe, with this cousinly example in their minds, longed for the Grävenitz to renounce all future claims upon the Dukedom of Wirtemberg, both for herself and for any issue of her 'marriage' with Eberhard Ludwig.

Thus when Schütz conveyed her demand for money as a condition to her renouncement, they listened to the preposterous request, and declared themselves ready to pay the favourite compensation. Schütz returned to Schaffhausen with this news, and was immediately re-despatched to Stuttgart with a demand for two hundred thousand gulden as the price of her renouncement.

The Geheimräthe were aghast. Twenty thousand, nay, even forty thousand, gulden they would pay, but two hundred thousand! This vast sum to be wrung out of the war-impoverished land! Impossible! Besides, it was as much as the marriage-portion of six princesses of Wirtemberg.

The Duke was approached. He retorted that the Countess of Grävenitz was perfectly justified in any demand she chose to make. The Duchess-mother arrived, and spoke, as usual, plainly to her son; but he had not forgotten how his mother had dragged him, like a repentant school-child, from Urach to be reconciled to Johanna Elizabetha. He owed the Duchess-mother a grudge, and paid it by remaining firm concerning the justice of Wilhelmine's claim.

The Privy Council offered her twenty thousand gulden. Then forty thousand. Both sums were refused. 'Two hundred thousand or nothing,' she answered. So the negotiations were broken off.

Meanwhile, had the Geheimräthe but known it, the 'Revers' had long been signed, sealed, and [204] despatched to Vienna.

Wilhelmine again sent Schütz to Stuttgart with the message that, as she had not been given just and fair compensation, she would know how, at a future date, to wring out from Wirtemberg a hundred times the modest sum refused her.

The Geheimräthe, thinking their foe vanquished and the affair at an end, laughed at this threat. They would have trembled had they known that the Grävenitz had a plan, and that their Duke was cognisant of the whole matter.

Wilhelmine, gazing at the waters of the Rhine with her half-closed, serpent-like eyes, sought for some device which should enable her to return to Stuttgart. In the first place, she loved power; in the second, she loved Eberhard Ludwig; in the third, she yearned to outwit her enemy Johanna Elizabetha and her opposers generally. Then she longed once more to defy the Duchess-mother, whom she, at the same time, greatly dreaded.

By this you will see that Wilhelmine was no longer merely the gay, charming, if scheming woman who had come to Wirtemberg sixteen months before. She had developed. Her extraordinary prosperity had poisoned her being. She had grown hard. Could she not achieve the height of power by one road, very well, she was ready to climb back by any circuitous path she could find. For many days her ingenuity and her searchings failed to show her any way back to Stuttgart. It was the pretext for returning which she sought; once there she knew she could grasp power again, and this time she intended to retain it. A chance speech of Madame de Ruth's set her on the track.

'Ah! my dear, we have gone too far; it is perilous to stand on the top of the hill; better to remain near the summit, indeed, but on some sheltered ledge whence we cannot be toppled over. Had I had my way, you should have married some high court dignitary, and as his wife you could have ruled undisturbed.'

'Can the wife of a court dignitary not be forbidden the court?' said Wilhelmine idly. [205]

'Naturally, my dear! The Emperor cannot order an official of a German state to remove his wife from the court where he is employed.'

'Only the prince's wedded wife can be exiled, then?' said Wilhelmine sneeringly.

'My dear! we climbed too high, alas!' Madame de Ruth replied.

Her words had started Wilhelmine on a new track of thought. Married to a courtier holding high office at court, she could return and resume her career. But that would declare her marriage with Eberhard Ludwig to be a farce, she reflected. Still, if this were the only way? In her mental vision she reviewed each courtier, but she could find none fitting for the position of husband in name. Schütz perhaps? She laughed at the very idea. No; the bridegroom must be a man of much breeding and no morals.

She wrote to Schütz requesting him to journey to Schaffhausen on important business. The attorney arrived, and Wilhelmine observed how shabby was his coat, how rusty his general appearance. He was again the pettifogging lawyer in poor circumstances, and Wilhelmine reflected that he would be all the more anxious to serve her in order to return to his ill-gotten splendour at her illegitimate court.

Schütz responded eagerly to her proposal. He acclaimed her a marvel of intelligence, and assured her that in Vienna he would be able to find the very article—a ruined nobleman ready to sell his name to any bidder.

On the day following Schütz's advent at Schaffhausen, Wilhelmine was surprised by a visit from her brother Friedrich, who arrived in a deeply injured mood. Since Wilhelmine left Urach, he averred, he had been treated in a manner all unfitting for an Oberhofmarshall, and the head of the noble family of Grävenitz. Serenissimus had paid him scant attention, and Stafforth had been reinstated as Hofmarshall to the Duchess Johanna Elizabetha—a brand new dignity, complained this Oberhofmarshall of a sham court. He made himself mighty disagreeable to his sister, varying his behaviour by outbursts of despair and noisy self-pity, which would have been laughable had [206] they not been so loud, violent, and disturbing. Wilhelmine informed him of her plan, and after many expressions of disapproval, when she had made it clear to him that it would be entirely to his advantage if she succeeded in her design, he gave the ugly plan his brotherly blessing and his sanction as head of the family.

Hereupon Schütz returned to Vienna to seek a bridegroom. In an astonishingly short time, he wrote that he had found an admirably adapted person in the Count Joseph Maria Aloysius Nepomuk von Würben, a gentleman of very old lineage, and ex-owner of a dozen castles in Bohemia, all of which, however, had gradually been converted into gulden, and the gold pieces, in their turn, had vanished into the recollection of many lost card games. This personage, owing to his sad misfortunes, found himself at the age of sixty inhabiting a garret in Vienna.

Schütz wrote that he knew Monsieur le Comte well. They met constantly at the eating-house. He further assured her that Würben was a very pleasant companion. Wilhelmine replied that it was profoundly indifferent to her whether her future husband was an agreeable companion or not, as she intended only to see him once—viz., at her own marriage, after which ceremony he could follow his namesake St. Nepomuk into the waves of the Moldau, for aught she cared! It angered her that Schütz wrote concerning Würben, as though he were in truth to be the companion of her life, and she winced under a new note of familiarity which had crept into the attorney's tone.

Friedrich Grävenitz, who had taken up his abode in Wilhelmine's house at Schaffhausen, made matters worse by what he conceived to be witty and subtle pleasantries. He was never done with his allusions to 'mon cher futur beau frère à Vienne,' and he playfully called his sister 'la petite fiancée.'

On a golden evening of late September, Würben, accompanied by Schütz, arrived at Schaffhausen. Wilhelmine and Madame de Ruth saw the coach crawling up the steep incline

which led to the little castle that Zollern had given to the favourite. With difficulty Madame de Ruth had induced Wilhelmine to offer her future husband one day's hospitality. The wedding was fixed for the morning after Würben's arrival, and the bridegroom had agreed to return to Vienna immediately after the ceremony. [207]

'I have the honour to present to you Monsieur le Comte de Würben!' said Schütz, as he ushered in the noble Bohemian. Würben bowed to the ground, and Wilhelmine and Madame de Ruth bent in grand courtesies.

'Delighted to see you, mon cher! Welcome to our family!' cried Friedrich Grävenitz ostentatiously, departing entirely from the ceremonious code of those days, which hardly permitted the nearest friends to greet each other in this informal manner. But Friedrich Grävenitz prided himself on his friendliness and geniality, and, like most genial persons, he constantly floundered into tactlessness and vulgarity. On this occasion his misplaced affability was received with undisguised disapproval. Madame de Ruth tapped him on the arm with her fan; Wilhelmine shot him a furious, snake-like glance; Würben himself looked surprised, and merely responded with a bow to the effusive speech. Schütz, of course, was the only one to whom it appeared natural, nay, correct. In his world geniality, translated into jocoseness, was indispensable before, during, and after a wedding—even at these scarcely usual nuptials!

Now Würben came forward. 'Mademoiselle de Grävenitz,' he said, 'believe me, I am deeply sensible of the great honour you will do me.'

'Monsieur, I thank you,' began Wilhelmine; but Friedrich Grävenitz interposed pompously:

'As the head of the family, Monsieur, I wish to express to you my pleasure at the thought of my sister bearing your ancient name.'

'My name is much at Mademoiselle your sister's service,' responded Würben; and Madame de Ruth surprised a covert sneer on the old roué's lips.

'Come, mes amis!' she cried, 'the travellers must be in need of refreshment. Will you not repair to the guest-chamber, gentlemen? and when you have removed the dust of travel from your clothes, we will partake of an early supper.' [208]

'Madame de Ruth, I will escort the gentlemen to their apartments, if they wish it,' said Friedrich pompously, opening his eyes wide in what he thought was a reproving look, but in truth was only angrily foolish.

'Thank you, Friedrich. I will tell you when I wish your assistance,' said Wilhelmine calmly. 'Dear Madame de Ruth, you are right. I think Baron Schütz knows the way to the guest-chamber? or shall I tell my brother to summon a lackey?' Her tone was haughty to insolence. The irritation, the disgust, the hatred of her odious though necessary plan, made her mood evil. She was grateful to Würben for his silence, and his fine, if somewhat contemptuous manner, and she bestowed a smile on him as he passed out of the room.

A constrained silence fell on the remaining three. Wilhelmine leaned back in the chair into which she had sunk directly Schütz and Würben disappeared; her elbows rested on the chair-arms, and her fingers were pressed together at the points in an attitude of fastidious, artificial prayer. Madame de Ruth fanned herself slowly and watched Friedrich Grävenitz, who stood paring his nails with a small file he had taken from his pocket.

'I certainly do not like your way towards me, Wilhelmine,' he broke forth, puffing out his fine torso. 'You show a spirit which is not nice towards the head of your family! I think——'

'Dear Friedrich, if you could but realise that I do not care what you think,' Wilhelmine interrupted icily.

'And your manner was not kind to Würben—a nice man, I like him!' said her brother in an almost ecstatic tone.

'How fortunate!' she called after Friedrich's retreating figure, as he strode across the room with such pompous haste that the affairs of the whole Empire might have waited his directions.

The two ladies smiled at one another wearily when he had gone; then, without honouring this self-sufficient person with a word of comment, they fell to discussing Würben. This Bohemian nobleman was not an altogether unpleasing personality. Of middle height, he had a stoop which caused him to appear short; it was not the stoop of the scholar, but that bend which ill-health, caused by debauch, often gives to a comparatively young man. His face was sallow, hollow beneath the eyes, emaciated between chin and cheek-bone. The brown eyes were feverishly bright and a trifle blood-shot. The well-shaven mouth had loose, sensual lips, and the teeth were large and discoloured. And yet one knew that this man, repulsive though he had become, must have been a youth of promise and some personal beauty; and his manner betokened the man of breeding, and one with knowledge of the great world. His sneer at the unholy bargain he was about to make told Madame de Ruth that he was fully aware of the degradation of it. An admirably adapted person for the purpose, she reflected; for, being ashamed of his bargain, he would hide in Vienna, content so long as he had sufficient money to risk at l'hombre and faro. This she and Wilhelmine discussed while Schütz and Würben were upstairs removing their dusty garments. [209]

Suddenly Friedrich Grävenitz burst into the room. 'His Highness has just ridden up to the door! This is really most inconvenient, most difficult for me.' He spoke loudly.

'Hush! be careful! Würben must not hear,' implored Madame de Ruth, while Wilhelmine sprang up. She breathed in laboured gasps, her eyes fixed wildly on her brother.

'His Highness? You are mad, Friedrich! or is this some absurd plot against me?' She turned on her brother fiercely. 'Is this some foolishness you have arranged?'

'It has nothing to do with me. I am never consulted,' he began; but his further utterance was cut short, for Eberhard Ludwig entered unannounced.

'Leave us together,' he said shortly. 'For God's sake, Madame de Ruth, manage that I may speak with her undisturbed.' Madame de Ruth hurried Friedrich Grävenitz away with scant ceremony.

'My beloved! oh, to see you again!' Serenissimus clasped her to him. 'Tell me you are mine, as you were at Urach! Am I in time to hinder this terrible sacrilege?'

She told him that the marriage had not yet taken place, that it was for the morrow. [210]

'It cannot be; you are my wife by the laws of God and man! I cannot suffer you to be called the wife of another. Tell me that you will not do this thing. Wilhelmine, my beloved, you cannot—you cannot——' He held her hand in his, speaking rapidly, indistinctly.

'There is no other way,' she said sadly.

'But it is not possible! You cannot, it is a shameful thing. I forbid you to do it. I will never leave you again. My son may reign at Stuttgart. See, beloved, we will live here together—live out our days in peace and love. It shall be a poem, an idyll—far from all interruptions, far from intrigues!'

He looked into her face with shining eyes, but he found there no answering spark of enthusiasm. Dropping her hand he turned away. She was aghast. True, she loved Eberhard Ludwig, but she realised at that moment how much more potent was her love of splendour and power. What! to drag out her life at Schaffhausen—even with him at her side? No, it was impossible.

'Eberhard, be reasonable. This marriage is no marriage, it is simply the purchase of a name. You know well enough the conditions which are accepted by Würben. Twenty thousand gulden on the day of our contract, twelve thousand gulden a year for his life. Various fine titles and court charges, provided he undertakes never to appear in Stuttgart, never to claim his marriage rights! He is to sign this document in the presence of the lawyers to-morrow before our——' she hesitated, 'before our marriage.'

'But you will vow before God to love and obey this man; you will give him your hand and kneel with him in prayer. Something of the sanctity of our true vows will be filched away. Sacred you are to me for ever, but oh! this will be desecration! you cannot, you must not——' he moaned.

'You knew this before. You knew and approved, and now you hinder the completion of the only plan by which I can return to you. You cannot give up your Dukedom, you cannot leave Stuttgart, and we cannot live apart.' She spoke harshly.

'But is Stuttgart so much to you? Wilhelmine, do you love me only as Duke of Wirtemberg?' His eyes were full of tears. 'Alas! I am the most miserable of men.' [211]

'Eberhard, heart of my life, look in my face and see if I love you! But because I love you I dare not take you away from your great position, from your ambition.'

'Ambition,' he broke in, 'ambition! I am ready to renounce everything——'

'Will you let yourself sink into a mooning poet, my hero of great battles? No! you shall go back, dear love—back to your grand, soldier's life! See, I will stay here and dream of you, if you will not let me take the only path back to Wirtemberg. You shall write to me, sometimes send me a poem, a jewel perhaps—but we shall be parted! O Eberhard!' She sighed deeply, but her strange, hard eyes watched him narrowly. He turned away his face. She saw that her reminder of his military ambition had succeeded as she expected.

'You are right. Alas! this horrible degradation, this masquerading before God—and yet it is the only way.'

Her arms stole round him. Against his cheek he felt her smooth skin, her warm lips sought his.

'I love you, only you,' she whispered. 'In a few days I follow you to Stuttgart. Come to me!'

He flung her from him almost roughly.

'Not now! God in heaven! not now! Can you dream that at such a time I could? It would make the hideous bargain you contemplate to-morrow one degree more vile.' He turned from her and fled. In a moment she heard the clatter of his horse's hoofs in the courtyard.

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[212]

CHAPTER XV

THE RETURN

A TRAVELLING coach and six horses thundered into Stuttgart, driven at a hand gallop, and raised clouds of white dust as it passed down the Graben. An escort of Silver Guards rode with this coach. One of the soldiers' horses knocked over a child playing in the roadway, but the cavalcade passed on unheeding, leaving the little crushed figure lying limp and still in the dust.

The coach drew up at the Jägerhaus, where the doors stood wide open, disclosing a company of servants drawn up in solemn line. Two sentries were posted at either side of the entrance. A black-clad major-domo bowed on the threshold, while half a dozen lackeys sprang forward to receive the tall woman who was slowly descending from the coach. Madame la Comtesse de Würben, her Excellency the Landhofmeisterin of Wirtemberg, Countess Grävenitz, had arrived at Stuttgart to attend to the duties connected with her invalid husband's court charge.

This exalted lady was the first personage of the court after the reigning Duchess, and his Highness had offered her apartments in the castle, but these were refused, her Excellency preferring to occupy an independent residence.

Thus it fell out that Wilhelmine returned to the Jägerhaus towards the end of September, some four months after she had fled from Urach, and a few days since the mock marriage with Würben, 'ce cher Nepomuk, mon mari,' as she ironically named him to Madame de Ruth.

There had been grievous storms at Stuttgart during the days succeeding his Highness's return from hunting in the Schönbuch, that shooting expedition which had been but a pretext to leave Stuttgart and hurry to Schaffhausen, in order to hinder the celebration of the ceremony of [213] Wilhelmine's marriage.

Serenissimus returned in a mood which would brook no contradiction. He announced to the Geheimräthe, and to the court, that it was his pleasure to revive the ancient office of Landhofmeister, and that he had conferred this, the highest charge of his court, upon a Bohemian nobleman of the name of Würben, but that this gentleman being seriously indisposed, his lady-wife had undertaken to fulfil the various duties of Landhofmeisterin, and would reside at the Jägerhaus. Private information came to the astonished Geheimräthe that this new evil was but the old poison with a new label; that this Countess Würben was the hated Grävenitzin. Bitterly they regretted their refusal of the two hundred thousand gulden, but it was too late now.

To Johanna Elizabetha this announcement was made by his Highness in person and with cruel frankness. She was told that she had refused a life of ease and peace, leaving his Highness to enjoy a happiness which she herself could never have provided, and that he took this way to save himself from despair, for without Wilhelmine he would not, nay, could not, live.

'You must abide by this, Madame, and if you are peaceably disposed, and behave with becoming consideration to her Excellency the Landhofmeisterin, it will be possible for you to remain in Stuttgart,' he told her.

Her Highness made no reply to this surprising speech, but immediately wrote to Stetten, imploring the Duchess-mother to come and put order into the family affairs. The dear lady arrived in high dudgeon, and according to her custom stated her opinion to Eberhard Ludwig in words he could not misunderstand. But in vain, and it was a very crestfallen, angry old lady who drove back through the fields to Stetten.

The court was in a quandary, in comparison to which the former perplexities in regard to the Grävenitzin were mere bagatelles. If they refused to go to court festivities where the Landhofmeisterin, after the Duchess, held the first rank, they would risk being excluded from court perhaps for years. Again, who knew how soon the favourite might fall into disgrace, or be [214] banished once more by some unexpected event? There was much talk and fervid declarations of noble sentiments, loyalty to the Duchess, love of purity, and the rest; but when Wilhelmine invited the entire court to visit her at the Jägerhaus, on the occasion of a grand evening rout, it was noticeable that those few who did not appear sent copious excuses, pretending illness, and adding almost medical descriptions of their ailments, so anxious were they that Wilhelmine should believe them to be really indisposed! Already it was considered dangerous to offend the Grävenitzin, as they still called the Countess of Würben, her Excellency the Landhofmeisterin, but to her face she was 'your Excellency,' and they paid her great court.

Naturally the Duchess Johanna Elizabetha held aloof, but she knew she must one day meet her rival face to face, one day take part in a court festivity where the woman would be only second in formal rank, in reality the first in the estimation of all.

The winter days grew short and dark, and Christmas approached. Christmas rejoicings with this sinful woman queening it at masque and dance! Even from informal family gatherings the Landhofmeisterin, as first lady in the land, could not be excluded.

'Dear and honoured Madame my Mother,' Johanna Elizabetha wrote, 'I have to meet this woman again. Let the first encounter not be before the world. I will invite her to our Christmas tree. Come you too, dear Madame my Mother, even if there is snow on the ground, to help your unhappy daughter, Johanna Elizabetha.' Thus she wrote to the formidable dame at Stetten.

It must be conceded that for the favourite this family gathering to which she was bidden presented disagreeable prospects of extreme difficulty, and she craved Eberhard Ludwig to permit her to decline the honour, but Serenissimus implored her to consent. It would be unwise to rebuff the Duchess's overture, and after all, possibly it was her Highness's intention to live

peaceably with her husband's mistress. Other ladies had done so. He quoted history and recent events: Louis XIV., Louise de la Vallière, and Marie Thérèse of France, and so on. Also he represented to her that the first meeting with Johanna Elizabetha would be a trifle awkward with the whole court agape, so perhaps this private family gathering was an excellent opportunity; besides, as Landhofmeisterin, it was correct she should be included in the Petit Cercle. [215]

She mocked at the homely custom of the Christmas tree, calling it unfitting for a grand seigneur's household to indulge in such old-fashioned peasant-like rejoicings.

'Can you dream of such a festivity at Versailles?' she asked, laughing.

He told her that his mother clung to the habit. It was an ancient German custom thus to celebrate the Birth of Christ.

'I love the notion, too, that in all my villages the peasants can have the same as I have, for once, poor souls!' he added simply.

'Eberhard, you are ridiculous!—yes, a ridiculous poet-fellow. But I will come to your peasant celebration, if it pleases you.' She was touched by this gentle saying of his.

And thus it fell out that on Christmas eve Wilhelmine ordered her coach to convey her to the castle. She drove through the snow in no happy frame of mind. Christmas trees and the favourite!—could anything be more incongruous? and she knew it. Angrily she sneered at the simple homeliness of the old German custom. Peasants could do these absurdities, but the Duchess of Wirtemberg?

In the long room where the madrigals had been sung on that well-remembered evening when Wilhelmine was installed lady-in-waiting to her Highness, a tall fir-tree was planted in a gilded barrel. A thousand twinkling lights burned on the branches, and little trinkets dangled temptingly. Overhead, on the topmost branch, the waxen Christmas angel with tinsel wings hovered over this family gathering. Symbol of peace and goodwill, this angel would look down pitifully on the men and women round the Christmas tree, whose hearts were full of bitterness, of envy and hatred! Lackeys were fastening candles on to the branches, and Johanna Elizabetha and Madame de Stafforth were hanging up trinkets and playthings for the Erbprinz. [216]

The Duchess-mother entered. She glanced round the room. 'Has the enemy not arrived?' she said humorously.

Johanna Elizabetha sighed.

'No, she has not come yet. It is hard she should spoil our Christmas Eve; but it is better than meeting her for the first time as Landhofmeisterin with all her friends to stare at me.'

'She will not enjoy her evening, my dear,' returned the Duchess-mother, with a grim smile.

At this moment Eberhard Ludwig entered, leading the Erbprinz by the hand. He sometimes endeavoured to be a kind father, but it was no easy matter for him. The Duchess-mother's face softened as she greeted her son, and bent to kiss the little boy, who scarcely responded to the old lady's embrace. His shining, excited eyes were fixed upon the Christmas tree, and snatching his hand from the Duke's grasp, he began to dance round in frantic childish rapture. Johanna Elizabetha forgot her troubles watching her son's joy, and she commenced cutting off the playthings for him.

'It were fitting to await our guest's arrival, Madame, before you strip the tree,' said the Duke coldly.

'Nonsense!' interrupted the Duchess-mother, 'surely Elizabetha can give her child the playthings if she wishes to?'

'Her Excellency the Landhofmeisterin!' announced a page, throwing open the door, and Wilhelmine appeared on the threshold.

His Highness hurried forward to greet her, while Johanna Elizabetha instinctively drew nearer to the Duchess-mother, catching the Erbprinz by the arm.

Wilhelmine bent low in an elaborate courtesy. Her Highness held out her hand shyly for her rival to kiss. The Duchess-mother watched the comedy for an instant, then turning to the Duke who stood behind Wilhelmine, nervously fingering his rapier-hilt, she said:

'Serenissimus will have the kindness to present to me the Landhofmeisterin, as I have not the pleasure to know her.'

'Madame, my mother permits me—This is Madame la Comtesse de Würben, Landhofmeisterin,' he stammered, and the Duchess-mother threw him a contemptuous glance. [217]

'Ah, Madame de Würben! how sad it must be for you to be obliged to leave your husband in Bohemia,' she said. 'Have you good news of him now? I am so interested in illness. Tell me exactly what ails poor Count Würben.'

Wilhelmine stared at this formidable dame in consternation. Würben's fictitious ailments were difficult to name.

'He suffered—from—from—smallpox some years ago, your Highness, and has never recovered his health,' she said haltingly.

'Ah! smallpox; yes, indeed, a terrible malady, and but too common. Did your husband contract it at the same time as you did, Madame? I see you must have been a great sufferer,' said the Duchess-mother, fixing her sharp brown eyes on the few hardly distinguishable pockmarks on Wilhelmine's face. The favourite flushed.

'I was not married to Monsieur de Würben at that time, your Highness,' she answered.

'Oh, indeed! Madame, forgive me; I did not know how long you had been married. Have you any children, Madame de Würben? No? Ah, a sad pity! The little ones would doubtless have been a consolation to you while you are forced to be absent from your husband; but perhaps we may have the pleasure of seeing Monsieur de Würben in Stuttgart before long?'

'I do not know, your Highness,' said Wilhelmine shortly. Each word the Duchess-mother spoke cut her to the quick, and she hated the tall, gaunt old lady as even she had never hated before.

'Well, I hope for you sake, Madame, your husband will be able to reside here soon. It is hard for a young woman to be alone. And besides, really you should pray for a son to succeed to the Würben family honours. I used to know a Count Würben at Vienna many years ago. A Count Nepomuk Würben—'Nepi,' they called him—perhaps an uncle of your husband's?'

'That is my husband's name, your Highness,' replied Wilhelmine in a toneless voice.

'Impossible! Why, the man I mean will be sixty years old by now, and he disgraced himself and squandered a fortune. No; that man cannot be your husband, dear Madame! I heard he had made [218] a fearful marriage—some adventuress who had amassed money and wished for an old and honourable name. It interests me much; pray ask your husband if that Würben was a cousin of his. A disagreeable subject though, for, of course, no nobleman would care to own so vile a person as cousin.'

Wilhelmine threw up her head proudly. 'Your Highness, Count Nepomuk Würben is my husband, and I must request you not to criticise him in my presence.'

Her spirit pleased the Duchess-mother, who replied in a different tone: 'That then, Madame, is your misfortune. We will not mention it again.'

Eberhard Ludwig during this painful scene stood in embarrassed, angry silence. He durst not interfere, for knowing his mother's character, he was well aware that any intervention on his part would only draw down upon Wilhelmine a flood of free-spoken remarks.

Meanwhile the other members of her Highness's intimate circle had entered from a small withdrawing-room, leading out of the larger apartment.

The Stafforths, Madame de Gemmingen, a young gentleman of the household, Monsieur de Röder, and the Erbprinz's governor, Monsieur le Baron de Walchingen, his tutor, and various other unimportant persons. The Duke's mother and Wilhelmine stood together in the centre of this group. The older woman wore the sombre garb of a widow's mourning, which she had never put off since Duke Wilhelm Ludwig's death thirty years ago.

Wilhelmine was dressed, as usual, in delicate yellow brocade with profusely powdered hair and flashing jewels. They made a striking contrast—sober sadness and old age, radiant youth and brilliant, lavish joy. And near by was Johanna Elizabetha, clad in dull, unnoticeable garments of grey blue silk. To Eberhard Ludwig the group was symbolic of his life's history, and he sighed heavily as he turned to greet Madame de Stafforth.

The Erbprinz, attracted by Wilhelmine's beautiful face and bright clothes, had begged a paper flower from the Christmas tree and offered it to her. Partly because she loved to tease children, [219] partly because the child's talk made a diversion from the Duchess-mother's acid remarks, Wilhelmine began bantering with the little boy, telling him the wildest tales, witty absurdities, sheer delightful fooling. The Erbprinz, accustomed to Johanna Elizabetha's prim stories always adorned with obvious moral endings, acclaimed Wilhelmine's phantasies with enthusiastic cries, begging her to tell him more. He was fascinated, half-afraid, puzzled, excited. Johanna Elizabetha watched this pair with jealous, disapproving eyes, and several times called the child away; but he shook his head, and holding on to Wilhelmine's gown looked up into her face in rapturous enjoyment and admiration of this beautiful new being and her wonderful stories. At length her Highness could bear it no longer. She approached the strangely assorted couple, and drawing the Erbprinz to her she tried to fix his attention upon the burning candles and glittering toys on the tree. But the boy pushed her from him; he wanted to hear the lovely lady's stories; they were much finer than any his mother ever told him, he said. Johanna Elizabetha could stay and listen too, if she liked, but she must not interrupt, he commanded. He struggled from his mother's encircling arm and, drawing near the favourite, he leaned his head against her, nestling close. Wilhelmine, really touched by the child's confiding ways, bent down to him and slipped her arm round his shoulders.

At this moment the Duchess-mother turning, saw the unexpected sight of her grandson in the embrace of the Grävenitz. She looked at them with stern disapproval. The Erbprinz lifted his hand and stroked Wilhelmine's face. This was too much for Johanna Elizabetha. She sprang forward like a tigress defending her young, and snatched the boy away from Wilhelmine.

Immediately the delicate, over-excitable child set up a wailing cry; he wanted to stay with the lovely lady who told such diverting stories, he said. Johanna Elizabetha in vain endeavoured to soothe him. Now the Duchess-mother bore down on the group and commenced rating the child for his disobedience. Johanna Elizabetha, emboldened by the old lady's approach, turned fiercely upon Wilhelmine.

'You have frightened my boy with your horrible stories!' she cried, and dragged the wailing Erbprinz towards the door; but he resisted manfully, crying that he would stay with the lovely lady. His granddame caught him, and bestowed a ringing box on his ear. The child raised a very tempest of sobs, and flinging off his mother's arm, fled howling towards Wilhelmine. Johanna Elizabetha, beyond herself with anger and disgust, horrified at the notion of the child being brought into contact with the woman she regarded as debased, rushed forward and, pulling the child violently away, she cried wildly— [220]

'Do not touch her; it is not fitting!'

Eberhard Ludwig, who had been conscientiously conversing with the few guests, hurried up.

'What is this?' he asked angrily. 'Madame, why does your son howl like a beggar's brat?'

The Duchess-mother came forward. 'A sorry spectacle, indeed,' she said grimly. 'The Landhofmeisterin, not being used to children, has frightened the Erbprinz.'

'Monseigneur,' broke in Wilhelmine, white to the lips, 'I crave permission to depart at once. I am not well.'

'Not well, Madame?' cried the Duke in an anxious tone; 'let me escort you immediately to your coach.'

Wilhelmine bowed to the two Duchesses, but her salute remained unacknowledged.

A petty social annoyance, a commonplace occurrence of disagreeable import, a moment's pique, have often brought about historic changes, the real cause whereof lies deep in the secret working of men's hearts and can only be understood by each one to himself. Thus in Wirtemberg's eighteenth-century record, the homely, unpleasant, trifling scene on Christmas Eve wrought a change in the history, destined to influence the affairs of the country for many years.

The Grävenitz returned to the Jägerhaus profoundly humiliated, deeply wounded. The Duchess-mother's remarks had been embarrassing and painful; each word as a finger of scorn pointed at that disgraceful bargain with Würben, at the recollection whereof Wilhelmine winced. But when Johanna Elizabetha snatched the Erbprinz away from her as though her very touch was [221] contamination for the child, her whole being had shuddered with the ignominy. She knew herself to be accounted vile, one of the outcasts from whose proximity every virtuous woman must shrink and instinctively seek to protect all she loves, all she esteems pure. There is a terrible anguish to the outcast woman in this withdrawal from her of a child. Suddenly, she learns to measure her shame with a new gauge: by the lofty instinct of a mother's reverence for her child's fair innocence. Then the pariah realises that she is thrust beyond the pale of human purity. She has chosen the black mud of vice as her portion, and her presence reeks; she is tainted, and may not approach the pure.

If in the stillness of that Christmas night Wilhelmine, realising this, agonised, as countless women have realised and suffered, the next morning she showed no sign of the night's anguish. Unless her mood of unrelenting decision was the outcome thereof.

She had decided to present to Eberhard Ludwig two alternatives: either Johanna Elizabetha must retire to a dower-house, leaving the favourite mistress of Stuttgart, or the court of Wirtemberg must follow their Duke and the Landhofmeisterin to Tübingen, Urach, or wherever it suited her to direct, leaving the Duchess in a mournful, deserted Stuttgart.

In any case, it must be provided that no possibility should exist of an humiliation such as she had suffered on the preceding evening. And as she intended to remain at the head of Wirtemberg's court, it was imperative Johanna Elizabetha should be removed. Murder no longer being politic—the Emperor had frightened the Grävenitz off that track—it remained to devise some other scheme whereby the Duchess could be rendered unobnoxious.

Upon Eberhard Ludwig's arrival at the Jägerhaus, he was immediately informed of his mistress's decision. Again a small event precipitated the formation of an important plan. Johanna Elizabetha had wept incessantly during the Christmas Eve supper, and the Duchess-mother's sharp tongue had rasped the Duke's irritable nerves till he had lost control of his temper and had roughly bidden his wife and mother to leave him in peace. There had followed a painful scene. Thus his [222] Highness was well disposed towards any scheme which would release him from his inharmonious family circle. Yet he hesitated to acquiesce in the daring project of the entire removal from Stuttgart of court and government. Wirtemberg had been governed at Stuttgart, and the chief ducal residence had been there since the twelfth century. As to Johanna Elizabetha's retirement to a dower-house he reminded Wilhelmine that the proposal had been made, and that the Duchess's answer was decisive: so long as she did not mourn her husband's death she would remain in residence at Stuttgart's castle. The Duke added that he had no power to force her to leave.

Serenissimus and the Landhofmeisterin were together in the famous yellow damask room of the

Jägerhaus. The blue-tiled stove radiated a pleasant warmth, and from the windows the lovers could see the snow-covered Graben, the main thoroughfare of the town. The cheerful jingle of sleigh-bells rang out as the peasants' sledges glided over the snow. The Christmas Day service in the Leonards Kirche had ended, and the traditional dole of silver pieces had been distributed in the Duke's name, an old custom of mediæval times.

It was one of those absolutely still winter mornings, so fraught with peace, so purified by the great white silence of snow. Something of the artificial elegance, the stilted formality of the eighteenth century with its scrupulous apeing of French airs, mannerisms, and vices, seemed to fall from the lovers in the Jägerhaus, and for an hour they dreamed of simple natural homely peace. Alas! their dream was of such a life together. Like most dreams it was based on an impossibility.

A peasant couple in a sledge passed the window. The man, a sturdy, thick-set figure in the Wirtemberg peasant's short, well-fitting, dark-blue coat, adorned with rows of round knob silver buttons. He wore a peaked fur cap drawn down over the ears. The woman was in a thick blue frieze cape and elaborate Sunday headdress. She had slipped her hand through her husband's arm and they were talking gaily together. Eberhard Ludwig pointed towards them and a sigh escaped his lips.

'There is the peace of two loving hearts. They are happier than we, for their love is duty, their duty love,' he said sadly. [223]

'Alas!' she answered; but she knew that for her such peace was not, and that she would not have wished for it; yet a regret smote her, a yearning to be all she was not. And with this pang came the bitter recollection of her painful humiliation. Her face hardened. 'That happiness is only possible in the protection of the strong,' she said. 'Do you think yonder peasant would suffer his beloved to be scorned, to be insulted? The Duke of Wirtemberg alone cannot protect the woman he loves.'

Eberhard Ludwig drew back from her.

'How cruel you are, dear heart,' he said, and a great sadness lay in his voice. She told him that the truth was often cruel to hear; that she but spoke these things because he let himself drift into weak conniving at the intrigues of Johanna Elizabetha. Then she recounted the petty spite and the thousand taunts to which she was subjected. She painted Stuttgart in sombre colours, the dullness, the stiffness. Why should Wirtemberg be the least brilliant, least gay, of all the German courts? She talked of Berlin and the splendours of the newly made King Frederick I. Of Dresden with the Elector-King of Poland, Augustus the Strong; of his splendid residence, the Zwinger, which, like an enchanted palace, had been built in so short a span, and to whose marvels each day was added a wonderful chamber, a gilded dome, or a fair work of art.

Why should not peace and happiness reign in Wirtemberg with splendour and gaiety? Why should not a gracious palace rise to rival even the glories of Versailles? She drew the picture with sure strokes, each word an added colour in the vision of a life of tranquil yet brilliant ease and distinguished magnificence.

Eberhard Ludwig, caught by the flame of her eloquence, flared into enthusiasm, and they fell to discussing which town or castle should be the chosen spot for their new court. Urach, Tübingen, Wildbad, all were reviewed. They spoke no longer of whether the great flitting should take place; it was now merely a question of where and how it should be accomplished. From which it may be seen that Wilhelmine, as usual, had won the day.

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[224]

CHAPTER XVI

LUDWIGSBURG

'And pile him a palace straight, to pleasure the Princess
he loved.'

ABT VOGLER.

FIVE leagues north of Stuttgart, in the heart of the forest, stood the small hunting castle, the Erlachhof, whither Eberhard Ludwig often fled from the world and for many peaceful days lived the life of hunter. In these woods he wandered in early spring, here on summer nights he had slept beneath the trees, dreaming the dreams of his poet nature.

The Erlachhof had been greatly rebuilt, his Highness having commanded many alterations and improvements in the old castle. Since the year 1704 the various works had progressed right well. The gardens were already famous far and wide, and all Europe had added to their wealth: tulips from Holland, carnations and roses from France, oleanders and passion-flowers from Italy, while Spain had furnished orange-trees and myrtles. And here it was that Wilhelmine decided the great palace should be built.

The Erlachhof, from a gentle, simple, old-world German maiden, was to be transformed into a queen among palaces. Thus the daring favourite willed it: a princely pleasure-house to rival Versailles.

The Italian architect Frisoni was called. An artist of no mean merit, and pupil of Jules Hardouin Mansard, the chief architect of Versailles, where Frisoni had worked at the plans together with his master. The Italian arrived: a small, dapper man, ridiculous in his huge powdered wig, his little brown monkey face peering out of the curled white locks. Her Excellency desired a palace on the same model as the fine French palazzo? Nothing easier! No? An original design, then, but of that style? Ah! more facile still! Cost? A trifle to so noble and magnificent a prince as Monseigneur Altissimo the Duke of Wirtemberg. One almost expected the vast structure to rise from the ground in a night, so easy did it seem from the man's account! [225]

The German gentlemen employed at the Erlachhof were deposed from power, and their dominion given over to Frisoni. Never was there such a stir in Wirtemberg. All the quarries rendered stone. Each village sent its most skilled workmen, and Frisoni despatched messengers to Italy to summon all the disengaged talent to the tremendous enterprise. In swarms they arrived—black-browed, olive-skinned, chattering like apes. And the little monkey in the flowing white peruke took direction. But first, the spiritual needs of the workmen must be considered; and the Grävenitz, raging with impatience in Stuttgart, was forced to look on while a Catholic chapel was built near the Erlachhof, ere ever the palace was begun.

The Wirtemberg workmen murmured, grumbled, finally mutinied. They would not work with chattering idolaters.

'Let them go, the German louts,' said Frisoni; 'I have better workmen in Italy.' So a new army arrived.

'Popery in our midst! The witch is bringing back Antichrist to Wirtemberg!' said Stuttgart.

The Geheimräthe informed Serenissimus that Frisoni's monetary demands were excessive. Forstner was despatched to look into the affair. He was appointed Grand Master of the works. Frisoni raged. The gulden had a way of flowing into Forstner's pocket, and, so Frisoni vowed, but few came out again.

Constantly the Duke and the Landhofmeisterin thundered up to the Erlachhof in their coach and six. Three times a week the favourite flew into a passion and rated Forstner for the tardiness of the building. He referred her to Frisoni, who referred her back to the Grand Master of the works. The plans were completed, the men worked hard, yet delays were frequent, he owned; but the builders, knowing themselves worthy of their hire, struck work when they went unpaid.

'Unpaid?' roared the Duke; 'when I have disbursed four hundred thousand gulden?'

'Look into the matter, your Highness, and you will know,' answered the architect. [226]

Forstner was arraigned at Stuttgart. He arrived, accompanied by a secretary and several big ledgers. The accounts seemed in order, certainly.

'Justice!' implored poor Forstner, 'for my honour as a gentleman!'

'Ask the workmen!' shrieked Frisoni, and they summoned a deputation of the Italian stone-cutters. They swore they had not been paid for months. The Madonna and all the saints knew how they starved.

'Where *is* the money?' asked the perplexed Duke, and was answered by so many contending truths from each side that he could but be aware that some one, many, or all parties were lying.

Obviously some one must be removed in order to simplify this tangle, but who? 'Who is guilty?' mourned Serenissimus. The Landhofmeisterin's argument was clear enough: 'We cannot waste time in seeking the criminal. Some one has to disappear from the scene; exit therefore the least useful! Probably Frisoni lies, but he is an admirable architect. Surely the Italian workmen lie; they do not look like starving creatures, but they are wonderful masons. Forstner is of no use to me; on the contrary, he incommodes me with his virtuous reasonings. Therefore, exit Forstner!'

'My honour is wounded, I will depart!' wailed this estimable personage; and he forthwith craved Eberhard Ludwig's permission to leave Wirtemberg.

'God speed you hence!' cried the Landhofmeisterin; and Forstner departed, thinking he went of his own free will.

'My four hundred thousand gulden!' bewailed Serenissimus.

'Procure more from the Geheimräthe, and refuse to pay arrears to the workmen,' counselled Wilhelmine. Which course being adopted and peacefully accepted by the Italians, it would look as though they had, in truth, received their due. But no one has ever known where went the four hundred thousand gulden.

Forstner retired to Strassburg, and for several years there was no word of him. [227]

The building at the Erlachhof went on apace now. Gulden flowed regularly and without stint, and each day more foreigners arrived to give their talents in return for broad gold pieces. Painters, sculptors, gilders came from north and south, and the Wirtembergers looked on aghast. Then was issued an astounding order. His Highness commanded some seven hundred of Stuttgart's rich merchants and burghers, also each trade guild in the country, to construct at their expense a number of houses near the Erlachhof. In this arbitrary decree, for the first time, the new palace was officially styled Ludwigsburg, after its lavish creator, Eberhard Ludwig.

The guilds of trade protested loudly, asking what it would advantage them to have houses in Ludwigsburg. The merchants and burghers followed suit. They received scant consideration of their protest. If they would not obey, his Highness would find himself compelled to levy a tax upon them. A tribute so exorbitant as to cripple them for years; whereas did they obey, he promised to purchase each mansion which the builder did not desire to inhabit. It was the better way, and forthwith the building began. But there was a further clause in the ducal mandate: the houses must be constructed according to Frisoni's plans and drawings, approved by his Highness. Again the burghers protested, but they were silenced by the Duke's promise to purchase.

Not only was a magnificent palace to be erected, but a town was to be conjured up as well, and from Frisoni's plans it appeared that it was to be a town of courtiers' houses. Bitter discontent reigned at Stuttgart, and the guards round the Jägerhaus were doubled.

But there was rejoicing in the Grävenitz camp. Things were going admirably for the satellites, the grasping, hungry parasites. Madame de Ruth and Zollern alone might have spoken some moderating word, but the old courtesan was swept off her feet by Wilhelmine's brilliancy, and Zollern dreamed of Ludwigsburg as a new Catholic centre.

Time did not hang heavy on Wilhelmine's hands during the years which elapsed ere the Corps de Logis and the two small pavilions at Ludwigsburg were completed. In spite of the frantic haste [228] with which the work was carried on, it was found impossible for the Duke to take up his residence in his new palace till the spring of 1711.

Meanwhile a new project engrossed the Landhofmeisterin's attention. Although she fully intended to occupy the palace itself, she deemed it expedient to possess an independent castle at Ludwigsburg, and on the foundations of the Schafhof, another small hunting lodge near the old Erlachhof, she caused a miniature summer palace to be erected. This she named La Favorite. It was constructed according to a plan in Mansard's 'Châteaux Joyeux.'

The Schafhof had been connected with the Erlachhof by a magnificent avenue of chestnut-trees, which remained for the most part intact save where a few trees had been cut to leave space for the fine terracing on the north side of the new Corps de Logis of Ludwigsburg. Still there was a shady avenue, commencing from the lowest terrace and following the gentle rise of the ground up to the Schafhof. This avenue she of course retained, merely causing the branches to be cut back, in order to leave an unbroken view of La Favorite from the windows of the Corps de Logis.

A host of gardeners laboured at the wood round the Châteaux Joyeux, turning the rough ground into a series of gracious flowering parterres.

The interior of Wilhelmine's little palace was a dream of beauty. Every room was panelled in white, and each panel encircled by a graceful design in gold, which terminated in gorgeous devices on the ceilings. For the most part the rooms were curtained with the Grävenitz yellow. The floors were a triumph of the wood-inlayer's art, the chairs and tables were of gilt or of inlaid rosewood. It was a house of sunshine: all Wilhelmine's windows looking full southward or westward, while on the colder north and east sides were the domestics' apartments.

At length, in the July of 1711, the Corps de Logis and the small adjoining pavilions were ready for occupation, and the long eastern and western side-wings were so nearly completed that it was possible to lodge the chief personages of the court, and the army of serving men and women. The [229] garden terracing was terminated, and the water for the numerous fountains laid on.

La Favorite was ready for its capricious namesake, and the town of Ludwigsburg counted some two hundred new houses. The old posting inn, formerly a dilapidated peasant's habitation, barnlike and unpromising enough to the traveller, had become a fine mansion with many guest chambers. The peasant innkeeper, who regarded every foreigner as an intruder, was replaced by a magnificent gentleman with condescending manners.

Enterprising venders of all sorts hurried to the new centre of opulence. Already an obsequious personage from Paris had taken up his abode in a room of one of the new houses, and a painted board hanging from his window informed the passers-by that he was permitted to style himself Coiffeur to her Excellency the Landhofmeisterin, to Serenissimus the Duke, and to the court in general. Along with this gentleman arrived several spruce ladies, one of whom was reported to be his wife, but opinions varied as to which of the eight possessed this honour. These demoiselles were expert dressmakers, and plied many other trades necessary for the beautifying of court ladies. A French corset-maker appeared on the scene, and a famous vender of cosmetics. In fact, there were not wanting all the elements which must ever be at hand for serving the whimsies and necessities of noble dames. The titles of these court purveyors were in the Landhofmeisterin's keeping, and were only procurable by payment of a good round sum.

The sun was sinking in a glory over the grim mount of Hohenasperg, that sinister, frowning fortress-prison which threatened conveniently near to Ludwigsburg, ready to lodge those unfortunate enough to incur the displeasure of Serenissimus, or, more accurately, of her Excellency the Landhofmeisterin. The departing sun left a flaming radiancy which hung over the 'mansardé' roofs of Ludwigsburg, and was reflected again and again in the waters of the hundred garden fountains.

All day a hurrying stream of vehicles had rumbled into the courtyard, setting down the servants [230]

and effects of his Highness of Wirtemberg, and of the lady who ruled his destiny. Frisoni was in a mighty pother; he ran round the room excitedly, moving a chair, smoothing out a fold in the curtains, drawing a table to another position. He hopped hither and thither like some gay little monkey. Suddenly a tremendous shout went up from the three thousand Italian workmen who had been permitted to assemble near the gilded gates to witness the arrival of the court.

First came a large detachment of the Silver Guard, which were to take up quarters in the newly completed barracks at Ludwigsburg. Then followed a company of Cadets à Cheval, two hundred youths of noble family attired in crimson uniforms with black velvet slashings and silver braidings. After these rode an hundred equerries to his Highness, uniformed in light blue with silver facings. Then came a file of richly painted coaches conveying the holders of court charges, each coach escorted by four mounted troopers. Then the musicians on white horses with gorgeous red velvet and gold trappings. A second detachment of the Silver Guard numbering about five hundred, and at last the great gilded coach and six hove into sight. On both sides rode Cadets à Cheval, their ordinary crimson and black slashed uniforms embellished by short cloaks of silver cloth, which fell from each youth's shoulders on to the horse's haunches. In the coach sat his Highness on the left, and the Landhofmeisterin on the right, the seat which custom, etiquette, and morality set apart for the Duchess, who, poor soul, mourned in solitude at Stuttgart, while her place in the pageant was taken by the beautiful, evil woman, Wilhelmine von Grävenitz. But oh! how lovely she was, this adventuress! She looked indeed well fitted to be the chief personage of this magnificence. Her garments, as usual, were of golden yellow; on her flowing, powdered curls she wore a little round hat with a waving white plume, fastened by a diamond clasp. On her breast glittered the broad riband and the white enamel stag, whose antlers bore the diamond cross of the order of St. Hubertus. The little hat was strangely like a crown; the baton of the Landhofmeisterin's office, which she held in her hand, resembled a sceptre: it was of gold, and [231] ablaze with precious stones. A travesty, no doubt, an absurdity, an insolence, but how fine it all looked! The Duke wore a white satin long-coat, embroidered with gold, and on his breast shone the St. Hubertus stag and cross. Truly the prince of some fable, seated beside a gorgeous princess.

Behind the golden coach followed two hundred life guards, uniformed in white and silver, and with drawn swords. Then came his Highness's forest guards, in green, with silver bandoliers and hunting horns, each with the white St. Hubertus stag and cross embroidered large upon the breast. After these rode the court pages, the Duke's secretaries, the officers of the household. And finally, three companies of the Wirtemberg regiments which had fought at Blenheim under Eberhard Ludwig.

A crowd of peasants from neighbouring villages had gathered outside the gates of Ludwigsburg; they raised a shout when they saw their Duke. He bowed, and the Landhofmeisterin also bent her head in dignified salutation. Immediately the shouting ceased, and a low ominous groan went up, intermingled with sibilant hissings. Wilhelmine grew pale, and shot a glance of hatred towards the peasants. His Highness spoke rapidly in a low tone to the cadet who rode at his elbow. The youth galloped back along the line of the cortège, and delivered an order to the captain of the 1st Regiment of Wirtemberg Cavalry. And as the gilded coach rolled in at the palace gates, Wilhelmine heard with satisfaction the howls and curses of the peasant crowd, which was being dispersed by the soldiers' swords.

When the Landhofmeisterin entered the palace of Ludwigsburg, the military brass instruments and drums in the courtyard ceased playing, and as the lovers passed over the threshold a strain from graceful, delicate, stringed instruments greeted them.

'Welcome to our house of harmony!' whispered Serenissimus, bending to kiss his mistress's hand.

Slowly and with dignity they were led by Frisoni through the beautiful rooms—the huge, gilded banqueting hall, the ball-rooms, the withdrawing-rooms, the picture-gallery, the audience-chamber, the card-rooms, the theatre. The little Italian caught the note of Wilhelmine's [232] ceremony, and he showed Ludwigsburg to her as though she were a princess bride, entering for the first time the palace of her new dominions, instead of an enterprising mistress, part designer and wholly inspirer of each nook and corner of a nation's ruin in stone and marble.

They passed up the broad white marble staircase, and Frisoni solemnly conducted them to his Highness's private apartments—the antechamber, the audience-closet, the writing-room, and the sleeping-room.

'The apartments of her Excellency are situated in the west pavilion. If your Highness wishes to inspect them we must pass downstairs once more, to gain the entrance to the pavilion,' he said gravely.

Eberhard Ludwig, smiling, bade him lead the way, though, of a truth, he knew a shorter way by a small door leading through the statue gallery directly from his apartments to the decorously closed pavilion.

In solemn procession, Serenissimus leading the Landhofmeisterin, preceded by Frisoni as guide, passed down the chief stair, and from the lower antehall to the door of the west pavilion. Here were the apartments of the great Landhofmeisterin. On the ground floor the room for her personal attendant, the wardrobe-room, her Excellency's library and business-room, where the various affairs of the Landhofmeisterin's office were to be transacted. Then up a narrow stair to the first floor to a large antechamber, a sleeping-room, a private writing-room, and above another

small stair leading to the powdering-room.

All these rooms were little masterpieces of various arts, chief among which that of the wood-inlayer—the floors, the walls, the doors being profusely inlaid with precious woods. Everywhere the arms of Wirtemberg were interwoven with the Würben and Grävenitz devices, and with the emblems of the chase and of music—symbols of the Duke-hunter and his beloved musician-mistress.

The courtiers who followed his Highness and the Landhofmeisterin expressed their admiration discreetly, Zollern and Madame de Ruth leading the chorus of approval.

At length the ceremonious inspection was concluded, and the courtiers hurried away to view [233]
their own quarters, leaving her Excellency in the pavilion, and Serenissimus in his sumptuous Corps de Logis.

When the courtiers' steps ceased to echo in the corridor, Wilhelmine drew a little golden key from her bosom and, approaching a panel in the antechamber wall on the first floor, fitted it into a keyhole which was artfully hidden in the intricacies of the inlaid design. She turned the lock and a small door flew open. She stepped through and found herself in the corridor of statues. Directly facing the hidden panel door she found another similar lock masked beneath the outstretched hand of one of the many plaster Amorini. Here again a small door sprang open beneath her touch, and she entered the Duke's sitting-room. Her entry, however, was further hidden by an arras of Gobelin tapestry fitted on a wooden partition running down one side of his Highness's room. At the end nearest the entrance to his sleeping-chamber, a small portion of this partition flew back upon touching a spring, and revealed a narrow doorway. Little wonder that both Eberhard Ludwig and Wilhelmine smiled when the Italian conducted them down and up the staircases and through innumerable rooms ere they reached the apartments of the Landhofmeisterin!

Serenissimus was standing at the window of his writing-room overlooking the courtyard. In his hand was a closely written page, and his face wore a look of distress and perplexity. He turned sharply when he heard Wilhelmine's step, and, flushing deeply, he crushed the paper into the breast of his coat. She was quick to note the movement, and the Duke's evident embarrassment.

'A letter, Monseigneur, which you would hide from me?' she said. Like most women in illegitimate positions she was easily suspicious, and all letters, petitions, every scrap of paper destined for her lover, were carried for inspection to the omnipotent Landhofmeisterin ere they were permitted to reach their destination.

'Yes, Madame, a letter from a private friend,' returned the Duke, his embarrassment turning to anger.

'Ah! something not intended for me? I crave your Highness's forgiveness. I came to say a word of [234]
my great happiness in being indeed installed in our House of Harmony,' she sneered bitterly, and turning, would have hurried back to her apartments; but Serenissimus followed her, and laying his hand on her arm drew her towards him.

'There are things in each life which can never be told. Beloved, there is a seal on my lips which honour has impressed with her fair image. I cannot tell you what is in this letter. Believe me, it is no pleasant thing that I hide from you; it would not make you happy to read these lines. Also, they are unimportant, for I do not heed them.'

She prayed him to tell her. How could she rest if she knew he had a thought apart from her? It gave her anxiety, she said, that it was something disagreeable. She used all her arts of attraction, of seduction, but he remained obdurate. Then she flamed into anger and left him with a bitter word.

To celebrate his Highness's entry into Ludwigsburg, a masked ball had been commanded to take place on the evening following the arrival of the court. The Duke and his mistress met at supper after the episode of the letter, but the Landhofmeisterin avoided his Highness's eye and seemed absorbed in conversation with Zollern. During the evening she played faro at her own table, and early took her leave, pleading that she was fatigued. On the morning of the masked ball his Highness attended a stag-hunt, and thus it fell out that he and Wilhelmine did not meet to discuss the vexed question of the letter.

The beautiful ballroom at Ludwigsburg was brilliantly illuminated by a thousand waxen tapers which burned in the huge crystal chandeliers. The Landhofmeisterin's own musicians discoursed rhythmical strains from the gallery, and a gay motley crowd moved on the inlaid polished floor. There were dominoes of every colour, bizarre, fantastic shapes; and somehow this masked assemblage had a strangely sinister appearance, a mysterious lurking menace seemed to emanate from it.

The Landhofmeisterin was easily recognisable from her great height. For a moment she had contemplated dressing in man's clothes, but Serenissimus had dissuaded her. The Duke's domino [235]
was of 'Grävenitz yellow' of the same hue as that of the Landhofmeisterin. Madame de Ruth had refused to go masked.

'My old face is mask enough,' she said; and Zollern, delighted to escape the ordeal of a travesty, had declared he would keep his old friend company. So the two sat together and made merry over the grotesque appearance of the other guests.

At first, many had approached the undominoed couple and, under cover of carnival licence, some had ventured to say sharp things to the old courtesan, but each in turn retired discomfited before the sting of Madame de Ruth's quick wit. The Landhofmeisterin stood near to her friend. She felt strangely lonely in this disguised crowd, and Serenissimus held aloof from her. She saw him exchanging compliments with a light blue domino, from whose supple movements Wilhelmine guessed to be a young and graceful woman.

A sudden wave of jealous fear invaded the Landhofmeisterin's heart. And leaving her safe place behind Madame de Ruth and Zollern, she walked out into the crowd of revellers. Instantly several masks left the dancing, laughing, whirling main stream and approached the newcomer. 'Fair mask, come tread a measure!' 'Do you seek love or amusement here?' and many other meaningless absurdities were squeaked into her ear by some unwary ones who had not recognised the much-feared Landhofmeisterin in the tall yellow-clad figure. She shot a glance of contempt at her interlocutors and pushed past them. Of a sudden she was surrounded by a circle of red-garbed gnomes who danced round her. 'Let me pass, good people,' she said; and when they would not, she broke through the chain of their arms and hurried on. They would have followed, but a black mask caught the ringleader and whispered in his ear, and the laughing gnomes fell back murmuring together.

The Duke was still dallying with the blue domino; Wilhelmine saw him lead her to one of the windows which opened out on to the terraces. She followed swiftly, hardly hearing the comments and whispers of the revellers who took this occasion to convey insulting words to the hated woman. As she reached the window in whose balcony she knew her lover to be, she felt a hand on [236] her arm. She turned angrily.

'What do you want? how dare you hinder me?' she said. It was a tall, thin domino who accosted her, entirely black, and with a skull and crossbones embroidered in white upon the breast. A startling figure, and to Wilhelmine's overwrought nerves it seemed to be the figure of Death come to snatch her life's glory and happiness from her in this her triumph of the completion of the palace.

'What do you want of me?' she said again, conquering her superstitious fear.

'I would speak to you, Madame; I have a warning to give you.' The voice was deep and low, and after the squeaky tones which the revellers affected in order to disguise their natural voices, this man's bass notes sounded hollow and funereal.

'Speak then here,' she answered.

'No; my warning must be given to you where none can hear,' he responded; and once more laying his black-gloved hand on her arm, he drew her away from the window towards a door which led down a short flight of steps into the moonlit garden. Did the man mean murder? It flashed across Wilhelmine that she was going blindly into danger. She paused on the topmost step of the flight.

'I will go no further; speak now, or I leave you here.' Her voice was calm, though her hands were trembling a little.

'I am sent to tell you that your hour has come; that your ill-gotten power, your evil triumphs, are waning.' His voice was deep, sonorous, impressive.

'Who sends you?' she asked. Coming from the brilliantly lit rooms and the stir and noise of the ball, this sudden interlude in the still, moonlit garden, with the strange, sinister, black-robed figure, seemed to her like a dream.

'I am sent by one you have ruined, in the name of the many you have injured! and yet, in mercy, I bid you fly while there is time!' the stranger answered.

'Ah! Mercy? This is some absurd fiction; no one has mercy upon me,' she said bitterly.

'Yes, I have. I came to deliver my message, and yesterday I saw your entry into Ludwigsburg. I [237] saw the peasants cruelly driven back by the soldiers' swords. I saw the great monument you have raised here to your shame, this mad, mock court of yours, and I hated you! but then I saw your youth, your beauty, and I vowed I would warn you, that you might carry this, your true wealth, to some atonement for your sins. I bid you fly; the Duke has information against you which must spell ruin for you—ruin and death.'

'You are mad,' she said quietly.

'No; I am not mad, unless compassion is madness.'

She drew off her mask, and, in the clear white moonlight, turned her face upon him—that strange, haunting face of hers, which Eberhard Ludwig said no man could forget.

'And so you had compassion because you saw me?' she laughed. 'Your mission is absurd, but I forgive you because some generous thought was yours even for the Grävenitzin.' She was all woman at that moment; the hard, cruel oppressor, the ruling Landhofmeisterin, was banished from her being, she was fascination incarnate.

'How beautiful you are—how beautiful——!' the black mask whispered.

'Tell me who you are,' she said, and smiled at him.

'An enemy who would turn friend, and more—if he looked too long at you,' he answered slowly.

'Tell me your name,' she asked once more.

'No; my name you will never know, only I have warned you.'

'I thank you,' she said gravely, and gave him her hand. He bent and kissed it, and vanished into the shadow of the garden. She stood a moment looking after her unknown visitor. Ruin and death, he had said. She pondered on why this stranger should have warned her. Evidently an enemy with an evil plan against her, turned aside by some man's whim, some sudden mood caused by the sight of her beauty. Flight, he counselled, flight for her! No! she would battle to the last, but she would not neglect the unknown's warning. In a flash it came to her that this man was connected with the letter which the Duke had refused to communicate to her. She replaced her mask and returned to the ballroom. Still the same monotonous whirling crowd, the pattering [238] feet of the dancers, the din of the music.

She searched for Serenissimus. He was standing with a group of masks at the lower end of the hall, and did not observe her. She made her way slowly through the crowd to the other side of the room, and slipped through the door into the ante-hall. Immediately two lackeys sprang forward to inquire her Excellency's pleasure. She waved them away and passed onward, out to the terrace, and towards her pavilion. The sentry at her door saluted her, but she gained her own ante-hall without meeting any of her waiting men, even Maria was gaping in the crowd in the courtyard probably.

Wilhelmine paused a moment in her antechamber on the first floor. She listened attentively, and called Maria under her breath, but no answer came. Then she drew out the little key, approached the door leading to the statue gallery and opened it gently. The gallery was in darkness, save where a faint white radiance was reflected from the moonlit garden without, but that side of the palace lay in deep shadow. She crept on and groped for the lock beneath the plaster Amorino's hand. At first she could not find it, but after some moments she felt the tiny keyhole, and, fitting the key, she turned it and the door swung open. She glided in behind the arras, and found the spring which opened the partition. She listened; there was no sound from the room within. She pressed the spring, the tapestry door opened silently beneath her touch, and she passed into the Duke's writing-closet. Here the moon shone full in, white and ghostly. Wilhelmine's mind flew back to that far-off night at Güstrow, when in the moonlight she had stolen the key from under her mother's pillow. How she had trembled! She had been a child in experience then, a very different being from the strong, self-confident woman she knew herself to be nowadays. And yet she trembled in the moonlit room as she had trembled then. What was that? The moonlight falling in sheeny silver through the window, seemed to her to take the shape of a tall, white woman's figure. She remembered the grim old legend of that Countess of Orlamünde, murderess of little children, who haunted all the palaces of her descendants. In the castle at Stuttgart, they [239] said, the White Lady walked, her pale trailing garments streaked with blood. Could she wander here too in new, gorgeous Ludwigsburg? Almost Wilhelmine turned and fled, but the remembrance of her dire peril came to her. She looked bravely at the moonlight—there was no ghost there; it was only the Lady Moon, witch of the night, throwing her cold, false smiles through the casement. Wilhelmine went forward boldly. She must find the letter at any cost; its contents threatened her, and she must know.

The Duke's bureau was locked. She pressed the secret spring in vain. Was she doomed to be baffled, after all? She remembered that her own bureau was identical with his Highness's. Resolutely, with that patience which is born of hazardous undertakings, she glided away through the arras door, through the black gallery, and regained her apartments. She heard a movement in her sleeping-room, and Maria came to her.

'Your Excellency, pray forgive that I was not here.'

Even Maria must not know why she had left the ballroom, she thought.

'Go to Madame de Ruth's apartments. A black silk domino lies in the wardrobe; go, bring it to me. I would change my colour and play a merry jest upon some friends.' The maid departed. Now all was clear for some time, for Madame de Ruth's apartment lay at the far end of the east wing. Swiftly she sought the key of her bureau; it was hidden in a secret drawer beneath the writing-desk. She took it, and passed through the little door again. Once more she listened behind the arras; it seemed to her as if something moved. She paused, then gently reopened the tapestry door and peered in. The room lay silent, deserted, white and ghostly as before. She passed in, and fitted her key into the bureau. The lock yielded and the bureau flew open. Letters, documents, drawings, plans for hunting excursions—all the usual occupants of Eberhard Ludwig's bureau. She could see enough in the moonlight. Ah! here a creased paper. She caught it up and examined it. Yes; this must be the thing she feared—four large pages filled with cramped [240] characters. She looked more closely. Forstner's writing! She almost laughed. This, then, was what his Highness had hidden so scrupulously from her! Thanks to the unknown's warning, she had come on the track of her most deadly enemy. Had the black mask not spoken, she might have forgotten the letter. She closed the bureau carefully and stepped behind the arras, shutting the tapestry door carefully. She was now in perfect darkness. She groped along the wall to find the lock of the gallery door. Great God! what was that? A movement near her, an icy touch on her hand. The White Lady's death-grip! and yet better that, she thought, than any human being's presence; better that than for any mortal to have seen her rifling the Duke's bureau. She sought wildly for the lock. At last she found it and slipped in the key. As the door sprang open something

pushed past her—a huge, black shape.

'Mélac!' she called in a strained voice, and the powerful beast came to her and rubbed his cold nose upon her hand. Only the wolf-hound, then, who had been sleeping in the darkness behind the arras. She laughed when she remembered her ghastly fear of the White Lady's death-grip!

She regained her own room. Maria had not returned from Madame de Ruth's apartment. She kindled a light from her steel tinder-casket and set a waxen taper aglow. Then she began to read Forstner's letter.

'Monseigneur, my Prince, and once my friend! Though it has been your pleasure to discredit me, I cannot rest until I have let you know the truth. You are being grossly abused, your noble trust and love made mock of by a creature too vile for human words to describe. A woman, who to her other lovers holds you up to scorn and ridicule! yes, ridicule of your passion, making mock, betraying the secrets of your bed. Besides, it is she who has the gulden which you accused me of purloining; she to whom half your revenues are carried, and you are doled out a paltry sum which, after all, you spend again upon this creature. You are weary of her, too; all your Dukedom knows that right well—weary of her, and you dare not dismiss her! The people laugh: your subjects, your friends, strangers, other princes, all Europe laughs. See her! observe her hideous [241] faults, her foul blemishes of mind and body, her filthy actions!' Then followed the names of his rival lovers, and a list of the vast sums she had filched from the ducal treasury. All this set forth so cleverly, with such apparent proof, that she trembled as she read. There were official business transactions accurately quoted and put in such a light as to seem to be robberies. It was a dangerous letter for her—half truth, half falsehood, difficult to unravel, impossible to deny entirely. 'Honour binds you, you say,' the epistle continued. 'Ah! my Prince! you have a toy which has turned to a viper in your hand! Throw it from you! Other princes have done so, and the world has applauded. Take a fair and noble mistress, one younger, less rapacious. Consider this woman: already she grows gross; in a few years' time she will be a mountain of flesh; her eyes are dimming, her lips are paler, her teeth less white than they were when she came from her obscure home.'

Wilhelmine, in all the magnificence of her beauty, of her maturity, read thus far quietly; then, raging, she sprang to her feet.

'I could have forgiven you some of your insults, Forstner, but this is too much! By God! by God! you shall suffer! I swear it by my salvation!'

She read on: details too disgusting, too gross to write down here, foul accusation upon accusation, hideous blasphemies against her bodily beauty.

Of a truth, not even a saint could have forgiven the writer of that letter—and Wilhelmine von Grävenitz was no saint.

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CHAPTER XVII

THE BURNING IN EFFIGY

On the morning following the masquerade, his Highness's Chief Officer of the Secret Service of Wirtemberg craved audience. The Secret Service had been instituted by Eberhard Ludwig after the murderous attack upon the Grävenitz in Duke Christopher's grotto. In the unquiet state of the country, rife with discontent and its attendant conspiracies, such a service was absolutely necessary; but, of course, this system of espionage was most unpopular, and as the Landhofmeisterin was credited with the institution of the Secret Service, the people's fear and hatred of her increased.

The Chief Officer had grave matters to communicate to his Highness: a plot to murder her Excellency the Landhofmeisterin had been discovered, and from intercepted papers it would appear that the conspirators also aimed at the Duke himself. It seemed that many influential persons were implicated.

The design was to induce his Highness to abdicate in favour of the Erbprinz, during whose minority Forstner was to be Premier, and the Duchess Johanna Elizabetha Regent of Wirtemberg. This portion of the conspiracy could be dealt with easily, but the murderous intent upon the Landhofmeisterin took a more serious aspect, as the Secret Service agents had procured information which led the Chief Officer to infer that the would-be assassins were actually in, or near, Ludwigsburg. It was, however, impossible to arrest every stranger on mere suspicion, for both Ludwigsburg and Stuttgart were full of country gentlemen who had been commanded to appear at the Mask Ball.

At mention of Forstner, his Highness went to his bureau to seek his erstwhile friend's letter. In vain he searched in drawer and secret panel. The letter had vanished. The four cadets, who stood [243] sentry at the door of the Duke's apartment, were questioned; they had seen none enter. His Highness's private waiting-men were examined, and the soldiers of the guard who stood in the lower antehall. All answered that no one had passed through. The Chief Officer of the Secret Service himself had watched the entrance of the Corps de Logis during the preceding evening.

The Duke searched his bureau once more. He was greatly disturbed. Open warfare, a hand-to-

hand combat, he said, were child's play to the horror of this lurking enemy, who evidently had access even to the private bureau. Zollern was requested to come and speak with the Duke; his advice was asked.

'Have you mentioned the matter to the Landhofmeisterin? She is very wise, and may be able to suggest some explanation,' said Zollern.

No; his Highness had not seen her Excellency. Then a sudden suspicion came to Eberhard Ludwig. She wished to see the letter; could she have purloined it?

'Do you know if the Landhofmeisterin left the ballroom during the last evening?' he asked Zollern.

No; the old Prince had observed her Excellency constantly, and she had not been absent from the dancing-hall, save for a few moments which she passed on one of the balconies in the company of a black domino, whose identity Monseigneur de Zollern had been unable to ascertain. Serenissimus dismissed his suspicions with relief. It is pain to doubt those we love.

Zollern took his leave, and the Duke desired the Secret Service officer to retire. He would ask her Excellency's advice in private. The Landhofmeisterin was summoned to attend his Highness on important business. After some little delay she arrived. Passing up the grand stairs, she was ceremoniously ushered into his Highness's presence.

His suspicion, though dismissed, rankled. Serenissimus greeted her coldly, and informed her of the letter's disappearance.

'Your Highness refers to a letter which I was not permitted to peruse? I regret that it should be lost, but you will remember that you considered it to be unimportant.' [244]

The relationship between the lovers was strained.

'I do not discuss the importance of the document, Madame. Indeed, the smallest scrap of paper missing from my bureau would be a grave matter to me, as I should thus ascertain that some person had access to my private papers.'

The Duke spoke with cold displeasure. He had felt a pang of jealous suspicion when Zollern informed him of Wilhelmine's interview with the black domino; also, he was still angry with his mistress for her stormy exit after his refusal to show her Forstner's letter; and further, he was greatly incensed at the plot to force him to abdicate. All these causes wrought an iron firmness into his usually gentle voice. Wilhelmine felt this to be a crucial moment in her life.

'It would appear that your Highness sees fit to question me in a strange manner upon this trivial matter! I am not aware that the Landhofmeisterin's office is concerned with the superintendence of your Highness's private bureau,' she said haughtily.

'You know my meaning perfectly, Wilhelmine,' the Duke broke out furiously. 'Alas! like a pack of cards built in a card-house, my happiness, my pride, my triumph, my joy in my new palace, come falling about my head! How sad, how futile a thing is earthly joy!' He turned away, and bent to stroke Mélac's head. The good beast had approached in seeming anxiety upon hearing the Duke's distressed voice.

Wilhelmine looked at his Highness for a moment in silence, and her face softened. After all, she loved Eberhard Ludwig, and in spite of her overweening prosperity, coupled with the world-hardness which marred her, there lingered something of tenderness in her love. Then, too, she was a consummate actress, and a being gifted with the womanly genius for charming, and therein lies sympathy. It is when this sympathetic spark is killed by the terrible blight of over-prosperity, that the deterioration of a woman takes place. Not all in a day, but gradually, the poison works: the first stage signalised by a cruel hardness to those they love; then an entire [245] incapacity for tenderness; ultimately the hideous blight falls on the woman's charm, her voice, her face, her laugh, the essence of her being. God knows the tragedy of it; God alone can gauge the agony inflicted by the world-hardened women upon the hearts of those who love them; and God Himself punishes eventually, for: 'The mills of God grind slow, but they grind exceeding sure.'

Still in Wilhelmine there lingered a little tenderness for Eberhard Ludwig, and this taught her a surer way to her own safety than ever her brain could have shown her. She came to him and, laying her hand on his shoulder, she said: 'The world and my heart lie at your feet, Eberhard, beloved. You are fighting with some wild phantasy, some spectre which exists only in your own mind. See, we share all things, let me share your sorrow. Is it only the loss of this letter which distresses you? Oh! tell me; surely you will not shut me out from your life?'

Her voice charmed him as on that first day when he had called her Philomèle, and he turned to her with his love shining in his eyes.

'Am I, indeed, scaring myself with a phantom?' he said, and a note of almost childlike appeal lay in his tone.

'Yes, only that,' she made answer, and, smiling, drew him to her. Then he told her the story of the plot against them, but he did not mention Forstner as the prime conspirator. She laughed.

'*You* are safe, for none can make you abdicate against your will; and I am safe because you protect me, beloved.'

'Safe? Yes; but ah! the letter! Who slinks past our guards and robs my bureau? It is hateful. I love to fight a man, but this lurking danger which I guess hidden behind each arras——'

'The letter? Are you sure you sought in each hiding-place of your bureau?' she said. Already in her mind a plan was forming whereby she could allay his fears and conquer his suspicions. Forstner's letter lay hidden in her bosom; she would replace it in the bureau-drawer while they searched, then, with the Duke's knowledge of Forstner's plot, she would break this dangerous enemy.

'Forgive me, Eberhard, but so many people search frantically and thus overlook the very object they seek! See, let us look through the papers together.' [246]

She approached the bureau, and made believe to be mighty awkward with the fastening. His Highness unlocked the panel, and together they began a review of the tumbled documents within, Wilhelmine talking gaily the while.

'What is it like, this precious letter?—large? small?' she asked.

'A large paper in Forstner's writing,' returned the Duke, forgetting that she did not know whence came the letter.

'In Forstner's writing!' she exclaimed. 'And this you hide from me? The man is my deadly enemy, and, as you know now at last, but a false friend to you! You say the world is dark and evil to you; what is it to me when you, the love of my life, can harbour letters from my cruel enemy?'

She flung herself down on the chair beside the bureau, and burying her face in the papers on the writing-desk, burst into a flood of tears. Eberhard Ludwig fell on his knees at her feet, and in broken words implored her pardon. He kissed the hem of her garment, accused himself of treason to her, prayed her to be consoled.

'Give me water, I am faint!' she moaned. He sprang up and hastened to his sleeping-room to bring water for her. Now was her moment: with incredible swiftness she drew the letter from its hiding-place and slipped it under a bundle of papers and plans on the bureau. When his Highness returned carrying a goblet of water, he found his mistress still weeping bitterly with her face hidden on the writing-desk.

She drank the water while Eberhard Ludwig hung over her in anxious rapture, heaping reproaches upon himself for his cruelty, but she refused to be consoled.

'What can I do to prove to you that all my unworthy suspicions have vanished?' he cried in desperation.

'Tell me what was written in that letter; let me defend myself,' she answered quickly.

'You ask the one thing I may not do. I cannot,' he said sadly.

'And the letter is lost!' she cried; 'who knows what enemy of mine has got it? Alas! perhaps all the world will know the vile things this man has written, and you have let him go unpunished. All will know save the accused criminal! Oh! the injustice! the cruelty!' [247]

The Duke shuddered.

'Yes, it is true; that terrible thing I had not remembered. O God! if I could but find that accursed letter! At least, no one but myself need have known of the foul accusations; but now that the letter is lost——'

Wildly he began to search once more in the bureau, and Wilhelmine almost laughed when she saw him lift the packet of papers under which she had slipped Forstner's letter. With a cry the Duke turned to her.

'Thank God! I have found it! It lay here beneath this bundle. Wilhelmine, beloved, now none can read these blasphemies against you,' he cried.

'So you tell me to my face that yonder paper is a blasphemy against me, a foul accusation, and you will not let me clear myself!' she cried wildly.

'I swore to Forstner that I would never, in spoken or written word, divulge his communications—never give or voluntarily let another take his letters. Unless you can divine what you wish to know, there is no help.' He laughed harshly.

'Divine what is in that letter?' she said in a musing tone.

Suddenly a thought came to her. She remembered each word of that horrible letter. It was necessary his Highness should know she knew, yet imperative that her knowledge should appear to have been gained in his presence.

Wilhelmine had studied many books of magic and innumerable accounts of occult manifestations. She was half-dupe, half-charlatan, and indeed she possessed much magnetic power.

Now in Bavaria, some years before this scene at Ludwigsburg, there had been discovered an extraordinary peasant-girl gifted with rare faculties of clairvoyance, thought-reading, ecstatic trances, prophecies, and the rest. An account of her short twenty years of vision-tortured life had been published by the doctor of her village—a crank, and supposed wizard himself. This pamphlet [248]

Wilhelmine had read, as she read all books concerning mysterious manifestations. His Highness, however, would never look at anything treating of magic or witchcraft. He honestly disapproved of such things, and feared them; though, in contradiction, he was much attracted by his mistress's strange powers, which he affected to doubt, yet, in truth, he was terribly afraid at times.

It was certain that he knew nothing of the Seer of Altbach, and thus Wilhelmine felt assured she might risk the shamming of one of the peasant-girl's feats, palming it off as an original accomplishment.

She continued to implore the Duke to show her the letter, but he was obdurate; honour bound him, he said.

At length Wilhelmine's scheme had matured in her fertile brain, and she was ready to begin her daring comedy.

'I cannot rest while I am ignorant of the accusations in that letter. There must be something terrible, some fearful wickedness against me, which you will not tell me, but which, like poison thrown into a well, will pollute each thought of me in your mind, till at length your love of me and your trust will die. Whereas, if I know of what I am accused, I can wrench out this poisonous root with the sword of Truth, for oh! love of mine, I am innocent, save for the sin of loving you.'

'And yet honour closes my lips! I swore to Forstner that his letters to me should never be divulged; and though he is doubtless a traitor to me, still I cannot absolve myself of my oath,' he answered sadly.

She stood up, and holding out both hands towards him, she said solemnly:

'Take both my hands in one of yours, look in my eyes, hold the letter on my brow, and I will tell you what he says. Thus your honour is cleared, for you have neither spoken nor given me the writing, but I shall have guessed.'

'What madness is this?' he cried angrily; 'your witch-working again! But if it calms you to play like this, I am ready to humour so ridiculous a whimsey.'

Half-laughing, half-annoyed, he took the letter from his pocket. Wilhelmine laid her two hands in [249]
one of his and gazed into his eyes.

For a moment she stood as though hesitating, and the Duke felt her hands flutter like caught birds. Her eyes seemed to look into some far distance. Slowly she began in a low voice:

'Monseigneur, my Prince, and once my friend, you are being grossly abused, your noble trust and love is made mock of by a creature too vile for human words. A woman, who to her other lovers holds you up to scorn and ridicule—yes, ridicule of your passion.' Her voice grew faint and faded into a whisper, and the hands which the Duke held trembled and twitched violently. Slowly, falteringly, she went on, sometimes reciting a whole sentence in the very words of the letter, sometimes only giving the gist; but always in the same low, monotonous voice, like the utterance of one who speaks in sleep.

The Duke stood rigid, fear and amazement written on his face. Once his hand, which held the letter to her brow, dropped to his side. Immediately the subtle comedian paused, moaning as though in physical pain. It was a magnificent bit of trickery; small marvel that his Highness was deceived.

When she had told him all the paper contained, she covered her face with her hands and fell to trembling as in an ague, moaning and sighing incessantly. In truth, she had worked herself into a fit of frantic emotion, and had her will been less strong, she must indeed have raved off into hysterics.

Now consider this thing. Here is a man who had lost a letter; who sought it; at length finding it safe in a locked bureau. The search takes place in the very presence of a being he had half accused of purloining the missing letter. This person, he is assured by a prince of the highest honour, has never left a crowded ballroom during the only hours when it would have been possible for her to have stolen the paper. Then he himself proposes, in jest, that she should guess the contents of a document, which he feels certain has been read by himself alone, and has [250]
merely been mislaid in a carefully locked bureau. This extraordinary feat she accomplishes in a seeming trance. Add to all this, that the woman is his beloved mistress, whom he ardently wishes to trust, and that often before she had told him she was gifted with occult powers. Is it matter of surprise that he implicitly believed Wilhelmine had accomplished a magic feat? White magic though; nothing evil here; on the contrary, almost a miracle, like some mediæval ordeal through which her purity and innocence alone could have sustained her. Yet he questioned her.

Could she read any paper in that manner? She answered that she had never tried before. She spoke to him in gentle words, praying him to give good faith to her. She clung to him like a tired child. What man could resist her?

Then she talked of Forstner's conspiracy. She depicted the vileness of one who could write such a letter at the very hour when he was plotting to ruin the man to whom he penned words of passionate exhortation and affection. She laid stress upon the treason against Eberhard Ludwig, and he in return flamed into anger concerning the design to murder this clinging, appealing

woman. Chivalry, honour, duty, bound him to protect her. Very subtly she led him on: to protect in this case must be to revenge her.

Then she lashed him to a fury against the traitor who had plotted against so lenient a prince. Taking the letter from his Highness (he let her have it now without demur), she went through the list of accusations, refuting each statement, throwing the blame upon Forstner for the various monetary defections which he himself, in this letter, had proved to exist in the Ludwigsburg building accounts. She pointed out that Forstner should be punished heavily, both in just revenge and as a warning to others. At last Eberhard Ludwig yielded, and promised that she should dictate Forstner's sentence.

Forstner tarried at Strassburg. He believed his letter would awaken the Duke from his long, evil, delicious dream; but when days, weeks, months passed without any change taking place at Ludwigsburg, and the Landhofmeisterin's triumph continued, Forstner's hopes waned. He dared [251] not return to Wirtemberg, yet the care of his properties demanded his presence.

Meanwhile Eberhard Ludwig had permitted the Landhofmeisterin to work her will in the Forstner affair. Little guessed the poor fool, waiting at Strassburg, what a terrible net was being woven round him. Slowly, silently, with deadly patience, the Landhofmeisterin was collecting a thousand threads for this fabric. Documents, statements, even the accounts of Forstner's private monies were bribed from his estate agents; each letter that he wrote, everything, was gathered by the Secret Service and brought to the Landhofmeisterin's office, where the long chain of evidence was being linked together by the Grävenitz and Schütz. She intended Forstner to be condemned, not only by the Duke's orders, but publicly, and on a charge so damning as to alienate all from him. Incidentally, the Duchess Johanna Elizabetha would be deeply implicated.

In the January of 1712 Forstner at Strassburg received some warning, and fled to Paris. Here, at least, he believed himself safe from the machinations of the all-powerful Grävenitz. True, he was implicated in that feeble plot to murder her, which had failed because the young man he had hired to do the deed had unaccountably disappeared, his fellow-conspirators having never seen or heard of him since the night of the Ludwigsburg masquerade. Forstner often wondered whether the youth was imprisoned in one of Wirtemberg's grim fortresses—Hohenasperg, Hohen-Urach, or Hohen-Neuffen. He shuddered when he remembered how men vanished into the gloom of these strongholds, which are built into the rock of the steep hills, and are inaccessible as an eagle's eyrie.

Yet proof was wanting to convict him of contriving murder or political disturbance, and, at least, he was safe in Paris. Lulled into carelessness by the silence from Wirtemberg, he showed himself abroad, even attending the genial, informal receptions of the Duchesse d'Orléans, that Princess of Bavaria who had succeeded, and by her sturdy, uncompromising treatment of the Duc d'Orléans, had revenged poor Henriette of England, his beautiful, brilliant, but little appreciated [252] first wife.

Elizabeth Charlotte received Forstner with much condescension. Death had relieved her, in 1702, from her sickly, despicable spouse, and she was free to open her house to every German traveller, which, in his lifetime, Monsieur had always endeavoured to prevent.

One day when Forstner was journeying to visit the Duchesse d'Orléans, he was arrested in the King's name and conveyed to the Bastille, where he was informed that he was accused of treason to the Duke of Wirtemberg, and of intent to murder several great personages of his Highness's court. He was further informed that he would be sent to Stuttgart under escort as soon as the necessary arrangements could be completed.

In vain Forstner remonstrated that he could not be imprisoned in France for a political offence in Wirtemberg. In vain he protested and claimed the protection of Louis XIV. The King at Versailles was busied with the saving of his soul and with the doctoring of his gangrened knee. So the doors of the Bastille closed on Baron Forstner, and he was left to reflect upon the danger of casting aspersions on a woman's beauty.

After some months the rumour of Forstner's imprisonment reached the Duchesse d'Orléans, who had believed her compatriot returned to Germany. Now it was a ticklish thing for the Duchess to undertake intervention on behalf of a Protestant, for though she had joined the Church of Rome on her marriage to 'Monsieur,' still it was whispered in Paris that she had reprehensible leanings to the faith of her childhood.

Madame de Maintenon and the King were more than ever hostile towards heretics, and the Bavarian princess had received several sharp reproofs on the subject already.

Then came the news that Forstner had been condemned to death in Stuttgart, and that he was to be conveyed thither without delay.

The Duchesse d'Orléans journeyed to Versailles, and demanded an audience of her august brother-in-law. The King was in an ungracious mood. He received his late brother's wife coldly. [253] He regretted that she should espouse the cause of this foreigner. Really, he had no intention of interfering in the affairs of any petty German prince. This was merely a question of international law. If this 'Baron de Forstnère' were in the Bastille, let him stay there. Louis asked angrily if he were expected to interest himself in such unimportant details, when he was so profoundly troubled with affairs of State. Little wonder that the King was not in a favour-granting humour.

The Congress of Utrecht was discussing peace, and Louis saw that though he had actually gained the day in the Spanish Succession War, still France had lost hugely in blood and gold, and was to lose still more in colonies.

But Elizabeth Charlotte was not to be put off thus easily. If it came to hard words, no one was more competent than she was to utter truth unshrinkingly. Petty German princes indeed! Louis had been anxious enough to share in the inheritance from a petty German prince, when, at the death of her father without male heirs, the Roi Soleil had seen a chance of grasping a portion of the Bavarian Palatinate! And so she told him in her loud voice and uncouth French. Madame de Maintenon interposed: Why did her Royal Highness take so deep an interest in this 'Forstnère?' she asked.

'Because he is a Bavarian, and his father and mine were friends,' she was told by the Duchess.

'Ah! a Bavarian—then a Catholique?' the saintly Marquise supposed.

'No indeed!'

Things looked very black for Forstner. But the Duchesse d'Orléans played her trump card. Though a Protestant, Forstner was a virtuous man, and the reason of his disgrace in Wirtemberg was simply that he opposed the terrible licence of the Duke's mistress.

Now the Marquise de Maintenon was a little sensitive on the subject of mistresses, and when Elizabeth Charlotte invoked her aid against the machinations of a wanton, old Veuve Scarron changed her tone. Then in the midst of the discussion the King had a twinge in his gangrened knee, and signed Forstner's release, in order to be rid of this pertinacious princess.

Meanwhile there had been storms at Ludwigsburg. In December 1711 the new Emperor Charles VI., former pretender to the Spanish throne, was crowned Emperor at Frankfort. The reigning princes of the various allied German states attended the coronation of the German king, crowned Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire. Eberhard Ludwig of Wirtemberg repaired to Frankfort for the historic ceremony, and it was the right of the Duchess of Wirtemberg to attend, if she so desired; but Johanna Elizabetha remained in her dreary black-hung apartments, sewing coarse linen garments for the poor, and weeping her desolation. Pageants were not for her obviously. [254]

But the Landhofmeisterin demanded to go to Frankfort with her Duke. Zollern and Madame de Ruth advised her to refrain from so preposterous a request; but she had set her mind upon it, and she importuned Serenissimus, who, poor man, was indeed all unable to grant her this whim.

There were pleadings, tears, angry words, finally a serious quarrel between the lovers. Friedrich Grävenitz, now a Privy Councillor and Minister of State, remonstrated pompously with his sister. He had gained nearly all he desired through her, and now affected to be the serious official, the hard-working minister and grave man of the world. She bade him return to his petty businesses of administration, and warned him that, did he interfere with her, she would cause him to be dismissed. Friedrich aimed at being Premier of Wirtemberg, and thus he bowed down once more to the all-powerful lady. The Landhofmeisterin continued to pester the Duke to convey her to Frankfort. Then, in the midst of this quarrel, news came from Stetten that the Duchess-mother was sick unto death, and Serenissimus abruptly left Ludwigsburg to receive his mother's dying blessing.

He returned in a few days deeply saddened. He had arrived at his mother's deathbed too late; she had almost passed away. True, her wan face had lit with love when Eberhard Ludwig stood beside her; bending over her, he had heard her murmur once more her favourite catchword, 'My absurd boy,' then a faint whisper of 'Johanna Elizabetha,' and the Duke knew that, with her last breath, the honest old lady had called him back to duty. But he returned to weep his mother's loss upon the breast of Wilhelmine von Grävenitz. In this softened mood, his Highness went near the granting his beloved's prayer, but Zollern stepped in and spoke privately with the Landhofmeisterin. [255]

Directly after the Duchess-mother's obsequies the Duke rode northwards to Frankfort to attend the Emperor's coronation. He journeyed with his chief officers and guards, and his proud mistress was left behind in Wirtemberg. Yet she had gained another triumph. If the Duke could not grant her request concerning the coronation, what would he give her in compensation?

'Anything in the world you ask,' he had replied. And she had demanded Stetten, the Duchess-mother's dower-house! Zollern and Madame de Ruth were overwhelmed when they heard of it. Good heavens! what would the Duchess-mother have said? But on the day when Eberhard Ludwig rode to the coronation, the Landhofmeisterin's coach thundered through the fields to Stetten.

When the news came from Paris that Forstner had been released from the Bastille, the Landhofmeisterin flew into a towering passion. The Geheimräthe were summoned, and the affair put before them once more. The evidence against Forstner was convincing, and any Chamber would have convicted him; but it is necessary to consider who composed this Privy Council.

Landhofmeister Count Würben—an invalid unfortunately, and unable to appear—was Premier and Minister of War, and in his regrettable absence his wife, her Excellency the Landhofmeisterin, presided at the sessions of the Council, and a more energetic, autocratic President could not have been found in Europe. Friedrich, Count von Grävenitz, was Minister of the Interior; Baron Schütz, Minister for Foreign Affairs; Baron Sittmann, Minister of Finance; and

two brothers Pfau, cousins of Schütz, held office as Councillors. For appearance sake (not that the Landhofmeisterin considered that often) there were several minor councillors, men of no importance, who obeyed implicitly the autocratic, vigilant, relentless President of Council. Thus [256] the entire government lay in the Grävenitz's capable hands. Small wonder that Forstner trembled.

The Council decreed that the recalcitrant Baron was to be summoned to attend his trial forthwith, and that a hope of rehabilitation should be held out to him if he came immediately to his country's first tribunal. The death sentence was rescinded, of course, pending this new trial.

Forstner replied to this official document that he had no intention of putting his head between the wolf's teeth, and that he intended to appeal in Vienna against the wrongful detention of his monies and properties in Wirtemberg. He reminded the honourable Council that he was by birth a Bavarian, and that, though he had resided in Wirtemberg, and owned lands in that dukedom, still the Wirtemberg tribunal had no jurisdiction over him.

Upon receipt of this answer the Privy Council solemnly recondemned Forstner to death, confiscated his Wirtemberg properties, and further decreed that if he refused to be executed in person, he should be burned in effigy in the market-place of Stuttgart by the common hangman.

Forstner's response to this was a letter to the Landhofmeisterin, wherein he suggested that he should summon a Privy Council on his estates in Alsace, composed of his valet, his gardener, his lackey, and the village fiddler. That he proposed, as President of this Council, to condemn her to death; and should she not joyfully repair for her execution, he would have her hanged in effigy, head downwards, over the pig-stye. Probably that drastic Bavarian, the Duchesse d'Orléans, inspired this letter, or else Forstner had developed a grim wit in his day of trouble.

The Duke and the Landhofmeisterin raged, and the day of the burning in effigy was fixed.

Then the officer of the Secret Service came to Ludwigsburg carrying a bundle of placards torn from the house walls in Stuttgart. Hundreds of these writings had been nailed to the walls and the doors, and seemed to resprout there like magic mushrooms, for as fast as the agent and his men removed one, another appeared in its place. These handbills set forth the gist of Forstner's [257] letter to the Landhofmeisterin, but in even more pregnant terms, and with additional remarks concerning her person, habits, and transactions.

'Death to the person found affixing such a placard. Imprisonment to those who speak of these handbills. Fines to each householder upon whose house or door such a paper is found.' Thus Eberhard Ludwig decreed; and one miserable wretch was actually hung for nailing up one of Forstner's placards; while innumerable fines were imposed upon the burghers whose houses had been thus decorated.

The burning in effigy of Baron Forstner was fixed for the 15th of February. The arrangements for this strange function were elaborate, and entirely supervised and in part designed by the Landhofmeisterin. Her aim was to make this mock execution not merely a symbol of the criminal's degradation, but a truly awe-inspiring ceremony, calculated to strike terror into the minds of the onlookers.

She caused every town and village of Wirtemberg to send their chief men accompanied by their wives (the Landhofmeisterin knew the power of womanly gossip in a country, or indeed in any community) to witness the sham holocaust. The members of the court were commanded to be present, and the Stuttgart burghers were informed that non-attendants would be fined.

The 15th of February dawned clear and frosty, and in spite of the burghers' hatred of the Landhofmeisterin and all she did, there was a certain amused anticipation in Stuttgart regarding the strange ceremony which was to take place.

For days carpenters, joiners, and builders had been at work in the market-place erecting a huge platform and a giant gibbet. The well-to-do burghers hired rooms in the houses looking on to the square. As they dared not refuse to attend, they desired at least to make this mock execution an occasion for popular entertainment.

At nine of the clock the bells of all churches in Stuttgart began to toll for the dead, and the tramp of soldiers proceeding to the market-place warned the compulsory sightseers that it was time to repair thither and they would not be crushed in the mob. Many set out in a jocular humour, but [258] quickly this gaiety changed; there was something inexplicably sinister in the atmosphere, a menace to freedom, an appalling sense of relentless tyranny.

Round the market-place the soldiery formed a double line, and the people soon saw that this mock ceremony was a grim threat; for the soldiers carried matchlocks, and the whisper ran round the assemblage that these were primed and loaded, and that the soldiers had orders to fire if any group of sightseers indulged in undue hilarity.

The newly erected platform was draped in black, and in the middle of the market-place stood a circle of stakes round a large centre pillar. This circle contained a huge pile of tar-soaked wood.

A brooding stillness fell on the people. The market-place was densely packed, each window of the surrounding houses held its complement of men and women. The church bells still tolled the solemn death tones, otherwise the silence was unbroken.

At length a flourish of trumpets sounded. The court was approaching. First came the officers of State and the members of the nobility, then a detachment of Silver Guards rode up, and formed into line before the black-draped platform. Another fanfare of trumpets and the Landhofmeisterin's gilded coach thundered into the market-place, the mob crushing back to avoid the flying hoofs of the escort's horses. Several coaches followed, containing the red-robed privy councillors and richly bedizened courtiers. Serenissimus sprang from the Landhofmeisterin's coach and assisted her Excellency to alight. She took her place beside his Highness in the centre of the platform, and the privy council and the court gathered round.

Then appeared a file of soldiers and officers, and in their midst was a rigid figure lashed between two condemned criminals. One a murderer, particularly odious to the Stuttgart burghers, for he had stabbed his employer, a well-known lady, the much-esteemed widow of a popular town councillor. The other a notorious horse-stealer, whom the law-abiding Stuttgarters had stoned but a few months past.

The rigid figure was ridiculous enough: the great waxen head sculptured to an unmistakable, though grotesque, likeness of the well-known features of Baron Forstner; then the long, emaciated limbs and even the man's noticeably narrow, flat feet had been reproduced, and they shuffled stiffly along the frost-dried cobble stones. It was a masterpiece of ridicule, yet there was something furiously cruel in the whole absurd travesty of a human being, something terrible in this association in ignominy, between the stiff, swaying waxen thing and the condemned criminals. Slowly this strange procession passed through the crowd, and the three figures—the two living, and the gruesome, inanimate parody of life—were pushed into the circle of faggots in the centre of the market-place and bound all three to the tall middle pillar. Then the common hangman, a huge, heavy-featured Swabian—a butcher by usual occupation—stepped forward and demanded in the accustomed formula: 'If by the will of God and His representatives of law and order on earth, these miserable men were to be sent to their eternal punishment?' The chief officer of law made answer that such was the 'will of Heaven and of the very noble Prince, our Lord Eberhard Ludwig, Duke and Ruler of Wirtemberg.' Then a member of the privy council rose, and in solemn tones read the indictment of Friedrich Haberle, the murderer, and Johannes Schwan, the horse-stealer, condemned to be burned at the stake, together with the effigy of the detestable traitor and purloiner of State monies, Christoph Peter Forstner. [259]

In spite of the threatened penalty, a murmur ran through the onlookers. They had expected to see a lifeless thing burned, but could they indeed be forced to witness the burning of two living men? The execution of a witch was another thing—they enjoyed that; but in cold blood to watch two human beings, not horrible magicians but merely sinners—to see these creatures burned along with that ghastly, lifeless, waxen thing,—that was awesome! A woman in one of the windows screamed, a child in the crowd below lifted a wailing cry. Perhaps the whole thing was inconsistent! What difference between the holocaust of a witch and that of two vile criminals? What matter to the dying men that an absurd image should be burned with them? yet there lay some indescribable horror in it.

The hangman advanced and applied a flaming torch to the tar-smeared faggots, which began to hiss and splutter in the still, frosty, winter air. [260]

'Hold!' cried the privy councillor, 'unbind those men! Friedrich Haberle and Johannes Schwan are reprieved from death, their sentence is commuted to flogging and banishment. Beside Christoph Peter Forstner's crimes these men have hardly transgressed. It is the will of his Highness that they should go free, in token of his wise mercy and to let you see how sure is his justice! And against so lenient a Prince has this odious traitor Forstner conspired! Hangman, do your work upon his image in symbol of his well-deserved punishment, from which the unjust protection of a foreign monarch shields the actual person of this criminal. But let this symbol of death be ever present in the souls of all beholders. Such will be the bodily fate of all those who conspire against his Highness or his Highness's government.'

The flames sprang upwards, licking round the waxen figure and scorching the arm of one of the criminals who was being released from the cords that bound him.

Every eye was upon the beauty of the woman seated beside the Duke Eberhard Ludwig. In abject submission and deadly hatred they gazed on the face of her who thus threatened them, for they read her threat against themselves in every word of the privy councillor's discourse, her menace in each flame which consumed the waxen figure of her enemy, Baron Forstner.

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CHAPTER XVIII

THE SINNER'S PALACE

Forstner's fate worked marvels in the outward behaviour of the Wirtembergers. The strange scene upon the market-place lingered in their minds, and the actual loss which Forstner sustained in confiscated properties, monies, and titles, made the sober burghers careful even in the private expression of their hatred of the Landhofmeisterin. They still spoke of her as the Landverderberin (Land-despoiler), but they greeted her with reverential demeanour when she thundered through town or village in her coach.

Of her witchcraft there was no longer any doubt, in all opinions. Forstner had suffered from a

grievous disease, they had heard, since the witch-woman had practised her horrid magic upon his effigy. True, Prelate Osiander had spoken openly of the natural and inevitable effects of such cruel misfortunes upon a man, already weakly in health, but they argued that the churchman was obliged to take this view, and his Reverence's opinions were rejected.

Yet the fierce hatred only smouldered under this calm and respectful demeanour, and the Landhofmeisterin knew this right well, for his Highness's Secret Service reported many things. The vigilance was unceasing; through the whole country the spies wandered, and many were the fines they levied for careless words which they called treason. 'Treason to whom, great God!' wailed the wretched people. 'Treason to his Highness's honour,' they were told, and knew her Excellency, his Highness's mistress, was meant under this respectable appellation.

There was no denying it: Wirtemberg belonged to the Grävenitzin. Eberhard Ludwig was a mere shadow at her side, but a loyal shadow which approved, or affected to approve, her every action. [262]

The doings at Ludwigsburg were always brilliant, often gay: masques, banquets, music, play-acting, dancing; and even foreign travellers repaired to the South German court to view the brilliancies which equalled those of Versailles before the pious, wanton Maintenon had turned the palace into a house of prayer-meeting, strangely enough almost Calvinistic in its gloom.

At Ludwigsburg the months flew by in a whirl of gaiety and elegant revelry. The groans of an oppressed peasantry, the curses of an overtaxed burgherdom, could not pierce through the chorus of merriment. Smaller stars waxed and waned, favourites of a day disappeared, but the Landhofmeisterin's power grew greater, and her ambition became each day more tremendous. She was treated with royal honours, and the court customs were so arranged that her kin should take precedency of all.

The news of Count Würben's death caused fresh alarms at Stuttgart, for it was expected that the Countess would again endeavour to remove Johanna Elizabetha and marry the Duke. But she had learned her lesson, and now contented herself with her towering position as ruler and mistress. To such a personage the minor detail of legal marriage seemed unimportant, though Madame de Maintenon's example rankled in the mind of every royal favourite.

The Landhofmeisterin believed her position to be unassailable, and if a thought crossed her mind that all this power and pleasure depended upon the will of a man and a Prince, that will which is so often better spelled caprice, still she could not doubt that this one man, one Prince, was constant and stable. From the force of love, of trust, of habit, and of fear he would remain hers till death. And after his Highness's death? For that she was prepared also. 'Gold is power,' she had said to Monsieur Gabriel long ago at Güstrow, and she did not forget this precept. She spent freely and magnificently, but she amassed an enormous fund in reserve. No year passed without some beautiful property becoming hers—broad acres of field and forest, entire villages, old and [263] lordly castles. To name but a few of these: Gochsheim, Welzheim, Brenz, Stetten (the Duchess-mother's dower-house), Freudenthal, the Castle of Urach, and the Château Joyeux La Favorite. Her treasury was well filled, for she levied taxes in the Duke's name, and they flowed into her privy purse: gold heavy with the curses of a people. Her dream of an empire where she should hold secret dominion over the wealth and enterprise of a vast Jewish community had been realised in a modified fashion. She had caused the stringent laws against the Jews to be relaxed; they were permitted to worship openly; a synagogue was erected in Stuttgart, and Jews could acquire civil rights. At her village of Freudenthal she had founded a Jewish settlement. Old Frau Hazzim died there in peace, blessing the name of the friend of Israel. The Jews, in return, served the Grävenitz well, and she had great sums safely awaiting her out of Wirtemberg. All this in preparation for the death of the man she loved! Yet, after all, the most loving and perfect wives make these arrangements if they can: the dower-house filled with linen and silver, and the jointure; but it will ever be regarded as a heinous offence for the mistress to provide for herself. These condemnations of ours are a part of the spontaneous human judgment, and it would not be entirely human were it not gloriously inconsistent.

Freudenthal was the place she loved best of all her possessions, and here she gathered together the most beautiful objects: pictures, Italian inlaid cabinets, graceful French furniture, wonderful silken hangings, carved ivories, many rare books. The gardens were laid out by her own design. Freudenthal lies sequestered from the world at the edge of a little valley, and close behind the village rise long, low, wooded hills—the Stromberg, dark with fir-trees, whose sombre tone is relieved by groves of beeches. Below Freudenthal verdant fields sweep away in soft undulations, broken here and there by beautiful orchards. The Grävenitz knew that an elaborate garden would be a false note in this rustic serenity, and her Freudenthal garden was designed in a simple style. She had found there a peasant's orchard, with many ancient fruit-trees; these she left untouched, [264] merely sowing fine grass instead of the corn which waves beneath the apple- and pear-trees in every Wirtemberg orchard. The actual garden she planted with bowers of roses and beautiful flowering borders along broad grass pathways. The only artificial embellishments were two flights of stone steps leading to simple fountains with large stone basins, where the water gurgled and splashed lazily. 'Frisoni, build the house not in the new style, I pray you,' she had said, 'some graceful Italian simplicity were better here'; and he built a very pleasant mansion, unturreted, without tortured elegancies—a long, low, broad-windowed country retreat, each proportion perfect, each line harmonious. What a wealth of flowers bloomed in the Freudenthal garden! How fragrant were the roses, the lilacs, the jasmine!

Here the Landhofmeisterin was wont to linger if his Highness were forced to leave her for a few days. Here she would live a short span of peaceful hours, ambition banished awhile, affairs of

State forgotten. Here she would sing again the songs she loved so well.

'Let us go to Freudenthal, et chantons les romances d'autrefois,' she would say to Madame de Ruth and Zollern. Then his Highness would come riding down the long, straight, narrow road from Ludwigsburg. He would dismount at the orchard gate and call to her: 'Wilhelmine! Philomèle!' and for an hour the glamour of youth and an echo of the early days of a great passion would return to them. Sometimes he would pray her to sing again the melody which she had sung in the Rothenwald when they had first loved; but alas! her voice was not the same. The beautiful notes were there, the consummate art, but the world-hardness had laid its touch upon her very music. True, Wilhelmine singing was always a being much more tender, more pure than Wilhelmine woman of the world, still her voice registered the hardening of her soul. Zollern said that when she sang 'she expressed all she was not,' and it was a cruel truth. Sometimes there rang for an instant an infinite yearning, but it vanished, and the cold, perfect, artificially passionate utterance resumed sway.

Now and then Eberhard Ludwig still wandered in the forest. He would leave the company of [265]
hunters, and followed by faithful old Mélac, the wolf-hound, he escaped to revel in the silence and beauty of the beechwood. Often he was terribly sad in those days. Wilhelmine perplexed him; it was the hardness in her heart which made him suffer. He winced when he heard even her glorious voice fraught with this new soul of harshness. Often he endeavoured to tell her of his sadness, but she laughed at him.

What more could he crave from her, indeed? She loved him, she was true to him. Alas! he could not explain that it was the essence of her love which had changed. She had no time to be sad, no time therefore to be tender. Poor Eberhard Ludwig! poor brilliant, successful Wilhelmine! And yet, who could blame her if she was greatly occupied? She was chief minister *de facto* of a country; she was finance minister of a queen, she was herself queen; she was Master of the Ceremonies to a court; she was purveyor of amusements to a great prince; yet she had lost the faculty to understand that this prince agonised because she was too occupied to give him tenderness. Passion she gave him, and brilliant gaiety; she tyrannised, flattered, charmed, cajoled him, what more could he desire? Only, he dreamed of the impossible; he dreamed of the love and friendship which remain, of the roses and kisses which do not fade and lose their savour. Of course, it was impossible; but from a dream's non-fulfilment a tragedy was preparing. The tragedy of satiety and inevitable disappointment.

All Wirtemberg was in the Landhofmeisterin's grasp, but two things disturbed her entire enjoyment of power: the continued residence of Johanna Elizabetha in Stuttgart, and the unrelenting disapproval of the Evangelical Church towards the unholy court of Ludwigsburg.

The Catholic Church, through Zollern, coquetted with the Landhofmeisterin in the hope of winning Wirtemberg's allegiance by her influence. But the Protestant community, headed by Prelate Osiander, was openly hostile. The Landhofmeisterin, piqued by this, made overtures offering to endow orphanages, schools, and to repair churches; but though the Church, after the [266]
manner of Churches, swallowed the gold greedily, still it refused to swallow the Landhofmeisterin so long as she remained in deadly and open sin.

To oust the Duchess was impossible; therefore it was deemed sufficient that she should be deserted and apparently forgotten, and surely in time the Church would permit itself to be mollified, and if cajolery failed, the Grävenitz dreamed of using the well-worn threat of Roman conversion. Meanwhile she was ruler of the land, and she thought it preposterous that in the State Church services her great name went unmentioned in the prayers to God for the salvation of Wirtemberg's ruler. The Duke was induced to intimate to Osiander his wish that the Landhofmeisterin should be prayed for when they interceded for himself. Osiander treated this request with contempt, and returned no answer. Then the matter rested for two years, and it seemed as though both the Duke and his mistress had forgotten it.

One day Osiander was summoned to Ludwigsburg. He could not refuse to obey the ruler of his country, and though he suspected the summons to be in truth from the Landhofmeisterin, it was signed and sealed by Eberhard Ludwig. So the Prelate rode to Ludwigsburg.

It was as he had feared, and he was conducted to her Excellency's reception room in the Corps de Logis. Bowing deeply, the page ushered the Prelate into the large apartment and retired, and Osiander found himself alone in the presence of the great Landhofmeisterin.

She came forward graciously and greeted the churchman with a profoundly reverential courtesy. He returned her salutation coldly and turned away his eyes, for her beauty was dazzling still, and he feared he might be influenced.

'I think, your Excellency,' he said quietly, 'I think his Highness the Duke wished to speak with me?'

'Monseigneur Osiander, I have ventured to request your presence concerning a matter which has been long in my thoughts,' she said in her most sonorous tones, and with that smile upon her lips which few could resist; but Osiander observed her coldly and gravely.

'I pray you be seated,' she continued, and pointed to a large red-cushioned chair, one which [267]
Zollern had brought from Rome, the typical dignified, high-backed chair of the Roman Cardinal. To Osiander its very shape was Papistical.

She flung herself down upon a gilt tabouret which stood near. It was much lower than the Prelate's seat, and he could not fail to look down into the deep décolletage of her bodice. He moved away a little, while a faint flush rose to his cheeks.

'I am listening, Excellency,' he said; 'but you will pardon me if I urge you to be brief, for I have much business to transact this afternoon.'

'Ah! Prelate, it is so difficult to be brief with those who do not comprehend!' She leaned towards him. 'I have ever—respected you, Monseigneur.'

The Prelate drew back from her. In his mind he repeated over and over again, as though the phrase were an incantation against some evil spirit: 'The Jezebel flatters me, the Jezebel flatters me,' but man, he could not remain insensible to the woman who thus appealed to him, though priest, he abhorred her. All her charm was in her eyes, her smile; there was a fragrance about her—an exhilaration.

'Madame, it were better if you respected God's laws,' he said sternly. His severity seemed to him as a barrier which he raised between his human weakness and her evil fascination. She sprang up; actress that she was, she meant to convince this man by a grand and tragical scene. She knew him to be too simple, too unsubtle, to detect the art which lent power and pathos to her words. Besides, she was well in her rôle, it amused her.

'Ah! you priest of God! I appeal to you, not concerning the necessarily unjust laws of men, but concerning the law of God and Nature. See, it is no law of God's that I have transgressed. Remember, I am truly the wife of Serenissimus, blessed by prayer. My second marriage is nothing—merely a political arrangement. And my sin, what is it? I found a good man dragging out the days of his youth in sadness beside a woman who could not understand him—a woman only his wife in name. I gave my life to him, I am true to him. The law of man refuses me justice, but [268] God does not, cannot; and I appeal to you, as God's representative on earth, to give me my spiritual right: to include me in your prayers.' She sank back upon the tabouret. The Prelate was astounded. The question of the Landhofmeisterin's being mentioned in the public prayers for the head of the State came back to him, but it was incredible, preposterous. No; this woman surely sought the grace of God. She was earnest, repentance had come to her. She desired his prayers. Thus well had Wilhelmine gauged the Prelate's character, his incapacity for detecting the play-actress in the passionate, imploring woman.

The pastor of souls was softened immediately by the vision of rescuing this strayed spirit.

'My daughter,' he said solemnly, 'if you indeed desire my prayers, I will intercede daily for you. I shall pray that your heart shall be steadfast, pray for God's pardon for your evil life. But I ask you to combat temptation with all your strength. May Christ in His mercy help you.'

The emotion of his great earnestness rendered the good man's voice tremulous.

'I thank you, you are generous to me.' She reached him her hand, and he held it gently between both of his. 'But, Prelate,' she continued, 'is it not written in the Bible that when two or three are gathered together God will grant their requests? I would fain have prayer offered for me in church.'

The Prelate started; yet the demand seemed too outrageous. He could not credit that this sinner wished for a nation's prayers as though she were, in truth, the Duke's legal wife. No, no; she was a repentant sinner seeking the grace of God. Far be it from him, a sinner, to refuse his help.

'You mean, your Excellency, that you wish me to pray silently for you when the faithful are gathered together?' he said tentatively.

'No, I do not mean that,' she answered quickly; 'I wish a prayer to be said aloud for my salvation.'

The Prelate was overwhelmed.

'Surely you do not wish to make public confession of repentance before the congregation?' he questioned. The woman seemed mad to desire thus to proclaim her shame, and yet he was filled [269] with reverence for the faith which could prompt so proud a being to humble herself in the eyes of all men.

'Monseigneur le Prélat Osiander,' she said after a pause, 'I am the Duke's wife before God, and it is my husband his Highness's command and mine, that my name should be included in the official prayer for the head of this Dukedom. I am ruler I would have you know.'

The preposterous demand was made, Osiander could no longer doubt. It was no repentant sinner with whom he dealt, but the all-powerful mistress who had but stooped for a moment to cajole him in the hope of gaining her aim, and who, finding him uncompromising, had resumed her imperious habit. The Prelate was aghast, indignant. He rose stiffly from his chair.

'Your Excellency cannot have considered this command, or even you, Madame, would not have dared to make it. The only prayer that can be said for you in church is that of intercession for the sinful.'

The Landhofmeisterin approached closely.

'Will you accede to my request? If not, you shall obey my order or it will be the worse for you.' She was beside herself with anger. She hated the word Sin; she always said it represented the

bourgeois' criticism of the life of gentlemen.

'No, Excellency, I will not obey you. With my consent the pure service of the worship of God shall never be sullied with your name.' Osiander was the sterner, the more relentless, because of his momentary weakness and credulity.

'You are obliged to pray for me,' she retorted mockingly; 'each time you petition Heaven for the health and happiness of the Duke, you pray for me! For me, do you hear? I am his health and his happiness.'

To Osiander this was rank blasphemy, and, good man though he was, he lost his temper.

'Indeed, Excellency, you say rightly. You are truly included in the prayers of the congregation, for each time we say "Lord, deliver us from evil," we pray for the end of your infamous reign.'

The Grävenitz laughed harshly. All traces of her softer mood, of her fascination, had gone past; [270] she had become once more the cold, proud woman, the tyrant whose statue-like beauty seemed to the Wirtembergers to be some devil's mask of false outward fairness, covering a mass of inner corruption.

'Is this the only answer you have, Osiander?' she asked roughly.

'Yes, your Excellency, and if it were to be my last word on earth.'

The Grävenitz looked at him fixedly for a moment; after all, she rather admired his intrepidity.

'Your audience is at an end,' she said haughtily, and bowed slightly as though she were really some rightful sovereign dismissing a froward courtier.

The Prelate returned her salute equally slightly, and turning away with a sigh, he left her presence.

In later years the estimable man was wont to aver he had never been so near to insulting a woman, yet he would add:

'But she was great in her very wickedness! Surely she must have been one of the angels fallen from Heaven and apprenticed in Hell! for of a truth she was in evil as compared with ordinary sinners, what in holiness is a saint compared with ordinary good people. A wonderful woman, alas!'

Ah, Osiander, did she leave some clinging fragrance, some spark of her subtle charm, to tingle for ever through your pure, simple soul?

In 1716 the Erbprinz Friedrich Ludwig had espoused Henriette Marie of Brandenburg-Schwedt, a pretty and most correct Princess who possessed, among other graceful talents, a perfect genius for tasteful dressing. The marriage festivities had not taken place at Stuttgart, in order to avoid the obvious complications of the meeting of the bridegroom's parents. The Erbprinz hardly knew his father, for Eberhard Ludwig had permitted him to remain chiefly with the Duchess in Stuttgart. At least the unfortunate Johanna Elizabetha was granted the happiness of watching over her gentle, sickly son. The boy had led a dull life enough in deserted Stuttgart, and his natural aptitude for music and study had thus found free scope. Immediately after his marriage, however, he was commanded to reside at Ludwigsburg, where a fine suite of apartments was [271] prepared for him and his bride.

Friedrich Ludwig protested that he desired to remain in Stuttgart, but the Landhofmeisterin willed it otherwise, and Serenissimus enforced her will.

Henriette Marie played her part in this difficult position with dignity and well-bred tact. She was perfectly correct in her demeanour towards the Landhofmeisterin, yet she kept her at a distance and gently rebutted the mistress's friendly advances, and refused to notice her subsequent sneers. Twice during each week the Erbprincessin drove to Stuttgart to visit her unhappy mother-in-law, and she was careful to inform Serenissimus of every intended visit. 'Have I your Highness's permission to journey to Stuttgart?' and 'I thank your Highness, I shall start this afternoon.'

The Landhofmeisterin raged, but she was powerless against the Erbprincessin's quiet dignity and amiable, obstinate coldness. Then, too, Henriette Marie's wardrobe was a source of much annoyance to Wilhelmine; she feared the younger woman had finer gowns than she. In fine, it was the tragi-comedy of that painful jealousy of the woman approaching forty years for the youth of twenty summers.

The Erbprinz, however, could not resist the Landhofmeisterin's charm. She sang him to a very frenzy of delight; she assumed a tender, motherly anxiety over his delicate health—an anxiety which she made charmingly friendly; while she avoided the tiresome questions, the constant open observation, the galling reminders of his weakness in the presence of others, all that which poor, really tender, desperately anxious Johanna Elizabetha had done, wearying her son, shaming him with his physical delicacy.

The Erbprincessin bore a son in August 1718—a weakly child, the picture of his feeble father. The little life's flame flickered and shuddered through one bitter Wirtemberg winter, and in February 1719 passed away into the best sleep the baby had ever known.

Here again the Landhofmeisterin triumphed over Johanna Elizabetha. She knew how to console the Erbprinz with words of hope, how to turn his thoughts away from the empty gilded cradle [272] where had lain that frail little being whom poor Friedrich Ludwig had loved with all his gentle heart. Alas! Johanna Elizabetha was too sad herself to be able to cheer sorrow, and she invariably met her stricken son with floods of tears, doleful questionings, torrents of lamentations, and he went back to Ludwigsburg—and the Landhofmeisterin—for consolation.

Thus things were fairly smooth at Ludwigsburg, and to Johanna Elizabetha it seemed like some wonderful, illicit heaven where her husband revelled and whence she was shut out. She sometimes dreamed of breaking into this Elysium, of expelling the regnant devil and rescuing Eberhard Ludwig. 'Perhaps, if your Highness spoke with Serenissimus things might change,' counselled Madame de Stafforth, and the Duchess prayed for strength to conquer the fortress of vice, Ludwigsburg. For years she hesitated. Indeed, she felt it would be almost immodest to enter the Sinner's Palace, but the day came when she decided to risk herself in the endeavour to turn his Highness's heart back to purity—purity and herself. She dressed herself in her sombre best and ordered her coach. Madame de Stafforth volunteered for service, but the Duchess said she would go alone. She was very brave and terribly afraid.

Through the waving, yellow corn-fields, bordered by fruit-trees for the most part, or else lying like a narrow white riband in the midst of the broad rich valley, the road wound from Stuttgart to the Erlachhof forest and the palace of Ludwigsburg. It was early August when the Duchess journeyed thither, and the corn stood high and golden in the hazy warmth of the sunshine. Far away to the right the hills rose blue and veiled, and to the left the grim fortress of Hohenasperg dominated the smiling, fruitful plain with frowning menace. Johanna Elizabetha's eyes sought the distant mound where she knew lay the prison fort; perchance Serenissimus would answer her pleadings by imprisonment in that dark fastness.

Her coach lumbered slowly on. The Duchess's horses were old and little used to work, and the journey seemed endless. At length the avenue leading to the residence gates was reached, and in [273] the cool shade of the chestnut-trees the Duchess's courage returned. After all, it was her right to enter any Wirtemberg palace, she told herself; yet a chill foreboding gripped her. Should she turn back?

The coach came to a jolting halt, and she heard her outrider explaining to the sentry at the gate that she was the Duchess journeying to the palace. The man seemed doubtful, but after several minutes' parley the little cortège of two outriders, an old shabby coach, two troopers of a Wirtemberg regiment for escort (no Silver Guard here!), and a heart-broken woman, was allowed to proceed.

The palace of Ludwigsburg lay in the August afternoon haze. Her Highness's eyes wandered over the vast pile: the long, low orangery to the south; the numerous rounded roofs of the palace which seemed like the amassment of a group of giant red-brown tortoises; the thousand large windows glinting in the sunshine, the stately gardens. The Duchess sighed deeply as her coach rolled down the broad street which led to the palace gates. She saw the fine houses which bordered this street on one side only, like so many courtiers turning their smiling faces towards the gardens, the palace, and—the Landhofmeisterin.

All this, then, Eberhard Ludwig had raised to honour the whim of a courtesan, of an unknown adventuress from Mecklemburg, while she, the Duchess, legal wife, princess of a noble house—she was shut out, banished to a grim haunted castle in a deserted town! She wrung her hands together. She was helpless, hopeless.

Several courtiers, lingering in the street, stared curiously at the shabby coach. One of the French dressmakers, hurrying from the palace, stood stock still in surprise at seeing so inelegant an equipage in the street of magnificent 'Louisbourg.' The Duchess, with the morbid sensitiveness of a deeply wounded, slighted woman, winced under the scornful inspection of the pert little dressmaker.

Now the coach entered the first gate of the palace, and once more the outrider was obliged to proclaim and assure the identity of the carriage's occupant. This time the sentry flatly refused to believe him, and it was necessary to call the Captain of the Guard. Here the Duchess's spirit [274] asserted itself. She summoned the Captain to the door of the coach and haughtily bid him admit her immediately. But the Captain, a youth appointed by the Grävenitz, feared her Excellency's displeasure more than God or man, and though he was gentleman enough to treat the Duchess courteously, he begged her to wait while he repaired to the Landhofmeisterin for instructions. No one was admitted to the palace without permission from her Excellency, he said.

The Duchess inquired if Madame de Ruth was in the castle. At least, she hoped that for the sake of old memories the grande Maîtresse du Palais, 'Dame de Déshonneur,' as she had once named her, would have sufficient humanity to help her now. Madame de Ruth was in the castle, the Captain replied, but she was very old and infirm, and he feared to disturb her afternoon rest. Very old and infirm? The Duchess sighed. Ah! many years had passed since she had seen the garrulous lady. Alas! she was no longer young herself. God in heaven! why did that sinful, triumphant wanton alone retain her beauty? She had been told that the Landhofmeisterin, like some evil giant tree, seemed to grow more beautiful, more resplendent each year. It was not true; for Time had set his cruel fingermarks upon Wilhelmine, but her wonderful health and her complaisant knowledge of success gave her a seeming youth. True, the pert little French dressmaker could have told the Duchess of violent scenes over gowns made to the measurements

of former years, which could not fit her Excellency; but the courtesan pays a homage to Venus, offering up the tribute of powder, paint, and gorgeous clothes, and Venus responds by a gift of seeming youth; while the virtuous woman is punished for her virtue and her neglect of the Goddess of Appearance, by a shorter span of beauty and youth. Yet there is an unerring justice in the world. When Time has worked his inexorable will, and powder, paint, and crafty clothing can no longer hide his ravages, then the virtuous woman triumphs, probably for the first time in her life. They are both old, she and the courtesan, but she is sometimes beautiful—old, grey, and sere, but venerable, charming—and little children love her, and younger women bring their [275] troubles—ay, and their joys, reverently to her, feeling a benediction in the touch of the pure, withered hand. While the courtesan—alas! a ridiculous garish absurdity, a grim ghost of past merriment, a horrid relic of forgotten debauches, a painted harridan at whom the boys jeer when she passes down the street. Here is one of God's great judgments and one of Nature's object-lessons.

But Johanna Elizabetha did not think of all this as she sat waiting at the gates of Ludwigsburg Palace; her mind was centred upon the probability of Madame de Ruth's kind heart prompting her to assist her erstwhile mistress. The minutes dragged on. Old and infirm, he had said; perhaps she came slowly down the stairs? Ah! at last! the Duchess heard the well-remembered voice in the distance talking ceaselessly. Then she saw Madame de Ruth, leaning on the arm of the Captain of the Guard, coming slowly towards her.

A deep courtesy, and Madame de Ruth stood at the coach door. In a tremulous voice the Duchess informed her that she would speak with Serenissimus on urgent business, but that the guard refused her admittance and she had therefore begged her to come to her assistance.

'Aha! your Highness craves the assistance of a Dame de Déshonneur? Nay,' she added in a gentler tone, 'I fear I have not the power to admit your Highness save to my own apartments.'

The Duchess bent forward. 'Madame de Ruth,' she said solemnly, 'you are an old woman and so am I; we have not many years before God judges us at His Eternal Tribunal. I pray you, by your hope of His mercy, to have mercy on me, help me this once.'

Madame de Ruth looked at her; indeed, the Duchess's tragic face was enough to soften even a harder heart than beat under the old courtesan's padded, beribboned corsage.

'Well, your Highness, come with me! I will endeavour to summon Serenissimus to my apartments,' she said. 'It will not be easy, and I hope your Highness is prepared to offer me apartments in Stuttgart? I may require them after this! My friend the Landhofmeisterin is averse [276] to any one being admitted to the palace without her permission.'

They passed through a maze of long, lofty, pink marble walled corridors, and up several winding stone stairs, ere they reached Madame de Ruth's apartments. Here the old courtesan left her Highness, while she withdrew to make arrangements for the Duke to be summoned. In truth, she hastily despatched a billet to the Landhofmeisterin informing her of the extraordinary occurrence, and begging her for instructions. Even Madame de Ruth was under the Grävenitz's iron rule and dared not offend her. The curt answer came back written in her Excellency's energetic, elegant writing: 'How is her Highness's appearance?' Madame de Ruth replied equally curtly with the one word 'Hideous!' and a moment after the paper was returned to her: 'Let him see her.—Wilhelmine von Würben und von Grävenitz, Landhofmeisterin.'

It was a curious interview between Eberhard Ludwig and his deserted wife; strained, unnatural, terrible, this meeting after long years, and insensibly they fell into their old attitudes: he wearied, irritated, coldly courteous; she tearful, imploring, tiresome. He told her that she was nothing to him, and that she had no further claims upon him; he provided residence, appanage, everything to which she had a right. She responded that she claimed his love, his company, and in answer he bowed deeply and left her presence.

Madame de Ruth returning to her rooms found a fainting woman prone upon the floor, and to her credit be it written, she tended the Duchess gently. When her Highness recovered from her swoon she requested Madame de Ruth to lead her to the palace chapel.

'I would fain leave a prayer here! A foolish fancy, you will say, but the sorrowful are often foolish,' she said bitterly.

Madame de Ruth guided the Duchess through another maze of long corridors, and ushered her into the tapestried room which is behind the palace gallery. Her Highness gazed with displeasure at the luxurious furnishing of the Ducal pew, its gilded armchairs, red silk cushions, soft red silk praying hassocks, and the gilt casement looking down into the church. The church itself, [277] designed by the Italian Papist, Frisoni, showed a wealth of delicate pink brocade and of rich azure hangings, of golden angels, of smiling goddesses whose voluptuous faces bore so unmistakable a likeness to the Landhofmeisterin. With a sigh the Duchess fell on her knees. 'God is everywhere,' she reminded herself, 'even in this frivolous chapel.' She prayed earnestly for some time, and, rising, would have turned to go, when her eye was caught by a finely sculptured medallion, placed high up to the right of the much gilded and ornamented pulpit. Its subject was Truth, and this severe personage stood represented by a charming shepherdess with rose-wreathed mirror, and flower-bedecked, coquettish hat, bare breast, and a skirt which, for no particular reason unless it were the showing of the model's beautiful limbs, suddenly fell on one side from the hip to the ankle of this remarkable figure of Truth. Here again the face was unmistakable, and the sculptor had taken immense pains to make this medallion a masterly

portrait of the Landhofmeisterin.

With a gesture of despair and disgust the Duchess turned away and hurried through the corridors. Placing her hand on Madame de Ruth's arm she pressed her guide forward at so rapid a pace that the older woman almost fell.

'Quick, Madame! quick, Madame! take me from this terrible place!' the Duchess repeated. It seemed to her that Wilhelmine's face, her triumphant beauty, pursued her at every yard of the Sinner's Palace. Even in the church she knew that each figure, feigning to beautify the House of God, was in reality merely another homage to the great mistress, another subtle compliment of the architect Frisoni's for the Landhofmeisterin.

Madame de Ruth accompanied her Highness to her coach, and in broken words the Duchess thanked her. 'If Fate turns against you here, Madame, you will find a welcome at Stuttgart in memory of your kindness on this most miserable day,' she said. But Madame de Ruth shook her head. She was of the Ludwigsburg world, and when Frivolity forgot her she knew that she would need no other refuge than six foot of earth beside her dead child.

Wearily the Duchess took her way homeward. There was no spark of hope left in her heart now; [278] she only raged that she had humbled herself, and to no avail. The magnificence of Ludwigsburg smote her as an insult. She shuddered at the remembrance of the endless reproductions of her enemy's features: the whole palace was a marble homage to the Grävenitz, a beautiful, enduring, kingly homage.

But the palace chapel! Ah! that was the worst of all, a very blasphemy. And yet how wondrous beautiful it was, this palace.

She closed her eyes, but in the darkness she saw again the smiling face of the woman who had ruined her life; she saw the graceful figure in the chapel medallion, the voluptuous parted lips of the carven angel who held the canopy over the pulpit, the delicately chiselled features of the Aphrodites and the nymphs which she had been forced to pass in the palace, and each one of which bore a resemblance to the Duke's mistress.

The sun was setting behind Hohenasperg, and a blood-red glow lingered in the sky over the south-westerly hills of the Rothwald. The peasants were going homeward after their day's work; already their sickles had cut great gaping wounds in the waving, yellow beauty of the corn-fields. A fresh north breeze sprang up and sent the white dust whirling in clouds behind the Duchess's coach. And the north wind brought Johanna Elizabetha another pang, for it wafted to her a sound of music from Ludwigsburg. The musicians of the Silver Guards were playing a merry strain in the palace gardens.

To the forsaken, humiliated woman this moment was symbolic of her whole life: she journeying alone down the dusty road towards the gathering gloom over Stuttgart; Eberhard Ludwig and the Landhofmeisterin at their beautiful palace living in music and revelry.

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CHAPTER XIX

THE GREAT TRIUMPH AND THE SHADOW

For years Germany had gossiped over the so-called 'Persian Court' of Leopold Eberhard of Wirtemberg, Duke of Mömpelgard. This prince had been so pampered by his mother, Anne de Coligny, that he reached the age of twelve years without having learned to read or write. When the over-tender mother died, the boy's father, Duke George, took his dunce-son's education in hand; but this gentleman was peculiar in his notions of the training of young minds. French and German he deemed unnecessary trivialities, and the Christian religion a banality. Instead of these prosaic lessons the boy was instructed in the Arabic, Hebrew, and Persian tongues, and, in lieu of the Bible, the Koran was placed in his hands.

A handsome, reckless, passionate youth, imbued with the comfortable theories of polygamy, Leopold Eberhard was destined to succeed his father in the family honours, and achieve a course of Persian living which, while practised frequently under other names at many courts, astounded Germany by this legalised manner of illegality.

One lady was already the wife of Leopold Eberhard. She was the daughter of a baker, and had held the post of housemaid at the small court of Oels in Silesia. Having succeeded in espousing a gentleman of the name of Zedlitz, she turned her attention to the eighteen-year-old Erbprinz of Mömpelgard; and her husband, Herr von Zedlitz, not approving of this new relationship, she divorced him and married Leopold. At first this undistinguished alliance displeased the old Duke of Mömpelgard, and he endeavoured to disinherit Leopold Eberhard; but when the ex-housemaid bore a fine son, the grandfather relented, and the couple took residence at Mömpelgard, the lady [280] being created by the Emperor Countess of Sponeck.

Now, in Mömpelgard resided an aged captain of the Imperial army, one Richard Curie, a tailor by trade, who, having enlisted in the army and risen to the rank of captain, changed his uneuphonious name to Monsieur l'Espérance, married a Mömpelgard butcher's daughter, and settled in her native town. Four fine daughters were born of this marriage. Leopold Eberhard cast his eyes upon these beautiful girls and remembered his Mahometan principles. At this

juncture, Duke George conveniently died, and Leopold Eberhard became Duke. Immediately all four damsels l'Espérance were appointed ladies' companions to the Countess of Sponeck. The eldest, Sébastiane, was the first object of Leopold's affection, but the Countess Sponeck suspected the intrigue and remonstrated with her spouse. To divert her jealousy from Sébastiane the Duke paid sham court to the youngest sister, Polyrène, but the playacting turned reality, and ended in serious passion. However, this episode with the second of the l'Espérances soon came to an end, for Polyrène fell dead during a gavotte at court. Great mourning, and Leopold sought consolation with another sister l'Espérance, Henriette Hedwig, wife of a lieutenant in the Mömpelgard guards, Herr von Sandersleben. This gentleman objected, divorced Henriette Hedwig, and left the Duke's service.

The Countess of Sponeck and the two sisters Espérance resided under one roof. We are told that it was hell on earth: they fought, they scratched, they yelled, they bit, till the Duke arrived on the scene, parted the combatants, and usually thrashed—the Countess of Sponeck! All Germany knew, watched, and laughed.

At length it could be borne no longer, and the Countess of Sponeck, with her children, retired to a distant castle. Then Henriette Hedwig died, and the Mömpelgard court seemed tidied up a little, although Henriette left five children in the castle, two of whom called Leopold father.

But there still remained a fourth sister Espérance, Elizabeth Charlotte. This lady's ambition soared higher than that of the other three sisters. She made Leopold divorce the Countess of [281] Sponeck. The other sisters had been called the legal wives of the Duke, according to his Mahometan principles, but Elizabeth Charlotte insisted upon a greater surety, and Leopold acquiesced, as usual, when his affections were engaged. The Countess of Sponeck being divorced, he married the fourth and last sister Espérance. He spoke of poor Sponeck as 'The Widowed Lady,' and Elizabeth Charlotte as 'The Reigning Lady.'

Now came the complications concerning the offspring of the Duke's various wives. To annoy poor Sponeck, Leopold in 1715 had entered into a contract with Wirtemberg, whereby he declared his distant cousin, Eberhard Ludwig, heir to Mömpelgard; but he soon repented of this admission, and besought the Emperor to legitimatise his children: those morganatically born by the Countess of Sponeck, and the rest of the brood from the Espérance sisters. The Emperor refused.

Then Leopold appealed to Louis XIV., who also proved obdurate. Finally during the Regency, Leopold repaired to Paris in person and prayed the Regent, Duc d'Orléans, to legitimatise his progeny. 'A Lutheran prince was legally permitted to marry whom, when, and as often as he wished,' he averred. This precept being received with mockery, he expatiated on Persian customs, and declared himself a believer in the Koran alone. But Paris laughed at him, and after making himself ridiculous at the court of France during eight months, Leopold returned to Mömpelgard. Then he married his son, George Leopold, Count of Sponeck, to his daughter Eleonore Charlotte of Sandersleben; and his son, Karl Leopold of Sandersleben, to his daughter Leopoldine Eberhardine of Sponeck. This double marriage was a magnificent ceremony at Mömpelgard, and Duke Leopold was wild with delight at the revival of 'the beautiful old Persian custom.' But Germany, and even France, stood aghast at the horrible affair. To celebrate his four children's nuptials, Leopold gave a grand ball. In the midst of this festivity he was struck down with apoplexy. The sisters Espérance, Sébastiane and Elizabeth Charlotte, fled before the approach of death, but honest Sponeck hastened back from her distant castle, and Leopold died in her arms.

Eberhard Ludwig of Wirtemberg laid claim to Mömpelgard, but he was obliged to send troops to [282] seize his inheritance. Then the bastards in a body commenced legal proceedings against the rightful heir, and against each other. Europe looked on, scandalised and amused.

The eldest Sponeck and his sister-bride hurried to Paris—'Prince et Princesse de Montbéliard,' they styled themselves—and as they were young, handsome, and seemingly wealthy, many persons of note espoused their sorry cause.

Eberhard Ludwig, who now added to his titles that of Duke of Mömpelgard, waited patiently for some time ere he took possession in person of his new domain. His troops were there, and Friedrich Grävenitz had been despatched to take direction of affairs.

Meanwhile, some of the bastards were raising doleful cries in Vienna and in Paris, but a few remained obstinately at Mömpelgard, and to Friedrich Grävenitz was assigned the task of removing them before Serenissimus made his state entry.

The Landhofmeisterin had intimated her intention of accompanying his Highness on this official journey, and there had ensued a sharp quarrel, by letter, between the lady and her brother in Mömpelgard. She won the day, of course, as usual, yet her heart was heavy in this hour of her greatest triumph, for the Duke grew colder to her each day. Madame de Ruth, her wily counsellor, had died a few months after the Duchess Johanna Elizabetha's visit to Ludwigsburg, and the courtiers had marvelled at the Landhofmeisterin's passionate grief. She had followed the old courtesan's coffin to Neuhaus, and had seen her laid to rest beside the little mound of the child's grave. And the Grävenitz had refused to be comforted.

Zollern almost deserted Ludwigsburg after his old mistress's death. He withdrew to his castle, and only at rare intervals could he be persuaded to visit the Duke and the Landhofmeisterin.

Yet the Grävenitz's power was unabated; in point of fact, it seemed to grow more absolute; but

the courtiers noticed her melancholy, and while some put it down to her grief at Madame de Ruth's death, others observed the Duke's colder manner, and predicted the Landhofmeisterin's [283] downfall. It was a blow to these prophets when the news was confirmed that the Grävenitz was to accompany Serenissimus on his state entry to Mömpelgard. There were various intrigues to prevent her Excellency from carrying out the project. Chief among these was a riot at Mömpelgard, which was entirely organised and stirred up by discontented Wirtembergers. It required little to enflame the Mömpelgarders, for they hated the very name of Duke's mistress from past Espérance experiences, and the Landhofmeisterin's doings in Wirtemberg were well known.

Friedrich Grävenitz wrote at great length to his sister (he always wrote lengthily, and the most trivial letter he alluded to as 'my business,' saying pompously, 'I have been working'). So he wrote at enormous length to Wilhelmine, advising her to refrain from journeying to Mömpelgard, but the Landhofmeisterin only laughed, and hurried on the preparations for the official entry.

Shortly before this time a new body-guard had been enrolled at Ludwigsburg. It did not oust the famous Silver Guard from favour, and the Cadets à Cheval also retained their proud position, but the new body-guard was a most resplendent corps, composed entirely of gentlemen of noble birth. One of Madame de Ruth's last witticisms had been to compare this 'Chevaliergarde' to the French and Austrian Chanoinesses.

'Really, Monseigneur,' she had told Serenissimus, 'you should make it compulsory for the gentlemen of the Chevaliergarde to have sixty-four quarterings and pure morals!'

Of course there was jealousy between the Silver Guard and the Chevalier troop, and the young Cadets à Cheval looked with displeasure at the new guard. But the Landhofmeisterin settled that as she did all things; she decreed that when the Cadets reached the age of twenty-one years it should be open to them to serve in the permanent Chevaliergarde, or to apply for officers' commissions in the Silver Guard, and the latter appointments being perforce limited in number, it soon became the recognised thing for the Cadets who wished to remain in the military service to enter the Chevaliergarde. The Landhofmeisterin ruled even the army.

Her Excellency had instituted an Order. His Highness had his St. Hubertus to give, and she [284] desired to have an Order of her own to distribute. Everybody laughed covertly, but the insignia of the Order of the White Trefoil were much coveted nevertheless, and the white riband and beautifully designed three-leaved badge of the Grävenitz's Order were proudly worn by the highest dignitaries, and at Ludwigsburg the courtiers who were fortunate enough to possess the decoration were careful never to appear without it.

On a glowing July morning a splendid cavalcade started from Ludwigsburg: the Silver Guard, the Cadets à Cheval, the Chevaliergarde, the dignitaries of the Wirtemberg court, and his Highness Eberhard Ludwig riding at the door of the golden coach, wherein throned the Landhofmeisterin and her sour-visaged sister Sittmann.

In each town and village the procession was greeted with commanded cheers and with triumphant arches decorated by her Excellency's instructions. The peasants' faces were sombre while they cheered, sometimes a suppressed snarl of hatred mingled with the acclamations. As the travellers proceeded on their journey, however, this hostility abated, giving place to peering curiosity, and at every halt the villagers crowded round asking which of the ladies was the Landhofmeisterin, and commenting on her appearance.

At Kehl on the Rhine there was an official reception by the burgomaster and chief citizens. From Kehl to Strassburg, a distance of several miles, peasants and townsfolk bordered the road, watching the entry of the magnificent Duke of Wirtemberg. The town of Strassburg, in those days only French by a recent treaty, received the German prince with vociferous delight. The Regent d'Orléans, wishful to show courtesy to the new Duke of Montbéliard, had commanded the garrison to render military honours to the travelling prince, and Serenissimus was greeted in Strassburg by some of the finest of France's troops, and by thundering cannon salutes. Then there were white-robed maidens strewing flowers before his horse's hoofs, and from the town-gate to the stately old Cathedral Square the concourse of men and women was so vast as to make [285] the progress slow and difficult; bands played and flags flew, and the Grävenitz was delighted. Eberhard Ludwig was feasted and honoured, and ever beside him was the tall figure of the Landhofmeisterin. In the evening the Duke received the chief burghers at a state banquet, and the Grävenitz sat to his Highness's right.

In Schlettstadt and Belfort, where he entered the Mömpelgard territory, the reception was enthusiastic; and, contrary to all expectations, the citizens of Mömpelgard itself received their new ruler with expressions of ecstatic loyalty, and even the Landhofmeisterin was loudly cheered. Here again the cannon roared a welcome, children and maidens strewed roses, choirs of youths chanted pæans of homage and rejoicing, and the Mömpelgard regiments, which but a few months before had been employed by the bastards to oppose the rightful heir, now greeted their Duke with respect. Banners waved from every house, arches of fresh flowers adorned the streets, the windows were spread with silken hangings, and the church bells rang peal upon peal. It was a scene of rejoicing, of enthusiasm, of pomp and magnificence, and it was the culminating point of the triumph of Wilhelmine von Grävenitz, but her heart was heavy with foreboding.

Serenissimus also, though he played his part in the fine pageant with seeming pleasure, was filled with profound sadness. The Erbprincessin had been brought to bed of a daughter only since

the loss of her first child. The Erbprinz was more ailing than ever; true, he fought gallantly against his weakness, seeking to fortify himself and please his father by outdoor exercises; but, though he rode magnificently, with skill and intrepidity, he had fallen fainting from his horse several times of late. The doctors shook their heads, and the cognizance forced itself upon Eberhard Ludwig that he himself would be the last Duke of the direct line.

After spending three weeks of feasting at Mömpelgard, his Highness set out for Stuttgart. The Mömpelgarders bade him adieu with many expressions of loyal devotion. They found their new Duke and his handsome, decorous mistress, who played so finely the rôle of legal Duchess, an agreeable change after Leopold Eberhard's 'Persian Court' and its absurdities, and they would [286] fain have induced Serenissimus to tarry in Mömpelgard; but the King of Prussia had intimated his intention of visiting Ludwigsburg in September, and Eberhard Ludwig hurried back to receive his royal guest. But on arriving in Ludwigsburg his Highness fell ill, and Friedrich Wilhelm's visit was postponed till the following spring.

The winter passed with little incident at Ludwigsburg. His Highness recovered rapidly from his actual illness, yet he did not regain his accustomed health and spirits, and thus the court festivities were both fewer and less brilliant than heretofore. The Landhofmeisterin's forebodings seemed to be infectious; a cloud hung over Ludwigsburg, and the people murmured ominously: 'His Highness wearies of her, and she has ill-wished him; he will die, and she will disappear with all the jewels and gold.'

Doubtless, the Landhofmeisterin's actions lent colour to these wild reports. She had studied various theories of medicine—quaint, old, forgotten herb lore, absurd mediæval magic. At first it had diverted her, then she grew credulous, and in the despair of knowing Eberhard Ludwig's love to be waning and his health broken, she resorted to the pitiful puerilities of love potions, life essences, and elixirs. Of course, for the brewing of these concoctions she required some extraordinary ingredients, and it was in the procuring of these that the gossip concerning her witch practices was revived and flourished. This prescription required the blood of a still-born male child; one old black-letter book recommended the heart of a yellow hen; another ordered the life-warm entrails of a black fighting-cock; a fourth prescription commanded the admixture of hairs from a dead man's beard! These ingredients mixed with herbs plucked in churchyards at midnight, or spices brought directly from the East, and with seven times distilled water, and suchlike, made a life elixir, or an infallible love potion, or again a cure for this or that disease. Among the many absurdities of ignorance some of the accumulated wisdom of experience may have crept into the old recipes: a real cure for a fever, or the application of a gold ring to an inflamed eyelid. Superstition said that the ring was the marvel-worker; possibly it was some [287] quality in the gold, some even-as-yet-undiscovered power of certain metals upon the human body, and which experience may have taught the old village woman and the wandering quack. But for the most part the Grävenitz's potions were harmless absurdities, yet she believed, and so did others, in their efficacy.

During the winter the Erbprinz's fainting fits were more frequent than ever, and the Erbprincessin sank into a deep and brooding melancholy, which was varied by attacks of painful excitement and sudden bursts of causeless anger. It was whispered at Ludwigsburg that she was surely going mad.

It was as though some fearful blight had fallen upon Eberhard Ludwig and his family, and the Pietists preached that the avenging hand of God was hovering over the sinner's court. The Secret Service reported these sermons to the Landhofmeisterin, and the preachers were fined or imprisoned, but the stream of denunciation continued nevertheless.

The Grävenitz was very lonely now. His Highness had changed to her, she could no longer blind herself to the fact. Madame de Ruth was dead; Zollern, old and sad, was rarely at Ludwigsburg. Friedrich Grävenitz was covertly hostile to her. In the autumn a serious quarrel had taken place; the brother demanding as free gift the property of Welzheim, which the Landhofmeisterin had lent him. This Wilhelmine refused; she did not relish her brother's way of asking, and she bitterly resented the pompous, self-righteous, disapproving manner which he had adopted towards her of late. After all, he owed her everything, she told herself. Her sister, Sittmann, was a useless parasite. The Landhofmeisterin accounted her as one who would desert her immediately did misfortune come. The Sittmann sons, young men who owed their high position entirely to their aunt's power, not to their own merit or capability, were colourless, insipid youths. Sittmann himself, Schütz and the rest, she knew to be fair-weather friends; evidently they descried the clouds gathering over their patroness's head, and they were quietly drawing back from her. Only Maria, the maid, remained faithful and admiring, and tended her adored mistress with unfailing patience and devotion. In the early spring the preparations began for the King of Prussia's visit, [288] but Serenissimus himself took the lead in settling the arrangements, and the Landhofmeisterin was constantly met with the answer: 'His Highness has ordered that otherwise, your Excellency,' or, 'that point has been settled by the Duke.' For twenty years she had directed and ruled, and now all things seemed to crumble at her touch.

King Friedrich Wilhelm I. arrived in Wirtemberg towards the middle of April. He was met at the frontier by Eberhard Ludwig and the whole Silver Guard. The cavalcade was very brilliant, the horses magnificent, and the bluff Prussian King greeted the Duke with rough cordiality. They had been companions-in-arms during the Spanish Succession campaigns, and as they rode together through the beautiful spring land of Wirtemberg they recalled old memories, fighting over again the battles of Blenheim, or of Malplaquet, and talking of military matters. It was like a breath of

the camp life of long ago, of those young, gay, adventurous days when the Future promised so much!

An official reception had been prepared for Friedrich Wilhelm at Ludwigsburg, and leaving the King at Heilbronn, Eberhard Ludwig hastened home. On the morrow, at the head of his troops, he would receive Prussia's martial ruler at a grand parade, after which the Corporal King was to be feasted at the palace.

Eberhard Ludwig reached Ludwigsburg late in the evening, and retired immediately, commanding a light supper to be served in his apartments. He was told that the Landhofmeisterin and the court awaited him, and that supper was already served, as usual, in her Excellency's dining-room. But Serenissimus sent word that he desired to be undisturbed, and prayed her Excellency to excuse him.

The supper at the Landhofmeisterin's table was partaken of in a constrained atmosphere. Her Excellency spoke with Baron Schütz of political affairs, but though her lips smiled, there was that in her eyes which banished easy talk in her presence. The Erbprinz was pale and silent; he had ridden much during the afternoon, and had swooned away in the palace courtyard when he dismounted. The Erbprincessin sat crumbling her bread with her long, delicate fingers, a heavy [289] cloud of aimless melancholy on her face. She had been feverishly excited during the day at the prospect of meeting her cousin King Friedrich Wilhelm, but, as usual, her passing brighter mood left her the more depressed. At the repast's conclusion the Landhofmeisterin rose and repaired, according to her custom, to the card-room. She played her hand at l'hombre, winning each game.

'Those who are fortunate at cards are unfortunate in all else, they say,' she remarked, as she noted her winnings in her neat scholarly handwriting. The courtiers murmured some banal phrases, and Schütz watched the Landhofmeisterin narrowly. Was it time for this Master-Rat to conduct his brood away from the threatened vessel? he wondered.

Earlier than usual her Excellency gave the signal to retire. 'We start to-morrow at nine of the clock for his Majesty's reception. Your Highness will occupy my coach. I trust it will not rain,' she said indifferently as she bade the Erbprincessin good-night. Now, it had been clearly understood that no ladies were to attend the reception. In fact, the Erbprincessin had consented to greet her cousin in private, only in order to prevent the Landhofmeisterin from meeting the mistress-hating monarch. There ensued an awkward pause after her Excellency's speech.

'I do not purpose to be present at the official reception, Madame,' said the Erbprincessin, 'and I had understood that your Excellency also would remain away.'

'Your Highness has been misinformed,' returned the Landhofmeisterin icily. 'We start, as I have had the honour to tell you, at nine of the clock to-morrow morning. I wish you would accompany me in my coach, Prince Friedrich, it would be a happiness to me to have your protection. May I count on you?' She turned to him with her wonderful smile. Friedrich Ludwig had a place in her affection, and though he never visited her at Favorite or Freudenthal, which wounded her deeply, she bore him no malice.

'In truth, Madame, I shall be proud to escort you in your coach to-morrow. At nine of the clock?' And he bade her good rest. He was grateful to her for thus making it seem a courtesy to her that [290] he should consent to drive instead of riding to the review, for the doctor had told him that evening that he could not ride, and he felt so weak and giddy after his swoon that he knew he dared not mount a horse. The Erbprincessin shot a veiled look of hatred at the Landhofmeisterin. How well the evil woman knew how to cajole men to her will!

The Landhofmeisterin repaired to her pavilion, and Maria assisted her to bed. Such a ceremony it was, this retiring to rest of the Landhofmeisterin! Such a profusion of delicious essences; all the perfumes of Araby were used, and she donned the fairest raiment of fine linen. According to custom, Maria left her fastidious mistress ready for sleep and reading a heavy tome of old-world magic by the light of two tall waxen tapers.

Hardly had the maid's footsteps ceased to echo on the stone steps of the pavilion, when the Grävenitz flung aside the book and, rising from her chair, listened attentively. Only the monotonous tramp of the sentries in the courtyard, and, more faintly, the same sound from the guards on the north terrace. Still her Excellency listened. Alas! for how many nights of late had she hearkened in vain for the click of the little key in the door from the statue gallery? Eberhard Ludwig never came to her, and as she stood listening her heart bled in anguish for the love that was no more. Could such love really die? she asked herself. If it could, then the vows Eberhard Ludwig had spoken were mockery. Had she built her life on so insecure a foundation? The whole fabric of her being was shattered. Her anguish was almost physical pain, and she knew why people said 'my heart bleeds,' for, of a truth, it seemed to her as though the strength ebbed away from her heart, leaving an aching, yearning void. Courage! she would try again. She lifted the waxen taper and held it between her face and the mirror. Yes, there were lines beneath the eyes; her cheeks were less full and her chin heavier than of yore, but her lips were soft and red, her eyes as blue, as vivid as they had ever been. She knew her hair was streaked with white beneath the powder, but it was still luxuriant. She was beautiful, desirable—but would he desire her? She replaced the taper, glided into the statue gallery, and opened the door leading to his Highness's [291] room. She listened; Eberhard Ludwig was asleep; she could hear the long, even breaths. Noiselessly she pushed aside the arras and entered. The moon shone into the room, and again she could have vowed that a white-shrouded woman's figure stood in the wan light, but, as

before, the faint vision vanished when she looked more searchingly.

'Eberhard, beloved,' she called gently, 'are you ill?' The old witchery was in her voice, and the sleeping man answered to it.

'I come, sweet love; I come, Philomèle!' Serenissimus appeared on the threshold of the writing-room. He had flung himself down to sleep without undressing, and was still in his riding-clothes. He looked ghastly in the pale moonlight, and she hurried to him with outstretched arms.

'You are ill and you do not come to me? Beloved, have I not tended you that you should thus flaunt me?' She drew him to her. 'What have I done, my heart, how have I sinned, that you have taken your love from me? See, I come to you to pray you to forgive me!' The old trick of speech, her catchword, 'See,' the low voice—the soft, strong arms.

He had doubted her, and why? She had given him all; it was not her fault if he wearied of her tyranny. No; he alone was to blame, his inconstancy, his weakness. He poured forth a torrent of self-reproach, and words of love, and she responded passionately. Once more they were lovers, thrilling to each other's touch. And the wan moon looked on at their transports, and perchance the pale wraith of the Countess of Orlamünde, the White Lady, watched the lovers and smiled, knowing that love's death, satiety, had them in his chill grip for all their passionate vows.

'I start at nine to-morrow morning for the reception, beloved. The Erbprincessin and Friedrich accompany me in my coach,' the Landhofmeisterin said as she prepared to return to her apartments. His Highness started.

'I pray you, do not go, Wilhelmine. The King is a bear, and if you meet him he will fail in courtesy to you,' he said.

'It is my right to go, and I start at nine,' she repeated.

'You shall not go; it is my right to forbid you,—you shall not go!' he cried. Then ensued a quarrel, [292] bitter, terrible, between two beings who so short a while before had loved so madly. The quarrel ended by the man giving in, as usual, but the wrangle pierced one more nail in his love's coffin for all that.

True to her word, the next morning at nine of the clock the Landhofmeisterin entered her coach accompanied by a very angry-faced Erbprincessin, and the Erbprinz. They drove past Hohenasperg to the plain where the review was to be held, and the Landhofmeisterin's coach took up a commanding position near to Eberhard Ludwig and the officers of his staff. The Prussian King appeared riding with a numerous retinue.

The field artillery spluttered volleys, and the cannon of Hohenasperg thundered a royal salute; the Silver Guard and the Chevaliergarde deployed and went through the series of antics customary at that period of military history. It was a small quantity of men with which to aspire to give a military display to the Soldier King, but under Eberhard Ludwig's zealous care the men were perfectly drilled, wonderfully accoutred, and the cavalry horses were unequalled in Germany. The light field-guns were of the latest invention, the artillery and fort gunnery were carefully distinguished according to the new military rule: in fact, it was all rigidly correct and perfect to the most approved and newest methods of that date; and Friedrich Wilhelm who, if he knew little else, was a past master of the martial art, was delighted at the display. But his face changed when he rode up to the coach to greet his cousin, and became aware of the Landhofmeisterin's presence.

'Why are you here?' he grumbled to the Erbprincessin. 'Women are best at home, looking after the children or cooking the dinner.'

'May I present her Excellency the Landhofmeisterin to your Majesty?' said Eberhard Ludwig; but the King turned a deaf ear.

'Go home, cousin, go home!' he bawled at the Erbprincessin; and putting spurs to his horse galloped away to inspect some new pattern of field-gun which his sharp eyes had espied with the artillery.

Eberhard Ludwig looked at the Landhofmeisterin in genuine distress. He had warned her of the [293] Prussian King's rough manners, but this was more than he had expected. Her Excellency's face was inscrutable.

'I should advise your Highness to follow that most kingly personage. Keep him in view, Serenissimus, or he may steal a tall man or so for his grenadiers from among your favourite guards. It is one of his graceful habits, I am told,' she said coldly.

The Erbprinz had flushed deeply when the martial king ignored the Landhofmeisterin. The Erbprincessin's face, on the contrary, had lightened considerably. It was delightful to see the Grävenitz put down for once! They drove home through the meadows, past the blossoming orchards, and never had the Landhofmeisterin been more charming; even the Erbprincessin could not forbear a smile at her witty sayings, and the Erbprinz laughed gaily. The Prussian King rode past the coach, glaring at its occupants with his protuberant eyes, and the Landhofmeisterin adroitly launched a witticism just as his Majesty was passing, in order that he should suffer the mortification of hearing and seeing their merriment half an hour after his unmannerly slight. Her ruse succeeded admirably, and she had the pleasure of observing the King's brick-coloured face

flush to purple with anger.

The Duke and his guest remained together all the morning, His Highness showing the King each detail of the palace. In the orangery they came across two remarkably tall garden boys, and Friedrich Wilhelm immediately offered Eberhard Ludwig three hundred thalers apiece for them. Now, they happened to be her Excellency's own gardeners, and to be proficient in the art of cultivating roses, so Serenissimus prayed the King to let him find other giants for him; these, he said, were not his to offer.

'Whose then? Whose then? What the devil! Why, the houndsdirts must belong to you! Whose can they be? If they are my little cousin's I will soon make her see I will have them,' the Prussian monarch shouted.

'They belong to her Excellency the Landhofmeisterin, sire.'

'What, that woman? Ha! you took her to Mömpelgard, I hear! Ridiculous things, women—want the lash, the whip. Do you hear, old comrade?—every woman wants the lash. Look at my daughter now—absurd hussy! will not marry. I ought to lash her, but she hides behind her mother's petticoats. Ridiculous things, women.' [294]

Serenissimus endeavoured to lead the shouting monarch from the orangery, but he was not to be outdone.

'Come to Berlin, boy; fine uniforms, good beer, and tobacco. Come, you will love me like your father!' he yelled at the tallest gardener, bestowing a heavy blow on the youth's shoulders with the stout cudgel which he always carried. The end of it was that Eberhard Ludwig made him a present of the Landhofmeisterin's gardeners, and the King in high good humour retired to take an hour's nap before starting to enjoy some wild-boar sticking in the forest.

All that day the Landhofmeisterin did not see Serenissimus, only in the afternoon she received a billet from him in which he forbade her to attend the supper in the state banqueting-hall. 'The Erbprincessin will be the only lady; she, being the King's cousin, must attend, but I command you to remain away. You will understand my reasons when you consider the events of this morning.—E. L.'

The letter was short, formal, cold in tone, and the Landhofmeisterin was deeply wounded. She had known that Friedrich Wilhelm would be unfriendly to her; his rough virtue, and hatred of illicit relationships, were famous throughout Germany, and she was aware that he would view with displeasure the magnificence and the French manners of Ludwigsburg. Had he not stamped, beaten, and roared out of existence every trace of the elegance and pomp of the Berlin court as it had been under his father, Friedrich I.?—that monarch who, by the way, had granted the Grävenitz that Letter of Royal Protection twenty years ago.

Still, though Friedrich Wilhelm had refused to ratify or acknowledge this document when begged to do so by the Duke of Zollern, the Landhofmeisterin had counted him as more or less bound by it, and the idea that he could utterly ignore her had never entered her head. Moreover, she thought she would not need the protection of Prussia. She had prepared a vast fortune out of Wirtemberg, and if death claimed Eberhard Ludwig before her own demise, she intended to retire to Schaffhausen and finish her days in magnificent seclusion. Yet it was infinitely galling to be hidden away in this manner. She raged at the thought of the courtiers' sneers. Not attend the supper? She, the ruler of Ludwigsburg and Wirtemberg, to be hidden like a common mistress! And then how coldly Eberhard Ludwig wrote to her. 'Alas! all things pass,' she said, and wept bitterly. The day wore on. She tried to read, to occupy herself, but she could not fix her mind on anything; her thoughts reverted to her humiliation. At last she heard the noise of the sportsmen's return, and Friedrich Wilhelm's loud voice shouting and laughing. Would Eberhard Ludwig come to her now? But no; she waited, and no one disturbed her solitude. [295]

At length Maria brought her a tray covered with dishes of delicious viands.

'If her Excellency refuses to be served properly in the dining-room, as usual, she must at least have a mouthful to eat,' the honest soul declared, and she hovered round the Grävenitz, imploring her to taste this or that, to drink a little wine; but the Landhofmeisterin pushed away her plate, saying that the food choked her, and Maria, grumbling, carried away the untasted supper.

Once more, Wilhelmine fell to listening. She heard the noise of a crowd gathering in the courtyard. She rang her handbell, and when Maria appeared she questioned her on the reason of a crowd being admitted to the palace precincts. His Highness had commanded the gates to be thrown open, she was told; it was the Prussian King's custom to permit the populace to see him eat.

'Disgusting!' quoth the Landhofmeisterin haughtily. 'I can smell the varlets from here. Sprinkle rose-water about the room, Maria.'

The hours dragged on monotonously. The noise of the crowd in the courtyard was drowned by the loud strains of the massed bands of the regiments in Ludwigsburg, who had been commanded to play before the windows of the banqueting-hall. The Landhofmeisterin's musicians with their harps, violins, and flutes were banished during the Prussian King's visit, for he hated all music save that of trumpet and drum. At length the Landhofmeisterin could bear her solitude and suspense no longer. She slipped into the statue gallery, and through a secret door to the Duke's [296]

private stairs. The topmost flight led to a small gallery which looked into the banqueting-hall. She had often watched from here the hunting dinners which his Highness gave, and from which ladies were naturally excluded. It was many years since one of these entertainments had taken place, and the staircase had fallen into disrepair; it was dirty and dusty, and creaked under her Excellency's tread. 'Disgraceful neglect! the housekeeper-in-charge shall be fined,' murmured the tyrant as she mounted. The door leading to the gallery was ajar. The Landhofmeisterin's face darkened with anger. Had some serving-maids dared to creep up to watch the doings in the banqueting-hall? But there was no one in the gallery, and she bent down, peering through the stucco balustrade into the hall below. Her attention was arrested by a cackling snigger behind her—a horrid, mocking, wheezy titter in the shadow of the overhanging ornamentation of the banqueting-hall roof, which came low down over the little gallery. She turned quickly and saw the grotesque, ape-like figure of one of the court dwarfs. Her Excellency had introduced these hideous abortions into Ludwigsburg, having read that they were a feature of the Spanish court in its grandest days. Eberhard Ludwig, disgusted at the sight of the puny monstrosities, had refused to permit them to go about the palace, and they had been relegated, poor displeasing toys, to the servants' regions. Here they were kicked and cuffed and made cruel sport of. During the foregoing winter one dwarf had died, and the other roamed around like some miserable outcast cur, lurking in dark corners, hiding from all living things, which he accounted rightly as his tormentors. He cowered before the Landhofmeisterin, laughing his horrible, cackling snigger, which was half mockery, half terror. He expected the Landhofmeisterin to push him brutally aside, but her sorrow had made her suddenly gentle; she felt dimly that this wretched creature [297] was an outcast, and so was she. 'Poor dwarf,' she said gently, 'I had thought you were dead! So you still wander in this vale of tears?' She spoke almost mockingly, and yet there was that in her tone which gave hope to the wretched being.

'O Madame, I am so miserable! They beat me, cuff me, the serving-maids pinch me, scratch me with their bodkins! They say you are hard and cold and cruel, but oh, have mercy on me!'

'*I* hard and cold and cruel?' she replied incredulously. 'Do they say that?' She had no idea that success and prosperity had thus changed her; the world-hardened never know it themselves.

'Ah, yes, they say that; but, I pray you, have mercy on me.' The poor, distorted figure threw itself down, grovelling at the Landhofmeisterin's feet.

'Go to my apartments in the pavilion and await me, I will attend to you in an hour's time. Stay, here is my ring; show that to the sentry and he will admit you,' she said. She would send him back to his Swiss mountain valley with gold enough to last him for his lifetime. Perhaps, if she did good to this outcast, God would relent, would give her back Eberhard Ludwig's love? The dwarf went, and the Landhofmeisterin turned her attention to the scene in the banqueting-hall.

The banquet was finished, but the guests still sat round the table with wine-reddened faces. The Prussian King loved to drink deep; he said he abhorred the milksop who could not follow him to the dregs of a tankard, and that was indeed no paltry measure. The Erbprincessin sat to the King's right, his Highness himself was on his Majesty's left. The Erbprinz, white and weary, sat opposite. The holders of important court charges were grouped around according to their respective ranks. Friedrich Grävenitz, as Count of the Empire and Prime Minister of Wirtemberg, sat to the left of Serenissimus; Prelate Osiander came next, then Schütz and Sittmann, and the brothers Pfau. Reischach, the Master of the Hunt; Baron Roeder, Master of the Horse; the Oberhofmarshall, the other Geheimräthe; the generals and officers of his Highness's staff; the [298] colonels of the Silver Guard, of the Chevaliergarde; the young captain of the Cadets à Cheval. Among the Wirtemberg courtiers were seated various members of the Prussian suite: Grumbkow, the powerful favourite; General Dönhoff; and the Austrian Ambassador at Berlin, Count Seckendorff, who always followed Friedrich Wilhelm I., a spy and intriguer in friendship's guise.

It was a brilliant assemblage, but it was well to be seen that deep drinking had been indulged in. Besides the Erbprincessin, only Osiander and the Erbprinz had calm and unflushed faces. The Landhofmeisterin's eyes wandered from Friedrich Wilhelm to Eberhard Ludwig; his face was flushed, and he swayed a little in his chair. His Highness was usually a moderate drinker, and, though during his various campaigns he had drunk and revelled like the rest, the Landhofmeisterin had never seen him with that vacant, sottish look, and her soul sickened at the sight. The Erbprincessin rose and took her leave, Friedrich Wilhelm shouting rough, good-natured pleasantries to her. Then his Majesty's friend, Grumbkow, craving the Duke's permission, called the lackey in charge, who produced the King's huge pipe, and in a few minutes the Landhofmeisterin saw the stately banqueting-hall take the aspect and smell of a tabagie. Dense clouds of smoke rose up, and she saw that the Prussian King was again served with an enormous jug of beer. The banqueting-hall was transformed, no trace of elegance or courtly grace seemed to remain; it had become a pothouse, of which Eberhard Ludwig was the jovial host. The Landhofmeisterin quivered with disgust, his Highness appeared sunken to a different level. She watched and listened; the music in the courtyard had ceased, and she could hear what they said in the banqueting-hall.

'What! Sapperment! you compose fiddling tunes, young man?' Friedrich Wilhelm was roaring at the shrinking Erbprinz. 'Just like my fool of a son. He blows squeaks on a tube which he calls my beloved flute' (the King gave a rough imitation of his son's refined speech). 'No good at all, this younger generation—eh! what, old comrade? A good fight, a good glass of beer, a good pipe, a good wife—that's what a man needs; no French jiggery and music nonsense. Fool's play—eh, [299] what? what?' He spoke in German; such German as it was, too, vitiated by French words which

he could not avoid, as he knew no others, adorned with unquotable oaths, short-clipped, rough phrases—the language of the man-at-arms in the guard-room. Yet he possessed a certain breezy charm, and Eberhard Ludwig seemed to respond to it. In truth, the King, when he was not in one of his furious rages, was a boon companion, and appealed to the brutish swagger which lies dormant in every man's being.

At length the company rose from table and gathered in groups of three or four, while the King and his host retired into the embrasure of one of the windows. The Landhofmeisterin saw that Friedrich Wilhelm spoke earnestly to Serenissimus; she noted the embarrassment on the Duke's face, he seemed like a chidden schoolboy, and with dismay the Landhofmeisterin observed that he was evidently impressed by the King's words. Could this rude monarch persuade so polished and refined a being as Eberhard Ludwig? Did he endeavour to separate her lover from her? A presentiment came to her; she knew instinctively that this was what the King essayed. After nearly an hour, the two men came forth from the window's embrasure, and she saw how the King held out his hand to Eberhard Ludwig, and how his Highness gripped and held it, saying something in a low, earnest tone.

She strained her ears, yet she could not catch the words; but she saw Friedrich Wilhelm's satisfied face. He clapped his Highness between the shoulders with a heavy hand. Evidently Serenissimus met with his Majesty's entire approval. The company broke up for the night, and the Landhofmeisterin rose from her cramped, kneeling position and took her way back to her apartments. A cruel foreknowledge of disaster overshadowed her; something unusual, elusively sinister, haunted her.

As she passed his Highness's door she hesitated. Should she go in bravely and speak her fear to him? Pride forbade, and a certain sense of hopelessness. She drew herself up proudly. No, he [300] loved her; how could he change after twenty years? He could not escape her, for she was his life; all his memories were hers, his past, his present; therefore she argued, as a woman always argues, his future too must be hers.

She passed into her apartments and, opening her window, leaned far out. How silent it was in the garden! The moonlight played gently over the terraces, only the splash of the fountains broke the stillness. The air was delicious, scented with freshness, and after the noisome fumes of wine, beer, victuals, and tobacco in the banqueting-hall, she thought the night air was laden with rose fragrance. So it had been on that far-off night in the Stuttgart palace gardens after the theatricals. Time had not played havoc then with Nature. How weary she was! Suddenly a moan in the room behind her attracted her attention. She started nervously, and, as usual, the thought of the White Lady worked in her mind. They said the poor ghost moaned when death drew near to any of her descendants, and she was Eberhard Ludwig's ancestress. The Landhofmeisterin dared not turn her head for fear she should see a tall, white, shrouded figure with bloodstained hands. Again the moan.

'Who is there?' the Landhofmeisterin said tremulously.

'Pardon, Madame, you said I was to await you.' It was only the dwarf, then. Her Excellency almost laughed in her relief.

'Ah! I had forgotten you. Well, tell me your story now. I am listening,' she said. It would serve to pass the time till his Highness came, for he would come, she told herself.

The dwarf stood trembling before her, ridiculous, grotesque, infinitely pathetic. He poured forth the tale of his miserable life, of the taunts, the jeers, the kicks, the cuffs, the lack of food which he had often suffered in the midst of the lavish splendour of Ludwigsburg. Incidentally he let her see how the very servants of the palace spoke of her, and how they mocked her authority when they dared.

His was a pitiful life-history, and the Landhofmeisterin was moved to compassion; her own heart was sore, and already the crust of world-hardness had begun to melt under the tears which were [301] welling up ready to be shed.

She told the dwarf that he was free to return to that humble cottage in the Swiss valley which he called home. There and then she wrote out a passport for him and an order for a seat in the Duke's diligence as far as the frontier; she gave him a purse of gold, and, more precious still, an official command to all to treat the deformed traveller with consideration; also, as postscriptum, an intimation that if the dwarf did not reach his home safe and unrobbed, she would cause the whole Secret Service to track the offender, who would suffer the utmost penalty of the law. With this document the dwarf could have travelled from one end of Wirtemberg to the other in safety; nay, more, he was sure of even servile acceptance from high and low, for never was monarch so feared in his domains as the Güstrow adventuress in the Dukedom of Wirtemberg.

'God reward you for this great good,' the dwarf said as he turned to leave her presence, and she answered sadly:

'It is too late; God's hand is heavy upon me.' But she did not believe it.

The hours passed, and still the Landhofmeisterin waited for Eberhard Ludwig. She watched the grey dawn slip into the sky, then the glow of the awaking sun came, and she knew that she waited in vain.

CHAPTER XX

[302]

SATIETY

'A Cloud of sorrow hanging as if Gloom
Had passed out of men's minds into the air.'

SHELLEY.

FRIEDRICH WILHELM and his Highness of Wirtemberg started early on the morning after the state banquet. A number of wild boars had been tracked in the Kernen forest and good sport was anticipated. The Landhofmeisterin from her couch heard the stir of the sportsmen's departure. In happier days she had waved farewell to her lover from her window, now she turned her face to the wall and moaned in anguish. But the day's routine should be carried out as usual, that she vowed; no one should pity her, no one notice that she feared her sun had set. She dressed according to her wont in a magnificent gown, sat patiently for an hour in her powdering closet while the obsequious Frenchman dressed her hair elaborately and powdered the curls afresh.

She reflected grimly on the blessings of powder to age-silvering locks; none would see that her black hair was streaked with white.

Her step had never been prouder than when she walked through her empty antehall which, but a few days earlier, had been filled with a bowing crowd of courtiers. She was almost surprised to find Baron Schütz awaiting her as usual in the 'Landhofmeisterin's business-room,' that small room on the ground floor of the west pavilion whence for twenty years had issued the ruling orders of Wirtemberg. She worked as she had done each morning for many years. Sitting at the large middle table she transacted the business of the Dukedom. Beside her was a pile of unwritten papers signed at the bottom of each page by Eberhard Ludwig. It was only needful to write any decree above his Highness's signature, to affix his seal beneath, and to add her own [303] official name 'W. von Grävenitz-Würben, pro Landhofmeister Wirtembergs,' to make the writing an unassailable, all-powerful, official document. Gradually things had come to this pass. The Duke preferred hunting, shooting, riding, to affairs of State, and in the course of years the Grävenitz had succeeded in grasping complete, autocratic power. There was no one to hinder her; her brother was Prime Minister in name, but he was forced to bring each important matter to her, for she represented his Highness.

The Geheimräthe were one and all her creatures; the Duke refused to meddle, and if he expressed a wish, it was so promptly and ostentatiously carried out that he never realised how entirely he had ceded the reins of government to his mistress. To the Landhofmeisterin's working-room came the officers of the Secret Service, bringing their reports on the doings of all Wirtembergers of high or low estate, each report of value being carefully noted and locked away in the wire-protected shelves which furnished the walls.

The Landhofmeisterin laboured, according to habit, on the morning after the banquet, and if she detected a freer tone in the heretofore obsequious Schütz's voice, a shade of insolence in his manner, she gave no sign thereof. If anything, she was more haughty, more dictatorial than ever.

'I am retiring to La Favorite for a few days' rest, Baron Schütz,' she said, when the affairs of the day were accomplished; 'you will bring me any business which it is necessary for me to consider. I shall have these with me'—she tapped the signed pages—'the seal I shall also have with me. As I am fatigued, I shall not work longer this morning. Au revoir, Baron.' He was dismissed.

'Your Excellency would do well to leave me the signatures. I may have need of them,' he said hurriedly, stretching out his hand towards the pile of signed warrant papers.

'Since when can Baron Schütz dispose of his Highness's signature? I have already told you that if urgent business arises, in spite of my fatigue, I shall be prepared to attend to it at La Favorite. Au revoir, Baron.'

She spoke resolutely, yet in a perfectly unconcerned voice, and Schütz, fearing lest his [304] observations had failed him, and the 'great one' was after all not nearing her downfall, bowed himself out with his accustomed obsequiousness. He would have changed his mind could he have seen the cloud of misery and anxiety which settled on her face directly she was alone. She arranged various papers, extracting several from the neatly docketed packets. These she regarded as instruments in her hands; this document was a sword of Damocles which she could suspend over the head of that enemy; this other a pistol which, an she willed it, she could level at the credit and honour of another; here a short report spelling ruin to a noble family's pride; there a note to convict an honoured courtier of fraud or of traitorous intrigue. If she was indeed to fall, she would not alone be flung from her eminence; those who had hated her should also be dragged down with her. She smiled bitterly. After all, even though she wreaked vengeance as she fell, what would it avail her? This triumph of her spite would be a satisfaction, but——She sighed, and would have replaced the damning papers in their hiding-place. No! she would take them with her. If the crushing misfortune came, at least she would have the consolation of retaining some power over others.

Sadly she mounted the stairs to her own apartments, and calling the waiting-maid, she bade Maria gather together all the jewels and gold; a few of her best-loved books; some of her most

gorgeous clothes. Grumbling, Maria packed them in a huge nail-studded chest.

The Landhofmeisterin stood watching till the last chosen object was safely packed away, then she bade Maria summon lackeys from La Favorite. They came quickly, and her Excellency ordered them to carry the chest to her little Château Joyeux. Her voice was perfectly steady as she gave these orders, her face stern and calm. Her whole action was unhurried, deliberate; she might have been making arrangements for a gay hunting expedition. There was no trace of anxiety in her manner.

Maria hovered about, after the lackeys had departed with the chest. Did her Excellency wish for this or that? Should she accompany her Ladyship's Grace to La Favorite? Calmly the [305] Landhofmeisterin bade her precede her, she would follow in a few moments. She heard Maria locking the wardrobes in the chamber below, listened to her giving orders for the redding up of the apartments, exactly as she had heard the maid finish her preparations for departure a hundred times before starting for Urach or Freudenthal.

'Beloved, the coaches await us; shall we begin our journey?' The Landhofmeisterin started. Yes; that was how Eberhard Ludwig had summoned her in the old, happy days. Her nerves had tricked her, it was only an echo of long ago. Could everything, indeed, be ended? Was she leaving Ludwigsburg for ever? Ah, no, no! how absurd! Of course Serenissimus would recall her directly this blustering King had gone back to his drill at Berlin! And yet——

She moved slowly round her rooms. Fifteen years since Frisoni had conducted her to her pavilion! She recalled how she and Eberhard Ludwig had laughed at the little Italian's ruse, when he led them up and down corridors and stairs in order to reach her apartments from his Highness's rooms. The memory of their mirth was torture to her. Once more she took the key from her bosom and, passing through the statue gallery, she gained the hiding-place behind the arras. She listened, but there was no sound; she pressed the secret spring of the tapestry door and entered the writing-closet. Slowly she walked round the room; she had not come to rob the bureau this time, nor to upbraid her lover, nor to tempt him once again. No; she had come to bid farewell, to look her last upon the familiar scene. One of the Duke's gauntleted hunting-gloves lay on the floor; she stooped and lifted it and put it to her lips. Then the full sense of her loneliness came to her, and she sobbed aloud. She hurried away, and her last vision of that well-known room was blurred by her tears.

One parting look round her own apartments, and she passed out on to the roofed terrace which led from the Corps de Logis to the West Pavilion. Here her own face met her on sculptured vaulting and ornamented wall. Her face, young, smiling, voluptuous, surrounded by the emblems of music held by Cupids. Love, music, and herself. What a mockery it seemed to her, this open [306] homage, this enduring monument of a dead passion!

With steady tread she paced down the flight of stone steps to the second terrace. Again a statue with her features met her eye. Frisoni had designed the pedestal. She remembered how she had laughed at the Italian for drawing a figure of Time with huge wings and holding giant sickle-blades in his oversized hands. She had called it awkward and ill-conceived, and the Italian had told her that Time was an awkward giant; that he crushed strength and glory sometimes, and left weakness and shame to live. She had hardly noted the answer then, but it came back to her now. She looked at the sickle-blades and shuddered, knowing that Time had mown her down at last.

All day the Landhofmeisterin busied herself with her books, with playing upon the spinet, and singing her favourite songs. She was a prey to fearful unrest. Night fell, the hunters had returned, and yet his Highness sent no word to her he had called 'Life of my Life.' Perchance he was much occupied. The Prussian King was an exacting guest, she told herself; framing excuses, reasons, all the pitiful resources of a woman's heart, to explain away her beloved's coldness. The fact that the courtiers held aloof from her caused her no pain, only bitter anger, yet even for these she elaborated reasons of absence. How often had she wearied of these people's importunities, how often longed to be left in peace, and yet now she would have given vast sums could she have seen her antechamber full again. She knew that Friedrich Wilhelm's visit would terminate on the morning following the wild-boar sticking in the Kernen forest. Would he go, this rough, virtue-loving despot? She remembered how he had tarried four whole weeks at Dresden when he had paid a visit to Augustus the Strong some years before. And this in spite of his disapproval of the reigning favourite, the Countess Orzelska, and the many lesser stars of that licentious court. Good Heavens! would he stay four weeks at Ludwigsburg? She smiled; even in her despair there was something humorous in her being which no sadness could dull, and she found her own dismay at the honoured guest's possible procrastination a trifle comic. [307]

Eberhard Ludwig must come back to her—he must; she repeated it over and over again. The night brought her no rest; always the same hammering thought, the torturing, nagging possibilities, the tangle of recollections. Sometimes she slipped away for a few moments into a restless sleep, but her dreams were as terrible as her waking thoughts. She was journeying in her coach to Stetten, the horses galloped fast—ever faster!—Eberhard Ludwig was at her side, then, with a gesture of anger, he flung himself out of the carriage. She was alone, and the horses were rushing onwards. A giant figure, of pitiless face, stood in their way—a being with huge, gnarled hands which held enormous sickle-blades. The horses were mown down, now the blades were descending over her. 'Great God! Mercy! he is cutting out my heart!' she awoke screaming.

Then the strain of agonised thought began once more to whirl in her mind. Eberhard Ludwig

must come back—he must. She fell asleep, and again the Dream Demon took hold of her. Now she was in Duke Christopher's Grotto in Stuttgart. The mob was nearing her, and her feet always slipped back on the slimy steps—she would never gain the first gallery. A shadowy figure with bleeding hands barred her way—the White Lady—the murderess. 'Back to the world to take your punishment!' the ghost whispered, and oh, horror! she pushed her back with those terrible, bleeding hands—*back*, down the slippery, slimy steps towards the crowd.

Eberhard Ludwig led the mob, and the Prussian King was with him. 'Beloved of my life, heart of my soul!' the Duke said, and clasped her to him; but his arms had become sickle-blades and they cut her to the heart, while Friedrich Wilhelm laughed and waved a cudgel. It hit her on the brow, blow after blow. 'Wanton, wanton, witch and wanton!' the King bawled at each stroke. She was dreaming; she knew it, she must awake; but the Dream Demon had not done with her. Now she was with Würben, now with Madame de Ruth, now at Güstrow, now at Urach in the Golden Hall, but always the glistening sickle-blades followed her. Würben cut at her with them; Madame de Ruth, Monsieur Gabriel, every one had got these searing blades, and always Eberhard Ludwig [308] stood watching, watching, and he did not save her!

In the grey dawn she awoke. It was all a dream, then. What was wrong, though? There was something—ah, yes! Eberhard Ludwig had ceased to love her. Absurd! It was a phantasy of her weary brain! She was ill, feverish.—Eberhard was occupied with an exacting guest, that was all. He would come back to her—he must. At last she slept dreamlessly. Fatigue conquered agony, and she slept.

The Landhofmeisterin awoke to a smiling world. Such a glory of Spring, of blossom and lilac. Maria threw open the windows, and the sound of the gardeners raking the paths of La Favorite gardens came in with the lilac scent. It was a good world, a very young world! Alas! the Grävenitz felt old and broken, ill from her night of agony. Maria told her that the Prussian King had left Ludwigsburg. Very early the cavalcade had started, and Serenissimus had ridden away with his guest.

'At what hour does his Highness return?' her Excellency queried.

'Not for several days; they say his Highness stays at Heilbronn to-night, and rides to the frontier with the King to-morrow, then goes boar-sticking in the Maulbronn forest, and will not return for four or five days,' the maid answered. The Landhofmeisterin sighed; in happier days the Duke had bidden her adieu tenderly, if he were forced to leave her for an hour, and now—— But it was absurd; of course he could not always worship her like a young lover, but he would never desert her.

'Who is in the antehall this morning, Maria?' she asked.

'No one, your Excellency.'

So the parasites were dropping away from the threatened tree.

All that day and the next, no one disturbed the solitude of La Favorite, even Baron Schütz held aloof. On the third morning the Landhofmeisterin sent for him, but the answer came back that the Finance Minister had left Ludwigsburg for a few days' rest. The Landhofmeisterin reflected grimly that Baron Schütz had never needed repose before.

Eight days passed ere Eberhard Ludwig returned. The Landhofmeisterin's fears had grown dim, [309] habit had resumed sway. She worked at the affairs of State each morning, and save that the business was transacted at La Favorite instead of at the palace, and that Baron Schütz was replaced by an underling clerk, everything seemed to have lost that touch of the unusual which is part of the menace of coming disaster. True, the courtiers were scarcely assiduous in the visiting of the Landhofmeisterin, but they dared not absent themselves entirely, for they were uncertain as to her fate, and they feared both her revenge and her reputed witchcraft. So they repaired perfunctorily to La Favorite, and though her Excellency refused to receive visitors, still she was informed of the courtiers' visits. Thus the old life seemed to be unaltered, and the Landhofmeisterin forgot her anxiety in a measure, yet a deep melancholy remained over her.

At length Maria reported that Serenissimus had returned, and once more a feverish unrest seized the Grävenitz. Would he come to her? Would he summon her? The night drew near, and no word came from the palace. The Landhofmeisterin's fears reawoke. She paced restlessly up and down the Favorite terrace whence she could see his Highness's windows. The lights were lit. She watched; gradually the palace grew dark. It was as though the light of her youth was extinguished when his Highness's windows grew black. She waited; perchance he would come yet? A terrible weariness fell on her. The night was very beautiful, moonlit and enchanted; the scent of the lilac smote heavy on the air—the lilac and the red thorn blossom—— How beautiful it was, how still, how divinely young it all seemed; and she was old, old and weary, and forsaken and unutterably sad!

'Your Excellency must rest; come, dear Madame!' It was Maria, the faithful friend, the only one who had not profited by her mistress's vast power; she alone who had never sought gain.

'Maria, I am too weary to sleep, and I dream so cruelly,' the Grävenitz said sadly.

'Come and rest, and I will sit beside you all night,' the good soul replied; and indeed, it seemed as

though her honesty had driven away the Dream Demon, for the great Landhofmeisterin slept like a tired child watched over by this faithful peasant woman. [310]

The next day the Grävenitz was utterly deserted. No word came from the palace, no Secret Service officers came to report to her, no courtiers thronged the antehall. It was Sunday, and the bells of the palace chapel rang. Maria had heard that Serenissimus had intimated his intention of attending church twice that Sunday. The Landhofmeisterin's thoughts followed him wistfully. Would he sit in his accustomed chair in the gilded pew? Would his eyes wander to the sculptured figures in the chapel, the figures which bore her features? Would he remember how often she had sung to that organ? Alas! Change is Death, and more cruel than Death.

The day passed, and still came no sign from Serenissimus. Then the Landhofmeisterin sent Maria to the town to gather news, and the maid returned and told her that it was rumoured his Highness would start on the following morning to attend the grand military review at Berlin. She had met one of the palace grooms, and he had said that the horses were to be in readiness soon after dawn. Good God! was Eberhard Ludwig taking this way in order to rid himself of her? It was entirely contrary to etiquette to hurry on a visiting monarch's heels in this manner.

Her pride was swallowed up in gnawing anxiety. She wrote to Eberhard Ludwig.

'Love has its rights, you cannot leave me without a word. What have I done? how have I offended you? you, for whom I would give my life! I ask nothing. If you have ceased to love me, then banish me, imprison me, all you will, but come to me once—once only. O beloved! remember the past; come to me and tell me the truth. Tell me to go, and you need never see my face again,' she wrote.

No letter came in answer; only a verbal message, delivered by a sullen court lackey, that his Highness would visit her Excellency ere he rode to Berlin. Her Excellency was to expect him in the early morning, as he commenced his journey betimes, owing to the long distance.

Another night of fierce unrest. Early she rose and made an elaborate toilet. She dressed in yellow, the colour he loved; her hair was freshly powdered, her face carefully painted. [311]

The dew glistened on the close-cropped grass of the gardens, the lilacs were more radiant than ever, the birds in the chestnut-trees sang their spring melody—the chant of nest-building, the mating song.

Eberhard Ludwig rode up the avenue of La Favorite, and dismounted before the terrace steps. His attendant took his horse, and walked the beautiful animal up and down in the shade of the chestnut-trees.

The Landhofmeisterin received Serenissimus in her yellow-hung sitting-room. He was cold and distant, and she was formal and restrained.

'I hope your Highness is in good health?' and 'your Excellency appears to be mighty well!' Then the ice broke, and she held out her arms to him.

'My beloved! my beloved! Ah! to see you again——' But he drew back.

'Madame, life is hard. We must part, you and I.'

'Oh no, no, not that! Tell me what has changed you? I have been true always,' and she clung to him.

'I must alter everything—sinon je suis perdu!' Always that phrase of his, he had called himself so often 'perdu!'

'Alter everything? Yes, yes; all you will. See, I am ready to change, to obey in all things, dismiss any person who displeases you; make some one else Landhofmeisterin, only keep me, do not banish me; you are my life, only you—you——'

'I must leave you; you have brought a curse upon the land——'

'I have brought a curse to you? If you leave me there will be a curse—the eternal condemnation, brought by a broken heart. Eberhard, my beloved! See—I implore you!'

'I must go—I must leave you—sinon je suis perdu—sinon je suis perdu,'—and so they wrangled, and exclaimed, and implored for an hour.

'Your last word then is: Go, woman who has loved me for twenty years!' she said bitterly at last. 'Yes? Well, then, hear me: I will not go!—never, do you hear? We belong together, you and I. All this is some madness of yours, which will pass. Come back to me to-morrow and tell me so, then all will be well. It is well, do you hear? You are maddened, distraught——' [312]

'This is my last word: Retire to one of your castles. I leave you your properties and your title, but Ludwigsburg must see you no more.'

She laughed in defiance. 'I will not go till you drive me forth at the point of the bayonet. Your friend, the King of Prussia, can teach you bayonet drill, and you can practise it on my heart.'

Then he rode away from La Favorite, his horse's hoofs outraging the peaceful dew.

Directly Serenissimus had ridden away, as if in defiance of impending fate, the Landhofmeisterin sent to summon the officers of the Secret Service. She would work, give commands, according to her wont. The officers tarried, and her Excellency waited in her yellow-hung salon. Would they dare, the creeping spies—dare to disobey her? she wondered. She passed out on to the terrace and glanced down the chestnut avenue. With a feeling of relief she recognised one of the Secret Service officers. He was hurrying to La Favorite as fast as, in other days, they and all the world had hastened to do her bidding.

She re-entered her sitting-room and, seating herself at her bureau, began to draft a ducal manifesto. The door opened, and, to her surprise, not the Secret Service officer whom she had thought to recognise, but a very inferior official, a mere spy, entered. He walked in without removing his hat, and came close up to the Grävenitz.

'What will you give me for my information?' he said roughly.

'What do you mean? You have come to report, I suppose; though why my chief officer, Jacoble, sends you, I do not know,' she returned haughtily. He leaned his hand on the bureau beside her.

'I have information which may save your life, but you must pay me for it.' She rang her handbell.

'My lackeys will show you how I pay the insolent,' she said. [313]

'Your lackeys! There will not be one left in your house in an hour's time,' he sneered.

Her face had grown ashen grey; even through her paint the death-like colour showed.

'What are you saying?' she cried hoarsely. 'Here, take my purse, all you will—but tell me quickly—quick, man, tell me!'

At the sight of the heavy golden purse the spy's face and manner changed. 'Serenissimus fell fainting from his horse in the village of Marbach. They cannot rouse him; the doctors say he will never awaken. They carry him to Ludwigsburg to die. No one has remembered you yet, but when they do——!' he flung out his arm in a crushing gesture.

'When they do, they will imprison me till orders come from the new Duke, you mean? Do you think I care? My place is beside Serenissimus, and I go to the palace immediately. Go, take the gulden and go.'

She swept from the room, and the spy saw her descending the steps from the terrace to the garden. Her calm dignity had disconcerted him, and, after all, he feared the Grävenitzin.

He turned to the bureau; at least, he would look through her papers. But even in her distress the Landhofmeisterin had remembered to shut and lock her bureau; and though the spy tried to wrench it open, her Excellency's secrets were guarded by intricate springs, and the man's efforts were unavailing.

The Landhofmeisterin walked swiftly down the shady avenue, and into the palace gardens. She had not passed that way since her departure from Ludwigsburg, ten days earlier. Her sharp eyes took in various neglected details. 'If he dies, and I go, the whole place will fall to ruin,' she murmured.

Great commotion reigned in the castle. She could see that even the sentries were discussing the Duke's health with a crowd of Ludwigsburg burghers. They started when they saw the Landhofmeisterin pass through the courtyard. Involuntarily they fell back into their correct attitudes, and left the crowd's questions unanswered. The Grävenitz hurried to the Corps de [314] Logis, but the doors were closed, as had been those on the north terrace facing La Favorite.

'The doors are locked from inside, Excellency,' said the soldier on guard. 'Count Grävenitz commanded it.'

'So, is my brother within?' she asked.

'Yes, Madame; and Baron Schütz, Baron Roeder, and the court physicians.'

They had locked her out, then. Ah! but she had her key of the west pavilion, and the key of the doors leading to his Highness's writing-room. She went to her former dwelling-place; there stood no sentry now before her Excellency's pavilion. The windows were closed and shuttered, and when she entered a chill air met her. She shivered; the gay, bright pavilion was like a tomb, the grave of happy hours, she thought. Her upstair rooms were dark and desolate. Once more she realised that she, her power, her glory, were dead things, and she bowed before the inexorable law, Change.

She passed through the statue gallery and into the arras passage. A deathlike silence reigned in his Highness's apartments. O God! would she find a still, white figure—a rigid, sheet-covered shape? She pushed open the tapestry door; the writing-closet was empty, but beyond, in the sleeping-room, she heard whispering voices.

The Duke lay on his bed fully dressed in his riding-clothes. His left arm was held by the second physician, while the chief surgeon bent over it, lancet in hand. A third doctor kneeled, holding a bowl under his Highness's arm, from which large drops of blood welled slowly, and fell with a sickening soft thud into the china bowl.

Friedrich Grävenitz, Schütz, and Roeder stood near the window, talking together in low tones. They started forward when the Landhofmeisterin appeared on the threshold, and Grävenitz approached her with outstretched hand.

'Wilhelmine, you must not come here now,' he said in an ungentle voice.

'It is my place! let me pass,' she returned; and, waving her brother away, she moved swiftly round to the other side of the bed. She knelt down close to the Duke, and taking his right hand [315] she raised it gently to her lips. The sufferer moved slightly for the first time since he had fallen fainting from his horse.

'Stem the blood, he is returning to consciousness,' whispered the chief surgeon; and the first physician twisted a linen band above the open vein, while the second doctor stanched the blood with a cloth, and then bound up the wound.

'His Highness must have entire quiet, Madame,' the court doctor said, bowing respectfully to the Landhofmeisterin. 'It were well if all retired and left him to my care alone, if you will permit me.'

'As Prime Minister, I consider it my duty to remain——' began Friedrich Grävenitz in a louder tone.

'As chief physician, I consider it my duty to order you to retire! Madame, will you assist me in this matter?' he said quietly to the Grävenitz.

'I will assist you, Herr Medicinalrath, by retiring myself. I am sure the gentlemen will do likewise. Count Grävenitz, I hold the first court charge, and I command you to depart.' It was true; at Ludwigsburg the Landhofmeisterin was entitled to command even the ministers, by reason of her high official capacity. She rose from her knees and looked yearningly at the lover of her youth.

'Will Serenissimus recover?' she whispered.

'Without a doubt now, your Excellency,' returned the physician.

She was passing out when her eye caught sight of the red-stained cloth with which they had stanched the blood from Eberhard Ludwig's arm. Tenderly she lifted it; it seemed to her that it was heavy with her beloved's lifeblood—a precious relic. She carried it away through the quiet, sunlit gardens. It was partly a despairing woman's whim, an absurdity, and partly she was prompted by her magic practices to take the cloth. There was an infallible life elixir and a powerful love potion, one of whose ingredients was the blood of the loved one. She would brew this mixture, Eberhard Ludwig should drink it, then the old happiness would return. He would be strong and well again, and with health would come love and happiness.

The Grävenitz's witch practices had long been an eyesore to his Highness. In the first place, he [316] feared magic exceedingly, and knowing the Landhofmeisterin's extraordinary magnetic power, he believed entirely in her witchcraft. Friedrich Wilhelm had thoroughly alarmed his Highness; doubtless a curse rested on him for his sin. Surely, thus to harbour an avowed witch would inevitably draw down the wrath of God, and 'we princes must make personal sacrifices for State reasons.' Then too Eberhard Ludwig, having ceased to love the Grävenitz, was in a propitious mood for returning to duty.

When the Duke regained consciousness he found himself with the kindly court physician, who told him of the Landhofmeisterin's visit, and of how it had been her touch on his hand which had first roused him from his swoon. The good man prated amiably to his Highness, thinking to please him, but the Duke's face grew dark. The physician had seen her Excellency's care of his Highness during his illness in the preceding autumn, and had been deeply impressed by her charm which she had chosen to exercise upon him.

At this moment the Duke's valets entered to remove the blood-filled bowl and the cloth used to stanch the blood, these having been left by the physician's orders, as it was imperative for Serenissimus to be undisturbed till he regained entire consciousness. The lackeys searched for the cloth, and not finding it, inquired if the physician had removed it. Baron Roeder, who was waiting in his Highness's writing-closet, heard the question through the open door. He tiptoed to the threshold and informed the physician that her Excellency the Landhofmeisterin had carried away the cloth. His Highness heard, and, starting up, commanded Roeder to bring it back forthwith.

'But, your Highness, her Excellency has carried it to La Favorite,' said the astonished courtier.

'You are to fetch it and bring it here! I tell you to go. If her Excellency will not give it, take it by force—by force, do you hear? Here is my signet-ring, show her that. Take a company of guards [317] with you—but bring me back that cloth!'

The Duke was beside himself; he was weak from loss of blood, and he had worked himself into a frenzy of fear. Suddenly the woman he had loved for twenty years had become, to his thinking, a dangerous, threatening witch; she who had lain on his breast, his mistress, the woman who had tended him in illness, the hallowed being he had well-nigh worshipped—offering up his country, his wife, his son, all things at her shrine—now appeared before him as the incarnation of evil to be compelled by a company of guards.

In vain the physician essayed to calm his Highness; he was as one distraught, raving frantically of the missing cloth, of spells and incantations.

Roeder, arriving at La Favorite, stationed his guards carefully. As a fact, the gentleman was terribly alarmed. It was no pleasantry to affront the wrath of the Grävenitz. Was she not a tyrant? and tyrants had strange ways of hanging on to power after actual favour was gone past. And was she not a witch? it was not reassuring to incur a witch's curse. Nay, but she was a fallen favourite, the vile amputated canker of a terrible epoch, harmless now the blister of her evil glory was pricked, and yet——

Politely he requested the Landhofmeisterin to deliver up the missing cloth, but she denied possessing it; he insisted, threatened to call the guard, and the whole house should be searched; he had his Highness's warrant. He showed her the Duke's signet-ring. She raged at him, dared him to oppose her, menaced him. Then, changing her tone, she cajoled him: if she indeed had the cloth, it would be easy for him to retract his statement concerning having seen her purloin it. Then she would be a friend to him; did he forget her power? He questioned her on the uses she would make of a blood-stained linen rag. She told him she had her purposes, and he remembered her witch practices, the stories of the ghastly ingredients of her magic potions. He alluded to witchcraft, and she defied him again, then he called the guard; but when the soldiers' tread echoed in the corridor, she drew the cloth from a hidden panel in her bureau and flung it at him, [318] with bitter words cursing him. And he departed trembling, the fear of the Grävenitz upon him.

Of course this was repeated in high colours to Serenissimus, and his superstitious terror deepened. Then the valets blabbed as to how Maria had often begged for locks of his Highness's hair, for parings of his nails. More absurdities for the magic love potions, very unappetising too. In a violence of revolt against his once beloved, Eberhard Ludwig signed an edict banishing the Landhofmeisterin from Ludwigsburg and from Stuttgart. She could remain in Wirtemberg, residing at any of her various castles; she should retain her monies, and effects, and her rank; but all power, all part in the country's government, was taken from her, and he would see her face no more.

In a mighty virtuous frame of mind Serenissimus rode away to Berlin, leaving this document to be enforced in his absence.

Meanwhile the Grävenitz waited in a fever of anxiety at La Favorite. On the day following his Highness's departure, the document was presented to her by Schütz and several officers of the law. She tore it across and across, and laughed in their faces. And the solemn officials retired to communicate with their Duke at Berlin concerning the further treatment of this extraordinary woman. Wirtemberg was much excited, for the news of her condemnation and of her defiance spread through the country. For days she was utterly alone with Maria and her personal domestics.

The Sittmann tribe found it necessary for its health to retire to Teinach, a watering-place in the Black Forest; and Friedrich Grävenitz remained secluded at Welzheim, the manor his sister lent him, and which he chose to regard as his own property. Ludwigsburg was like a city of the dead; the Erbprincessin seldom left her apartments now; day after day she sat brooding in deep melancholy. The Erbprinz sometimes rode out from the palace, but he avoided the direction of La Favorite. The Landhofmeisterin, deprived of the company of the man she had loved during so many years, deprived of her accustomed occupation of governing a country, used to the homage [319] of courtiers and the blandishments of parasites, sank into profound dejection.

After some two weeks the Landhofmeisterin heard the thud of a cantering horse's hoofs nearing La Favorite. A wild hope sprang up in her heart: it was Eberhard Ludwig, of course; he had repented of his harshness, and was coming to lead her back in loving triumph to Ludwigsburg.

The lackey announced that his Highness the Erbprinz awaited her Excellency in the ballroom. Ah! not Serenissimus then; but he had sent his son to tell her the good news.

'Quick, Maria, a dash of rouge, a little powder. Is my hair becomingly dressed? Give me my fan—yes! a rose at my bosom. How do I look?' And the Grävenitz sallied down to meet her beloved's son.

This was indeed a triumph. The Erbprinz had never visited her at Favorite or Freudenthal. Everything was coming right, of course—she had known it would!

'Good morning, Prince Friedrich, it is a great joy to me to see you. Are you well? you look in good health.' It was a very smiling, beautiful woman who spoke. Magnificent—a trifle over-mature perchance; but a full-blown rose is a fine thing, though some prefer the rosebud.

'I thank your Excellency; I am well, but I come on an unpleasant mission—I regret——'

'Serenissimus is not ill, Monseigneur?' she cried.

'No, Madame; my father is in the enjoyment of health, but—but—O Madame! believe me, I am loth to be the bearer of such evil tidings to you, for you have always been my friend.'

'Prince Friedrich, if I have been your friend, spare me now; tell me without hesitation what your mission is. Alas! I am indeed a stricken woman.'

In truth, her face was tragic. All the more terrible was this menace to one who had dared to build such a structure of hopefulness upon so slender a basis.

'Madame, my father bids me give you this letter. If you do not obey immediately, I am to enforce

these commands. I pray you spare me that, dear, dear Madame!' He took her hand in his and kissed it; he was a very tender-hearted, an easily subjugated little grand seigneur. [320]

'Madame la Comtesse de Würben, Comtesse de Grävenitz, Landhofmeisterin de Wirtemberg.—In view of a great change impending in my dukedom, I command you to depart instantly from my court of Ludwigsburg. You are at liberty to reside at any of the castles you have obtained from me, but I forbid you to venture into my presence or to importune the members either of my government or of my court. You have refused obedience to my commands, delivered by my Finance Minister, Baron Schütz, and by various high law officials. I now make known to you that such future defiance will be punished as traitorous to me. Here is my warrant and signed decree given at Berlin this 29th of May 1730, signed Eberhard Ludwig, Dux Wirtembergis.'

The Landhofmeisterin read this letter once, then mechanically she read it again. It was written by his Highness; no secretary had been intrusted with this precious document. It seemed to her an added cruelty that the well-known handwriting should form these stern words—the graceful, elegant writing which she had seen blazoning her lover's passionate, poetic homage to her in words of love and promises of fidelity. The Erbprinz stood silent with bowed head. What would she say, what would she do, this forceful woman? At length, he raised his head and looked at her. She was still poring over the Duke's letter as though its contents puzzled her. The silence grew intolerable.

'Madame, believe me, I am truly grieved,' he began.

'Grieved? grieved? Ah! who would not be? This is an outrage, a madness. What! can you believe that I can be banished? I? Why, this whole world is of my making, this Ludwigsburg. Go back and send a messenger to Berlin to say that I will not go.' She spoke quietly, almost indifferently.

'Alas! Madame, if you have not left before sunset, I am bound to have you removed by force,' he answered.

'You? My poor boy! You?—you remove me?' She began to laugh.

'It may be ridiculous, Madame,' he said humbly, 'but such are my father's orders.' She laughed again. 'Come, Madame, give me your answer. Believe me, I would spare you pain but if you will not go, I am commanded to have you arrested and conveyed to Hohenasperg.' Then the horror of it came to the Landhofmeisterin. [321]

'I to Hohenasperg? O God! God! that it should come to this! Ah! the cruelty! But still I will fight to the last—I will never go.' Her voice had risen to shrillness, her face was contorted by anger; she looked incarnate rage, a Megæra. Suddenly her features resumed their usual expression—nay, more, it was the face of the grande charmeuse.

'Prince Friedrich, help me; this is only a passing mood of your father's! Let me stay here till he returns from Berlin. Use your power for my good; you are heir to all this splendour; you will reap the harvest of beauty I have sown at Ludwigsburg. Help me, and you will never regret it.' She had come close to him, smiling into his eyes. The frail, sensitive youth flushed scarlet.

'Prince, you are the image of your father as I knew him twenty years ago. You bring my youth back to me.' She laid her hand upon his shoulder and drew him towards her. She was very beautiful for all her forty-five years, her presence was intoxication.

'Friedrich, Friedrich, you could revenge so much—so much neglect, if you were my friend.' Her lips were very near to his, her breath was on his cheek. Like most super-sensitive beings, he was vividly passionate; and she knew it, and this was her last card: to make him love her, aid her to stay at Favorite, then, when Eberhard Ludwig returned, surely jealousy would recall love. It was a dangerous game enough, but it was her last resource.

'Little Friedrich, who makes me feel young again,' she murmured. Now her lips are on his—and the room swings round him—while the scent of the fading lilacs in the garden is wafted in with delicious, heavy, unwholesome sweetness. And she herself, caught by an eddy of her feigned passion, is swept into a wave of sensual recollection. She is in the Rothenwald again on a spring morning—overhead a bird sings a rhapsody—and she—— [322]

With a cry the Prince sprang away from her.

'Madame! O Madame! you tempt me from my duty; you must go from here. Indeed, I cannot help you, but I will not let the guards disturb you, till to-morrow. I pray you, Madame, go this day.'

'Never; you do not know me! I will never go. Use force if you will—but I stay at Ludwigsburg.'

The Erbprinz turned away sorrowfully.

'Then I cannot help you.' He took her hand and raised it to his lips. 'Farewell, Madame,' he whispered. Did his lips linger on her hand a little longer than custom dictated? She thought so, and smiled to herself as Prince Friedrich left her.

Hardly had the Erbprinz departed when she heard the sound of approaching wheels in the avenue. 'I am receiving many visitors to-day,' she thought bitterly. To her surprise Monseigneur de Zollern was announced. He greeted the Landhofmeisterin warmly, though gravely, and immediately commenced questioning her on her position. She told him the details of the foregoing weeks. Zollern listened attentively, with his hands crossed as usual over the porcelain

handle of his stick. He had grown terribly old in spite of his straight and dapper figure, and his face was like ancient parchment; only the bright, restless eyes seemed eagerly alive.

He told the Landhofmeisterin that the news of her misfortune had reached him, and that he had come to counsel her immediate retreat. He argued with her gently, but she was obdurate; go she would not. Then the old man begged her to depart; he prayed her, by Madame de Ruth's memory, to be reasonable.

'Consider, Madame,' he said, 'I am a very old man—yes, yes, old and broken—and I have travelled far to save you from your own obstinacy, for you are dear to me; you are my one remaining link with the past, with my past youth. You were Madame de Ruth's friend, and I cherish you as that. Yes; she was the love of my life—I may say it now, for it is ancient history—and she loved you. Would she not have counselled prudence? Fly now, that you may return later.'

At this moment a lackey brought a folded paper to the Grävenitz.

'Unknown to me, General Pruckdorff had received orders from my father to expel you by force from Favorite and Ludwigsburg if you have not left by six of the clock this evening. I pray you, Madame, fly! I shall never forget you.—Friedrich Ludwig, Erbprinz.' [323]

Without a word the Landhofmeisterin handed the paper to Zollern.

'Ah! a charming invitation!' he said loudly, so that the lackey who stood waiting could not fail to hear. 'I should advise you to accept. A most entertaining fête. Order your carosse, dear Madame.'

Calmly the Landhofmeisterin gave the necessary commands for her coach and outriders, and summoning Maria she bade her collect some few objects of value and various papers. Then she took leave of Zollern.

'Au revoir, Monseigneur,' she said.

'Adieu, Madame; this is the last act of the comedy called the Great Intrigue,' he answered.

Yet she tarried till the last moment at La Favorite. It was a terrible leave-taking. She wandered round her pretty rooms, looking her last at the graceful devices, the slender traceries on wall and ceiling, at the things she had loved—the beautiful porcelains, the delicate, brocaded hangings. Then she passed out on to the terrace. What a wondrous summer evening it was! The sun was sinking low in the west—when the last ray had vanished the soldiers would come to drag her away. It was time, she must hasten—and yet she lingered. She leaned on the balustrade and contemplated the palace. Her thoughts travelled back to the days when Ludwigsburg was still a-building, and she and Eberhard Ludwig had planned the gardens together.

'Here should be a parterre of roses,' she had said.

'Nay, jasmine and heliotrope here; the roses must be beneath your window to sigh out their souls before your shrine,' he had answered.

Could it be ended? The habit of years was too strong, she could not realise. She listened to the summer sounds in the garden: the rustle of the gentle breeze in the chestnut-trees, the chirping of the grasshoppers, the bees droning over the flowers. Spring was past, it was summer. 'Ah! winter for me; winter and sadness for ever now,' she moaned. The sun was sinking—she must fly. 'Farewell happiness!' she murmured, and with bent head she passed down the terrace steps and entered her coach. [324]

As she drove down the avenue she heard a bugle ring out from the Ludwigsburg casern.

'Ride faster, hasten to Freudenthal!' she called to her postillions, and at a gallop the Landhofmeisterin's coach thundered away westwards to the distant line of hills where lay Freudenthal. Once she turned as she passed through the Ludwigsburg gates. She turned and saw the great roofs of the palace which had been reared for her, and whence she was henceforward banished for ever.

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CHAPTER XXI

THE DOWNFALL

'Life is but a vision—what I see
Of all which lives alone is life to me,
And being so—the absent are the dead,
Who haunt us from tranquillity, and spread
A dreary shroud around us, and invest
With sad remembrances our hours of rest.
The absent are the dead—for they are cold.'

Byron.

Freudenthal was full of ghosts for the Grävenitz: Madame de Ruth, her dead friend; Zollern, who had bade her farewell for ever; and Eberhard Ludwig, the unfaithful lover of her vanished youth.

She walked in the gardens, listening involuntarily for the voice which had so often called 'Philomèle beloved' from the orchard gate. There was no consolation on earth for her, she knew that; all she had loved, all she had achieved, her power, her great honours, were dead things. The forced inaction of her future tortured her. How would she pass the long dreary hours of the rest of her life? True, the Jewish community of Freudenthal had greeted her with enthusiasm; they were faithful, these despised Israelites. For a moment it had warmed her heart back to a little interest in living. She busied herself with the affairs of the village, but she was used to a press of work, of governing, of vital interests; how could these minor matters occupy her for long?

She tried to read, but though her eyes followed the lines her thoughts flashed away to Ludwigsburg. She struck a few chords on the spinet; unconsciously her fingers glided into a melody Eberhard Ludwig had loved, and only a sob broke from her lips when she would have sung. Ghosts at Freudenthal? She was the ghost herself; she was the shadow of bygone days—the poor, yearning, broken-hearted ghost.

They came and told her that Serenissimus had returned from Berlin, and that he had been greeted by the news of the Erbprinz's serious illness. Prince Friedrich had fallen ill of a nervous fever, they said. Ah, yes! she told herself she had caused it; in her morbid sadness she took the blame of every untoward occurrence upon her shoulders. She had caused Friedrich Ludwig to fall ill, for great emotions must perforce shatter so frail a being as he was, and she had tortured him, tempted him. [326]

One day two travelling coaches rolled into Freudenthal—the Sittmann tribe arrived. It was but ill received by the Grävenitz. Why had they come? she asked. Her sister informed her that Serenissimus had broken up the court of Ludwigsburg; he was to reside henceforth at Stuttgart. Had she not heard? Oh, yes! His Highness was reconciled with the Duchess, and it was disagreeable for former members of the Ludwigsburg court nowadays. This latter was said in a whiny tone of reproach.

'Get you gone to your own apartments, my sister and my sister's brats! If stay you must at Freudenthal, then stay, but leave me now,' the Grävenitz said; and though she was no longer the all-powerful Landhofmeisterin, still there was that about her which made the parasites shrink back. But they had done enough, had they not? in telling her thus roughly that the woman she had loathed and despised with all jealousy's venom during twenty years, had triumphed over her at last.

The Grävenitz stood before one of the most galling of life's lessons, she had to bow to the inexorable commonplace. Her whole being was agonised; she was breasting the dark waters of despair, she was living a tragedy, but everyday life had to go on as usual: the necessary routine of it, the dressing, the eating, the lying down to rest at night. She heard the village children singing on their way home from school, and the harvesters driving merrily to the fields. Sometimes she would cry out in protest against Nature, against the unalterable, indifferent working of the universe: the smiling sun, the peace of summer evenings. All things went their way heedless of her tragedy.

Summer blossomed gloriously; then the long, weary days grew shorter, and autumn brought endless nights to the stricken woman. Once, twice she had written to Serenissimus, but no answer came to her. [327]

The Erbprinz still battled with death. Eberhard Ludwig and Johanna Elizabetha watched together at his bedside, and the Erbprincessin sat stonily silent in the darkened room whose gloom seemed deepened by the poor girl's overshadowed mind.

Then in October came the news that Death had conquered; the Erbprinz had passed away, and the Erbprincessin, half-mad already, had fallen into such despair that her clouded soul grew utterly black, and she raved in hopeless insanity. Truly God's hand was heavy upon Wirtemberg.

A few days after this terrible news the Grävenitz, wandering moodily in the Freudenthal garden, heard the rattle of an approaching troop of horse. He was coming to fetch her, of course—her lover, her trusted one. She had known he must come! And she hurried away to her tiring-room to don her finest raiment. She would meet him like a bride. Was it not fitting that she should be gorgeously attired on this great day of triumph—this renascence of joy in her life?

The gown of golden cloth lay spread out for her; she always kept it ready, for she knew he would come.

'Quick, Maria,' she called, as with trembling hands she began her toilet; 'quick! His Highness comes!' She seemed young again, with flushed cheeks and shining eyes. Then her sister Sittmann burst into the room.

'Wilhelmine, I hardly know how to tell you—it is——' she said, but the Grävenitz interrupted her.

'You need not—for I know—I always knew.' She stood before the mirror fastening a diamond ornament into her hair, and her glowing eyes met her sister's reflected in the glass.

'Good lack, sister! what ails you?' she cried, for the Sittmann's face was ashen, and she gazed at the Grävenitz in terrified bewilderment.

'Who do you think has come, then? Wilhelmine, you are mad! It is a troop of horse, headed by Roeder, with a warrant for your arrest.'

The diamonds slipped from the Grävenitz's fingers, and fell unheeded on the floor, while all the glow and youth faded from her face. [328]

'What are you saying? It is you who are mad—I know—it is his Highness,' she stammered hoarsely, seemingly incapable of comprehending the meaning of her sister's words. Suddenly her vigour returned, her courage, and that perfect grip of startling events which had stood her in good stead for many years.

'Where are they? Maria, bolt all the doors—quick, girl! In the court, you say? Tell them I am in the garden, send them round, then shut and bar each window.' She gave her orders clearly and calmly, like some general, the practised commander in a hundred sieges. By this time all the inmates of Freudenthal had gathered at the door of her apartment: Baron Sittmann and his sons, the brothers Pfau, a horde of serving men and women. Once more the Grävenitz seemed to be the great Landhofmeisterin whose lightest word was law, and they did her bidding without question or comment.

'Back, all of you, I will speak with Baron Roeder.' She moved to her bedchamber window which looked upon the garden. Below, on the terrace, stood Roeder and another officer consulting together in low tones, while through the garden tramped the soldiers, seeking her whom they had treated with royal honours for twenty years. She flung open the window and stood before the two officers.

'Monsieur le Baron Roeder,' she said slowly, 'to what do I owe the pleasure of your visit? I am rejoiced to see you; but kindly desire your men to spare my garden—they are ruining my flowers.'

Roeder looked dumbfounded.

'Certainly, your Excellency,' he stammered, 'but I must crave a word with you immediately.'

'I regret, Monsieur, that illness confines me to my room. I cannot receive you. Tell me your business from where you are.' She spoke mockingly, looking down at the man below.

'Impossible! Madame, I must speak with you face to face,' he said angrily; and indeed it was an absurd situation.

'We are face to face, Monsieur de Roeder, and I pray you tell me your mission without delay. I am fatigued with standing so long. Come, I am not in the habit of waiting, Monsieur.' [329]

'Then, Madame, I arrest you in the Duke's name. You are my prisoner, and if you will not come quietly, I shall be obliged to use force,'—this with a gesture towards the soldiers, who had formed into line behind him.

'I am Countess of the Empire, Landhofmeisterin of Wirtemberg, and none but my superior can arrest me, Monsieur. Also, this house of mine is on free territory, subject only to the authority of the Emperor. I refuse to be arrested, I refuse to give you admittance, and I command you to withdraw.' She spoke perfectly calmly, with the tone given by the habit of command, which she had wielded for nigh upon a quarter of a century.

Roeder hesitated; what she said might be true, and he greatly feared her, but he had his orders from the Duke. He recalled his Highness's words when he had intrusted him with the Grävenitz's arrest: 'I have not done enough. God's vengeance is not fulfilled. The witch-woman, the Land-despoiler is still at large in my country, and God has taken my only son from me. I must purge my land of this sinner—punish her—break her in atonement,' his Highness had said. The Duke was firmly persuaded that so long as the Grävenitz remained free, God's wrath would be on Wirtemberg, and the notion was fostered by her enemies. No one spoke of her now save as the 'Land-despoiler,' that name which the peasantry had called her in secret for many years.

'Madame, give yourself up peaceably, or I shall force my way in,' Roeder called to her; but she had gone from the window, and the house was shuttered, and with closed doors.

Then began the work of breaking into the manor of Freudenthal. Twenty soldiers hacked in the doors with axes, while the rest stood sentry keeping the Jews at bay, for the members of the Jewish settlement gathered round, eager to protect their friend; but they were unarmed, and the inherited submission of their oppressed race made them poor protectors. The soldiers poured into the house. Roeder was received before the Grävenitz's door by Madame de Sittmann. She implored him to spare her sister, who, she assured him, was really ill. The door leading from the Grävenitz's apartment was bolted from within. He knocked loudly, but there being no response, he summoned the soldiers to break it in. [330]

With a crash the door yielded, falling inwards. And then he saw his quarry. She stood in the middle of the room, erect, vigorous, a very flame of hatred burning in her eyes. She was clad in the golden gown which she had donned in honour of joy's return; on her breast was the order of St. Hubertus, and the jewels of Wirtemberg gleamed on her neck and in her hair. Never had she looked more beautiful, more magnificent than in this hour of her defeat, and even Roeder stood silent and abashed before her.

'Well, Monsieur le Baron de Roeder,' she said, 'so you have defied me again? See here, I curse you; you have called me a witch, and you are cursed by me. It will not bring you happiness.'

'It is my duty, Madame,' he replied steadily. Her face changed.

'You are right, man; I grow petty in my old age. See, I forgive you. Alas! my hour has struck.' She held out her hands towards him. 'Do not bind my wrists, I will come. It is useless to fight Fate. Ah, Roeder! Roeder! whither are you dragging me?' Her potent charm was alive in every word. After all, it was a greater weapon than curses; she knew that, and used it now.

'I thank your Excellency for aiding me in my terrible task,' said Roeder huskily. 'Is there anything in which I may serve you before we start?'

'No, Monsieur, I am ready; only permit my maid Maria to accompany me, and to bring such things as are necessary for my comfort,' she said quietly.

'It is against his Highness's orders, Excellency,' he began; but she smiled at him, la grande charmeuse, and as usual she conquered.

Sadly the cortège left Freudenthal. Only once did the Grävenitz break down. As she passed the orchard gate where Eberhard Ludwig had so often stood on summer evenings calling 'Philomèle beloved,' she bent her head, and, sobbing bitterly, murmured: 'Change is Death.' [331]

The fortress of Hohenasperg stands about half a league from Ludwigsburg. In the midst of rich orchards this gaunt rock rises abruptly from the plain like some huge fist of a heathen god, threatening the peace of the fruitful land with sombre menace. From heathen days it was named Asperg, after the Aasen or Germanic gods, whose sacred mountain it was. Round this stronghold men fought for centuries: naked barbarians against Roman legions; rebellious knights of old against Imperial troops; Protestant generals against the armies of the Holy Roman Empire; later, Wirtembergers against the invading Frenchmen. Asperg, impregnable in war time, was a prison in times of peace; from its dark walls and giant ramparts escape was impossible for the prisoner. The very name of Asperg was a terror, its shape was awe-inspiring. And hither they brought Wilhelmine von Grävenitz on that smiling October afternoon. Slowly her coach rumbled up to the grim gate over which a sinister lion's head frowns down at those who enter this stern prison. The arms of Wirtemberg are emblazoned on each side of the lion's head, surmounted by that ducal crown for which the Grävenitz had made so audacious a struggle.

Her coach drew up before this gate and Roeder bade her descend. Here his charge ended, he had conveyed the Land-despoiler to durance vile. The governor of the prison met his prisoner at the gate. A bluff-mannered Wirtemberger, short of stature, red of visage, and with fiery little twinkling eyes beneath heavy, bristling eyebrows. A fierce bull-dog man he looked, but his appearance belied him; for he was a tender-hearted gentleman, and received his prisoner with a courteous consideration which many a polished courtier would not have offered to the fallen tyrant. Up the steep, dark, well-like road to the inner courtyard he led the Grävenitz, followed by Maria, who wept bitterly.

'I have orders to lodge you safely, Excellency. Safe you will be here, and I do not purpose to restrict your liberty greatly,' he said as he ushered her into a small chamber with a door leading on to the ramparts. Two sentries stood on either side of the entrance to her apartment, but for the rest the room was clean and pleasant, and commanded a fair view of the plain beneath. [332]

'I thank you, Monsieur, for your kindness,' she said, approaching the barred window. Then she gave a little cry, like to the moan of one wounded when a fresh agony is inflicted.

'Give me a cell, Monsieur—a dungeon; only not that—not that—if you have mercy in your heart!' she pointed tragically through the window. In the dying sunlight lay the great palace of Ludwigsburg, the rounded roofs, the terraces, and the Château Joyeux of La Favorite in the midst of flowering parterres.

'I regret, Madame, believe me. I regret infinitely, but I have not another apartment to offer you. Do not look from the window overmuch, Madame.' The old man's voice broke and he put out his strong rough hand to draw her away from the beautiful, peaceful view. But how inconsistent is the human heart! She waved him away, and stood as though rooted to the spot, her eyes fixed upon the scene of her passed happiness.

At first the tumult in her heart shut out the peace which was silently waiting for admittance; the peace of seclusion bringing those calm thoughts which wait upon the fevered soul of man in Nature's vast aloofness. Gradually the beauty of the fruitful plain with its cornfields and rich orchards, the mystery of the far-off hills on the horizon, the poetry of the distant, dark-blue line of the forests, the song of the wind murmuring through those few trees which had sprung up on the fortress terraces and ramparts unabashed by warfare; gradually this peace came to the Grävenitz, and she grew calm. True, she agonised when her eyes fell upon Ludwigsburg, and she raged when the prison governor told her of the march of events in Stuttgart; but still she knew a greater peace, a more equable inner life than had been hers in the day of her power.

A commission waited upon her, demanding the restitution of the jewels of Wirtemberg. Some she had carried with her to Hohenasperg, some had been already found at Freudenthal. It cost her a pang to part with the jewels. Had not Eberhard Ludwig given each one to her with a lover's vow, a passionate word? [333]

They demanded also that she should give up certain locks of his Highness's hair which she had unlawfully retained for purposes of detestable magic. She made answer that she had but one

strand of his hair in a diamond locket. She said that she had worn this on her heart for twenty years. 'Is that magic, Messieurs?' she asked. Had they known it, they had indeed touched upon one of her sorceress secrets—the charm of a woman who can love a man with undying poetry and romance. They told her that she must give up this pathetic lock of hair, that she retained it to brew love potions and such abominations. They took it from her, leaving her the empty crystal locket with its encircling diamonds.

'How you fear me, Messieurs!' she said with a flash of her old defiance. Then they left her with her empty locket and her empty life.

Yet her atonement was only beginning; 'the wages of sin is death,' and worse than death a long-drawn agony of humiliation and loneliness. Abasement, shame, defeat, fear, inaction, loneliness, yearning—all these she had drunk in her cup of suffering, but in the dregs there remained one more drop of gall—jealousy.

Now, in the spring before she left Ludwigsburg, she had been annoyed by a rumour which had caused much commotion among the Wirtemberg peasants, and even the courtiers had been infected with a wave of superstitious interest. In the house of Wirtemberg there is a legend which tells how Count Eberhard the Bearded, in humility and repentance of his youthful sins, made a pilgrimage to Jerusalem accompanied by twenty-four noble youths bound by sacred vows to purity and godly life. When Count Eberhard was praying before the Holy Sepulchre, of a sudden a withered whitethorn-tree quickened and blossomed in token of God's grace, and a priest in Eberhard's following prophesied that so long as the world lasted, this thorn-tree should flower whenever the noble race of Wirtemberg should bloom anew. Piously the pilgrims bore the thorn- [334]
tree back to their native land, and set it in a fair and sheltered spot near to the abode of a venerable hermit. Here Count Eberhard instituted an order of prayerful monks, garbed in fair blue habits, and for many generations these holy men tended the thorn-tree, building giant supports beneath its spreading roots and vigorous branches. In Protestant days the poor thorn-tree was forgotten, save by the peasants who clung to their old legends and vowed that, whenever an heir was born to the house of Wirtemberg, the aged thorn put forth a flowering branch.

It happened that, shortly before the Grävenitz was banished from Ludwigsburg, Eberhard Ludwig, in the course of his wood wanderings, came to Einsiedel where stood the ruined monastery and the fateful thorn-tree. An old peasant woman, who was gathering sticks for her fire in the deserted monastery garden, told him of the legend, and, pointing to the whitethorn, exclaimed: 'You who are a traveller, go to the palace and tell the Duke that the thorn has blossomed. Tell him to leave the wanton Land-despoiler, and go back to his true wife. God has caused the thorn to bloom anew in token of pardon, and there will be an heir born to Wirtemberg to take the place of the dying Erbprinz.' Now the Erbprinz was not dying when the old crone spoke these words, but Eberhard Ludwig, always feverishly anxious for his son's welfare, hurried back to Ludwigsburg in an agony of fear and related the peasant woman's prophecy, and the strange fact of that ancient thorn-tree putting forth a spray of white blossom. Her Excellency the Landhofmeisterin had been much offended by the story, and had mocked Serenissimus for his credulity.

Of course when, shortly after this event, Eberhard Ludwig repudiated his mistress and returned to his neglected Duchess, popular report immediately had it that the whitethorn had prophesied the happy occurrence, and that her Highness Johanna Elizabetha was to become a mother. This the Grävenitz had heard during her sojourn at Freudenthal, but it was in November at Asperg that she heard the Duchess was indeed with child. At first she vowed she did not believe it; it was [335]
an absurd story started by the believers in that ridiculous thorn-tree; but when the fact of her Highness's pregnancy could be doubted no longer, the Grävenitz fell into an agony of jealousy. She paced her small room like some tortured tigress; she cursed all men; she sobbed in a passion of anger. Waking or sleeping the thought never left her. Her dreams were for ever of Eberhard Ludwig and the woman she hated. God, how she despised her! How she shuddered at the thought of her motherhood. She told herself that it was disgust, and even as she formulated the thought she knew that it was envy—cruel, aching envy which tortured her. She was jealous, then? She? The very supposition was an abasement. Could she be jealous of that dull, heavy woman, with her reddened eyes? But she would be the mother of his child. . . .

They told her that prayers for her Highness's safe delivery were offered up in all the churches in Wirtemberg, and that there was immense rejoicing in the land. There was no doubt then, and the Grävenitz's dreams were unending of the Duchess holding out a beautiful man-child to Eberhard Ludwig, who smiled in happiness and peace.

At length one day in December Maria told her that there were exciting rumours in the village which nestles at the base of the fortress rock of Hohenasperg. The Duchess was sick unto death, they said, and the doctors were entirely puzzled. Into the Grävenitz's heart there crept a ray of hope. God forgive her! she prayed for death to visit Stuttgart's castle.

Daily she sent Maria to the village to learn the news. One day the governor came to her and told her he had a terrible thing to communicate. Good, honest man, he often spent an hour with his prisoner telling her news of the outer world.

'The Duchess has suffered a cruel disappointment, Madame,' he said; 'all Wirtemberg will condole with her. Her hopes are ended, the doctors have been mistaken, there will be no heir to the Dukedom. Her Highness suffers from dropsy. Great heavens! what ails you?' he cried, for the

Grävenitz had flung herself back into her chair, convulsed in a horrible paroxysm of mirthless laughter.

The plain below Hohenasperg was white with snow—a light fall, which lay thinly on the even ground but had failed to whiten the fortress rock, where only patches clung, emphasising the sombre colour of the stone hill. The sky was leaden, lowering, sinister, pregnant with unborn snow. A company of horsemen took its way up the steep road leading from the village of Asperg to the fortress. Following this cavalcade was a coach drawn by four horses. The Grävenitz, standing on the west terrace, watched the horsemen approach. She wondered idly if another State prisoner was being conveyed to Hohenasperg. She saw the leader of the troop parleying with the sentry. He showed a document to the man; then the outer gate swung back and the cavalcade was hidden from her sight between the gloomy walls of the steep, dark lane leading up to the second or inner gate. She turned away; after all, these things were of no account to her. That was one of her agonies; she to whom all things had mattered, the much occupied, the ruler, the indefatigable administrator—she was forced into lethargic quiescence. Every hour was empty for her. She turned away listlessly. The afternoon was drawing to a close. It would be a white world to-morrow, she reflected, for those swollen clouds could not hold the snow longer. [336]

The prison governor was coming along the terrace towards her. She greeted him in friendly fashion; but at first he spoke no word, only took both her hands in his.

'I have bad news, Madame,' he said, after a pause.

'Ah! tell me; I am used to sadness now. What is it? O God! but it is not some accident to Serenissimus?' she said. The old man shook his head.

'No, Madame, but you are to be removed from my care. And I fear——' he began.

'Death? Would he dare? After all, perhaps, it were better,' she said calmly.

'No, not that; you are to be moved to Hohen-Urach. . . . Madame, they will try you for your life. Alas! his Highness believes you have cast a spell upon the Duchess and caused her misfortune. Asperg is too close to Stuttgart.'

She smiled at him. 'It does not signify, dear friend. One prison is like another, I suppose; but I shall miss my jailor! Let me thank you, Monsieur, for your great courtesy to the fallen Land-despoiler.' She spoke almost gaily, and the governor turned away his head. [337]

'I would help you, Excellency; pray God I may be able to serve you one day,' he said huskily.

'Tell them I shall start to-morrow, when the snowstorm is over. I shall be prepared.'

'I regret—Excellency—In truth, I scarce know how to tell you—It is ordered that you shall travel to-day—immediately,' he said.

'A prisoner has no choice, Monsieur,' she answered bitterly.

As the cortège passed out of the Hohenasperg gate, the first snowflakes fell, and when they reached the village at the foot of the hill there was a whirling storm.

The journey to Urach through the snow was terrible. For hours the cavalcade wandered in the snowdrifts between Nürtingen and Urach, and when at length the unhappy woman was housed for a few hours' rest in a village inn, her slumber was broken by the sounds of rude merriment in the hall below her sleeping-room, where the peasants were dancing. She was wont to say afterwards that this trivial episode had been one of her most painful experiences. Her nerves were on the rack, for she expected that some cruel trial awaited her at Urach. She was terribly weary from the long hours of wandering, and from cold and exposure; her pride had been galled by the gaping, laughing, jeering, mocking crowd of peasants which had stood round her while the captain of the guard made arrangements for her night's lodging. Then her sensitive ear was tortured by the peasants' music, which beat on and on in monotonous, inharmonious measure all through the night.

If suffering is atonement for sin, certain it is that the Grävenitz agonised at Urach. Her imprisonment was infinitely more rigorous than it had been at Hohenasperg. The governor treated her with scant consideration, and answered her questions shortly. He forbade the faithful Maria either to go to the town or to speak with the other inhabitants of the fortress prison. Thus the Grävenitz had no knowledge of the doings in the world. She tasted real imprisonment, the torture of being entirely cut off from human interests. Also she was left in ignorance of her future. Death, banishment, perpetual imprisonment? She knew nothing. She penned passionate appeals to his Highness, but the governor informed her that he could forward no writings from a prisoner awaiting trial. [338]

'When shall I be tried, and for what offences?' she demanded.

'I am not at liberty to say,' he returned, and left her.

She fell ill, or feigned to do so, and when the apothecary tended her she offered him vast sums if he would tell her what had occurred in Stuttgart. The man reported this to the prison governor, who further restricted the Grävenitz's liberty in punishment. She was no longer permitted to walk on the ramparts. She grew really ill after this. For many days she lay upon the rude pallet, which

was called bed at Urach, and, turning her face to the wall, refused to take nourishment. Maria, in an agony of fear, sought the governor and told him her Excellency lay dying.

'A very curious coincidence,' said the governor musingly.

'How, sir? I do not understand,' inquired Maria.

'It is said that his Highness lies dying also; there can be no harm in telling you that,' replied the cautious official. Maria, burdened with her sorrowful secret, returned to watch over her beloved mistress. For weeks the Grävenitz pined in hopeless sadness and physical illness, then her old spirit returned, and she faced life again. Maria had not told her that Serenissimus was sick unto death, dead perhaps by this time; she knew not, for none at Hohen-Urach would answer the witch's serving-maid.

Spring came, and the Grävenitz petitioned the prison governor to permit her to walk on the ramparts as before. Unwillingly the man acceded to her request, and once more she was at liberty to breathe the air of heaven, and to feast her eyes upon the majestic view of the hill-country. But there was pain for her, even in this her one enjoyment, for from the rampart she looked down upon that little hill-town of Urach which had seen her in the heyday of her youth and love. She could even see the windows of the Golden Hall where she had held high revel on that [339] summer night so long ago, and whence she had fled before the Emperor's stern decree. Remembrance was pain, and yet her thoughts lingering in the past brought her echoes of joy and laughter. What matter if the echo was softened by a sigh?

At length, in August, an attorney waited upon her in her prison. He was charged to defend her in her trial, he said. A semblance of justice was to be meted out to her; she should benefit by the pleadings of a man of law. This personage was a village notary, and all unfitted by knowledge or experience to battle against the skilled prosecutors. And yet she was grateful; for, at least, she would thus learn of what she was accused. The list of her crimes was appalling. Firstly: treason. Secondly: purloining of lands and monies. Thirdly: witchcraft and black magic. Fourthly: bigamous intent. Fifthly: attempted murder. It is characteristic of the age that the fifth indictment should not have been the first.

Her treason consisted in having grasped the reins of government from the hand of their rightful wielder, his Highness Eberhard Ludwig of Wirtemberg; in having kept back from his knowledge many facts in the administration of the country, and destroying documents addressed to him. Also in having been untrue to him in word and deed. Almost comic this last—a sort of topsy-turvy adultery charge!

'Purloining of lands and monies.' She replied that if his Highness's presents were accounted to her as peculation, she had been guilty. For the rest she, having governed the country in his name and with his sanction, had made free use of the revenues for legitimate and public official purposes, exactly as do other rulers, be they kings, dukes, or ministers of state.

To the charge of witchcraft and black magic she refused to make answer, save that she denied harming man, woman, child, or beast. She was still hoist with her own petard: the pitiful belief in the potency of her absurdities.

Bigamous intent she repudiated proudly. She had been married in all legal form, and according to the ancient privileges of ruling princes to take to wife whom they chose, provided they, by open and public decree, declared any prior union null and void. It had pleased the Emperor as [340] over-lord to decide otherwise, and she had bowed to this decision, thus forfeiting her just rights. For this she could not be punished, she averred.

The attempted murder she denied absolutely. It was an absurd story founded on the indiscretion of an insane servant, whom she had dismissed from her service.

For the rest, she referred her accusers and her judges to the first, and only competent witness on her side, viz. his Highness Duke Eberhard Ludwig of Wirtemberg.

Such in few words are the contents of the massive dossier of her trial, and her dignified answers.

The details these gentlemen of the law permitted themselves to prepare are numerous, and unfit for publication to-day. Her alleged misconduct (she being mistress, not wife—the term seems strangely applied!) is accompanied with a dozen disgusting stories, which it must be said were entirely fabricated for the trial; and, as she herself pointed out, the chief and only competent witness on her side was the man she had loved and lived with for over twenty years,—who, however, was the very person to permit the commencement of this trial, and must have read and approved the accusations in all their revolting details! He also, and he alone, could prove that the woman had governed, purloined, etcetera, with his sanction. He alone could say whether he had made free gifts to his beloved mistress of lands, jewels, and monies; or whether she had appropriated them without his consent.

Concerning the witchcraft charge it is difficult to exculpate the Grävenitz, seeing she herself refused to deny her magic practices, and there is little doubt that she possessed that magnetic or hypnotic power, the use whereof our ancestors called witchcraft. It is curious to speculate how much of this power, in wonderfully subtle and varied forms, exists in every human being of whom we say: 'They have great personal charm.'

The village notary carried the Grävenitz's answers to Stuttgart, and for many weeks the unhappy

woman heard no more of her trial. She waited in a fever of impatience, but she dared not make any endeavour to obtain news for fear the governor should see fit once more to restrict her little liberty. [341]

Her pride was not broken; it was terribly sentient, quivering with painful defeat and humiliation. Worse than all was the silence she was forced to maintain. She spoke with Maria, but the good, tender-hearted peasant, though she sympathised passionately and with that noble loyalty of which such women are capable, yet she could not comprehend or respond to the workings of her mistress's brain, could not offer consolation to the cultured mind.

In truth, it was a terrible downfall, a disaster; this gorgeous life, this towering success, which of a sudden had been broken, flung down into the very depths of mortal abasement.

The summer days passed. Autumn came, and still no news arrived from Stuttgart, nor did the notary return to give her information. Suspense deepened to melancholy, and, as the days dragged by, melancholy was supplanted by despair. 'I shall die in Hohen-Urach,' she said to Maria.

At length towards the beginning of November the notary arrived.

'Your trial will take place soon, Excellency,' he said. 'It has been retarded by his Highness's illness; that being over, the matter will proceed.'

The man rubbed his hands in self-satisfaction. He was persuaded that the authorities in Stuttgart had chosen him for his qualities of mind and knowledge of law, and he had become a very important personage in his own estimation and in that of his cronies in the village.

'His Highness's illness, Herr Märkle? I pray you tell me what has ailed the Duke?' Her voice shook a little, but the man had spoken so airily that she could not believe the Duke's illness had been serious.

'Ah, Excellency! you were unaware of the sad circumstances? Yes, truly, a long and painful malady; lung trouble it was.'

'It is over then? quite passed? I rejoice,' she returned.

'Yes, Excellency; it ended a week ago. His Highness died in his sleep.'

She looked at him for a full moment as one deaf, who, knowing some one has spoken some word, hears not and wonders pitifully. The notary had turned away and busied himself with writings and documents on the table. Already his thoughts were rehearsing a wonderful oration he would speak, a masterpiece of pleading. What a great man he was, to be sure! Of course, he would move to Stuttgart. His ambition soared—surely a very great lawyer. [342]

A rustle of silken garments in the room behind him, and two hands fell on his shoulders: hands of iron they seemed.

'Say that again; you do not know what you have said.' It was a strange voice which spoke: a voice so hoarse, so toneless, that the fat little man trembled, recalling in a flash the stories of witches' transformation into ravening wolves or terrible demons. He wriggled round. The Grävenitz stood over him, her hands upon his shoulders, her eyes like two flames scanning his face.

'Say what, Excellency? I do not know——' The trivial fact of the Duke's death and of this woman's agony had been lost for him in his dream of his own judicial splendour.

'What did you say of his Highness? Tell me, or I will kill you,' she returned in the same fearful voice.

'I said what all the world knows: that the Duke Eberhard Ludwig died from lung trouble, on the 31st of October—a week ago,'—he answered angrily, struggling to remove those gripping hands from his shoulders.

'It is a lie! Another lie to torture me. Go, you lying, cruel devil—the Duke shall punish you.'

She was mad for the moment; sense, dignity, all was swept away in her terrified fury. She pushed the man from the room, her murderous hands gripping and bruising his shoulders with demoniacal force.

'Go, liar!' she cried, as she thrust the little man through the door.

She stood silent and motionless. 'He said that all the world knew,' she whispered hoarsely.

She flung herself face downwards on the stone floor of the prison-room, moaning and biting her hands like one possessed of a devil.

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[343]

Duke Karl Alexander, successor to Eberhard Ludwig, was a gallant gentleman, hero of a hundred battles. He was received in Wirtemberg with popular enthusiasm, in spite of the damning fact that he was a Roman Catholic. He reassured his people by swearing to uphold the Evangelical Church. This being so, he began his reign with the entire approbation of the Wirtembergers, and in the press of business and rejoicings the trial of the Grävenitz seemed forgotten. Still, the mass of carefully prepared accusations remained, and the gentlemen of the law but bided their time.

Meanwhile the chorus of approval in Stuttgart wavered; for if Eberhard Ludwig had countenanced the Land-despoiler, Karl Alexander was also ruled by a favourite, into whose hands he confided the administration of the Dukedom. This favourite was Joseph Süss Oppenheimer, a Frankfort Jew. To the horror of officialdom, Süss was made Minister of Finance, and, in point of fact, chief adviser to the new Duke.

Unheard of that a Jew should be admitted into the government! That one of the despised race should appear at court; not only appear, but rule, direct all things, be the familiar friend of a noble Duke!

If money had been levied by the Grävenitz, far heavier taxes were imposed by Süss Oppenheimer. If the court at Ludwigsburg had been brilliant and lavish in the Land-despoiler's day, it was the scene of an unending series of costly festivities under the new régime. And if the late Duke's mistress had been ruinous to the country's finance, the new Duke maintained half a dozen such ladies in the greatest splendour. Süss was accused of arranging the Duke's relations with these ladies, and of sharing their favours with his unsuspecting patron. It is certain that the Jew led a dissolute life, and that his amours were numerous.

The Wirtembergers were in despair, and murmured more ominously than ever; but they were powerless. Süss was master of the situation, exactly as the Grävenitz had been before.

Of all this the prisoner at Hohen-Urach knew nothing. She succeeded in persuading the governor to forward a letter from her to her brother, Friedrich Grävenitz, in which she implored him to [344] visit her; but she received no answer from that estimable personage. In point of fact, he was in an awkward predicament himself. True, he had sided against his sister openly, but the Duke, not relishing a too glaring reminder of the past, had commanded him to retire to Welzheim. At Eberhard Ludwig's death Grävenitz waited upon Karl Alexander, who, honest gentleman, disapproved of a brother showing open hostility and ingratitude to a sister, and begged the petitioner to return to his country-seat.

Now Grävenitz, to his horror, found that he was implicated in his sister's misdemeanours. Had he not shared in the benefits of her peculations? In vain he protested, denouncing his sister and benefactress in pompous self-righteous words and writings. But the legal authorities paid no heed, and intimated briefly that Welzheim did not belong to him, although he held it in his possession; nine points of the law certainly, but not conferring ownership. He was directed to relinquish Welzheim to the new Duke's representatives. This he declined with many high-flown expressions, which, however, the legal gentlemen considered beside the point at issue; and Count Friedrich Grävenitz was lodged in his own palace in Stuttgart, under arrest and well guarded. He was tried for peculation, but the prosecution ceased when Friedrich Grävenitz consented to deliver up Welzheim to his Highness the Duke, and to pay a fine of fifty-six thousand gulden. He was liberated and permitted to leave the country, which he did, repairing to Vienna where he appealed to the imperial tribunal for justice.

When he received his sister's letter he was under arrest, and later his own affairs absorbed him. So the Grävenitz's appeal remained unanswered. The appointed day came for her trial, and the village notary spoke his dreamed-of oration. The tribunal listened, or appeared to listen, but the sentence was a foregone conclusion. Wilhelmine von Grävenitz, Countess of Würben, late Landhofmeisterin of Wirtemberg, was condemned to death.

Yet it was written in her book of Destiny, that Vienna should interfere in all the important events [345] of her life. The Emperor intimated that, as Countess of the Empire, she could not be put to death without his consent, and this he withheld. Süss Oppenheimer[2], Wirtemberg's Minister of Finance, had appealed on her behalf. The sentence was commuted to perpetual imprisonment [346] and forfeiture of all lands, monies, and jewels. This information was imparted to her by the prison [347] governor. She received it calmly, merely remarking: 'Death would have been much shorter.' She had sunk into an apathy since the news of his Highness's decease.

The winter passed without event. Spring found the Grävenitz grown white-haired, and she had fallen into the habit of patient, indifferent acquiescence in all things. Maria wished her to walk upon the ramparts for an hour's fresh air? Very well, she would go.

'Your Excellency must eat, must sleep, must rest.'

'Certainly; it does not matter. I will do as you say, Maria.'

It was as though she gave her body into the peasant woman's command; her soul was elsewhere, in that mysterious land into which her eyes seemed to be for ever gazing with painful, straining effort, seeking—seeking and imploring.

Towards the end of May, an official document was brought to the governor of Hohen-Urach. It contained the pardon of Wilhelmine von Grävenitz, provided she undertook to leave Wirtemberg for ever, and to abandon any future claims upon land or property of all sorts in the Dukedom. The governor was directed to accompany the lady to the frontier, with an escort of two hundred horse. Further, he was to place in her hand, at the moment of her passing out of Wirtemberg territory, a sum of a hundred thousand gulden, 'in fair compensation for any loss incurred,' it was set forth in the pardon. With this surprising document was a sealed letter addressed to the Grävenitz, which was to be delivered immediately.

The governor repaired to the prisoner's apartment, but found it deserted. The Grävenitz was

taking the air upon the ramparts. He found her leaning over the stone parapet, gazing, as usual, into the distance with those terrible, haunted, unseeing eyes. In vain the valley was radiant with Spring's tender treasury; she gazed unseeing at the wealth of blossom, the feathery green of the beech-trees, and at the rounded hills so rich in sombre firs enhancing the wondrous youth of the beech leaves; at the little hill-town, red-roofed and sheltered, clustering round the old castle. All this peaceful beauty of Nature's renascence was nothing to her. As she had said, death would have been much shorter; this long-drawn agony, this numb pain, was death in life. [348]

'I have the happiness to announce to your Excellency that his Highness the Duke has granted you pardon. When it suits you to travel, I am to accompany you to the frontier under escort,' the governor said coldly.

She turned her eyes upon him, but she gave no sign of comprehension; once only she started and winced, when he said his Highness the Duke, otherwise she remained unmoved and unresponding as one deaf. He waited a moment for her to speak, then slowly repeated his announcement.

'Where am I to go to?' she said at last in a low, uncertain voice.

'Where it pleases your Excellency. Anywhere out of Wirtemberg.'

She turned to Maria who stood behind her. 'Have I a house anywhere? I have forgotten,' she said.

'Surely, surely, Excellency; your castle at Schaffhausen,' replied the peasant woman.

'Very well; we will start to-morrow for Schaffhausen,' the Grävenitz answered in her new, broken, docile voice.

'There is a letter for you, Madame,' the governor told her.

'A letter? Who should write to me? The dead do not write.'

'O Madame! Madame! read it; there may be good news,' cried Maria.

'Good news? Good news for me? There can be none. Do you not know that there can be none?' she said tonelessly.

Even the governor's eyes were wet as he handed her the letter. She broke the seal listlessly.

'I send you the best terms I can make for you, in remembrance of the Judengasse of Stuttgart, and in gratitude for your kindness to my race.—Joseph Süss Oppenheimer.'

Fastened in one corner of this short missive glittered a little jewel. The Grävenitz looked long at it, not comprehending. Then a scene of her past came back to her—she was in a darkened room, which smelt of strange, sweet essences, and a Jewish boy sang a Hebrew love-song. [349]

Joseph Süss Oppenheimer, the Jew, had proved himself, in this instance, to be truly what Eberhard Ludwig had called him in pleasantry many years ago—'un preux chevalier.' One who could render homage and service to a fallen favourite.

FOOTNOTES:

[2] Joseph Süss Oppenheimer was the son of Michaele, a famous Jewish beauty, daughter of Rabbi Salomon of Frankfort, a musician of talent. Michaele was not only possessed of wonderful beauty, but God had blessed her with a glorious voice. She married Rabbi Isaschar Süsskind Oppenheimer, also a singer and musician, and together the couple wandered from city to city, and from palace to castle, discoursing sweet melodies. The lady's morals suffered from this vagrant life, and the Jewish community of Frankfort stood aghast at her amours. Jewish women are usually remarkably virtuous, and Michaele's evil reputation was easily achieved.

There was an ugly story concerning the birth of Joseph Süss. In brief, he was reported to be a love-child; but the dates do not tally, and it is certain that Rabbi Isaschar accepted the infant as his own. From his mother Joseph Süss inherited marvellous personal beauty, and from both his parents his musical gift. From the mother too, if we are to believe all the tales, he received a nature of abnormal, passionate sensuality.

At an early age Süss was sent to his relatives in Vienna, the famous bankers Oppenheimer. Here the boy was reared in splendour and refinement, and instructed in the intricacies of banking, usury—in short, in finance. He repaired occasionally to his family in Frankfort, halting on the road to visit an aged relation in Stuttgart, Frau Widow Hazzim, at whose house in the Judengasse he made the acquaintance of Wilhelmine von Grävenitz.

Süss matured early, and became, not a musician as he had boasted in his childhood, but a very capable financier. He fell in with Duke Karl Alexander of Wirtemberg during a sojourn at Wildbad. His Highness sought a secretary and treasurer, and he was immediately captivated by the young Jew's personal beauty, his fascination, his vivid intelligence, and knowledge of business. The Duchess was interested, attracted, and delighted in Süss's music and the haunting charm of those ancient Hebrew melodies which his father, Rabbi Isaschar, had taught him. Süss was taken into his Highness's service, and when Karl Alexander succeeded his cousin Eberhard Ludwig in the Dukedom of Wirtemberg, the Jew accompanied his patron to Ludwigsburg and Stuttgart.

He was made Minister of Finance and became, in reality, ruler of the court, for the Duke gave over everything to his trusted favourite. The treasury was exhausted by the Grävenitz's magnificence, and Süss set to work to replenish the empty chests.

It would be too long to recount here the endless money-raising schemes which were put in motion by Süss; suffice it to say, that never had Wirtemberg been so squeezed even in the time of Eberhard Ludwig. But if Süss procured vast sums, he spent them as readily. The festivities at Ludwigsburg were more opulently splendid and more numerous than ever, and the Duke had six mistresses and a favourite to enrich instead of one Land-despoiler! Süss lived like a prince—and a very lavish prince at that—and the money, of course, came from the Duke's treasury. Now Michaele's heritage became noticeable; if the Duke had six mistresses Süss had sixty. No woman could resist him; they said he was so gloriously handsome, so witty, so 'differing from the rest of mankind,'—not an original statement from amorous dames!

Thus Süss inherited his mother's nature, and together with his unbridled passion for love came the illimited desire for, and need of, gold.

By the first, he incurred the hatred of those men—husbands, brothers, fathers of the women he took for his pleasure; by the second, the undying animosity of the oppressed taxpayers. The end came swiftly. Four years of debauch and lavish expenditure, and death fell suddenly upon Karl Alexander of Wirtemberg. He died at nine of the clock one evening, and the next dawn saw Joseph Süss a hunted fugitive. He was caught between Ludwigsburg and Stuttgart, and immediately thrown into prison. Here he languished, a prey to terrible anxiety and remorse; his only visitants were pastors of the Christian religion who tortured him with argument. 'You are a Jew, but you do not even adhere to the damnable tenets of your vile cult,' they said.

'I am a man and no coward, and I will not abjure the faith of my fathers,' he responded. They held out spurious hopes of pardon would he swear to the pure faith of the Crucified, but Süss remained nobly obdurate. Then the Church—she to whom Christ bequeathed His sweet message of pardon, of tenderness, and of leniency—deserted the faithful Jew, and the law of human cruelty and punishment took hold of him. He was accorded no trial. His sins were as scarlet indeed; besides, he of the despised race had dared to rule. The name Jew was a stigma in itself, and this word the people howled round the tumbril which bore the erstwhile gorgeous favourite to a death of ignominy. A few women in the crowd sighed and shed a tear when they saw the godlike beauty of the man, broken to pathetic ruin by adversity, white-haired, vilified, aged by his degradation; but chiefly the crowd howled and reviled, and the men spat in the Jew's face and covered him with a load of horse-dung and foul ordure. They hung him finally after unspeakable tortures. Then his body was left to rot in Stuttgart's market-place in the sight of all. A hideous carrion dangling in a silver cage, which his judges had caused to be constructed as a terrible warning to those who would profit by the favour of princes.

Tragic enough in itself, this story of the downfall of a superb ruler and courtier, the more appalling, when we consider that it was chiefly a cruel triumph of race hatred. No unbaptized Jew in German history has risen to such official eminence as Joseph Süss Oppenheimer, and there is little doubt that, had he not been of the race of Israel, even though he had committed the same crimes, he would not have suffered this fearsome death.

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[350]

CHAPTER XXII

REST

'Memories that make the heart a tomb.'

THERE is solace to the mourner in the sound of rushing waters; most of all can the stricken soul find a short oblivion in the ceaseless chant of the ocean's mighty surging; and by the tumult of a great river human unrest is soothed ineffably.

At Schaffhausen the Rhine falls in giant cascades, roaring and dashing against those rocks which, legend says, Wotan flung into the river in his mighty rage against a poor husbandman who had drowned himself and his lowly wife because her mortal beauty had excited the desire of the amorous wanderer.

White, whirling foam, and above a thin, glistening, veil-like mist made of the myriad drops flung up from the water's impact; but here too the eternal poet, Legend, has wrought a delicate phantasy: this mist he calls the breath from the lips of the Rhine-maidens who sing for ever beneath the foam.

An enchanted place this Schaffhausen, guarded by the great white Alps whose pure crests rise in awful majesty to high Heaven. And here it was that the Grävenitz dwelt after she left Wirtemberg, and here Time the consoler healed her bruised heart and her crushed pride. She dwelt in the small castle which Zollern had given her and where her marriage with Würben had been solemnised. Her soul rested from pain, but there were torturing ghosts of the past around her: Eberhard Ludwig, Madame de Ruth, Zollern, her unkind brother, even the fraudulent attorney Schütz, and the ridiculous figure of her name-husband, Nepomuk Würben. Yes, all her life's denizens had vanished. Death or absence had swallowed them; only she, the central figure, remained.

She was memory-haunted, who herself was but a memory.

Her great healthfulness endured, but sometimes she suffered from strange swoons. 'It is from the heart,' said the apothecary whom Maria called in. [351]

'God knows—heart affliction!' said the Grävenitz bitterly, when they told her of this verdict.

Years passed, and still she lingered at Schaffhausen, though she often promised herself to journey to Berlin armed with that 'Letter of Royal Protection' which Zollern had procured for her from Prussia's first King Friedrich I. But she shrank from bringing her cause before Friedrich Wilhelm I., the blustering monarch who had played so unexpected a rôle in her life. She accounted him as the destroyer of her happiness, for she believed that it was he alone who had influenced Eberhard Ludwig against her, and had induced him to banish her. Woman-like, she threw the blame of her lover's action entirely upon the adviser.

She hankered after her beautiful Freudenthal, and she dreamed of returning thither. Deeming herself forgotten, she believed she would be safe in Wirtemberg. Also the fierce torrent of the people's rage had been diverted to another channel, their hatred sated with their vengeance on another favourite. Süss Oppenheimer, who had saved her from imprisonment, had paid the penalty of his own crimes; in his expiation he had borne the brunt, and, for the time, appeased the people's wrath against favouritism.

Karl Alexander of Wirtemberg was dead, and his son, a child of some twelve years, was Duke of Wirtemberg. He resided in Stuttgart with his mother, a princess of the House of Thurn and Taxis.

Ludwigsburg was deserted, the palace closed; the busy crowd of merchants, clothiers, perruquiers, dressmakers, which had flocked to the new centre of gaiety, had vanished. The Grävenitz had heard that Ludwigsburg was like a city of the dead, with grass-grown streets and deserted houses. Surely she, who belonged to that forgotten past, was forgotten also? She longed to return and once more to view the scenes of her dead glory. But the years passed, and she lingered in Switzerland.

In 1740 she heard of the death of Friedrich Wilhelm I. of Prussia, and of the accession of his much-tried son—that Friedrich whom the world was justly to call Great.

A fresh hope sprang up in the Grävenitz's heart. This young man, so noble, so just, so cultured, would he not give her justice? She would journey to Berlin and present the Letter of Royal Protection; he would recognise her claims, and induce the Wirtemberg government to give her back her Freudenthal. [352]

The headman of the canton of Schaffhausen supplied her with the necessary travelling papers. 'A lady of quality and her serving-maid journeying to Berlin on court business,' it was certified therein; no mention of the names of Grävenitz or Würben, which might have awakened dangerous memories.

Once more her way lay through the spring-radiant land. Fate had caused her to wait for the blossom, it was her destiny always to see Wirtemberg clothed in the fairest raiment. She journeyed through the smiling valleys, she passed beside the peaceful Neckar river. Her way led her near to Rottenburg, and she turned from her road to visit the Neuhaus. Here she found ruin. Madame de Ruth had bequeathed her property to Zollern, and while he lived the place had been tended with pious care; but he too was dead, and the Neuhaus had passed to an heir-at-law who knew not, and if he had known, would not have comprehended, the loving memory which caused the dilapidated mansion to be treasured. It is always so; there is no sadder thing than the melancholy of a place, once sacred and beloved, which has fallen into the chill hands of the indifference of another generation.

The Neuhaus was turned farm: the upper rooms were used as hay-lofts, and in that long, panelled living-room, which had seen Wilhelmine von Grävenitz's strange marriage, a peasant woman cooked, scolding her brood of children. She stared at the Grävenitz.

'Oh yes! this is my husband's farm. What do you want with me? See the house? There is not much to see,' she said suspiciously. A gulden changed her tone.

'Certainly; look if you like,' she said, and followed the sad visitant from room to room, hands on hips, and shrill voice explaining how the rats were so bad in the house that she and her husband would have to leave next month.

'Is there a grave here? a grave surrounded by a stone wall? No? But it was consecrated ground, it cannot have been destroyed?' The Grävenitz spoke quietly, but she could have wept aloud. [353]

Yes, the woman said, there was a bit of walled-off land, but it did not belong to them. There was a gate, and they had not the key. Perhaps there was a grave there; the grass grew so high you could not tell. She led her visitor through the neglected garden which Spring, the glorious gardener, had yet made fair with blossom and the budding lilac. The Grävenitz peered through the bars of the graveyard gate. Ah, thank God! who sends Spring to garnish the graves of the forgotten dead! The tombs were hidden by a fair coronal of waving grasses, and the redthorns above made a baldaquin more beautiful than the work of man's hand.

'Forgotten, yet so peaceful,' she murmured as she turned away.

'Did you speak, lady?' said the peasant woman; but the Grävenitz shook her head.

'Only to myself; only to myself always now,' she answered.

At Tübingen no one paid heed to the traveller, but she did not venture up to the castle. She might have dared it, for none would have remembered her, or recognised in the tall, white-haired woman the beautiful young courtesan who had held mock court in the ancient university castle. She learned that no Duke had resided there for many years, it was entirely given up to the students and their grave professors.

'But the state-rooms? I heard that there were fine apartments in the castle, where princes and their courts held high revel?' she queried of the innkeeper.

'Eh! all those are dismantled now, Madame,' returned the man. Dismantled—the word rang in her ears. Yes; the very scenes of her glorious past were changed.

Through the shadowy Tübingen forest she journeyed onwards. She commanded her driver to turn aside before Stuttgart, and thus she passed along by-roads to Ludwigsburg.

The sun was still high in the heavens when she entered the well-remembered avenue of shady chestnut-trees. Here too Spring had been busy, crowning the trees with bloom. A regal decoration for her home-coming, she thought.

At the stately town-gate her coach halted, and for the first time in her life she paid toll upon [354] entering Ludwigsburg. Her eyes sought the monogram sculptured on the stone gate-pillars: 'E. L.' entwined in graceful curves on a rounded shield upheld by playful amorini. How well she remembered when Frisoni had brought her the drawings for this device. Would her Excellency wish her chiffre to appear in the design? the Italian had asked, and she had rejected the proposal, she hardly knew why.

Her coach lumbered down the Ludwigsburg street. It was in a deplorable condition, and the heavy carriage jolted and swung from side to side. The houses which bordered one side of the street were closed and shuttered, and their blank windows seemed like sightless yet imploring eyes gazing towards the deserted palace gardens.

The driver halted. She heard him shouting to one of the rare passers-by in this dead city, 'Where is the inn?' She made a movement forward and would have called through the window, 'The inn is further down the street,' but she checked herself, remembering that she must betray no knowledge of the town she had created.

It was a daring thing, this visit to Wirtemberg. Who could tell if some one might not recognise her and set a howling mob upon her? The law would not interfere with her; she had been pardoned, and was merely passing through the country on her journey to Berlin, but some remnant of hatred might linger in the peasants' memory.

When she reached the inn the innkeeper looked hard at his guest. Did he recognise her? she wondered.

'Is this Ludwigsburg?' she asked, feigning ignorance.

'Yes, lady. Whom have I the honour of serving?'

She gave some name at random, adding: 'I am travelling from Austria and Switzerland home to Berlin.' Then she inquired concerning the palace. Could a stranger visit the gardens? Did the reigning prince reside in that beautiful palace? and so on, questioning like an inquisitive traveller.

If she wished she could see the whole place, she was told. The new gatekeeper was a very friendly fellow; he would let her into the gardens if she gave him a trifle to purchase a drink of wine. She ordered a meal and pretended to eat, though the food choked her, but she dared not [355] show undue eagerness to visit the palace. At length the dreary subterfuges were over; she had intimated her intention of passing the night at the inn; she had been shown the guest-chamber; she had pretended to rest, and now she was free to repair to her sorry sight-seeing without incurring suspicion.

Evening fell over Ludwigsburg, yet the rounded roofs of the palace were still kissed by the departing sunshine, when she walked up to the gateway through which she had so often driven in ceremonious state surrounded by the splendid Silver Guard. A squat-figured, broad-faced Wirtemberger stood in the gateway, smoking a huge carved wood pipe of rank tobacco. The blue smoke rose in spirals from the pipe bowl, and the man blew clouds of a browner hue, the delicate blue-grey of the smoke spoiled from the admixture of human breath.

The man watched the Grävenitz's approach without offering greeting or comment.

'Are you the gatekeeper?' she asked.

'Yes, that I am,' he grunted ungraciously. Good Heavens! how she would have had him flogged if he had spoken to her thus twelve years ago! She looked at him steadily.

'I am a stranger, and would fain visit this famous palace,' she said.

'Have you an order from the court? I cannot let strangers enter without one,' he returned gruffly.

'No, I have no order. Will you let me see the gardens, at least?' He shook his head and continued

smoking.

'See, I will give you something for your trouble, but I must see the gardens.' She held out two golden pieces. 'Take these, and let me enter,' she said imploringly.

The man's manner changed. This must be some great lady if she could pay him in gold when he would have let her in for a few groschen. Well, these travellers often had strange fancies; and if it pleased her to pay so much for so small a thing!—He took the money and moved aside.

'Go in, go in, lady! Shall I come round with you? I have heard tell all about the old days here: I can show you where Duke Eberhard Ludwig lived, and where the Duke Karl died. I will go fetch the castle keys.' She shuddered.

'No! no! I do not wish to see; I will only walk in the garden. Do not disturb yourself,' she said [356] hastily, and passed on. The gatekeeper followed her a few steps: 'You can see the gardens of La Favorite, if you wish; you need only walk straight from the north terraces and you will come to La Favorite,' he called after her. How strange it was to be thus directed by a newcomer, told the way, shown what she had planned and devised yard by yard. She nodded to the man. 'I thank you, I shall find my way,' she answered.

And now she was free to wander in the past, free to suffer the exquisite pain of memory. She walked slowly on. How the trees had grown! And the little lilacs she had planted—they were tall bushes now. The paths were grass-grown, the water in the basin of the fountain on the south side was covered with weeds and thick green slime, the large stone vases which stood round the basin were moss-covered. The lichen hid the medallions on the vases, the medallions which bore her sculptured portrait. There were the clumps of rose peonies she had planted—in bud too—she would never see them flower again. On, through the gardens to the courtyard where grass grew between the paving-stones. The palace windows were closed and shuttered. No sound broke the stillness of this deserted dwelling-place. The thought came to her that only herself, a ghost of past glories, and perhaps the sinister spectre of the White Lady, moved about the dead palace. She passed on. The door of the main entrance on the ground floor of the Corps de Logis stood ajar. Strange that it should be so in this shut house. She entered; no, it could not matter even if the doors had stood wide open, for the hall was entirely empty—not a chair or table for a thief to drag away! And the well-remembered staircase, leading to Eberhard Ludwig's apartments, was boarded up with rough deal planks.

The air struck chill and tomblike in the entrance-hall, yet the Grävenitz lingered. Yes; there from the ceiling her own face looked down at her in two bas-reliefs. In one the face was smiling with half-open, voluptuous lips, and the eyes, a little drooping, told of some delicious thrill of passion. Opposite this was the figure of Time, winged and frowning, with huge scythe-blades in his mighty [357] hands. She shuddered; those relentless blades had indeed mown down the little day of her love's triumph. What devil had prompted the Italian Frisoni to illustrate this terrible truth upon the very palace built to honour her?

Across the entrance-hall she saw another bas-relief, again her face, but serious this time, looking fixedly, gravely upwards—the expression of one who aspires, of one who would compel Destiny. Facing this was a medallion bearing a ducal crown in the centre, the scroll-work round this medallion was made of giant thorns, and a peering, mocking satyr's face peeped out from the thorn wreath.

Had the Italian dared to mock her thus? And in the old days she had not noted the insolent meaning underlying the beautiful designs! How she would have revenged herself upon the artist!

She turned away. After all, the man had spoken truly in his sculptured allegory: Time, and Change, and Death are more mighty than Love, than Joy, than Power. She mused on, and unconsciously her wanderings, led by old custom's memory, brought her to the vaulted arcade beside the door of the east pavilion where she had dwelt. Here, too, her own face met her in the bas-reliefs. Graceful designs of musical instruments, emblems of her taste, and everywhere laughing Cupids held wreathed flowers, viole d'amore, harps and lutes around the mistress-musician's voluptuous face.

The carven stone held for ever the memory of Eberhard Ludwig's homage in the beauteous picturing of Love, Laughter, Music—all that she had wielded with such potency to charm; and she knew that the sneering artist-architect had hidden everywhere the figure of Time the Avenger; sometimes she had called him the Consoler, but she knew him better now as the Eternally Pitiless, waiting to reap his harvest—the flowers reaped with the wheat.

Suddenly the full message came to her: 'All things wither, but the remembrance of the sinful light of love is bitter pain, whereas the memory of the pure woman is sweet with children's tears.' She had read the words in some book, they smote her now. In an agony of weeping she leaned her head against the stone picture of Music, Love, and Laughter, and her own young face. 'O God! O [358] God! have I not atoned by pain?' she moaned.

A soft evening breeze came stealing round her. Nature could give no answer to her fearful questioning, but the gentle Spring wind kissed her on lips and brow. She rose and took her way to the terrace. Here, too, was ruinous neglect—grass-grown paths, moss-covered sculptures, untended plants. She looked up at the windows of the rooms which had been Eberhard Ludwig's; they were closed and shuttered.—Dead, everything was dead!

She hurried on towards La Favorite, her Château Joyeux. Here again was ruin, and here also her own face met her sculptured everywhere—smiling, young, and indifferent to the ruin. The flowering parterre was untended, but the lilacs and the redthorn-trees made the garden fair. The long Spring twilight faded, night drew near—and the Grävenitz turned away. 'Farewell,' she said aloud, 'the night comes! Farewell, Spring!'

That night Maria could not induce her beloved mistress to taste food. 'I am so weary, Maria, let me rest. I think God will give me sleep,' she said, and the faithful peasant woman left her.

In the morning Maria found her resting still. God had given her the Great Sleep.

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