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THE SIGN OF FLAME.

FROM THE GERMAN OF E. WERNER

TRANSLATED BY

EVA FREEMAN HART AND E. VAN GERPEN

"Give me a nook and a book,
And let the proud world spin round."

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THE SIGN OF FLAME.
Translated by EVA FREEMAN HART and E. VAN GERPEN.

THE SIGN OF FLAME

CHAPTER I.

Through the gray fog of an autumn morning a flock of birds took flight; sweeping now, as if in farewell, close to the firs, so recently their home--rising now to a goodly height, directing their flight toward the south, and disappearing slowly in the veiled distance.

The gloomy eyes of a man standing at a window of the large castle-like mansion situated at the edge of the forest, followed this flight.

He was of tall stature and powerful in physique; the erect bearing would have betrayed the soldier even without the uniform which he wore: his features not handsome but strong; hair light, and eyes blue; in short, a typical German in appearance; but something like a shadow rested on those features, and the high brow bore deeper furrows than the years seemed to warrant.

"There, the birds are already leaving," he said, pointing to the flock which fluttered in the distance until lost entirely in the mass of fog. "The autumn is here in nature and also in our lives."

"Not yet in yours," interrupted his companion. "You are standing in full strength at the height of your life."

"Perhaps so considering years; but I feel as if old age would approach me sooner than any one else. I feel much like the autumn of the year."

The other gentleman, who was in civilian dress, was probably older than his companion. His stature was of medium height and frail. At first sight he appeared almost insignificant beside the powerful form of the officer, but the pale, sharply outlined face bore an expression of cold,

superior calm; and the sarcastic line around the thin lips proved that behind the cold composure expressed in his whole manner something deeper lay concealed.

He now shook his head with displeasure.

"You take life too hard, Falkenried," he said reproachfully; "you have changed remarkably in these last years. He who has seen you as a young officer, merry as the day, would not recognize you now. And why all this? The shadow which once clouded your life has long ago vanished; you are heart and soul a soldier; you receive distinction at every opportunity; an important position is assured you in the near future; and, what is best--you have kept your son."

Falkenried did not reply; he folded his arms and again looked out into the gray distance. The other continued:

"The boy has grown as handsome as a picture in these last few years. I was quite surprised when I saw him, and even you confess that he is extraordinarily gifted, and, moreover, in several respects is endowed with absolute genius."

"I wish Hartmut were less gifted and had more character instead," Falkenried said in almost harsh tones. "He can make poetry and learn languages as if it were play, but as soon as he begins earnest study he remains far behind the others; while as to military strategy, nothing whatever can be done with him. You have no idea, Wallmoden, what iron severity I have to bring to bear on that."

"I only fear that you do not accomplish much with this severity," interrupted Wallmoden. "You should have followed my advice and sent your son to the University. That he is not cut out for a soldier you ought now finally to see."

"He must and shall be fit for it; it is the only thing possible for his unruly disposition, which chafes under every curb and feels every duty a burden. The University--the life of a student--would give him fullest liberty. Nothing but the iron discipline to which he has to bow keeps him in check."

"Yes, for a while; but can it force him in the future? You should not deceive yourself. His are, unfortunately, inherited faults, which may possibly be suppressed, but never uprooted. Hartmut is in appearance the image of his mother; he has her features--her eyes."

"Yes, I know," Falkenried said, gloomily, "her dark, demoniacal, glowing eyes, which knew how to charm everything----"

"And which became your ruin," completed Wallmoden. "How did I not warn and implore against them, but you would not listen to anything. Passion had taken hold of you like a fever and held you in bonds altogether. I have never been able to understand it."

A bitter smile flitted around Falkenried's mouth.

"I believe that. You, the cool, calculating diplomat who carefully measure every step, are safe from such charms."

"I should at least be more careful in my choice. Your marriage brought misfortune with it from the beginning. A wife of foreign race and blood--of wild Slavian nature, without character, without any understanding for that which is custom and duty to us, and you with your strict principles--your irritable sense of honor--it had finally to come to such an end. And I believe you loved her up to the separation in spite of everything!"

"No," said Falkenried harshly. "The illusion vanished in the first year. I saw only too clearly--but I shuddered at the idea of laying my domestic miseries open to the world by a divorce. I bore it until no choice was left me--until I finally--but enough of it!"

He turned quickly, and again looked out of the window. There was suppressed torture in the sudden breaking off.

"Yes, it needed much to tear a nature like yours from the roots," Wallmoden said seriously; "but nevertheless the separation left you free from the unfortunate claim, and with that you should have also buried the reminiscences."

"One cannot bury such reminiscences; they always rise up again from the supposed grave, and just now----" Falkenried broke off suddenly.

"Just now--what do you mean?"

"Nothing; let us speak of other things. You have been at Burgsdorf since the day before yesterday. How long do you intend to stay?"

"Perhaps two weeks. I have not much time at my disposal, and am Willibald's guardian really only in name, since the diplomatic service keeps me mostly in foreign countries. In fact, the guardianship rests in the hands of my sister, who rules everything, anyhow."

"Yes, Regine is well up to her position," assented Falkenried. "She rules the large estates and numerous people like a man."

"And issues commands from morning to night like a sergeant," completed Wallmoden. "With all due appreciation for her excellent qualities, I always feel a slight rising of the hair at the prospect of a visit to Burgsdorf, and I return from there regularly with shattered nerves. Real primitive conditions rule in that place. Willibald is actually a young bear, but the ideal of his mother for all that. She does her best to raise him an ignorant young country squire. All interposition is of no use, for he has every inclination for it, anyway."

The entrance of a servant interrupted them. He handed a card to Falkenried, which the latter glanced at hastily.

"Herr Egern, Solicitor. Very well, show the gentleman in."

"Have you a business engagement?" asked Wallmoden, rising. "I will not disturb you."

"On the contrary, I beg you to remain. I have been advised of this visit, and know what will be discussed. It concerns----"

He did not conclude, for the door opened and the one announced entered.

He seemed surprised not to find the officer alone, as he had expected, but the latter took no notice of the surprise.

"Herr Egern, Solicitor--Herr von Wallmoden, Secretary of the Ambassador."

The barrister bowed with cool courtesy, and accepted the offered chair.

"I probably have the honor of being familiar to you, Herr Major," he began. "As counsel for your wife, I had occasional cause to meet you personally in that suit for divorce."

He stopped, and seemed to expect an answer, but Major Falkenried only bowed in mute assent. Wallmoden now began to be attentive. He could now understand the strangely irritable mood in which he had found his friend upon his arrival.

"I come to-day also in the name of my former client," continued the lawyer. "She has asked me--may I speak freely?"

He cast a glance at the Secretary, but Falkenried said shortly:

"Herr von Wallmoden is my friend, and as such is familiar with the case. I beg you to speak without restraint."

"Very well, then--the lady has returned to Germany after long years of absence, and naturally wishes to see her son. She has already written to you on that behalf, but has not received an answer."

"I should consider that a sufficient answer. I do not desire this meeting, and therefore shall not permit it."

"That sounds very harsh, Herr Major. Frau von Falkenried has surely----"

"Frau Zalika Rojanow, you mean to say," interrupted the Major. "She resumed her maiden name, so far as I know, when she returned to her country."

"The name is of no consequence," replied the lawyer calmly. "The sole consideration here is the perfectly justifiable wish of a mother, which the father cannot and must not deny, even when, as in this case, the son is given to him unconditionally."

"Must not! And if he should do it, notwithstanding?"

"Then he oversteps the borders of his rights. I would like to ask you, Herr Major, to consider the matter calmly before speaking such a decided 'No.' The rights of a mother cannot be so completely cancelled by a decision of the court that one may even deny her a meeting with her only child. The law is upon the side of my client in this case, and she will enforce it, if my personal appeal is ignored as was her written request."

"She may try it then. I will let it come to the test. My son does not know that his mother is alive, and shall not learn it just yet. I do not wish that he should see and speak to her, and I shall know how to prevent it. My 'No' remains unchanged."

These remarks were given quietly, but upon Falkenried's features there lay an ashy paleness, and his voice sounded hollow and threatening. The awful excitement under which he labored was apparent; only with supreme effort could he force himself to outward calm. The lawyer seemed to understand the fruitlessness of further effort. He only shrugged his shoulders.

"If this be your final decision, then my errand is, of course, finished, and we must decide later

upon further moves. I am sorry to have disturbed you, Herr Major."

He took his leave with the same cool politeness with which he had entered.

Falkenried sprang up and paced the room stormily after the door had closed upon the lawyer. A depressing silence reigned for a few moments, after which Wallmoden spoke half audibly.

"You ought not to have done that. Zalika will hardly submit to your 'No.' If you remember, she carried on a life-and-death struggle for her child at that time."

"But I remained victor. I hope she has not forgotten that."

"At that time it concerned the possession of the boy," interrupted the friend. "The mother now only requests to see him again, and you will not be able to deny her that when she demands it with decision."

The Major came to a sudden standstill, but there was a scarcely veiled contempt in his voice as he said:

"She dares not do that after all that happened. Zalika learned to know me in our parting hour. She will take care not to force me to extremes a second time."

"But she will perhaps try to obtain secretly what you refuse her openly."

"That will be impossible; the discipline of our school is too strict. No relations could be started there of which I would not be notified immediately."

Wallmoden did not seem to share this confidence; he shook his head doubtingly.

"I confess that I consider your keeping, with such persistence, the knowledge of his mother's existence from your son a mistake. If he should hear it now from another source--what then? And you will have to tell him finally."

"Perhaps after two years, when he enters life independently. He is still but a scholar--a mere boy. I cannot yet draw the veil from the tragedy which was once enacted in the home of his parents--I cannot."

"Then at least be upon your guard. You know your former wife--know what can be expected from her. I fear there are no impossibilities for that woman."

"Yes, I know her," said Falkenried with boundless bitterness, "and just for that reason I will protect my son from her at any cost. He shall not breathe the poison of her presence for even an hour. Rest assured, I do not underrate the danger of Zalika's return, but as long as Hartmut remains at my side he will be safe from her, for she will not approach me again. I pledge you my word for that."

"We will hope so," returned Wallmoden, rising and giving his hand, "but do not forget that the greatest danger lies in Hartmut himself. He is in every respect the son of his mother. I hear you will come with him to Burgsdorf the day after tomorrow?"

"Yes; he always spends the short autumn vacation with Willibald. I myself can probably stay only for the day, but I shall surely come with him. Au revoir!"

The Ambassador's Secretary departed, and Falkenried again approached the window, glancing only hastily after the friend, who bowed once more. His glance was again lost with the former gloom, in the gray masses of fog.

"The son of his mother!"

The words rang in his ears, but there was no need for another to tell him that. He had long known it, and it was this knowledge that furrowed his brow so deeply and caused those heavy sighs.

He was a man to offer himself to every open danger, but he had struggled in vain, with all his energy for years, against this unfortunate inheritance of the blood in his only son.

CHAPTER II.

"Now I request that this utter foolishness shall end, for my patience is exhausted. There has been an awful turmoil in all Burgsdorf for three days, as if the place were conjured. Hartmut is full of foolishness from head to toe. When once he gets free from the rein which his father draws so tight there is no getting on with him. And you, of course, go with him through thick and thin, following obediently everything that your lord and master starts. You are a fine team!"

This lecture, delivered in very loud tones, came from the lips of Frau von Eschenhagen of Burgsdorf, who sat at breakfast with her son and brother.

The large dining-room was in the lower story of the old mansion, and was a rather bare room, the glass doors of which led to a broad terrace, and from there into the garden. Some antlers hung upon the whitewashed walls, giving evidence of the Nimrod proclivities of former owners. They were also the only ornament of the room.

A dozen straightback chairs standing in stiff rows like grenadiers, a heavy dining table, and two old-fashioned sideboards constituted all of the furniture, which, as one could see, had already served several generations.

Articles of luxury, such as carpets, wallpaper or paintings, were not there. The inmates were apparently satisfied with the old, inherited things, although Burgsdorf was one of the richest estates in the vicinity.

The appearance of the lady of the house corresponded fully with the surroundings. She was about forty years old; of tall, powerful figure, blooming complexion, and strong, heavy features, which were very energetic, but which could never have been beautiful. Nothing escaped easily the glance of those sharp, gray eyes; the dark hair was combed back plainly; the dress was simple and serviceable, and one could see that her hands knew how to work.

This robust person lacked gracefulness, certainly, but possessed something decidedly masculine in carriage and appearance.

The heir and future lord of Burgsdorf, who was scolded in this way, sat opposite his mother, listening, as in duty bound, while he helped himself bountifully to ham and eggs. He was a handsome, ruddy-faced boy of about seventeen years, with features which might portray great good nature, but no surplus of intellect. His sunburned face was full of glowing health, but otherwise bore little resemblance to his mother's. It lacked her energetic expression. The blue eyes and light hair must have been an inheritance from the father. With his powerful but awkward limbs he looked like a young giant, and offered the completest contrast to his Uncle Wallmoden, who sat at his side, and who now said with a tinge of sarcasm:

"You really ought not to make Willibald responsible for the pranks and tricks. He is certainly the ideal of a well-raised son."

"I should advise him not to be anything else. Obeying of orders is what I insist upon," exclaimed Frau von Eschenhagen, slapping the table with such force as to cause her brother to start nervously.

"Yes, one learns that under your regime," he replied, "but I would like to advise you, dear Regine, to do a little more for the mental training of your son. I do not doubt that he will grow up a splendid farmer under your leadership, but something more is required in the education of a future lord, and as Willibald has outgrown tutors, it may be time to send him off."

"Send him----" Frau Regine laid down knife and fork in boundless amazement. "Send him off!" she repeated indignantly. "In gracious name, where to?"

"Well, to the University, and later on let him travel, that he may see something of the world and its people."

"And that he may be totally ruined in this world and among these people! No, Herbert, that will not do. I tell you right now. I have raised my boy in honesty and the fear of God, and have no idea of letting him go into that Sodom and Gomorrah from which our dear Lord keeps the rain of fire and brimstone by His long-suffering alone."

"But you know this Sodom and Gomorrah only by hearsay, Regine," interrupted Herbert sarcastically. "You have lived in Burgsdorf ever since your marriage, but your son must one day enter life as a man--you must acknowledge that."

"I do not acknowledge anything," declared Frau von Eschenhagen stubbornly. "Willy shall be a thoroughly capable farmer. He is fitted for that and does not need your learned trash for it. Or do you, perhaps, wish to take him in training for a diplomat. That would be capital fun!"

She laughed loudly, and Willy, to whom this proposition seemed as ridiculous, joined in in the same key.

Herr von Wallmoden did not indulge in this hilarity, which seemed to jar upon his nerves. He only shrugged his shoulders.

"I do not intend that, indeed; it would probably be lost pains; but I and Willibald are now the only representatives of the family, and if I should remain unmarried----"

"*If?* Are you contemplating marriage in your old age?" interrupted his sister in her inconsiderate manner.

"I am forty-five years old, dear Regine. That is not usually considered old in a man," said Wallmoden, somewhat offended. "At any rate, I consider a late contracted marriage the best, because then one is not influenced by passion as was Falkenried to his great misfortune, but one allows reason to guide the decision."

"May God help me! Must Willy wait until he has fifty years upon his back and gray hairs upon his head before he marries!" exclaimed Frau von Eschenhagen, horrified.

"No; for he must consider the fact that he is an only son and future lord of the estates; besides, it will depend upon an individual attachment. What do you say, Willibald?"

The young future lord, who had just finished his ham and eggs, and was now turning with unappeased appetite to the *wurst*, was apparently greatly surprised at having his opinion asked. Such a thing happened so seldom that he was now thrown into a spell of deep musing, declaring as the result of it:

"Yes; I shall probably have to marry some time, but mamma will find me a wife when the time comes."

"That she will, my boy," affirmed Frau von Eschenhagen. "That is my affair; you do not need to worry about it at all. You will remain here in Burgsdorf, where I shall have you under my eyes. Universities and travels are not to be considered--that is decided."

She threw a challenging glance at her brother, but he was regarding with a kind of horror the enormous amount of eatables which his nephew was piling upon his plate for the second time.

"Do you always have such a healthy appetite, Willy?" he asked.

"Always," assured Willy with satisfaction, taking another huge piece of bread and butter.

"Yes; God be thanked, we do not suffer from indigestion here," said Frau Regine, somewhat pointedly. "We deserve our meals honestly. First play and work, then eat and drink, and heartily--that keeps soul and body together. Just look at Willy, how he has prospered with that treatment. He need never be ashamed to be seen."

She slapped her brother upon the shoulder in a friendly manner at these words, but so heartily that Wallmoden hastily pushed his chair out of her reach. His face betrayed plainly that his hair was "standing on end" again; but he gave up the enforcing of his rights as guardian in the face of these primitive conditions.

Willy, on the contrary, apparently discovered that he had turned out extraordinarily well, and looked very pleased at this praise of his mother, who continued now rather vexedly:

"And Hartmut has not come to breakfast again! He seems to allow himself all sorts of irregularities here at Burgsdorf, but I shall lecture the young man when he comes, and make him----"

"Here he is already!" cried a voice from the garden.

A shadow fell athwart the bright sunshine that poured in through the open window, in which there suddenly appeared a youthful form, which swung itself through from the outside.

"Boy, are you out of your senses that you enter through the window?" exclaimed Frau von Eschenhagen indignantly. "What are the doors for?"

"For Willy and other well-raised people," laughed the intruder mirthfully. "I always take the shortest route, and this time it led through this window."

With one jump he landed in the middle of the room from the high sill.

Hartmut Falkenried, like the future lord of Burgsdorf, stood at the border between boyhood and manhood, but beyond that likeness it required but a glance to see the superiority of Hartmut in every respect.

He wore the cadet uniform, which became him wonderfully, but there was something in his whole appearance indicative of a revolt against the strict military cut.

The tall, slender boy was a true picture of youth and beauty, but this beauty had something strange and foreign about it; the movement and whole appearance had a wild, unruled element; and not a feature reminded one of the powerful, soldierly figure and grave composure of the father. The thick, curly hair of a blue-black color, falling over the high brow, denoted a son of the South, rather than a German; the eyes also, which glowed in the youthful face, did not belong to

the cold, calm North; they were mysterious eyes, dark as night, yet full of hot, passionate fire. Beautiful as they were, there was something uncanny about them.

And now the laugh, with which Hartmut looked from one to another of the assembly, had more of the supercilious about it than of a boy's hearty mirth.

"You introduce yourself in a very unconventional manner," said Wallmoden sharply; "you seem to think that no etiquette is to be observed at Burgsdorf. I hardly think your father would have permitted such an entrance into a dining-room."

"He does not take such liberties with his father," said Frau von Eschenhagen, who fortunately did not feel the stab which lay for her also in her brother's words. "So you finally come now, Hartmut, when we have finished breakfast? But late people do not get anything to eat--you know that."

"Yes, I know it," returned Hartmut, quite unconcerned; "therefore I got the housekeeper to give me some breakfast. You can't starve me out, Aunt Regine. I am on too good terms with all your people."

"So you think you will be able to take all sorts of liberties unpunished," cried the lady of the house angrily. "You break all the rules of the house; you leave no person nor thing in peace; you stand all Burgsdorf upon its head! We shall know how to stop all that, my boy. I shall send a messenger over to your father to-morrow, to ask him to kindly come for his son, who can be taught no punctuality or obedience."

This threat was effective; the boy grew serious and found it best to yield.

"Oh, all that is only jesting," he said. "Am I not to utilize the short vacation----"

"For all sorts of foolishness?" interrupted Frau von Eschenhagen. "Willy in all his life has not done so many pranks as you in these last three days. You will ruin him for me by your bad example and make him also disobedient."

"Oh, Willy can't be ruined; all pains are thrown away with him," confessed Hartmut frankly.

The young lord did not look, indeed, as if he had any inclination to disobedience. Quite unconcerned by all this conversation, he calmly finished his breakfast by still another piece of bread and butter; but his mother was highly incensed over this remark.

"You are doubtless extremely sorry for that," she exclaimed. "You have taken pains enough to ruin him. Very well, it remains as I said--to-morrow I write to your father."

"To come for me? You will not do that, Aunt Regine. You are too good to do that. You know very well how strict papa is--how harshly he can punish. You surely will not accuse me to him--you have never done so before."

"Leave me alone, boy, with your flatteries." Frau Regine's face was still very grim, but her voice already betrayed a perceptible wavering, and Hartmut knew how to take the advantage offered. With the artless frankness of a boy, he laid his arm around her shoulders.

"I thought you loved me a little bit, Aunt Regine. I--I have anticipated this trip to Burgsdorf so joyously for weeks. I have longed until I was sick, for forest and lake, for the green meadows and the wide, blue sky; I have been so happy here--but, of course, if you do not want me, I shall leave immediately; you do not need to send me away."

His voice sank to a soft, coaxing whisper, while the large, dark eyes helped with the pleading only too effectively. They could speak more fervently than the lips; they seemed, indeed, to have peculiar power.

Frau von Eschenhagen, who to Willy and all Burgsdorf, was the stern, absolute ruler, now allowed herself to be moved to compliance.

"Well, then, behave yourself, you Eulenspiegel," she said, running her fingers through his thick curls. "As to sending you away, you know only too well that Willy and all my people are perfectly foolish about you--and so am I."

Hartmut shouted in his happiness at these last words, and kissed her hand in fervent gratitude. Then he turned to his friend, who had now happily mastered his last sandwich, and was regarding the scene before him in quiet amazement.

"Are you through with your breakfast at last, Willy? Come on; we wished to go to the Burgsdorf pond--now don't be so slow and deliberate. Good-by, Aunt Regine. I see that Uncle Wallmoden is not pleased in the least that you have pardoned me. Hurrah! Now we are off for the woods."

And away he dashed over the terraces and down to the garden. There was in this unruliness an overflowing youthful happiness and strength that were enchanting; the lad was all life and fire. Willy trotted behind him like a young bear, and they disappeared in a few seconds behind

the trees and shrubberies.

"He comes and goes like a whirlwind," said Frau von Eschenhagen, looking after them. "That boy cannot be restrained when once the reins are slackened."

"A dangerous lad!" declared Wallmoden. "He understands how to rule even you, who otherwise rule supreme. It is the first time in my knowledge that you pardon disobedience and unpunctuality."

"Yes, Hartmut has something about him that really bewitches a body," exclaimed Frau von Eschenhagen, half vexed over her yielding. "When he looks at one with those glowing, black eyes, and begs and pleads besides, I would like to see the one who could say no. You are right; he is a dangerous lad."

"Yes, very true; but let us leave Hartmut alone now and consider the education of your own son. You have really decided----"

"To keep him at home. Do not trouble yourself, Herbert. You may be an important diplomat and carry the whole political business in your pockets, but nevertheless I do not surrender my boy to you. He belongs to me alone, and I keep him--settled!"

A hearty slap upon the table accompanied this "settled," with which the reigning mistress of Burgsdorf arose and walked out of doors; but her brother shrugged his shoulders, and muttered half audibly: "Let him become a country squire, for all I care--it may be best, anyhow."

CHAPTER III.

In the meantime, Hartmut and Willibald had reached the forest belonging to the estate. The Burgsdorf pond, a lonely water bordered by rushes in the midst of the forest, lay motionless, shining in the sunlight of the quiet morning hour.

The young lord found for himself a shady place upon the bank, and devoted himself comfortably and persistently to the interesting occupation of fishing, while the impatient Hartmut roamed around, starting a bird here, plucking rushes and flowers there, and finally indulging in gymnastics upon the trunk of a tree which lay half in the water.

"Can you never be quiet in one place? You scare off all the fishes," said Willy, displeased. "I have not caught a thing to-day."

"How can you sit for hours in one spot waiting for the stupid fishes--but, of course, you can roam through field and forest all the year round whenever you like. You are free--free!"

"Are you imprisoned?" asked Willy. "Are not you and your companions out of doors every day?"

"But never alone--never without restraint and supervision. We are eternally on duty, even in the hours of recreation. Oh, how I hate it--this duty and life of slavery!"

"But, Hartmut, what if your father should hear that?"

"He would punish me again, then, as usual. He has nothing for me but severity and punishment. I don't care--it's all the same to me."

He threw himself upon the grass, but harsh and disagreeable as his words sounded, there was in them something like a pained, passionate complaint.

Willy only shook his head deliberately fastening a new bait to his hook meanwhile, and deep silence reigned for a few moments.

Suddenly something dashed down from on high, lightning-like; the water, just now so motionless, splashed and foamed, and in the next moment a heron rose high in the air, carrying the struggling, silver-shining prey in his bill.

"Bravo! that was a splendid shot," cried Hartmut, starting up, but Willy scolded vexedly. "The con---- robber strips our whole pond. I shall tell the forester to keep an eye on him."

"A robber!" repeated Hartmut, as his eyes followed the heron, which now disappeared behind the tree-tops. "Yes, surely; but it must be beautiful--such a free robber's life high up in the air. To dash down from the heights like a flash of lightning--to grab the booty, then soar high with it

again where no one can follow--that is worthy of the chase."

"Hartmut, I actually believe you have a good notion to lead such a robber's life," said Willy, with the deep horror of a well-raised boy for such inclinations.

His companion laughed, but it was again that harsh, strange laugh which had in it nothing youthful.

"And if I should have it, they would know how to get it out of me at the cadets' school. There is obedience--discipline--the Alpha and Omega of all things, and one finally learns it, too. Willy, have you never longed for wings?"

"I? Wings?" ejaculated Willy, whose full attention was again directed to hook and line. "Nonsense! who could wish for impossibilities?"

"I wish I had some," cried Hartmut, flaming up. "I wish I were one of the falcons of which we hear. Then I would soar high up into the blue air--always higher and higher toward the sun, and would never, never come back."

"I think you are crazy," said the young lord calmly; "but I have not caught anything yet; the fish will not bite at all to-day. I must try another spot."

He gathered up his fishing paraphernalia and went to the other side of the pond.

Hartmut threw himself upon the ground again.

How could he expect that the stolid, matter-of-fact Willibald should harbor thoughts of flying!

It was one of those autumn days which seem to charm back the summer for a few short hours--the sunshine was so golden, the air so mild, the woods so fresh and fragrant. Thousands of brilliant sparkles danced upon the water; the rushes whispered low and mysteriously as the air breathed through them.

Hartmut lay quite motionless, listening to this mystery of whispering and fluttering. The wild, passionate flame, which had flared up almost uncannily when he spoke of the bird of prey, had disappeared from his eyes. Now they were riveted dreamily upon the shining blue of the sky, with a consuming longing in their depths.

Light footsteps drew near, almost inaudible on the soft forest soil; the bushes rustled as if brushed by a silken garment, and parted; a female figure emerged noiselessly and stopped short, fixing an intent look upon the young dreamer.

"Hartmut!"

He started and sprang up quickly. He did not know the voice, nor the stranger, but it was a lady, and he bowed chivalrously.

"Gracious lady----"

A slender and trembling hand was laid hastily and warningly upon his arm.

"Hush--not so loud--your companion might hear us, and I must speak with you, Hartmut--with you alone."

She stepped back again and motioned him to follow. Hartmut hesitated a moment. How came this stranger, whose face was closely veiled, but who, to judge by her dress, belonged to the highest class, at this lonely forest pond? And what was the meaning of the familiar "thou" from her to him, whom she saw now for the first time? But the mystery of the encounter began to interest him, and he followed her.

They stopped under the protection of the bushes where they could not be seen from the other side, and the stranger slowly raised her veil.

She was no longer in her youth--a woman still in her thirties--but the face with the dark, flashing eyes possessed a strange fascination, and the same charm was in the voice, which, even in the whisper, was soft and deep, with a foreign accent, as if the German which she spoke so fluently was not her native tongue.

"Hartmut, look at me. Do you really not remember me? Have you not kept some recollection from your childhood that tells you who I am?"

The young man shook his head slowly, and yet there arose in his mind a remembrance, misty and dreamlike, that told him he did not now hear this voice for the first time--that he had seen this face before in times long, long past. Half timidly, half transfixed, he stood there gazing upon the stranger, who suddenly stretched out both arms toward him.

"My son! my only child! do you not know your mother?"

Hartmut retreated, startled.

"My mother is dead," he said in a low tone.

The stranger laughed bitterly; it sounded exactly like that harsh, unchildlike laugh which had come from the lips of the lad only a short while ago.

"So that is it; they have called me dead. They would not leave you even the memory of your mother. But it is not true, Hartmut. I live--I stand before you. Look at me! look at my features, which are yours also. They could not take those from you. Child of my heart, do you not feel that you belong to me?"

Still Hartmut stood motionless, looking into the face in which he saw his own reflected as in a mirror. There were the same features, the same abundant, blue-black hair; the same large, deep black eyes--yes--even the strange demoniac expression which glowed like a flame in the mother's eyes, glimmered as a spark in the eyes of the son. The natural resemblance showed that they were of the same blood, and now the voice of that blood woke up in the young man.

He did not ask for explanations--for proofs; the confused, dream-like recollections suddenly became clear. Only one more second of hesitation, then he threw himself into the arms which were open for him.

"Mother!"

In the exclamation lay the glowing devotion of the lad, who had never known what it was to possess a mother, and who had longed for it with all his passionate nature.

His mother! As he lay in her arms while she overwhelmed him with passionate caresses--with tender, fond names such as he had never heard, all else disappeared in the flood of overwhelming delight.

Several minutes passed thus, then Hartmut disengaged himself from the embrace which would have detained him.

"Why have you never been with me, mamma?" he asked vehemently. "Why did they tell me that you were dead?"

Zalika drew back. In a moment all the tenderness vanished from her face; a light kindled there of wild, deadly hatred, and the answer came hissing from her lips:

"Because your father hates me, my son, and because he did not wish to leave me even the love of my only child when he thrust me from him."

Hartmut was silent with consternation. He knew well that no one dared mention his mother's name in his father's presence--that his father had once silenced him with the greatest harshness when he had ventured to ask for her, but he had been too young to muse over the why.

Zalika did not give him time for it now. She stroked the dark, curly hair back from the high forehead, and a shadow rested on her face.

"You have his brow," she said slowly, "but that is the only thing to remind of him; everything else belongs to me--to me alone. Every feature tells that you are wholly mine. I knew it would be so."

Again she embraced him, overwhelming him with caresses, which Hartmut returned as passionately. It was an intoxication of happiness to him--like one of the fairy tales of which he had so often dreamed, and he gave himself up to the charm unquestioningly and unreservedly.

But now Willy made himself heard on the opposite bank, calling loudly for his friend, and reminding him that it was time to return home.

Zalika started.

"We must part. Nobody must know that I have seen you and spoken with you, particularly your father. When do you return to him?"

"In eight days."

"Not until then?" The tone was triumphant. "I shall see you every day until then. Be here at the pond to-morrow at the same hour. Dispense with your companion under some pretext, so that we may be undisturbed. You will come, Hartmut?"

"Certainly mother, but----"

She did not give him time for an excuse, but continued in the same passionate whisper:

"Above all, be silent to everybody; do not forget that. Farewell, my child, my beloved only son. Au revoir!"

One more fervent kiss upon Hartmut's brow, then she vanished in the bushes as mysteriously as she had appeared. It was quite time, for Willy appeared on the scene, his approach being heralded by his heavy stamping upon the forest ground.

"Why do you not answer?" he demanded. "I have called three times. Did you fall asleep? You look as if you had been startled from a dream."

Hartmut stood as if stunned, gazing upon the bushes in which his mother had disappeared. At his cousin's words he straightened himself and drew his hand across his brow.

"Yes, I have been dreaming," he said, slowly; "quite a wonderful, strange dream."

"You might rather have been fishing," said Willy; "just see what a splendid catch I got over on the other bank. A person ought not to dream in broad daylight. He ought to be properly occupied, my mother says--and my mother is always right."

CHAPTER IV.

The families of Falkenried and Wallmoden had been friendly for years. As owners of adjoining estates they visited each other frequently; the children grew up together, and many mutual interests drew the bonds of friendship still closer.

As both families were only comfortably well off, the sons had their own way to make, which, after completing their education, Major Hartmut von Falkenried and Herbert Wallmoden had done. They had been playmates as children, and had remained true to that friendship when grown to manhood.

At one time the parents thought to cement this friendship by a marriage between the--at that time--Lieutenant Falkenried and Regine Wallmoden. The young couple seemed in perfect accord with it, and all looked propitious for the match, when something took place which brought the plan to a sudden end.

A cousin of the Wallmoden family--an incorrigible fellow who, through divers bad capers, had made it impossible to remain at home, had, long ago, gone out into the wide world. After much travel and a rather adventurous life, he had landed in Roumania, where he acted as inspector upon the estates of a rich Bojar. The rich man died, and the inspector thought best to retrieve his lost fortunes and position in life by marriage with the widow.

It was consummated, and he returned to his old home, accompanied by his wife, for a visit to his relatives, after an absence of more than ten years.

Frau von Wallmoden's bloom of youth had long passed, but she brought with her her daughter by her first marriage--Zalika Rojanow.

The young girl, hardly seventeen years old, with her foreign beauty and charm of her glowing temperament, burst like a meteor upon the horizon of this German country nobility, whose life flowed in such calm, even channels.

And she was a strange object in this circle, whose forms and manners she disregarded with sovereign indifference, and who stared at her as at a being from another world. There was many a serious shaking of heads and much condemnation, which was not uttered aloud, because they saw in the girl only a temporary visitor, who would disappear as suddenly as she had come into view.

Just about this time Hartmut Falkenried came from his garrison to the paternal estates, and became acquainted with the new relatives of his friends. He saw Zalika and recognized in her his fate. It was one of those passions which spring up lightning-like--which resemble the intoxication of a dream, and are paid for only too frequently with the penance of the whole life.

Forgotten were the wishes of the parents, his own plans for the future--forgotten the quiet affection which had drawn him to his playmate Regine. He no longer had eyes for the domestic flower which bloomed young and fresh for him; he breathed only the intoxicating perfume of the foreign wonder-plant. All else disappeared before her, and in a quiet hour with her he threw himself at her feet, confessing his love.

Strangely enough, his feelings were returned. Perhaps it was the truth of extremes meeting which drew Zalika to a man who was her opposite in every respect; perhaps she was flattered by

the fact that a glance, a word from her could change the grave, calm and almost gloomy nature of the young officer to enthusiasm.

Enough, she accepted his proposal and he was permitted to embrace her as his betrothed.

The news of this engagement created a storm in the whole family circle; entreaties and warnings came from all sides; even Zalika's mother and stepfather opposed it, but the universal disapproval only increased the determination of the young couple, and six months later Falkenried led his young wife into his home.

But the voices who prophesied misfortune to this marriage were in the right. The bitterest disappointment followed the short term of happiness. It had been a dangerous mistake to believe that a woman like Zalika Rojanow, grown up in boundless freedom and accustomed to the uncontrolled, extravagant life of the families of the Bojars of her country, could ever submit herself to German views and conditions.

To gallop about on fiery horses; to associate freely with men who spent their time in hunting and gambling, and who surrounded themselves in their homes with a splendor which went hand in hand with the most corrupted indebtedness of estates--such was life as she had known it so far, and the only life which suited her.

A conception of duty was as foreign to her as the knowledge of her new position in life. And this woman was to accommodate herself now to the household of a young officer of but limited means, and to the conditions of a small German garrison!

That this was impossible was proved in the first weeks. Zalika began by throwing aside every consideration, and furnishing her house in her usual style, squandering heedlessly her by no means insignificant dowry.

In vain her husband entreated, remonstrated; he found no hearing. She had only sarcasm for forms and rules which were holy to him; only a shrug of the shoulder for his strict sense of honor and ideas of decorum.

Very soon they had the most vehement controversies, and Falkenried recognized too late the serious error which he had committed. He had counted upon the all-powerful efficacy of love to battle against those warning voices which had pointed out the difference of descent, education and character, but he was forced now to recognize that Zalika had never loved him; that caprice alone, or a sudden outburst of passion, which died as suddenly, had brought her to his arms.

She saw in him now only the uncomfortable companion who begrudged her every pleasure of life; who, with his foolish--his ridiculous ideas of honor, fettered and bound her on every side. Still, she feared this man, whose dominant will succeeded always in bowing her characterless nature under his rod.

Even the birth of little Hartmut was not sufficient to reconcile this unhappy marriage; it only held it, apparently, together. Zalika loved her child passionately; she knew her husband would never permit her to keep it if they separated. This alone retained her at his side, while Falkenried bore his domestic misery with concealed pain, putting forth every effort to hide it at least from the world.

Nevertheless, the world knew the truth; it knew things of which the husband did not even dream and which were kept concealed from him through sheer compassion.

But finally the day came when the deceived husband was told what was no secret to others.

The immediate result following was a duel in which Falkenried's opponent fell. Falkenried himself was imprisoned, but was soon pardoned.

Every one knew that the offended husband had only vindicated his honor.

In the meantime, steps were taken for a divorce, which was granted in due time. Zalika made no opposition. She dared not approach her husband; she trembled before him since that hour of separation, when he had called her to account; but she made desperate efforts to secure the possession of her child, fighting as for life.

It was in vain. Hartmut was given unconditionally to his father, who knew how to prevent every approach of the mother with iron inflexibility.

Zalika was not even allowed to see her son again, and it was only after convincing herself entirely on that point that she left--returning to the home of her mother.

She had seemed lost to and forgotten by her former husband until she suddenly reappeared in Germany, where Major Falkenried now held an important position in the large military school at the Residenz.

* * * * *

It was about a week after the arrival of Hartmut at Burgsdorf. Frau von Eschenhagen was in

her sitting-room with Major Falkenried, who had but just arrived.

The topic of their conversation seemed to be very serious and of a rather disagreeable nature, for Falkenried listened with a gloomy face to his friend, who was speaking.

"I noticed Hartmut's changed demeanor the third or fourth day. The boy, whose mirth at first knew no bounds, so that I even threatened to send him back home, suddenly became subdued. He committed no more foolish pranks, but roamed for hours through the woods alone, and when he returned was always dreaming with his eyes open, to such an extent that one had almost to awake him. 'He is beginning to get sensible,' said Herbert; but I said, 'Things are not going right; there is something behind all this,' and I questioned my Willy, who also appeared quite peculiar. He was actually in the plot. He had surprised the two one day. Hartmut had made him promise to keep silent, and my boy positively hid something from *me, his mother!* He confessed only when I got after him seriously. Well, he will not do it a second time. I have taken care of that."

"And Hartmut? What did he say?" interrupted the Major hastily.

"Nothing at all, for I have not spoken a syllable to him about it. He would probably have asked me why he should not see and speak to his own mother, and only--his father can give him the answer to that question."

"He has probably heard it already from the other side," said Falkenried bitterly; "but he has hardly learned the truth."

"I fear so, too, and therefore I did not lose a minute in notifying you after discovering the affair. But what next?"

"I shall have to interfere now," replied the Major with forced composure. "I thank you, Regine. I apprehended trouble when your letter called me so imperatively. Herbert was right. I ought not to have allowed my son to leave my side for an hour under the circumstances. But I believed him safe from every approach here at Burgsdorf. And he anticipated the trip with such pleasure--he longed for it almost passionately. I did not have the heart to refuse him. He is happy, anyway, only when absent from me."

There was deep pain in the last words, but Frau von Eschenhagen only shrugged her shoulders.

"That is not the fault of the boy alone," she said straightforwardly. "I also keep my Willy under good control, but nevertheless he knows that he has a mother whose heart is full of him. Hartmut does not know that of his father. He knows him only from a grave, unapproachable side. If he had an idea that you idolize him secretly----"

"He would abuse the knowledge and disarm me with his caressing tenderness. Shall I allow myself to be ruled by him as every one else is who comes into his presence? His comrades follow him blindly although he brings punishment upon them by his pranks. He has your Willibald completely under control--yes, even his teachers treat him with particular indulgence. I am the only one he fears, and consequently the only one he respects."

"And you think by fear alone to succeed with the boy, who is doubtless now being overwhelmed with the most senseless caresses! Do not turn away, Falkenried; you know I have never mentioned that name to you, but now that it is brought forward so prominently, one may speak it. And since we happen to be upon the subject, I tell you frankly that nothing else could be expected since Frau Zalika's appearance. It would have done no good to have kept Hartmut from Burgsdorf, for one cannot treat a seventeen-year-old lad like a little child. The mother would have found her way to him in spite of all--and it was her right. I would have done just so, too."

"Her right!" cried the Major angrily. "And you tell me that, Regine?"

"I say it because I know what it is to have an only child. That you should take the child from its mother was right--such a mother was not fit for the raising of a boy--but that you now refuse to let her see her son again after twelve years is harshness and cruelty, which hatred alone can teach you. However great her faults may be, that punishment is too severe."

Falkenried stared gloomily before him--he might have felt the truth of the words. Finally he said, slowly:

"I would never have thought that you would take Zalika's part. I offended you bitterly once for her sake--I broke a bond----"

"Which had not even been tied," interrupted Frau von Eschenhagen. "It was a plan of our parents--nothing more."

"But the idea was dear and familiar to us from childhood. Do not attempt to excuse me, Regine; I only know too well what I did at that time to you and--to myself."

Regine fixed her clear, gray eyes upon him, but there was a moist gleam in them as she replied:

"Well, yes, Hartmut; now since we are both long past our youth, I may, perhaps, confess that I liked you then. You might have been able to make something better of me than I am now. I was always a self-willed child--not easy to rule; but I would have followed you--perhaps you alone of all the world. When I went to the altar with Eschenhagen three months after your marriage, matters were reversed.

"I took the reins into my own hands and began to command, and since then I have learned it thoroughly---- But now, away with that old story, long since past. I have not thought hard of you because of it--you know that.

"We have remained friends in spite of it, and if you need me now, in advice as well as deed, I am ready to help you."

She offered her hand, which he grasped.

"I know it, Regine, but I alone can advise here. Please send Hartmut to me. I must speak to him."

Frau von Eschenhagen arose and left the room, murmuring as she went: "If only it is not too late already! She blinded and enraptured the father once. She has probably secured her son now."

CHAPTER V.

Hartmut entered the room and closed the door behind him, but remained standing near it. Falkenried turned toward him.

"Come nearer, Hartmut; I must speak with you."

The youth obeyed, drawing near slowly.

He already knew that Willibald had had to confess; that his rendezvous with his mother had been betrayed; but the awe with which he always approached his father was mingled to-day with defiance, which was not unnoticed by the Major.

He scanned the youthful, handsome person of his son with a long, gloomy glance.

"My sudden arrival does not seem to surprise you," he began; "you probably know what brought me here."

"Yes, father, I surmise it."

"Very well, we do not need then to continue with preliminaries. You have learned that your mother is still living. She has approached you and you are in communication with her. I know it already. When did you see her for the first time?"

"Five days ago."

"And since then you have spoken with her daily?"

"Yes, near the Burgsdorf pond."

Question and reply alike sounded curt and calm.

Hartmut was accustomed to this strict, military manner, even in his private intercourse with his father, who never allowed a superfluous word, a hesitation or evasion in the answers. This tone was kept up even to-day to veil his painful excitement from the eyes of his son. Hartmut saw only the grave, unmoved face; heard only the sound of cold severity as the Major continued:

"I will not make it a reproach to you, as I have never forbidden you anything regarding it; the subject has never been mentioned between us. But since matters have gone so far, I will have to break the silence. You thought your mother dead, and I have silently allowed you to think so, for I wished to save you from reminiscences which have poisoned my life. I meant that your youth, at least, should be free from it. It seems that it cannot be, so you may hear the truth."

He paused for a moment. It was torture to the man, with his delicate sense of honor, to talk on this subject before his son, but there was no longer a choice--he must speak on.

"I loved your mother passionately when a young officer, and married her against the wish of my parents, who saw no good to result from a marriage with a woman of foreign race. They were right, the marriage was deeply unfortunate, and we finally separated at my desire. I had an undeniable right to demand the separation, and also the possession of my son, which was granted me unconditionally. I cannot tell you any more, for I will not accuse the mother to the son; therefore let this suffice you."

Short and harsh as this explanation sounded, it yet made a strange impression upon Hartmut. The father would not accuse the mother to him, who had been hearing daily the most bitter accusation, abuse and slander against the father.

Zalika had put the whole blame of the separation upon her husband, upon his unheard-of tyranny, and she found only too willing a listener in the youth whose unruly nature suffered so intensely under that severity. And yet those short, earnest words now weighed more than all the passionate outbursts of the mother. Hartmut felt instinctively upon which side the truth stood.

"But now to the most important point," resumed Falkenried. "What has been the subject of your conversation?"

Hartmut had not expected this question, and a burning blush suffused his face. He was silent and looked to the ground.

"Ah, so! you do not dare to repeat it to me; but I request to know it. Answer, I command you!"

But Hartmut remained silent; he only closed his lips more firmly, and his eyes met his father's with dark defiance.

Falkenried now drew nearer.

"You will not speak? Has a command from that side, perhaps, made you silent? Never mind, your silence says more than words. I see how much estranged from me you have become, and you would become lost entirely to me if I should leave you longer under that influence. These meetings with your mother must be ended. I forbid them. You will accompany me home to-day and remain under my supervision. Whether it seems cruel to you or not, it must be so, and you will obey."

But the Major was mistaken when he thought to bow his son to his will by a simple command.

Hartmut had been in a school during these last days where defiance against the father had been taught him in the most effectual manner.

"Father, you will not--you cannot command that," he burst forth now with overpowering vehemence. "It is my mother who is found again; the only one in the whole world who loves me. I shall not let her be taken from me again as she has already been taken. I shall not allow myself to be forced to hate her because you hate her. Threaten--punish me do whatever you will with me, but I do not obey this time. I will not obey."

The whole unruly, passionate nature of the young man was in these words; the uncanny fire flamed again in his eyes; the hands were clenched; every fibre throbbed in wild rebellion. He was apparently decided to do battle against the long-feared father.

But the burst of anger which he so confidently expected did not come. Falkenried only looked at him silently, but with a glance of grave, deep reproach.

"The only one in the whole world who loves you!" he repeated slowly. "You have, perhaps, forgotten that you still have a father."

"Who does not love me, though," cried Hartmut in overwhelming bitterness. "Only since I have found my mother have I known what love is."

"Hartmut!"

The youth looked up, startled by the strange, pained tone which he heard for the first time, and the defiance which was about to break forth again died on his lips.

"Because I have no pet names and caresses for you; because I have raised you with seriousness and firmness, do you doubt my love?" said Falkenried, still in the same voice. "Do you know what this severity toward my only, my beloved child has cost me?"

"Father!"

The word sounded still timid and hesitating, but no longer with the old fear and awe; it now contained something like budding faith and trust; like a happy but half-comprehended surprise, and with it Hartmut's eyes hung as if riveted upon his father's features. Falkenried now put his hand upon his son's arm, drawing him nearer, while he continued:

"I once had high ambitions, proud hopes of life, great plans and aspirations, which came to an end when a blow fell upon me from which I shall never be able to rally. If I still aspire and

struggle, it is from a sense of duty and because of you, Hartmut. In you centers all my ambition; to make your future great and happy is the only thing which I yet desire of life; and your future can be made great, my son, for your gifts are extraordinary ones; your will is strong in good as well as evil. But there is yet something dangerous in your nature, which is less your fault than your doom, and which must be taken in hand in time, if it is not to develop and dash you into destruction. I had to be severe to banish this unfortunate tendency; it has not been easy for me."

The face of the youth was covered by a deep blush. With panting breath he seemed to read every word from his father's lips, and now he said in a whisper, in which the suppressed joy could scarcely be hidden:

"I have not dared to love you so far. You have always been so cold--so unapproachable, and I----"

He broke off and glanced up at his father, who now put his arm around Hartmut's shoulders, drawing him still closer to him. Then eyes looked deep into eyes, and the voice of the iron man broke as he said, lowly:

"You are my only child, Hartmut, the only thing which has remained to me from a dream of happiness that dispersed in bitterness and disappointment. I lost much at that time and have borne it; but if I should lose you--you--I could not bear it."

His arms closed around his son tightly, as if they could never be detached. Hartmut had thrown himself sobbing upon his father's breast, and father and son held each other in a long, passionate embrace.

Both had forgotten that a shadow from the past still stood threateningly and separatingly between them.

* * * * *

In the meantime, Frau von Eschenhagen, in her dining-room, was giving Willy a curtain lecture. She had done so, in fact, this morning, but was of the opinion that a double portion would not come amiss in this case. The young heir looked completely crushed. He felt himself in the wrong, as well toward his mother as toward his friend, and yet he was quite blameless. He allowed himself to be lectured patiently, like an obedient son, only throwing an occasional sad look over at the supper which already stood upon the table, although his mother did not take any notice of it at all.

"This is what comes of having secrets behind the backs of parents," she said severely, concluding her lecture.

"Hartmut is getting what he deserves in yonder; the Major will not treat him very mildly. I think you will let playing helpmate in such, a plot alone in the future."

"But I have not helped in it," Willy defended himself. "I had only promised to be silent and I had to keep my word."

"You ought not dare to keep silence to your mother; she is always an exception," Frau Regine said decidedly.

"Yes, mamma, Hartmut probably thought so, too, when it concerned his mother," remarked Willibald, and the remark was so correct that she could not well say anything against it; but that angered her the more.

"That is different--entirely different," she said curtly; but the young lord asked persistently:

"Why is it entirely different?"

"Boy, you will kill me yet with your questions and talking," cried his mother angrily. "That is an affair which you do not and shall not understand. It is bad enough that Hartmut has brought you in connection with it at all. Now do you keep quiet, and do not concern yourself further about it. Do you hear?"

Willy was dutifully silent. It was perhaps the first time in his life that he had been reproved for too much talking; besides, his Uncle Wallmoden, who had just returned from a drive, entered now.

"Falkenried has already arrived, I hear," he said, approaching his sister.

"Yes," she replied. "He came immediately upon receiving my letter."

"And how has he borne the news?"

"Outwardly very calm, but I saw only too well how it rent his heartstrings. He is alone now with Hartmut, and the storm will probably burst."

"I am sorry; but I prophesied this turn of affairs when I learned of Zalika's return. He ought to

have spoken then to Hartmut. Now I fear he will but add a second mistake to the first one by trying to accomplish a separation by force and dictating. This unfortunate obstinacy which knows only 'either--or'! It is least of all in the right place here."

"Yes, the meeting yonder lasts too long for me," said Frau von Eschenhagen with concern. "I shall go and see how far the two have gotten, whether it offends the Major or not. Remain here, Herbert; I shall return directly."

She left the room, which Wallmoden paced disconsolately. His nephew sat alone at the supper table, about which nobody seemed to think. He did not dare to begin eating by himself, for a regular turmoil reigned to-day in Burgsdorf, and the Frau Mamma was in a very ungracious mood. But fortunately she returned after a few minutes, and her face was beaming with satisfaction.

"The affair is settled in the best way," she said in her short and decided tone. "He has the boy in his embrace. Hartmut is hanging upon his father's neck, and the rest will arrange itself easily now. God be praised! And now you may eat your supper, Willy. The confusion which has disturbed our whole household has come to an end."

Willy did not allow himself to be told twice, but made brisk use of the coveted permission. But Wallmoden shook his head and muttered: "If it were only truly at an end!"

CHAPTER VI.

Neither Falkenried nor his son had noticed that the door had been quietly opened and closed again. Hartmut still clung to his father's neck. He seemed to have lost in a moment all awe and reserve, and was overwhelmingly lovable in his new-found, stormy caresses, the charm of which the Major had rightly feared would disarm him. He spoke but little, but again and again he pressed his lips upon the brow of his son, looking steadily into the beautiful face, full of life, which pressed so close to his own.

Finally Hartmut asked in a low voice: "And--my mother?"

A shadow passed again over Falkenried's brow, but he did not release his son from his arms.

"Your mother will leave Germany as soon as she is convinced that she must in the future, as in the past, stay away from you," he said, this time without harshness, but with decision. "You may write to her. I will allow a correspondence with certain restrictions, but I cannot--I dare not permit a personal intercourse."

"Father, think----"

"I cannot, Hartmut; it is impossible."

"Do you hate her, then, so very much?" asked the youth reproachfully. "You wished the separation--not my mother--I know it from herself."

Falkenried's lips quivered. He was about to speak the bitter words and tell his son that the separation had been at the command of honor; but he looked again in those dark, inquiring eyes, and the words died unspoken. He could not accuse the mother to the son.

"Let that question rest," he replied gloomily; "I cannot answer it to you. Perhaps you will learn my reasons later and will understand them. I cannot spare you the hard choice now. You can belong only to one--the other you must shun. Accept it as a doom."

Hartmut bowed his head; he might have felt that nothing further could be gained. That the meetings with his mother had to end when he returned to the strict discipline of the school, he knew; but now a correspondence was permitted, which was more than he had dared to hope for.

"Then I will tell mamma so," he said in a crestfallen way. "Now, since you know everything, I may see her openly, may I not?"

The Major started; he had not considered this possibility.

"When were you to see her again?" he asked.

"To-day, at this hour, at the Burgsdorf pond. She is surely awaiting me there now."

Falkenried seemed to battle with himself. A warning voice arose in him not to allow this leave-taking, yet he felt that to refuse would be cruel.

"Will you be back in two hours?" he asked finally.

"Certainly, father; even earlier if you desire it."

"Go, then," said the Major, with a deep breath. One could hear how reluctant was the permission which his sense of duty forced from him. "We shall drive home as soon as you return. Your vacation ends shortly, anyway."

Hartmut, who was just about to leave, came to a standstill. The words recalled to him what he had entirely forgotten in the last half hour: the discipline and severity of the service which was awaiting him. Heretofore he had not dared to betray his aversion to it openly, but this hour which banished the awe of his father broke also the seal from his lips. Obeying a sudden impulse, he turned and put his arms again around the neck of his father.

"I have a request," he whispered, "a great, great request which you must grant me; and I know you will do it as a proof that you love me."

A furrow appeared between the Major's eyebrows as he asked with slight reproach: "Do you require proofs of it? Well, let's hear it."

Hartmut nestled still more closely to him; his voice had again that sweet, coaxing sound which made his prayers so irresistible, and the dark eyes implored intensely, beseechingly.

"Do not let me become a soldier, father. I do not love the calling for which you have decided me. I shall never learn to love it. If I have bowed until now to your will, it has been with aversion, with secret grumbling, and I have been unbearably unhappy, only I did not dare to confess it to you."

The furrow on Falkenried's brow sank deeper, and he released his son slowly from his embrace.

"That means, in other words, that you do not like to obey," he said harshly, "and just that is more important to you than to any one else."

"But I cannot bear any compulsion," Hartmut burst forth passionately, "and the military service is nothing but duty and fetters. To obey always and eternally--never to have a will of your own--to bow day after day to an iron discipline and strict, cold forms by which every individual movement is suppressed. I cannot bear it any longer. Everything in me demands freedom for light and life. Let me go, father; do not keep me any longer in these bonds. I die--I suffocate under them."

To a man, who was heart and soul a soldier, he could not have done his cause greater harm than by these imprudent words. It sounded like a stormy, glowing prayer. His arm yet lay around his father's neck, but Falkenried now straightened himself suddenly and pushed him back.

"I should consider the service an honor and no fetter," he said cuttingly. "It is sad that I should have to recall that to my son's mind. Freedom--light--life! You think perhaps that one can throw himself at seventeen years into life and grasp all its treasures. The longed-for freedom for you would be only recklessness, ruin, destruction."

"And what if it should be so!" cried Hartmut, totally beside himself. "Better go to ruin in freedom than to live in this depression. To me it is a chain--a fetter--slavery----"

"Be silent! not a word further," commanded Falkenried so threateningly that the youth grew silent despite his awful excitement. "You have no choice, and take care that you do not forget your duty. You must become an officer and fulfill your duty completely as does every one of your comrades. When you are of age, I no longer have any power to hinder you. You may then resign, even if it give me my deathblow to see my only son flee the service."

"Father, do you consider me a coward?" Hartmut burst forth. "I could stand a war--I could fight----"

"You would fight foolhardily and rush blindly into every danger; and with this obstinacy which knows no discipline you would destroy yourself and your men. I know this wild, boundless desire for freedom and life to which no barrier, no duty is sacred. I know from whom you have inherited it and where it will finally lead; therefore I keep you securely in the 'fetters,' no matter whether you hate it or not. You shall learn to obey and to bow your will while yet there is time; and you shall learn it. I pledge my word to that."

Again the old, inflexible harshness sounded in his voice; every line of tenderness, of softness, had disappeared, and Hartmut knew his father too well to continue supplication or defiance. He did not answer a syllable, but his eyes glowed again with that demoniac spark which robbed him of all his beauty; and around his lips, which were pressed closely together, there settled a strange, bad expression as he now turned to go.

The Major's eyes followed him. Again the warning voice came to him like a presentiment of evil, and he called his son back.

"Hartmut, you are sure to be back in time? You give me your word?"

"Yes, father." The answer sounded grim, but firm.

"Very well. I shall trust you as a man. I let you go in peace with this promise which you have given me. Be punctual."

Hartmut had been gone but a few moments when Wallmoden entered.

"Are you alone?" he asked, somewhat surprised. "I did not wish to disturb you, but I saw Hartmut hasten through the garden just now. Where was he going so late?"

"To his mother, to take leave of her."

The Secretary started at this news. "With your consent?" he asked quickly.

"Certainly, I have permitted him to go."

"How imprudent! I should think that you knew now how Zalika manages to get her own way, and yet you leave your son to her mercy."

"For only half an hour to say farewell. I could not refuse that. What do you fear? Surely no force. Hartmut is no longer a child to be borne into a carriage and carried off in spite of his resistance."

"But if he should not refuse a flight?"

"I have his word that he will return in two hours," said the Major with emphasis.

"The word of a seventeen-year-old lad!"

"Who has been raised a soldier and who knows the importance of a word of honor. That gives me no care; my fear lies in another direction."

"Regine told me that you were reconciled," remarked Wallmoden, with a glance upon the still clouded brow of his friend.

"For a few moments only; after that I had to become again the firm, severe father. This hour has showed me how hard the task is to bend, to educate this roving nature. Nevertheless I shall conquer him."

The Secretary approached the window and looked out in the garden.

"It is twilight already, and the Burgsdorf pond is half an hour's distance," he said, half aloud. "You ought to have allowed the rendezvous only in your presence, if it had to take place."

"And see Zalika again? Impossible! I could not and would not do that."

"But if the leave-taking end differently from what you expect--if Hartmut does not return?"

"Then he would be a scoundrel to break his word!" burst out Falkenried; "a deserter, for he carries the sword already at his side. Do not offend me with such thoughts, Herbert; it is my son of whom you speak."

"He is also Zalika's son; but do not let us quarrel about that now. They await you in the dining room. And you will really leave us to-day?"

"Yes, in two hours," the Major said, calmly and firmly. "Hartmut will have returned by that time. My word stands for that."

CHAPTER VII.

The gray shadows of twilight were gathering in forest and field, becoming closer and denser with every moment. The short, foggy autumn day drew near its close. Through the heavy-clouded sky the night lowered sooner than usual.

A female figure paced impatiently and restlessly up and down the bank of the Burgsdorf pond. She had drawn the dark cloak tightly around her shoulders, but was unmindful of her shivering, caused by the cold evening air. Her whole manner was feverish expectation and intense listening for the sound of a step which could not as yet be heard.

Zalika had arranged the meetings with her son for a later hour, when it was desolate and dim in the forest, since the day Willibald had surprised them and had to be admitted into the secret. They had parted, however, before dark, so that Hartmut's late return should not cause suspicion at Burgsdorf. He had always been punctual, but now his mother had waited in vain for an hour.

Did a trifle detain him, or was the secret betrayed? One had to expect that, since a third party knew it.

Deathlike silence reigned in the forest; the dry leaves alone rustled beneath the hem of the gown of the restlessly moving woman.

Night shades already lingered under the tree-tops; a cloud of mist floated over the pond where it was lighter and more open; and over there where the water was bordered by a marsh, whitish-gray veils of mist arose yet more thickly. The wind blew damp and cold from over there, like the air of a vault. A light footstep finally sounded at a distance, coming nearer in the direction of the pond with flying haste. Now a slender figure appeared, scarcely recognizable in the gathering dusk. Zalika flew toward him, and in the next moment her son was in her arms.

"What has happened?" she demanded, amidst the usual stormy caresses. "Why do you come so late? I had given up in despair seeing you to-day. What kept you back?"

"I could not come any sooner," panted Hartmut, still breathless from his rapid run. "I come from my father."

Zalika started.

"From your father? Then he knows----"

"Everything."

"So he is at Burgsdorf? Since when? Who notified him?"

The young man, with fluttering breath, reported what had happened, but he had not finished when the bitter laugh of his mother interrupted him.

"Naturally they are all in the plot when it concerns the tearing of my child from me. And your father, he has probably threatened and punished and made you suffer for the heavy crime of having been in the arms of your mother?"

Hartmut shook his head.

The remembrance of that moment when his father drew him to his breast stood firm, in spite of the bitterness with which that scene had ended.

"No," he said in a low voice; "but he commanded me not to see you again, and requested irrevocable separation from you."

"And yet you are here? Oh, I knew it!"

The exclamation was full of joyous victory.

"Do not triumph too soon, mamma," said the youth bitterly. "I came only to say farewell."

"Hartmut!"

"Father knows it. He allowed me this meeting, and then----"

"Then he will grasp you again, and you will be lost to me forever, is it not so?"

Hartmut did not answer; he folded his mother in his arms, and a wild, passionate sob, which had in it as much of anger as pain, escaped his breast.

It had now grown quite dark; the night had commenced; a cold, gloomy autumn night, without moon or star shining, but over there upon the marsh where lately the veils of mist floated, something now shot up with a bluish light, glimmering dimly in the fog, but growing brighter and clearer like a flame; now appearing, now disappearing, and with it a second and a third. The will-o'-the-wisp had commenced its ghostly, uncanny play.

"You weep," cried Zalika, pressing her son closely to her; "but I have seen it coming long ago, and if your Eschenhagen had not betrayed us, the day you had to return to your father would have brought your forced choice between separation or--decision."

"What decision? What do you mean?" asked Hartmut, perplexed.

Zalika bent over him, and, although they were alone, her voice sank to a whisper.

"Will you bow feebly and defenselessly to a tyranny which tears asunder the sacred bond between mother and child, and which stamps under foot our rights as well as our love? If you can do that, you are not my son; you have inherited nothing of the blood that flows in my veins. He sent you to bid me farewell, and you accept it patiently as a last favor. Have you really come to take leave of me, perhaps for years? Actually, have you?"

"I have to," interrupted the youth despairingly. "You know father and his iron will. Is there any possibility of anything else?"

"If you return to him, no. But who forces you?"

"Mamma, for God's sake!" shrieked Hartmut, terrified. But the encircling arms did not release him, and the hot, passionate whisper again reached his ear:

"What frightens you so at the thought? You will only go with your mother, who loves you devotedly, and who will henceforth live for you alone. You have told me repeatedly that you hate the vocation which is forced upon you, that you languish with longing for freedom. There is no choice there for you; when you return your father will keep you irrevocably in the fetters. If he knew that you would die of them, he would not let you free."

She had no need to tell that to her son; he knew it better than she did. Only an hour ago he had seen the full inflexibility of his father, his hard "You shall learn to obey and bow your will."

His voice was almost smothered in bitterness as he answered: "Nevertheless, I must return. I have given my word to be back at Burgsdorf in two hours."

"Really," said Zalika, sharply and sarcastically; "I thought so. Usually you are nothing but a boy, whose every step is prescribed; whose every moment counted out; who ought not even to have his own thoughts; but as soon as the retaining of you is concerned, you are given the independence of a man. Very well; now show that you are not only grown in words, but that you can also act like a man. A forced promise has no value. Tear asunder this invincible chain with which they want to bind you and make yourself free."

"No--no," murmured Hartmut, with a renewed attempt to free himself. But he did not succeed. He only turned his face and looked with fixed eyes out into the night, into the desolate, silent forest darkness and over yonder where the will-o'-the-wisp still carried on its ghostly dance.

Those quivering, tremulous flames appeared now everywhere; seeming to seek and flee from each other, they floated over the ground, disappearing or dissolving in the ocean of fog, only to reappear again and again. There was something ghastly yet fascinating in this spectre-like play; the demoniac charm of the depths which that treacherous mire concealed.

"Come with me, my Hartmut," implored Zalika, now in those sweet, coaxing tones which were so effectively at hers as well as at her son's command. "I have foreseen everything and prepared for it. I knew that a day like this had to come. My carriage awaits me half an hour's distance from here. It will take us to the next station, and before anybody at Burgsdorf thinks you will not return, the train will have carried us into the far country. There are freedom, light and happiness. I will lead you out into the great distant world, and after you know that, you will breathe with relief and shout like a redeemed man. I myself know how one released feels. I too have borne that chain which I riveted myself in foolish error, but I would have broken it in the first year but for you. Oh, it is sweet, this freedom. You will feel it, too."

She knew only too well how to succeed. Freedom, life, light! These words found a thousand-fold echo in the heart of the young man, whose passionate thirst for freedom had been so far suppressed. This promised life shone with a magic splendor like a beacon before him. He needed only to stretch forth his hand and it was his.

"My promise," he murmured with a last attempt to gather strength. "Father will look at me with contempt if----"

"If you have reached a great, proud future?" Zalika interrupted him passionately. "Then you can go before him and ask if he dares consider you with contempt. He would keep you upon the ground while you have wings which will carry you high up. He does not understand a nature like yours; he will never learn to understand it. Will you languish and go to ruin for only a word's sake? Go with me, my Hartmut--with me, to whom you are all in all--out into freedom."

She drew him along, slowly but irresistibly. He still resisted, but did not tear himself away; and amidst the prayers and caresses of his mother this resistance slowly gave way--he followed.

A few moments later the pond lay wholly deserted; mother and son had disappeared; the sound of their steps died away. Night and silence brooded alone. Only over yonder in the fog of the marsh fluttered that noiseless spectral life. It floated and vanished, rose and sank again in restless play--the mysterious sign of flame.

PART II.

CHAPTER VIII.

The warm, golden light of a clear September day lay over the green ocean of forest, which stretched as far as the eye could reach. These immense forests had covered this part of Southern Germany for countless years; trees one hundred years old were no rarity among them. The whole bore the character of a mountainous forest, for hills and dales succeeded one another.

While the railroads spun their web all around the country, drawing one place after another within their grasp, this "Wald," as these miles and miles of wooded land were briefly called by the people, lay still and deserted, like a green island, almost untouched by the life and strife around.

Here and there a village rose from the forest green, or an old castle, almost in ruins, gray and dilapidated. There was one exception to it, in a powerful, old, gray edifice which stood upon a height and overlooked the whole vicinity. This was "Furstenstein," once the hunting lodge of the sovereign, but at present the habitation of the Chief of all the foresters.

The castle dated from the beginning of the last century and had been built with all the waste of space of that epoch when the hunting lodge of the Prince had to accommodate for weeks the whole court suite.

Furstenstein was only partly visible at a distance, for the forest covered all the castle mount, the gray walls, the steeples and bow windows lifting themselves from among the crown of green firs. The size of the old structure was only apparent when one stood before the entrance portal, for many additions belonging to later times were attached to it. It was to be understood that decay here was carefully kept back, for the numerous rooms of the upper floors were kept in readiness for the commands of the Prince, who came here occasionally in the fall.

The similarly extensive lower floor was given to the chief of the forest department, Herr von Schonan, who had lived here for years, and who knew how to make the loneliness agreeable by keeping a very hospitable house and by frequent sociable visitings in the neighborhood.

He was entertaining guests at present. His sister-in-law, Frau Regine von Eschenhagen, had arrived yesterday, and her son was also expected.

The two daughters of the house of Wallmoden had made very desirable matches, the elder one marrying the lord of the Burgsdorf estates and the younger one Herr von Schonan, who belonged to a wealthy South German family. In spite of the distance separating them, the sisters and their families had remained in intimate association, and even after the death of the younger one, which had occurred several years previously, these family connections were continued.

This friendship, however, had a quality of its own, for Herr von Schonan was always on the war-path with his sister-in-law. As both natures were terse and inconsiderate they came to a tussle at every opportunity, made up regularly, deciding to keep the peace in future, but the promise was broken just as regularly. A new difference of opinion would come up in the next hour, the dispute would be carried on with fullest passion, until it again raged with undiminished power.

Just at present a very unusual harmony seemed to prevail between the two, who sat upon the terrace before the entrance room.

The Chief Forester, who in spite of his advanced years, was still a very stately man, with strong, sunburned features and slightly gray but thick hair and beard, was leaning comfortably back in his chair, listening to his sister-in-law, who, as usual, was monopolizing the conversation.

Frau Regine was now near her fiftieth year, but had scarcely changed in the last decade. The years could not make much impression upon her strong physique; a little wrinkle perhaps here

and there in the face, a few silver threads mingled with the dark hair; but the gray eyes had lost none of their keen clearness; the voice was as full and steady, the carriage just as energetic as formerly. It was very evident that the lady bore the sceptre in her domain now as before.

"As I said, Willy will be here in a week," she was saying. "He had not quite finished with his harvest work, but it will soon end, and then he will be ready for the betrothal. The affair has long been settled between us, but I decidedly advocated the delay, for a young girl of sixteen or seventeen years has all sorts of childish tricks still in her head, and cannot preside well over an orderly household. But Antonie is now twenty years old and Willy twenty-seven; this suits exactly. You are satisfied, are you not, brother, that we now arrange the betrothal of our children?"

"Quite satisfied," affirmed the Chief Forester; "and we are of the same opinion in all else concerning it. Half of my money will fall to my son after my death, the other half to my daughter, and you can also be at rest about the dower which I have set apart for the wedding."

"Yes, you have not been stingy about it. As to Willy, you know he has had possession of the Burgsdorf estates for three years. The money, according to the will, remains in my hands. After my death it will, of course, fall to him. The young couple will not be in need. Sufficient care has been taken for that; therefore all is decided."

"Yes, decided. We will celebrate the betrothal now and the wedding in the spring."

The thus far clear sky was darkened now by the first cloud. Frau von Eschenhagen shook her head and said dictatorially:

"That will not do, the wedding must occur in the winter, for Willy will not have time to marry in the spring."

"Nonsense! One always has time to marry," declared Schonan, just as dictatorially.

"Not in the country," persisted Frau Regine; "there the motto is, first work and then pleasure. It has always been so with us, and Willy has learned it, too."

"But I emphatically beg that he will make an exception in the case of his young wife, otherwise the deuce may take him!" cried the Chief angrily. "Besides, you know my conditions, Regine. My girl has not seen your son for two years; if he does not please her, she shall have a free choice."

He had attacked his sister-in-law in a most sensitive spot. She straightened herself to her fullest height in her offended motherly pride.

"My dear Moritz, I credit your daughter with some taste at least. Besides, I believe in the old custom of parents choosing for their children. It was so in our time and we have fared well with it. What do young people know of such important things? But you have always allowed your children their own way too much. One can see there is no mother in the house."

"Is that my fault?" demanded Schonan, angrily. "Should I have given them a stepmother? In fact, I wished to once, but you would not consent to it, Regine."

"No, I had enough of marriage with one trial," was the dry answer, which roused the Forester still more. He shrugged his shoulders sarcastically.

"Why, I shouldn't think that you could possibly complain of the late Eschenhagen. He and all his Burgsdorf danced entirely after your piping. Of course, you would not have gotten the upper hand of me so easily."

"But I should have had it in a month," remarked Frau Regine with perfect composure, "and I should have taken you under my command first of all, Moritz."

"What! you tell me this to my face? Shall we try it, then?" shouted Schonan in a passion.

"Thank you, I shall not marry a second time. Do not trouble yourself."

"I have not the slightest idea of it. I had enough of it with that one jilting; you do not need to do it a second time"; with which the Chief Forester pushed back his chair angrily and left.

Frau von Eschenhagen remained quietly seated. After awhile she called in a quite friendly manner: "Moritz!"

"What is it?" sounded crossly from the other side of the terrace.

"When is Herbert to come with his young wife?"

"At twelve o'clock," came the curt reply.

"I am glad of that. I have not seen him since he was sent to your capitol, but I have always said that Herbert was the pride of our family, whom one could parade anywhere. He is now Prussian Ambassador to His Excellency at your court."

"And a young husband of fifty-six years, besides," said Herr von Schonan scornfully.

"Yes, he took his time to marry, but then he has made a splendid match for all that. It was surely no little thing for a man of his years to win a wife like Adelaide, young, beautiful, rich----"

"And of burgher descent," interrupted Schonan.

"Nonsense! Who asks nowadays after a pedigree when a million is involved. Herbert can make use of it. He has had to get along with small means all of his life, and the position of ambassador will require more display than the salary will admit of. And my brother does not need to be ashamed of his father-in-law, for Stahlberg is one of our first industry men and a man of honor from tip to toe, besides. It was a pity that he died after the marriage of his daughter, for she has surely made a sensible choice."

"Pouf! You call it a sensible choice when a girl of eighteen takes a husband who could be her father?" cried the Chief, drawing near in the heat of the controversy. "Of course when one becomes a baroness and the wife of the Prussian Ambassador, one plays a big rôle in society. This beautiful, cool Adelaide, with her 'sensible' ideas which would do credit to a grandmother, is not congenial to me at all. A sensible girl who falls heels over head in love and declares to her parents, 'This one or none at all,' is much more to my taste."

"Well, these are beautiful ideas for a father!" cried Frau von Eschenhagen indignantly. "It is exceedingly fortunate that Toni has taken after my sister and not after you, for otherwise you might live to see the like in her. Stahlberg raised his daughter better. I know from himself that she obeyed his wish when she gave her hand to Herbert, and so, of course, it is all right and as it should be. But you do not understand anything about educating children."

"What! I, a man and a father, not understand the bringing up of children?" shouted Schonan, cherry-red with vexation.

The two were in the best possible condition to fly at each other again, but fortunately they were interrupted this time, for a young girl, the daughter of the house, stepped out on the terrace.

Antonie von Schonan could not be called exactly pretty, but she had a stately figure like her father and a fresh, blooming face, with light brown eyes. Her brown hair was folded in simple plaits around her head and her dress, although suitable to her position, was also plain. But Antonie was in those years when youth displaced every other charm, and as she drew near, fresh, healthy, stately in her whole appearance, she was exactly the daughter-in-law after Frau von Eschenhagen's own heart, and she nodded in a friendly way to her.

"Father, the carriage is returning from the station," said the young lady in a very deliberate, somewhat drawling tone. "It is already at the foot of the castle mount. Uncle Wallmoden will be here in fifteen minutes."

"What, tausend! They have driven like lightning!" exclaimed the Chief Forester, whose face brightened at the news. "Are the rooms all in order?"

Toni nodded as calmly as if that were a self-evident fact. As her father started off to look for the carriage which was to bring his guests, Frau von Eschenhagen said with a glance at the little basket which the young girl carried: "Well Toni, you have been busy again?"

"I have been in the kitchen garden, dear aunt. The gardener insisted that there were no pears ripe as yet, but I looked for myself and gathered a basketful."

"That is right, my child," said her future mother-in-law, highly satisfied. "One must have her eyes and hands everywhere, and never rely upon servants. You will some day be a splendid housekeeper. But now let us go. We will also meet the uncle."

CHAPTER IX.

Herr von Schonan was already in advance and just descending the wide stone steps which led to the castle court, when a man emerged from one of the side buildings and came to a standstill, bowing his greeting respectfully.

"Hallo, Stadinger; what are you doing at Furstenstein?" cried the Chief Forester. "Come up here."

The man obeyed the command. He walked actively with firm, erect carriage, in spite of his snow-white hair, and a pair of keen, dark eyes shone from his tanned face.

"I have been with the Herr Steward, Herr Oberforstmeister," he replied, "to ask if he could not let me have a few of his people to help me, for everything is topsy-turvy with us at Rodeck just now. We have not hands enough for the work."

"Ah, yes; Prince Egon has returned from his travels in the Orient; I heard of it," said Schonan. "But how does it happen that he comes to Rodeck this time, this small forest nook which offers neither room nor comforts?"

"Heaven alone knows that; one never dares ask why with our young Highness. The news came one morning, and the castle had to be put in order, good or bad. I have had pains and worry enough to get ready in two days."

"I believe that. Rodeck has not been inhabited for years, but now there will be life once more in the old walls."

"But the old walls will be stood on their head with it all," grumbled the castle keeper. "If you only knew how it looks there, Herr Oberforstmeister. The whole hunting hall is packed full of lion and tiger skins and all manner of mounted animals, and the live parrots and monkeys sit about in every room. There is such a noise and making of faces that one cannot hear a word at times; and now His Highness has announced to me, besides, that a whole herd of elephants and a large sea serpent are on their way here. I think apoplexy will overtake me."

"What is on the way here?" demanded Schonan, who could not believe his ears.

"A sea serpent and a dozen elephants. I have remonstrated with might and main. 'Your Highness,' I have said, 'we cannot house any more of the beasts, particularly not the sea serpent, for such a beast needs water, and we have no pond at Rodeck. As to the elephants--well, we will just have to tie them to the trees in the forest. If we cannot do that, I do not know what to do.' 'Good,' says His Highness, 'we will tie them to the trees, it will be a picturesque sight; and we will send the sea serpent to board at Furstenstein. That pond is large enough.' I beg of you, Herr Oberforstmeister, he will populate the whole neighborhood with those awful beasts."

The Chief Forester laughed aloud and patted the shoulder of the old man, who seemed to enjoy his special favor.

"But, Stadinger, did you really take that in earnest? Don't you know your Prince? It seems that he has not become more settled by his absence."

"No, really not," sighed Stadinger, "and what His Highness does not know, Herr Rojanow will surely find out. He makes it ten times worse. Oh, dreadful that such a madcap should fall to our lot!"

"Rojanow? Who is that?" asked Schonan, becoming attentive.

"Yes, that is what nobody knows exactly, but he is everything with us since His Highness cannot live without him. He found this friend somewhere back there in the heathen lands. The friend himself may be half a heathen or a Turk; he looks just like it, with his dark hair and his fiery eyes, and he knows how to command from the very bottom. He sometimes drives all the servants helter-skelter with his orders and actions, as if he was lord and master of Rodeck. But he is handsome as a picture--almost more so than our Prince, who has given strict orders that his friend has to be obeyed like himself."

"Probably some adventurer who takes advantage of the Prince. I can imagine that," muttered Schonan, continuing aloud: "Well, may God help you, Stadinger! I must go now to meet my brother-in-law. Do not let any gray hairs grow on account of the sea-serpent. If His Highness threatens you with it again, just tell him I would offer the Furstenstein pond with pleasure, but I must see it alive before me first."

He nodded laughingly at the old man, who looked much comforted, and walked toward the entrance portal.

Frau von Eschenhagen and her niece had also appeared, and the carriage now came in sight upon the broad forest road of the castle mount, rolling, a few minutes later, into the castle court.

Regine was the first to greet them. She shook her brother's hand so heartily that he drew back with a slight shudder. The Chief Forester remained in the background; he stood somewhat in awe of his diplomatic brother-in-law, whose sarcasm he secretly feared; while Toni allowed neither her uncle, His Excellency, nor his beautiful wife to rouse her from her composed deliberation.

The years had not passed Herbert von Wallmoden by as lightly as they had his sister; he had aged considerably; his hair had turned quite gray, and the sarcastic lines around his mouth had become more pronounced; otherwise he was still the cool, aristocratic diplomat--perhaps a few degrees cooler and more reticent than formerly. The superiority which he had borne to his surroundings seemed to have grown with the high position which he filled at present.

The young wife at his side would probably have been taken by every stranger for his daughter. He had truly shown good taste in his choice.

Adelaide von Wallmoden was, indeed, beautiful, although of that composed, serious beauty which usually aroused only calm admiration, but she seemed equal in every respect to the high position in life brought her by this marriage.

The young wife, scarcely nineteen years old, and who had been married but six months, showed perfect ease of manner--an unexceptional mastery of all forms, as if she had lived for years beside her elderly husband.

To his wife Wallmoden was politeness and attention personified. He now offered his arm to lead her to her room, returning in a few minutes to join his sister, who awaited him on the terrace.

The attitude of these two to each other was in many respects a strange one. The brother and sister were of the most pronounced opposites in appearance as well as character, and usually of opinion as well; but the blood relationship gave them, in spite of this difference, a feeling of closest union. This was evident as they sat together now after the long separation.

Although Herbert was somewhat nervous during the conversation, for Regine did not find it necessary to subdue her peculiar manner, causing him embarrassment more than once with her inconsiderate questions and remarks, he had long ago learned to consider that as unavoidable, and surrendered himself to it now with a sigh.

At first they spoke of the coming betrothal of Willibald and Toni, which had Wallmoden's full approval. He thought the match very suitable, and besides, every one in the family had been long acquainted with it.

But now Frau von Eschenhagen began an entirely different subject. "Well, and how do you feel as a husband, Herbert?" she asked. "You have certainly taken your time for it, but better late than never, and to speak the truth, you have had extraordinarily good luck in spite of your gray hair."

The Ambassador did not seem very well pleased at this allusion to his age. He pressed his thin lips together for a moment, and then replied with some sharpness: "You should really be a little more careful in your expressions, dear Regine. I know my age very well, but the position in life which I brought my wife as a wedding gift should counteract the difference of the years somewhat."

"Well, I should think the dowry she brought you was not to be slighted," remarked Regine, quite unconcerned as to the rebuke. "Have you already presented her at court?"

"Yes, two weeks ago, at the Summer Residenz. Mourning for my father-in-law prevented it before. We shall have open house in the winter as my position requires. I was most pleasantly surprised at Adelaide's manner at court. She moved upon the strange ground with an ease and composure which were truly admirable. I saw there again how happy my choice was in every respect. But I wish to inquire after several things at home. First of all, how is Falkenried?"

"Surely you do not need to ask me that? Are you not in regular correspondence with him?"

"Yes, but his letters grow shorter and more monosyllabic. I wrote him at length about my marriage, but received only a very laconic reply. But you must see him frequently, since he has been called to the position of Secretary of War. The city is near."

"You are mistaken there. The Colonel shows himself very rarely at Burgsdorf, and he is becoming more and more reticent and unapproachable."

"I am sorry to hear that; but he used always to make an exception of you, and I hoped much from your influence since he is back in your vicinity. Have you not tried, then, to renew the old intimacy?"

"I did at first, but finally had to give it up, for I saw that it was painful to him. Nothing can be done there, Herbert. Since that unfortunate catastrophe which both of us lived through with him he has changed into stone. You have seen him several times since then and know the ruin that has worked there."

Wallmoden's brow clouded and his voice was harsh as he returned: "Yes, that scoundrel--that Hartmut lies heavy upon his heart, but more than ten years have passed since then, and I hoped that Falkenried would return to sociable life in time."

"I have never had that hope; that blow went to the root of life. I shall never forget that evening at Burgsdorf while I live. How we waited and waited--first with restlessness and anxiety, then with deadly fear. You guessed the truth directly, but I would not permit myself to believe it--and Falkenried! I can see him yet as he stood at the window, looking fixedly out into the night pale as a corpse, with teeth tightly clenched, having for every fear expressed the one reply, 'He will come--he must come. I have his word for it.' And when, in spite of all, Hartmut did not come--

when the night wore on and we finally learned upon inquiry at the railroad station that the two had arrived there in a carriage and taken the express train--God in heaven! How the man looked when he turned to leave, so mute and stiff! I made you promise not to leave his side, for I believed that he would blow his brains out."

"You judged him wrongly," said Wallmoden decisively. "A man like Falkenried considers it cowardice to lay hands on his life, even if that life has become torture to him. He stands up even to a lost post. Although what would have happened if they had let him go that time--I do not dare to surmise."

"Yes, I knew that he had asked for his dismissal, because to serve after his son had become a deserter did not accord with his ideas of honor. It was the step of despair."

"Yes, truly; and it was fortunate that his chiefs would not dispense with his military genius and force. The chief of the general's staff took the affair in his own hands and brought it before the king. They concluded finally to treat the whole unfortunate occurrence--at least as far as it could concern the father--as the act of a heedless boy, for which a highly deserving officer could not be held accountable. Falkenried had to take back his request for resignation, was transferred into a far-away garrison, and the affair silenced as much as was possible. It is, indeed, buried and forgotten now after ten years by all the world."

"It is not forgotten by one," finished Regine. "My heart burns sometimes when I think of what Falkenried was once, and what he is now. The bitter experience of his marriage had made him rather serious and unsocial, but occasionally the full charming amiability of his manner would break through, warm and hearty, from his inmost heart--all that is over. He knows now only the iron severity of duty--all else is dead. Even the old friendly relations have become painful to him. One has to let him go his own way."

She broke off with a sigh, which betrayed how near to her heart was the friend of her youth, and laying her hand upon the arm of her brother, she continued: "Perhaps you are right, Herbert, in that one chooses best and most sensibly in late years. You do not need to fear the fate of Falkenried. Your wife comes from a good race. I knew Stahlberg well. He had worked up to the heights of life with firmness and ability, and even as a millionaire he remained the upright man of honor he had ever been. Adelaide is the daughter of her father in every respect. You have chosen well and you my heartfelt wishes for your happiness."

CHAPTER X.

Rodeck, the hunting lodge belonging to the possessions of the Prince of Adelsberg, was about two hours' distance from Furstenstein, in the midst of deepest forest loneliness. The small building, erected without much taste, contained at the most about a dozen rooms, whose old-fashioned and shabby furniture had been put in as good order as the short notice of the coming of the Prince permitted.

The little castle had not been inhabited for years and looked somewhat dilapidated, but when one emerged from the deep, dark forest into the opening, and beheld at the end of the wide green sward the old gray edifice with its tall, spiked roof and four steeples at the corners, it had truly something of the forest idyl about it.

The Adelsbergs had once been a reigning family, but a family that had long since lost its sovereignty. They had retained, however, the princely title, an enormous fortune, and a very extensive property. The once numerous family counted at present but few representatives; the main branch only a single one--the Prince Egon, who, as lord of all the family estates, besides being closely related to the reigning house through his late mother, played an important rôle among the nobility of the land.

The young Prince had always been considered a rover, who at times followed very eccentric notions and bothered himself very little about princely etiquette when he wished to follow some momentary whim. The old Prince had been very strict with his son, but his death made Egon von Adelsberg the sole master of his own will very early in life.

He had now returned from a tour in the Orient which had kept him in foreign lands two years, but instead of occupying the princely palace in town, or one of his other castles which were furnished with every conceivable splendor for a summer or fall visit, he took a notion to go to the old forest nook--the little half-forgotten Rodeck--which was not prepared for the honor of receiving its master, and could offer but scant accommodation.

Old Stadinger was right: one must never ask Prince Egon why. Everything depended entirely upon his momentary caprice.

In the morning of a sunny autumn day, two gentlemen in hunting costume stood upon the lawn at Rodeck talking with the castle-keeper, while a light open carriage stood upon the gravel road, ready for departure. At a casual glance the two young men bore a certain resemblance to each other. They had tall, slender figures, deeply tanned faces, and eyes in which glowed the whole fiery gayety and courage of youth, but upon closer examination the wide difference between them was apparent.

The Southern coloring of the younger one, who might, perhaps, be about twenty-four years old, was caused, apparently, by a prolonged stay under a hot sun, for the light, curly hair and blue eyes did not match it--they betrayed the German. A light beard, curly like the hair, framed a handsome, open face, which, however, did not follow any strict line of beauty. The forehead was rather too low, but there was something like bright sunshine in this face which charmed and won everybody.

His companion, several years his senior, had nothing of this sunny quality, although his appearance was more imposing. Slender like the younger one, he towered above him in height, and his dark complexion was not caused by the sun alone. It was of that olive tint which allows a pale face to still look fresh, and the blue-black hair which fell in thick waves over the high brow made the apparent paleness more noticeable. The face was beautiful, with its noble, proud lines so firmly and energetically pronounced, but upon it appeared also deep shadows lying over brow and eyes; such shadows as one seldom finds on youthful features.

The large, dark eyes, which had in their depths something gloomy, told of hot, unruled passions. In their flashing there was something uncanny but mysteriously attractive. One felt that they could charm with demoniac power; in fact, the whole personality of the man possessed this uncanny, entrancing charm.

"But I cannot help you, Stadinger," said the younger of the two gentlemen. "The newly arrived lot has to be unpacked and a place found for them. Where? that is your affair."

"But, Your Highness, if that is absolutely impossible?" argued the castle-keeper, in a tone indicating that he stood in rather familiar relations to his young master. "Not a nook is free any more in Rodeck. I have had trouble enough already to house the servants which Your Highness brought along, and now every day boxes large as houses arrive, and always it is 'Unpack, Stadinger,' 'Find room, Stadinger,' and in the meantime the rooms stand empty by the dozen in the other castles."

"Do not grumble, old forest spirit, but find room," interrupted the Prince. "The arrivals have to be put up here at Rodeck, at least for the present, and if the worst comes you will have to give up your own lodgings."

"Yes, certainly; Stadinger has room enough in his lodgings," joined in the second gentleman. "I shall arrange it myself and measure it all."

"And Lena can help you with it," added the Prince, supporting the proposal of his friend. "She is at home, is she not?"

Stadinger measured the gentlemen from head to foot, then answered drily:

"No, Your Highness, Lena is away."

"Where?" cried the Prince, starting up. "Where has she gone?"

"To town," was the laconic reply.

"What! I thought you intended keeping your grandchild at home all winter."

"That has been changed," replied the castle-keeper with imperturbable composure. "My old sister Rosa only is at home now. If you wish to measure my dwelling with her help, Herr Rojanow, she would consider it a high honor."

Rojanow glanced at the old man in no very friendly way, and the young prince said reproachfully:

"Now listen, Stadinger, you treat us in quite an unaccountable manner. You even take Lena away from us, the only one who was worth looking at. All else here in the female line have the sixties behind them, and their heads positively shake from old age; and the kitchen women you got from Furstenstein to help actually offend our sense of beauty."

"Your Highnesses do not need to look at them," suggested Stadinger. "I look out that the servants do not come into the castle, but if Your Highness goes into the kitchen like the day before yesterday----"

"Well, must I not inspect my servants at times? But I shall not go into the kitchen a second time--you have taken care of that. I have my suspicions that you have gathered here all the very

ugliest of the Wald to celebrate my arrival. You ought to be ashamed, Stadinger."

The old man looked sharply and fixedly into his master's eyes, and his voice sounded very impressive as he answered:

"I am not ashamed a bit, Your Highness. When the late Prince, Your Highness' father, gave me this post of rest he said to me, 'Keep order at Rodeck, Stadinger--I rely upon you.' Well, I have kept order for twelve years in the castle, and in my house particularly, and I shall do that in future. Has Your Highness any orders for me?"

"No, you old, rude thing," cried the Prince, half laughing, half angry. "Make haste and get away. We do not need any curtain lectures."

Stadinger obeyed. He saluted and marched off.

Rojanow looked after him and shrugged his shoulders sarcastically.

"I admire your patience, Egon. You allow your servants very far-reaching liberty."

"Stadinger is an exception," replied Egon. "He allows himself everything; but he was not so much in the wrong when he sent Lena away. I believe I should have done the same in his place."

"But it is not the first time that this old castle-keeper has taken it upon himself to call you and me to order. If I were his master he would have his dismissal in the next hour."

"If I tried that it would turn out badly for me," laughed the Prince. "Such old family heirlooms, who have served for three generations, and have carried the children in their arms, will be treated with respect. I cannot gain anything there with orders and prohibitions. Peter Stadinger does what he will, and occasionally lectures me just as he sees fit."

"If you suffer it--such a thing is incomprehensible to me."

"Yes, it is a thing you do not comprehend, Hartmut," said Egon more seriously. "You know only the slavish submission of the servants in your country and the Orient. They kneel and bow at every opportunity, yet steal and betray their masters whenever they can and know how. Stadinger is of an enviable simplicity. My 'Highness' does not intimidate him in the least. He often tells me the hardest things to my face; but I could put hundreds of thousands in his hands--he would not defraud me of one iota of it. If Rodeck were in flames and I in the midst of it, the old man, with all his sixty years, would stand by me without a second thought. All this is different with us in Germany."

"Yes; with you in Germany," repeated Hartmut slowly, and his glance was lost dreamily in the dusk of the forest.

"Are you still so prejudiced against it?" asked Egon. "It cost me persuasion and prayers enough to get you to accompany me here--you fought so against entering German territory."

"I wish I had not entered it," said Rojanow, gloomily. "You know----"

"That all sorts of bitter remembrances have their origin here for you--yes, you have told me that; but you must have been a boy then. Have you not yet overcome the grudge against it? You have the most obstinate reticence, anyway, upon this point. I have not yet heard what it really was that----"

"Egon, I beg of you, leave the subject," interrupted Hartmut, harshly. "I have told you once for all that I cannot and will not speak of it. If you mistrust me, let me go. I have not forced myself upon you, you know that; but I cannot bear these inquiries and questions."

The proud, inconsiderate tone which he used toward his friend did not seem to be anything new to the Prince. He merely shrugged his shoulders and said pacifyingly:

"How irritable you are again to-day! I believe you are right when you insist that German air makes you nervous. You are entirely changed since you put foot on this soil."

"It is possible. I feel that I torture you and myself with these whims; therefore let me go, Egon."

"I know better! Have I taken so much pains to catch you, just to let you fly off again now? No, no, Hartmut, I shall not let you go by any means."

The words sounded playful, but Rojanow seemed to take them wrongly. His eyes lighted up almost threateningly as he returned:

"And what if I *will* leave?"

"Then I shall hold you like this."

With an indescribably charming expression, Egon threw his arm around his friend's shoulder.

"And I shall ask if this bad, obstinate Hartmut can bring his conscience to desert me. We have lived together almost two years, and have shared danger and joy like two brothers, and now you would storm out into the world again without asking about me. Am I, then, so little to you?"

Such warm, heartfelt beseeching was in the words that Rojanow's irritation could not live. His eyes lit up with an expression which showed that he returned just as intensely the passionate, enthusiastic affection which the young Prince bore him, even if he was, in their mutual relationship, the domineering one.

"Do you believe that for the sake of any one else I would have come to Germany?" he asked in a low voice. "Forgive me, Egon. I am an unstable nature. I have never been able to stay long in any place since--since my boyhood."

"Then learn it now here at my home," cried Egon. "I came to Rodeck especially to show you my country in its entire beauty. This old edifice, which nestles in the midst of the deep forest like a fairy castle, is a piece of forest poetry such as you could not find in any of my other possessions. I know your taste--but I must really leave you now. You will not drive with me over to Furstenstein?"

"No; I will enjoy your much-praised forest poetry, which, it appears, is already tiresome to you, as you wish to make calls."

"Yes; I am no poet like you, who can dream and be enthused all day," said Egon, laughing. "We have led the life of hermits for a full week, and I cannot live on sunshine and forest perfume and the curtain lectures of Stadinger alone. I need people, and the Chief Forester is about the only person in the neighborhood. Besides, this Herr von Schonan is a splendid, jolly man. You will yet meet and know him, too."

He motioned to the waiting carriage, gave his hand to his friend, sprang to his seat and rolled away.

CHAPTER XI.

Rojanow looked after him until the vehicle had disappeared behind the trees, then he turned and took one of the paths which led into the forest. He carried his gun over his shoulder, but evidently did not think of hunting. Lost in thought, he walked further and further aimlessly, without noticing the road or direction, until deepest forest loneliness surrounded him.

Prince Adelsberg was right; he knew his friend's taste. This forest poetry took full possession of him. He finally came to a standstill and drew a deep breath, but the cloud upon his brow would not dispel; it grew darker and darker as he leaned against the trunk of a tree and allowed his eyes to roam about. Something not of peace or joy was depicted in those beautiful features, which all the sunny beauty around could not erase.

He saw this country for the first time; his former home was far removed in the northern part of Germany; nothing here reminded him directly of the past, and yet just here something awoke in him which seemed to have long been dead--something which had not made itself felt in all those years when he crossed oceans and countries, when intoxicating waves of life surrounded him and he drank with full thirsty draughts the freedom for which he had sacrificed so much--everything.

The old German woods! They rustled here in the south as up there in the familiar north; the same breath floated through the firs and oaks here which whispered there in the crowns of the pines; the same voice which had once been so familiar to the boy when he lay upon the mossy forest soil. He had heard many other voices since, some coaxing and flattering, some intoxicating and enthusiastic, but this voice sounded so grave and yet so sweet in the rustling of the forest trees--the fatherland spoke to the lost son!

Something moved yonder in the bushes. Hartmut looked up indifferently, thinking that some game was passing through, but instead of that he saw the glimmer of a light dress. A lady emerged from a narrow side path which wound through the forest, and stood still, apparently undecided as to the direction she ought to take.

Rojanow had started at the unexpected sight. It awoke him suddenly from his dream and called him back to reality. The stranger had also noticed him. She, too, seemed surprised, but only for a moment; then she drew near and said with a slight bow: "May I ask you, sir, to show

me the road to Furstenstein? I am a stranger here and have lost my way in my walk. I fear I have wandered considerably from my path."

Hartmut had scanned the appearance of the young lady with a quick glance, and immediately decided to act as guide. Although he did not know the road about which she had asked--knew only the direction in which it lay--it troubled him but little. He made a deeply polite bow.

"I place myself entirely at your service, gracious Fraulein. Furstenstein is, indeed, rather far from here, and you cannot possibly find the road by yourself, so I must beg you to accept my escort."

The lady seemed to have expected the right direction to be pointed out, and the proffered escort was evidently not especially welcome, but she may have been afraid of losing her way a second time, and the perfect politeness with which the offer was made scarcely left her any choice. She bowed after a moment's hesitation and replied: "I shall be very much obliged to you. Please let us go."

Rojanow pointed out a narrow, half-covered path which led in the direction of Furstenstein, and entered it without further ado. He decided to retain his rôle as guide, for the little adventure began to interest him.

His protégé was, indeed, beautiful enough to make the encounter interesting. The pure, delicate oval of her face; the high, clear brow surrounded by shining blonde hair; the lines of the features--all was perfect symmetry, but there was something chilling in the strong regularity of these lines, which was rather increased by a mark of energetic will power most plainly pronounced. The young lady could not be more than eighteen or nineteen years old at the utmost, but she had nothing of the charm of mirth and gayety belonging to that age. The large blue eyes looked as calm and grave as if a girlish dream had never brightened them, and the same cold, proud composure was visible in the carriage and whole appearance.

This tall, slender figure affected one like a chilling breath. Her plain but elegant apparel showed that she belonged to the high classes.

Rojanow had time enough to observe her as he walked now behind her and now before, bending back the low-hanging bows, or warning of the unevenness of the ground. This narrow forest path was truly not comfortable, and proved itself not very appropriate for the toilet of a lady. More than once her dress was caught by the bushes; the veil of her hat was entangled in the boughs at every opportunity, while the mossy soil proved at times very damp and foggy.

All of this, however, was borne with perfect indifference, but Hartmut felt that he was not doing himself much credit with his post as guide.

"I am sorry to have to lead you over such a rough path, Fraulein," he said courteously. "I am really afraid of fatiguing you, but we are in the densest forest and there is no choice whatever."

"I am not easily fatigued," was the calm rejoinder. "I care little for the roughness of the road if it only leads to the desired end."

The remark sounded somewhat unusual from the lips of a young girl. Rojanow seemed to think so, and smiled rather sarcastically as he repeated:

"If it only leads to the desired end? Quite so--that is my opinion, but ladies are usually of a different mind; they wish to be borne softly over every inconvenience."

"All of them? There are also women who prefer to go alone, without being led like a child."

"Perhaps, as an exception. I prize the chance which gives me the good fortune of meeting such a charming exception----"

Hartmut was about to utter a bold compliment, but suddenly grew silent, for the blue eyes looked at him with an expression that made the words die upon his lips.

At this moment the lady's veil was caught again by a thorny bush, which held it fast relentlessly. She stood still, but hardly had her companion stretched forth his hand to disengage the delicate fabric, when she tore herself free with a quick motion of the head. The veil remained hanging in shreds on the bough, but his help had become totally superfluous.

Rojanow bit his lip. This adventure was developing quite differently from what he had expected. He had thought to play the agreeable in that bold, vainglorious manner which had become his second nature toward ladies, to a timid young being who trusted herself entirely to his protection, but he was being shown back to his proper place by a mere glance at his first attempt. It was made very clear to him that he was to be guide here and nothing else.

Who, then, in truth, was this girl who, with her eighteen or nineteen years, already showed the perfect ease of a great lady and who knew so well how to make herself unapproachable? He concluded to have light about it at any cost.

The narrow path now ended; they emerged into an opening, the forest continuing on the other

side.

It was not easy to be a guide here, where one was as little acquainted with the country as Hartmut, but he would never confess his ignorance now.

Apparently quite certain, he kept in the same direction, choosing one of the wood roads which crossed through the forest. There must surely be a spot somewhere which would offer a free outlook and make it possible to find the right road.

The wider path now permitted them to walk side by side, and Hartmut took immediate advantage of it to start a conversation, which thus far had been impossible, since they had had to struggle with so many obstacles.

"I have neglected so far to introduce myself, gracious Fraulein," he commenced. "My name is Rojanow. I am at present at Rodeck, a guest of Prince Adelsberg, who enjoys the privilege of being your neighbor, since you live at Furstenstein."

"No; I am likewise only a guest there," replied the lady.

The princely neighbor seemed to be as indifferent to her as the name of her companion; at all events, she did not seem to consider it necessary to give her name in return, but accepted the introduction with that proud, aristocratic movement of the head which seemed to be peculiar to her.

"Ah, you live, then, at the Residenz, and have taken advantage of the beautiful fall weather for an excursion here?"

"Yes."

It sounded as monosyllabic and rebuking as possible, but Rojanow was not the man to be rebuked. He was accustomed to have his personality felt everywhere--to meet with consideration and importance, particularly among the ladies, and he felt it almost an insult that this oft-tested success was denied him here. But it excited him to enforce a conversation which apparently was not desired.

"Are you satisfied with your stay at Furstenstein?" he began anew. "I have not yet been there, and have only seen the castle from afar, but it seems to overlook the whole vicinity. A peculiar taste is needed, however, to find the country beautiful."

"And this taste does not seem to be yours."

"At any rate, I do not love the monotony, and here one has the same view everywhere. Forest and forest and nothing but forest! It is enough sometimes to create despair."

It sounded like suppressed resentment. The poor German forests had to atone for torturing the returned prodigal to such an extent that he had been upon the point several times of fleeing from their whispering and rustling. He could not bear it--this grave, monotonous tune of old times which the leaves whispered to him.

His companion heard, of course, only the sarcasm in the remark.

"You are a foreigner, Herr Rojanow?" she asked calmly.

A dark shadow passed again over Hartmut's brow. He hesitated for a moment, then replied coldly: "Yes, gracious Fraulein."

"I thought so; your name, as well as appearance, betrays it, and therefore your opinion is conceivable."

"It is certainly an unbiased opinion," said Hartmut, irritated by the reproach contained in the last words. "I have seen a great deal of the world, and have but now returned from the Orient. Whoever has known the ocean in its brilliant, transparent blue, or its majestic, stormy uproar; whoever has enjoyed the charm of the tropics, and been intoxicated with their splendor and coloring--to him these evergreen forest depths appear but cold and colorless, like all of these German landscapes, anyhow."

The contemptuous shrug of the shoulders with which he concluded seemed to finally arouse his companion from her cool indifference. An expression of displeasure flitted across her features, and her voice betrayed a certain excitement as she answered: "That is probably solely and entirely a matter of taste. I know, if not the Orient, at least the south of Europe. Those sun-glaring, color-shining landscapes intoxicate for the moment, certainly, and then they weary one. They lack freshness and strength. One can dream and enjoy there, but not live and work. But why argue about it? You do not understand our German forests."

Hartmut smiled with undeniable satisfaction. He had succeeded in breaking the icy reticence of his companion. All of his charming politeness had been without effect, but he saw now that there was something which could call life into those cold features, and he found it attractive to draw it out. If he offended by it, it did not matter; it gave him pleasure.

"That sounds like a reproof which, alas! I have to accept," he said, with an undisguised sneer. "It is possible that this understanding is wanting in me. I am accustomed to measure nature differently from most people. Live and work! It depends greatly upon what one calls living and working. I have lived for years in Paris, that mighty centre of civilization, where life throbs and flows in a thousand streams. Whoever is used to being borne on those sparkling waves cannot bring himself again into narrow, *petit* views--into all those prejudices and pedantries which in this good Germany are called 'life.'"

The contemptuous stress which he put upon the last words had something of a challenge in it, and reached its aim.

His companion came to a sudden standstill and measured him from head to foot, while from the formerly cold, blue eyes there flashed a spark of burning anger. She seemed to have an angry reply upon her lips, but suppressed it. She only straightened herself to her fullest height, and her words were few and of icy, haughty reprimand.

"You forget, mein Herr, that you speak to a German. I remind you of it."

Hartmut's brow glowed dark-red under this stern reproof, and yet it was directed only to the stranger--the foreigner--who forgot the consideration of a guest.

If this girl had an idea who spoke so to her--if she knew! Hot, burning shame rose suddenly within him, but he was man of the world enough to control himself immediately.

"I beg your pardon," he said with a slight, half-sarcastic bow. "I was under the impression that we were exchanging only general views, which have the right of unbiased opinions. I am sorry to have offended you, gracious Fraulein."

An inimitable, proud and disdainful motion of the head assured him that he did not even possess the power to offend her. She shrugged her shoulders in a barely perceptible manner.

"I do not wish to bias your opinions in the least, but as our views are so widely different on this matter, we will do better to discontinue our conversation."

Rojanow was not inclined to continue it. He knew now that those cold, blue eyes could flash. He had wished to see it--had caused it to happen, and yet the matter had ended differently from what he had anticipated. He glanced with a half hostile look at the slender figure at his side, and then his eyes roamed resentfully again in the bitterly abused green depths of the forest.

CHAPTER XII.

This forest loneliness had, however, something fascinating in it. It was touched by the first slight breath of autumn; that touch which has not yet brought withering and death, but has only steeped the landscape in richer coloring. Here and there brilliant red and gold flashed through the bushes, but the forest itself still rested fresh and aromatic in its green dusk.

Beneath the crowns of the century-old trees bending gracefully toward each other, deep, cool shadows glided, and in the openings golden sunshine lay glistening on the flowers which bloomed here in the light. Occasionally in the distance the bright mirror of a small pond glittered, resting lonely, as if lost in the midst of the deep forest.

Through the profound quiet all around could be heard the low rustling of the mighty trees and the humming and singing of thousands of insects that seemed to float upon the rays of the sun: all of those mysterious voices which are heard only in solitude--the sweet, dreamy language of the forest. It lured and coaxed irresistibly with its green depths, which stretched endlessly, always further and further, as if it wished to keep forever within its charm the two now walking through it.

But suddenly quite an unexpected obstacle appeared before them. Dashing and roaring from the thickly grown heights, a broad forest brook made a way for itself with merry haste through bushes and rocks.

Rojanow paused in his walk and took in the situation with a quick glance, but as nowhere could a ford or bridge be discovered, he turned to his companion.

"I fear we are in trouble; the brook seems to put an end to our path. It is usually easy to cross on the moss-covered stones at the bottom, with some care, but yesterday's rain has covered them

completely."

The young lady was looking anxiously for some crossing place. "Would it not be possible further down?" she asked, pointing down the stream.

"No, for the water is deeper and more rapid there. We must cross here at this place. Of course, you cannot go through the water. You will permit me, Fraulein, to carry you over?"

The offer was made with perfect courtesy and reserve, but Rojanow's eyes flashed triumphantly. Chance was avenging him now on the unapproachable one, who would not suffer his assistance even in the disengaging of her veil from a thorn bush. She had now to entrust herself unconditionally to his help, there was no choice but to allow herself to be carried in his arms to the other bank.

He drew near as if the permission sought had been granted, but she recoiled.

"I thank you, Herr Rojanow."

Hartmut smiled with an irony which he took no pains to conceal. He was master of the situation now and intended to remain so.

"Do you desire to turn back?" he asked. "More than an hour would be lost, whereas if we cross here the other side will be reached in a few moments. You can trust yourself to my arms without fear--the crossing will be quite without danger."

"I think so, too," was the calm reply, "and therefore I shall try it alone."

"Alone? That is impossible, Fraulein!"

"Impossible to walk through a forest brook? I do not consider that a particularly heroic deed."

"But the water is deeper than you think. You will get a thorough wetting, and besides--it is really impossible."

"I am not effeminate in the least and do not catch cold easily. Be so kind as to go first. I will follow."

That was plain enough, and sounded so commanding that remonstrance was not possible. Hartmut bowed a silent assent and waded through the water, which could do no damage to his high hunting boots.

It was indeed, rather deep and violent, so that he had to be careful in getting a firm foothold upon the stones. A slight smile played around his lips as he stood on the other bank and awaited his companion, who had refused his protection so haughtily. Let her try coming alone; the water would frighten her; she would not be able to battle with it, and would be compelled to call him to help her in spite of her reluctance.

She had followed him without hesitation. With her delicate, thin boots offering no resistance whatever, she already stood in the water, which was cold, but she seemed scarcely to feel it. Catching up her dress with both hands, she advanced carefully and slowly, but quite surely, to the middle of the brook.

But here in the midst of the dashing, foaming flood, it required the firm step of a man to hold its own. The slender, soft foot of the lady searched in vain for a hold upon the slippery stones. The high heels of the dainty boots were as much of a detriment as the dress, the hem of which was caught by the waves.

The courageous pedestrian apparently lost the confidence hitherto displayed. She slipped several times and finally stood still. A questioning glance flew over to the bank where Rojanow stood, firmly decided not to lift his hand to help her until she asked for it.

She may have read this resolution in his eyes, and it seemed to give her back instantly her failing strength. She stood immovable a moment, but the determined expression in her features was in full play. Suddenly she slipped from the flooded stones into water a foot deep, where she now, indeed, gained terra firma directly on the bottom of the brook, and could walk unmolested to the other bank. She grasped a branch of a tree, instead of Hartmut's offered hand, and by its aid swung herself to dry land.

Naturally she was very wet. The water ran from her dress, which she had released from her grasp without consideration, but with perfect unconcern she turned to her escort and said: "Shall we continue on our way? It cannot be very far to Furstenstein."

Hartmut did not return a syllable, but something like hatred sprang up within him for this woman, who would rather slip into the cold flood than trust herself to his arms. The proud, spoiled man whose brilliant traits had heretofore won all hearts, felt so much more keenly the humiliation which was forced upon him here. He almost cursed the whole encounter.

They walked on. From time to time Rojanow threw a glance upon the heavy, wet hem of the

dress which trailed on the ground beside him, but otherwise he bestowed his whole attention upon the surroundings, which seemed to get lighter. This forest thickness must end some time!

His supposition was correct. He had been successful in his leadership, for the path taken at random proved the right one. In about ten minutes they stood upon a slight elevation which offered a free outlook. Over yonder, above an ocean of treetops, rose the towers of Furstenstein, while a broad road, which could be plainly seen, wound to the foot of the castle mount.

"There is Furstenstein," said Hartmut, turning for the first time to his companion, "although it will be about half an hour's walk from here."

"That is of no consequence," she interrupted him quickly. "I am very grateful to you for your guidance, but I cannot now miss the road, and I should not like to trouble you further."

"As you wish, gracious Fraulein," Rojanow said, coldly. "If you desire to dismiss your guide here he will not force himself upon you."

The reproach was understood. The young lady herself might feel that a man who had guided her through the forest for hours might well deserve a different dismissal, even if she found it necessary to keep him at a distance.

"I have already detained you too long," she said graciously, "and since you have introduced yourself, Herr Rojanow, let me give you my name also before we part--Adelaide von Wallmoden."

Hartmut started slightly and a burning blush covered his face as he repeated slowly, "Wallmoden!"

"Is the name familiar to you?"

"I believe I have heard it before, but it was in--in North Germany."

"Most probably, for that is my husband's home."

Unmistakable surprise was depicted in Rojanow's face as the supposed young girl announced herself a married woman, but he bowed politely.

"Then I beg your pardon, gracious lady, for the wrong address. I could not anticipate that you were married. In any case, I have not the honor of knowing your husband even by name, for the gentleman who was then known to me was already advanced in years. He belonged to the diplomatic corps, and his name was, if I am not mistaken, Herbert von Wallmoden."

"Quite right; my husband is at present Ambassador at the court of this country. But he will be anxious about my long stay. I must not tarry longer. Once again, my thanks, Herr Rojanow."

She bowed slightly and took the descending road. Hartmut stood motionless, looking after her, but an ashy paleness was on his face.

So--he had hardly set foot upon German soil before there met him a name and connection with old times which was at least painfully disagreeable to him.

Herbert von Wallmoden, brother of Frau von Eschenhagen, guardian of Willibald, and friend of----

Rojanow suddenly broke off in his thoughts, for a sharp, painful stab sank into his breast.

As if to throw something from him he straightened himself, and again the harsh, offensive sarcasm trembled around his lips, over which he had such masterly command.

"Uncle Wallmoden has made a fine career at least," he murmured, "and seems to have had good luck besides. His hair must have been gray a long time, and yet with it he conquers a young, beautiful girl. Of course an ambassador is always a good match, hence the cool, aristocratic manner which does not consider it worth the while to bend to other mortals. Probably the diplomatic school of the husband has educated his chosen one especially for this position. Well, he has succeeded admirably."

His eyes still followed the young wife, who had already reached the foot of the hill, but now a deep furrow appeared in his brow.

"If I should meet Wallmoden here--and it can scarcely be avoided--he will recognize me beyond a doubt. If he then tells her the truth--if she learns what has happened--and looks at me again with that look of contempt----" In wild, out-breaking wrath he stamped his foot upon the ground, then laughed bitterly.

"Pah! what do I care? What does this blond, blue-eyed race, with their indolent, cold blood, know of the longing for freedom--of the storm of passions--of life in general? Let them pass judgment upon me! I do not fear the meeting. I shall know how to hold my own."

Throwing back his head in proud defiance, he turned his back upon the slender female figure

yet visible, and walked back into the forest.

CHAPTER XIII.

At the home of the Chief of all the foresters, the talked-of family fête for which Wallmoden and his young wife had expressly come, had taken place according to programme, and the lord of Burgsdorf and Antonie von Schonan were formally betrothed.

The young couple had long known that they were intended for each other, and were perfectly contented therewith.

Willibald, like a good son, was still of the opinion that the selection of his future wife was solely the business of his mother, and he had quietly waited until she found it convenient to betroth him. Still it was agreeable to him that it was just Cousin Toni he was to marry.

He had known her since their childhood; she suited him admirably, and what was of some importance, she made no demands for the romantic part of the engagement, which, with the best will in the world, he could not have complied with.

Toni exhibited the good taste which Frau Regine credited her with. Willy pleased her very much, and the prospect of becoming mistress of stately Burgsdorf pleased her still better. So all was in perfect accord.

The betrothed couple were at present in the reception room where the piano stood and Antonie was entertaining her betrothed with music at the request of her father. She herself considered music a very tiresome and superfluous affair; but the Chief Forester had insisted that his daughter should demonstrate not only her ability as a housekeeper, but that she had also been educated in the higher arts.

He was walking up and down the terrace with his sister-in-law, with the original intention of listening to the music, but instead of that they were quarreling again, although they had started out with a peaceful conversation about the happiness of the children. This time the quarrel seemed to be of a very violent nature.

"I really do not know what to think of you, Moritz," said Frau von Eschenhagen with a very red face. "You do not seem to have any sense of the impropriety of this acquaintance. When I ask you who this bosom friend of Toni's really is--the one who is expected at Waldhofen--you answer me in the calmest manner possible that she is a singer, and recently engaged at the Court Theatre. An actress! a theatre princess! one of those frivolous creatures----"

"But, Regine, do not get so excited," interrupted von Schonan vexedly. "You act as though the poor thing was already lost body and soul, because she has appeared on the stage."

"So she is," declared Regine; "whoever once enters this Sodom and Gomorrah is not to be saved--they go to their ruin there."

"Very flattering to our Court Theatre," said Schonan drily. "Besides, all of us go there."

"As audience--that is quite different. But I have always been against it. Willy has been allowed to attend the theatre but seldom, and then only in my company; but while I fulfil my maternal duty, conscientiously protecting my son from any touch with those circles, you give his future wife over freely to their poisonous influences. It is worthy of a cry to heaven!"

Her voice had grown very loud, partly through indignation and partly that she might be heard, for the musical performance in the room, whose glass doors stood wide open, was of a rather loud nature.

The young lady had a somewhat hard touch and her performance reminded one of the working of an ax in hard wood. Although her three listeners had strong nerves, a low conversation had become an impossibility.

"Let me explain this matter to you," said the Chief Forester pacifyingly. "I have already told you that this case is an exception. Marietta Volkmar is the granddaughter of our good old physician at Waldhofen. He had the misfortune to lose his son in the prime of life--the young widow followed her husband in the next year, and their child, the little orphan, came to her grandfather. That happened when I was promoted here to Furstenstein, ten years ago. Dr. Volkmar became my house physician; his granddaughter the playmate of my children, and

because the school in Waldhofen was very poor, I offered to let the little one participate in the lessons of my children. The friendship dates from then.

"Later on, when Toni was sent to boarding school for two years, and Marietta went to the city for her musical education, this daily intercourse was, of course, broken, but Marietta visits us regularly when she comes to her grandfather during her vacations, and I do not see why I should prohibit it as long as the girl remains good and true."

Frau von Eschenhagen had listened to the explanation without abating her severity in the least, and now she laughed ironically.

"Good and true at the theatre! One knows how things go there, but you seem to take it just as easy as this Dr. Volkmar, who looks so venerable with his white hair, and yet consents to his granddaughter--a young soul entrusted to his care--going on the path to destruction."

Herr von Schonan made an impatient gesture.

"Regine, you are usually such a sensible woman, but you have never wished to be reasonable on this point. The theatre and everything connected with it has always been under a ban to you. The decision has not been an easy one for the doctor. I know that; and if one like me can sit in the warm nest and support one's children, one should not break the staff over other parents who struggle with bitter cares. Volkmar still works night and day with all his seventy years, but the practice brings him but little, for our vicinity is poor, and Marietta will be quite without means after his death."

"She ought to have become a governess or companion, then; that is a decent vocation."

"But a miserable vocation. One knows well how the poor things are treated and overworked. If a child of mine, whom I loved, had to decide her lot in life, and it was told me that she had a fortune in her throat and that a splendid future was assured her--well, I should let her go on the stage, depend upon that."

This confession knocked the bottom out of the barrel. Frau Regine stood for a moment quite still in affright; then she said solemnly: "Moritz, I shudder at you."

"I don't care. If it gives you any pleasure to shudder, keep at it; but if Marietta comes to Furstenstein as usual, I shall not repulse her, and I also have nothing against Toni's going to see her in Waldhofen."

Herr von Schonan had also to speak very loud, for his daughter was pounding the keys so that the windows rattled, and the strings of the piano were seriously endangered. The Chief Forester, while in the heat of the controversy, noticed this as little as did his sister-in-law, who now replied with much sharpness:

"Well, then, it is at least a good thing that Toni is to marry soon. Then the friendship with this theatre princess will come to an end, depend upon that. Such guests are not suffered at our respectable Burgsdorf, and Willy will not allow his wife the correspondence which seems now to be going on at a lively rate."

"That means that *you* will not allow it," shouted von Schonan, mockingly. "Willy has nothing to forbid or allow; he is only the obedient servant of his gracious Frau Mamma. It is unjustifiable how you keep that boy under your thumb when he is of age, betrothed, and soon to be a husband."

Frau von Eschenhagen, offended, straightened herself.

"I believe I am more conscientious with my responsibilities than you are. Do you wish to reproach me for raising my son with filial reverence and love?"

"Oh, well; there is a point where conscientiousness ceases and maltreating commences. You have already made Willy quite silly with your eternal supervision. He did not dare to even propose on his own account; when the matter began to get too long for you, you interfered as usual. 'Why these preliminaries, children? You shall have each other--you wish it, your parents consent, you have my blessing--therefore kiss each other and bring the thing to an end.' That is your standpoint. I, too, had filial reverence and affection, but if my parents had come into my wooing like that they would have heard something very different. But Willy accepted it calmly. I truly believe he was glad that he did not have to make a formal proposal."

The excitement of the twain had again risen to the boiling point, and it was now well that the noise inside had so increased that they could not hear each other further.

Fraulein Antonie had strength at least in her hands, and as she seemed to consider that the most important thing, her performance sounded as if a regiment of soldiers were storming an attack.

It was too much for her father. He suddenly broke off the conversation and entered the room.

"But, Toni, you do not need to break the new piano," he said with vexation. "What piece are

you playing?"

Toni sat at the piano, laboring in the sweat of her brow; not far removed sat her betrothed upon a sofa, his head supported by his arm and eyes shaded by his hand, apparently quite entranced with the music.

The young lady turned at her father's question and said in her usual slow voice, "I was playing the March of the Janissaries, papa. I thought it would please Willy, since he, too, has been a soldier."

"So? But he served as a dragoon," muttered Schonan, approaching his future son-in-law, who did not seem to appreciate the delicate attention, for he gave no sign of approval.

"Willy, what do you say to it? Willy, do you not hear? I actually believe he has fallen asleep."

Alas! the supposition proved correct. While the March of the Janissaries thundered over the keys, Willy had softly and sweetly fallen asleep, slumbering so soundly that he did not even now awake. This seemed too much for his mother, who had also approached. She grasped his arm sharply.

"But, Willy, whatever does this mean? Are you not ashamed of yourself?"

The young lord, shaken and scolded on all sides, finally aroused himself and sleepily gazed around. "What--what shall I---- Yes, it was beautiful, dear Toni."

"I believe it," cried the Chief with an angry laugh. "Do not trouble yourself to play any more, my child. Come, we will let your groom-elect have his nap out in peace. He has good nerves; one must confess that."

Saying which he took his daughter's arm and left the room, where the fullest maternal wrath now broke over poor Willibald. Frau von Eschenhagen, already provoked by the preceding conversation, did not spare her son, but justified only too well the reproaches of her brother-in-law. She scolded the engaged and soon-to-be-a-husband young man like a schoolboy.

"This surpasses everything conceivable," she concluded in highest indignation. "Your father was not very much at courting, but if he, after two days' betrothal, had fallen asleep while I was entertaining him with my music, I should have aroused him very unceremoniously. Now, do you go immediately to your fiancée and beg her pardon. She is quite right to feel offended."

With which she grasped him by the shoulder and pushed him very emphatically toward the door.

Willy accepted it all very humbly and remorsefully, for he was indeed shocked at his untimely slumber; but he could not help it--he had been so sleepy and the music was so wearying.

Quite crushed, he entered the next room, where Toni stood, rather offended, at the window.

"Dear Toni, do not think hard of me," he began hesitatingly; "it was so hot and your playing had something so pacifying."

Toni turned. That this march, with her playing of it, should be pacifying was new to her; but when she saw the crushed mien of her betrothed, who stood like a prisoner before her, her good nature conquered, and she held out her hand.

"No, I am not angry with you, Willy," she said cordially. "I do not care either for the stupid music. We will do something more sensible when we are at Burgsdorf."

"Yes, that we will," exclaimed Willy, joyfully pressing the offered hand. He had not yet aspired to even a kiss upon the hand. "You are so good, Toni."

When Frau von Eschenhagen entered soon afterward, she found the couple in perfect harmony, engaged in a highly interesting conversation about dairy affairs, which were somewhat different in the two localities of Burgsdorf and Furstenstein. This was a subject over which Willy did not fall asleep, and his mother congratulated herself secretly upon this splendid daughter-in-law, who showed no inconvenient sensitiveness.

The young man found opportunity almost directly to prove himself grateful for the indulgence of his betrothed. Toni complained that a package which she had ordered and which was needed for the supper table had not yet come. It had arrived safely at the post office, but, it seemed, with a wrong address, and had not been delivered to the messenger, who in the meantime had been dispatched elsewhere. No other servant was at liberty to go, and the time of need for it was drawing near. Willibald hastened to offer his services, which were joyfully accepted by his fiancée.

CHAPTER XIV.

Waldhofen was the most important village of the vicinity, but still only a small place. It was about half an hour's distance from Furstenstein and formed a kind of centre for all the scattered villages and hamlets of the Wald.

It looked very desolate and forlorn during the afternoon hours, when nobody was on the streets; so thought Herr von Eschenhagen as he walked across the market place, where the post office was situated.

He finished the errand which had brought him to Waldhofen, and found a man to carry the parcel to the castle. Then, since the streets of the quiet little place offered no diversion, he turned into a lane which led to the high road behind the gardens of the houses.

The path was rather boggy; yesterday's rain had made it quite without a foothold in places. Yet Willibald was farmer enough not to care about such things, but marched on unconcernedly.

He was in an exceedingly happy mood. It was surely a pleasant thing to be betrothed, and he did not doubt in the least that he would lead a very happy life in the future with his good Toni.

At this moment a carriage came toward him, making its way laboriously through the boggy soil, and apparently bringing travellers, for a large trunk was strapped on behind, and the inside seemed to contain various travelling appurtenances.

Willibald could not help wondering why they used this lane, which, in its present condition, was very tiresome; indeed the driver seemed dissatisfied. He turned in his seat to consult with the traveller, who so far had not been visible.

"It really does not go any further, Fraulein. I told you so before. We cannot get through here, the wheels stick in the mud. We are in a fix now."

"But it is not far now," said a fresh voice from the inside; "only a few hundred paces. Just try it again."

"What is not possible is not possible," returned the driver with philosophical composure. "We cannot get through that mire before us; we must turn back."

"But I do not wish to drive through town." The voice had a spice of defiance in it now. "If it is not possible to drive on, I shall dismount."

The driver stopped, the door was opened, and a light, slender figure sprang from the carriage with such sure aim as to reach a higher spot across the mire. There she remained and glanced around searchingly: but as the lane made a bend nearby, only a little of it could be overlooked. The young lady seemed to observe this with dissatisfaction. Then her glance fell upon Herr von Eschenhagen, who, approaching from the other direction, now reached the bend.

"Please, mein Herr, is the lane passable?" she called. He did not answer directly, being petrified with admiration of her daring and graceful jump. Why, she flew through the air like a feather and yet stood firm and safe upon her feet where she landed.

"Do you not hear?" repeated the Fraulein impatiently; "I asked if the lane is passable."

"Yes, I have walked over it," said Willibald, somewhat confused by the dictatorial questioning.

"I see that, but I have no boots like yours and cannot wade through the mire. Is it possible to pass along the hedges? Great heavens! at least answer me."

"I--I believe so. It is somewhat dry over yonder."

"Well, I shall try, then. Turn back, driver, and deliver my baggage at the post office. I will send for it. Wait, I will take that satchel with me. Hand it across."

"But the satchel is too heavy for you, Fraulein," remonstrated the driver, "and I cannot leave the horses alone."

"Well, then, this gentleman will carry it for me. It is not far to our garden. Please, mein Herr, take the satchel, the small one upon the back seat with the black leather lining. But do make haste."

The little foot stamped the ground impatiently, for the young lord stood there with open mouth. He could not comprehend how a total stranger could dispose of him so nonchalantly, nor

how so young a girl could command in such a way.

At the last very ungracious words, however, he made haste to approach and take the designated satchel, which seemed the proper thing to be done.

"So," she said shortly. "You, driver, stop at the post office, and now forward into the bogs of Waldhofen!"

She picked up her gray travelling dress and walked close to the hedge, where the road was somewhat higher and dryer.

Willibald, of whom no notice was taken, trotted behind her with the satchel. He had never seen anything so graceful as this slender figure, which did not reach to his shoulder, and he occupied himself in observing this figure, because he had nothing else to do.

The young girl had something exceedingly charming and graceful in her motions, as well as her whole appearance; but the small head, with the dark hair curling from under her hat, was carried with undeniable spirit. The face was rather irregular in outline, but lovely with its dark, roguish eyes, while the small, rosy mouth, around which lay a line of refractory defiance, and the two dimples in the chin, made it perfectly charming. The gray travelling dress, in spite of its plainness, was very tasteful and met the requirements of fashion. The young traveller apparently did not belong to the home-made villagers of Waldhofen.

The road around the corner proved indeed somewhat dryer, but one had to keep to the little, raised path near the hedge and to jump at times over damp places. Conversation was, therefore, not possible, and Willy, in truth, never thought of commencing it. He carried the satchel patiently, accepting just as patiently the fact that his companion did not concern herself in the least about him, until, after ten minutes' walk, they stood at the low gate of a garden.

The young girl bent over the pickets and pushed an inside bolt; then she turned.

"Many thanks, mein Herr. Please give me my satchel now."

In spite of its small dimensions, the bag was rather heavy, much too heavy for the little hands outstretched for it. Willibald was seized with a sudden attack of chivalry--not a usual fault with him--and declared that he would carry it to the house, which was accepted with a gracious nod.

They passed through a small, but carefully kept, garden to an old, plain house, and entered through the back door into a cool, dusky hall, where their arrival was immediately perceived. An old servant rushed out of the kitchen.

"Fraulein! Fraulein Marietta! Have you come already to-day? Ach, what joy----"

She got no further, for Marietta flew to her and pressed her little hand upon her mouth.

"Be still, Babette! Speak quietly; I want to surprise him. Is he at home?"

"Yes, the Herr Doctor is in his study. Do you wish to go there, Fraulein?"

"No; I will steal into the sitting room and sing his favorite song. Careful now, Babette; so that he does not hear us."

Like a fairy she slipped lightly and noiselessly to the other side of the house and opened a door. Babette followed her, not noticing, in the joy and surprise of her Fraulein's return, that some one else stood in the dark hall. The door was left wide open, a chair was carefully moved, and directly a low prelude began in trembling notes, probably from a venerable old piano; but it sounded like the music of a harp, and then a voice arose, clear and sweet and joyous as a lark.

It did not last many minutes, for a door opposite was hastily opened, and a white-haired old man appeared.

"Marietta, my Marietta! is it really you?"

"Grandpapa!" was cried back, joyfully. The song broke off and Marietta threw herself upon her grandfather's neck.

"You naughty child, how you have frightened me!" he scolded, tenderly. "I did not expect you until the day after to-morrow, and intended to meet you at the station. Now I hear your voice, and do not dare to believe my ears."

The young girl laughed merrily as a child. She was more than happy and content.

"Yes, the surprise has been a complete success, grandpapa. I drove into the lane and actually stuck in the bog. I came in the back door. What do you want, Babette?"

"Fraulein, the man who brought the bag is still there," said the old servant, who had but just observed the stranger. "Shall I pay him for you?"

The young lord still stood there with the satchel in his hand. But now Dr. Volkmar turned and exclaimed in great embarrassment: "Gracious heavens! Herr von Eschenhagen!"

"Do you know the gentleman?" Marietta asked without much surprise, for her grandfather was accustomed to meet all of Waldhofen in his office of physician.

"Certainly. Babette, take the valise from the gentleman. I beg your pardon, mein Herr. I did not know that you were already acquainted with my granddaughter."

"No, we are not acquainted in the least," declared the girl. "Will you not present the gentleman to me, grandpapa?"

"Certainly, my child. Herr Willibald von Eschenhagen of Burgsdorf----"

"Toni's betrothed!" interrupted Marietta, gaily. "Oh, how funny that we should meet in the middle of a bog! If I had only known, Herr von Eschenhagen, I would not have treated you so badly. I let you follow me like a regular porter. But why did you not say something?"

Willibald did not say anything now, but looked mutely at the little hand which was cordially extended to him. Feeling that he had to either say or do something, he grasped the rosy little hand in his giant fist and squeezed and shook it heartily.

"Oh!" cried the young lady, retreating horrified; "you have an awful handshake, Herr von Eschenhagen. I believe you have broken my fingers."

Willibald turned red with confusion and stammered an excuse. Fortunately, Dr. Volkmar now invited him to enter, which invitation he accepted silently, and Marietta narrated in a very laughable way her meeting with him. She treated her friend's betrothed like an old acquaintance, for she had long known of their engagement. She asked him about Toni, about the Chief Forester and all the household, her small, red mouth rattling on like a mill wheel.

Still the young lord was almost mute. The clear voice which sounded, even in talking, like the twittering of birds, utterly confused him.

He had only met the doctor yesterday, when the latter had called at Furstenstein. There had been some casual mention of a certain Marietta--a friend of Toni's--but he did not know anything further, for his fiancée was not very communicative.

"And this naughty child allows you to stand in the hall without ceremony, while she seats herself at the piano to notify me of her arrival," said Volkmar, shaking his head. "That was very naughty, Marietta."

The young girl laughed and shook her curly head.

"Oh, Herr von Eschenhagen will not be offended at that, and therefore he may listen while I sing you your favorite song again. You scarcely heard a note of it before. Shall I begin now?"

Without waiting for an answer, she ran to the piano, and again that silvery, clear voice arose, entrancing the ear with its charm. She sang an old, simple carol, but it sounded as soft and sweet and coaxing as if spring and sunshine had suddenly entered the desolate rooms of the old house. It spread sunshine over the face of the old, white-haired man, where many a line of care and anxiety was visible. He listened with a smile, half sad, half happy, to the song which may have reminded him of his youth. But he was not the only attentive listener.

The young lord of Burgsdorf, who two hours previously had fallen asleep amidst the thunders of "The Janissaries' March"--who, in perfect accord with his betrothed, had considered silly music a tiresome thing--now listened to those soft, floating sounds as intently as if they brought him a revelation.

He sat there, bent over, his eyes fixed immovably upon the young girl, who apparently put all her soul into the song, moving her head to and fro with an infinitely graceful motion.

When the song ended he breathed deeply and passed his hand across his brow.

"My little singing bird," said Dr. Volkmar, tenderly bending over his granddaughter and kissing her brow.

"Well, grandpapa, my voice has not exactly deteriorated in the last few months, has it?" she asked, teasingly, "but it does not seem to please Herr von Eschenhagen. He does not say a word about it."

She glanced with a childish pout over at Willibald, who now also arose and approached the piano. A slight flush suffused his face, and his usually quiet eyes flashed as he said in a low tone: "Oh, it was beautiful, very beautiful!"

The young singer may have been accustomed to other compliments, but she felt the deep, honest admiration in the laconic words, and knew very well the impression the song had made. She smiled, therefore, as she replied: "Yes, the song is beautiful. I have always had a regular

triumph when I sang it as an addition to my rôle."

"To your rôle!" replied Willibald, not understanding the expression.

"Yes, in the play from which I have just returned. Oh, it has been a splendid success, grandpapa. The manager would gladly have prolonged it, but I had already given the greater part of my vacation to it, and I wished to be with you at least a few weeks."

The young lord listened with increasing astonishment.

Play! vacation! manager! What could all that mean? The doctor saw his surprise.

"Herr von Eschenhagen does not know your vocation, my child," he said, quietly. "My granddaughter has been educated for the opera."

"How dryly you say that, grandpapa!" cried Marietta, springing up. Straightening herself to the fullest height of her dainty figure, she added, with mock solemnity: "For five months a member of the highly respected Ducal Court Theatre, a person of official honors and renown!"

Member of the Court Theatre! Willibald almost shuddered at those awful words. The obedient son of his mother shared her disdain of "actresses." Involuntarily he receded a step and glared horrified at the young lady who had imparted such awful news to him. She laughed merrily at this motion.

"You are not compelled to show so exceeding much respect and awe, Herr von Eschenhagen. I will allow you to remain near the piano. Has not Toni told you that I am on the stage?"

"Toni--no!" Willibald burst out, having lost his composure completely. "But she is waiting for me. I must return to Furstenstein. I have tarried here already too long."

"You are very polite," laughed the girl, gayly. "That is not very flattering to us, but since you are engaged you must naturally return to your fiancée."

"Yes, and to my mamma," said Willibald, who had a dark feeling that something awful threatened him, before which his mother appeared as a saving angel. "I beg your pardon, but I have stayed here already too long----"

He stopped, for he remembered that he had already said that once, and searched for other words, but could not find any, and, unhappily, repeated the phrase for the third time.

Marietta almost choked with laughter, but Dr. Volkmar declared politely that they did not wish to detain him any longer, and begged him to take his regards to the Chief Forester and Fraulein von Schonan.

The young lord scarcely heard. He looked for his hat, made a bow, stammered a few words of adieu and ran off as if his head was burning. He had but one thought--that he must leave as quickly as possible; that gay, teasing laugh made him crazy.

When Volkmar, who had escorted Willibald to the door, returned, his granddaughter was wiping the tears from her eyes, quite overcome with laughter.

"I believe something is wrong with Toni's betrothed here," she cried, putting a delicate ringer to her forehead. "At first he ran behind me, mutely carrying the bag like a fish wife; then he seemed to thaw at my singing, and now he is seized with an attack of something and runs away to Furstenstein to his 'mamma,' so quickly that I could not even send a greeting to his betrothed."

The doctor smiled a little plaintively. He had observed closely and guessed whence came this sudden change of manner in his guest.

"The young man has probably not had much intercourse with ladies," he said, evasively; "and he seems to stand somewhat in awe of his mother, but he appears to please his fiancée very well, and that is surely the most important thing."

"Yes, he is handsome," said Marietta, somewhat thoughtfully; "even very handsome. But I believe, grandpapa, he is also very stupid."

In the meantime Willibald had run like a storm to the next corner, where he came to a standstill and tried to collect his thoughts, which were in great confusion. It was a long time before he succeeded, but he looked back once more to the doctor's house before he walked on.

What would his mother say to it? She who had placed the whole world of actresses under a ban; and she was right. Willy plainly felt that something bewitching belonged to the tribe; one had to beware of them.

But what if this Marietta Volkmar should take a notion to visit her friend at Furstenstein? The young lord ought to have been horrified at the thought, and was convinced that he was horrified; but with all that the strange flash returned to his eyes. He suddenly saw in the reception room, at the piano where Toni had been a little while ago, a small, delicate figure, whose dark, curly head

moved to and fro like a bird, and the thunder of the march changed into the soft, rippling notes of the old carol, while between all again sounded the gay, silvery laugh which also was music.

And all this loveliness must be ruined and lost because it belonged to the stage! Frau von Eschenhagen had often expressed such an opinion, and Willibald was too good a son not to consider her an oracle. But he heaved a deep sigh, and murmured: "Oh, what a pity; what a great pity!"

CHAPTER XV.

About half way between Furstenstein and Rodeck, where the forest mountains rose to their greatest height, lay the Hochberg, a popular resort for sight-seeing on account of its magnificent views. The old stone tower upon its summit, the last remnant of an otherwise totally demolished castle ruin, had been made an object of interest, and at its foot nestled a little inn, which entertained numerous guests from the neighborhood. Strangers did not often come into these almost unknown forest mountains and valleys. Visitors of any sort were somewhat rare now in the fall, but to-day's beautiful weather had enticed several people out on the trip. Half an hour ago two gentlemen had arrived on horseback, attended by a groom, and now a carriage, bringing more sight-seers, drove up to the inn.

Upon the flat roof of the tower, near the stone breastwork, stood the two gentlemen, the younger one zealously occupied in pointing out and explaining the various points of interest.

"Yes, our Hochberg is renowned for its views." he said. "I was obliged to show them to you, Hartmut. Is not the view over this wide, green forest ocean incomparable?"

Hartmut did not answer; he seemed to be looking through the glass for some distant point.

"Where is Furstenstein? Ah, there. It seems to be an enormous old structure."

"Yes, the castle is worth seeing," assented Prince Adelsberg. "But, outside of that, you were wise to remain at home the other day; I was bored to death by the visit."

"So? You seemed to think a great deal of the Chief Forester."

"Certainly, I like to chat with him; but he had driven out and returned only just before I left. His son is not at Furstenstein. He is studying at the school for foresters, so I had to wait upon Fraulein von Schonan; but that pleasure was not exactly interesting. A word every five minutes and a minute to every word. Very many domestic virtues, but very little behind the forehead. I kept the conversation going by the sweat of my brow, and then had the honor of meeting the betrothed of the Baroness--a genuine, undiluted country squire, with a very energetic mamma, who has him and the future daughter-in-law under complete control. We had an exceedingly brilliant conversation, finally landing on turnip culture, in which I was thoroughly instructed. The visit was bearable only when the Chief Forester returned with his brother-in-law, the Baron Wallmoden."

Rojanow still held the glass directed upon Furstenstein, listening, apparently, indifferently. Now he repeated questioningly: "Wallmoden?"

"The new Prussian Ambassador to our court, a genuine diplomat in appearance; aristocratic, cool and buttoned up to the chin; also having very agreeable manners. Her Excellency, the Frau Baroness, was not visible, which I bore with composure, since the husband already has gray hair, and consequently the lady would probably be of an age which one approaches only with veneration."

A peculiarly bitter expression played around Hartmut's lips as he now lowered the glass.

He had kept his encounter with Frau von Wallmoden from his friend. Why mention the name? He wished to be reminded of it as little as possible.

"But our romantic forest solitude will soon be ended," continued Egon. "I heard from the Chief Forester that the court will come to Furstenstein this year for the hunting season, and I can then expect a visit from the Duke. I am not very delighted at the prospect, for my highly honored uncle has a habit of holding forth to me just as frequent and just as impressive moral sermons as Stadinger, and I must naturally keep the peace then. But I shall present you at this visit, Hartmut. You consent?"

"If you consider it necessary, and the etiquette of your court allows----"

"Bah! the etiquette is not so strictly adhered to with us. Besides, the Rojanows belong to the nobility of your country, do they not?"

"Certainly."

"Well, then, you are in every case entitled to the presentation. I consider it by all means desirable, for I have set my mind on seeing your 'Arivana' at our Court Theatre; and as soon as the Duke knows you and your work, that will be done beyond a doubt."

The words betrayed the passionate admiration the young Prince felt for his friend; but the latter only shrugged his shoulders slightly.

"Possibly, particularly if you plead for me; but I do not like to succeed under protection. I am no poet of renown. Indeed, I'm not sure whether I am a poet; and if my work cannot smooth a way for itself----"

"You would be obstinate enough to keep it from publicity; that is like you. Have you no ambition at all?"

"Perhaps only too much, and from that arises originally what you call my obstinacy. I never could bow down and subordinate myself in life. I could not; my whole nature rose against it, and I am not at all suited to the ways of your court."

"Who told you that?" laughed Egon. "They will flatter and spoil you there, just like everywhere else. It is your nature to rise everywhere like a meteor, and one does not expect these stars to travel in old routes. Besides, you have from the start the exceptional position of guest and foreigner, and when you are once summoned by the halo of poesy, then----"

"Then it is with that you intend to keep me here in your country?"

"Well, then, yes. I do not think that I alone possess the power to keep you here permanently, you wild, restless guest; but a rising poet's name is a fetter which one does not slip off so easily, and I have sworn to myself since this morning not to let you go again at any price."

Rojanow started and looked at him inquiringly.

"Why just since this morning?"

"That is my secret for the present," said Egon, jestingly.

"Ah, more guests are coming here, it seems."

A step was heard upon the narrow, winding stone stairs, and the bearded face of the tower watchman appeared at the opening which led to the platform.

"Please take care, gracious lady," he said, warningly, looking back with concern; "the last steps are very steep and much worn. So, now we are at the top."

He offered a helping hand to the lady who followed him, but she did not need it, ascending easily with effort.

"What a beautiful girl!" whispered Prince Adelsberg to his friend, who, instead of replying, made a deep and formal bow before the lady. She could not conceal a certain surprise at the sight of him. "Ah, Herr Rojanow, you here?"

"I am admiring the view from the Hochberg, which may also have attracted you, Your Excellency."

The face of the Prince betrayed boundless astonishment when the "beautiful girl" was called "Excellency," and when he saw that she was not a stranger to his friend. He speedily drew near for an introduction to this acquaintance, and Hartmut could not avoid presenting the Prince Adelsberg to the Baroness Wallmoden.

He touched upon the forest encounter very lightly, for the lady found it convenient to-day to enshroud herself in her haughty reserve. It was hardly necessary, for Rojanow observed the strictest reticence. Both seemed decided to treat the acquaintance as a very slight and formal one.

Egon had thrown a glance of the liveliest reproach upon his friend. He could not understand how Hartmut could have kept such a meeting to himself; but, after that, he cast himself with ardor into the conversation. He announced himself a neighbor, mentioned his recent call at Furstenstein, and expressed his regret at having missed Frau von Wallmoden at that time. A conversation was commenced, in which the Prince exhibited his amiability and vivacity, while retaining the reserve of etiquette. He knew from the beginning that he stood before the wife of the Ambassador, whom one could not approach with a bold compliment, as Hartmut had ventured.

Finally his happy, unaffected good humor succeeded in diminishing the icy atmosphere which surrounded the beautiful woman, and he had the good fortune of being permitted to show and explain to her the surrounding country.

CHAPTER XVI.

Hartmut did not join in the conversation with his usual vivacity, and when he again drew out the glass from his pocket, at the Prince's request, he suddenly missed his letter-case.

The watchman offered at once to look for it, but Rojanow declared he would do it himself. He remembered exactly the place where something had slipped to the floor when he came up the stairs, which he had not noticed at the time. It was the letter-case, no doubt, and he would find it with little trouble and return. Saying which, he bowed and departed.

Under other circumstances Egon would doubtless have thought it strange that his friend should refuse the offer of the old man and take upon himself the trouble of searching the dark stairway, but he was at present so totally occupied with his office of explanatory exhibitor that he did not seem to regret being left alone.

Frau von Wallmoden had accepted the glass which he offered her and followed with apparent attention his explanations as he pointed out all the various heights and villages.

"And over yonder, behind those hills, lies Rodeck," he concluded; "the little hunting lodge where we live like two hermits, cut off from all the world, having only the company of monkeys and parrots, which we brought from the Orient, and which have already become quite melancholy."

"You do not look at all like a hermit, Your Highness," said the young Baroness, with a fleeting smile.

"In truth, I have not much taste for it; but at times Hartmut has perfect attacks of the ailment, and then I bury myself in solitude for weeks for his pleasure."

"Hartmut! That is a thoroughly German name, and it is also surprising that Herr Rojanow speaks German with such fluency and without even a foreign intonation. Yet he introduced himself to me as a foreigner."

"Certainly. He comes from Roumania, but was raised by relatives in Germany, from whom also he may have inherited the German name," said the Prince, simply.

It was plainly to be seen that he knew nothing further of the origin of his friend. "I became acquainted with him at Paris, when I was about to begin my trip to the East, and he decided to accompany me. It was my good star of fortune that brought him to me."

"You seem infatuated with your friend."

There was something like disapprobation in the tone.

"Yes, Your Excellency, I am indeed," affirmed Egon, warmly; "and not I alone. Hartmut is one of those genial natures who conquers and wins people by storm wherever he appears. You should see and hear him when he is heart and soul enthusiastic. Then his soul flames like fire into yours. He envelops everything with his warmth; one has to follow where his flight leads."

The enthusiastic eulogy found a very cool listener. The young lady seemed to bend all her attention upon the landscape, as she replied: "You may be correct. Herr Rojanow's eyes betray something of it, but such fiery natures make upon me an impression more uncanny than sympathetic."

"Perhaps because they bear the demoniac lines which are peculiar to genius. Hartmut has them. He startles me sometimes, and yet the dark depths of his nature draw me irresistibly to him. I have actually forgotten how to live without him and shall try everything to retain him in our country."

"In Germany? You will hardly succeed in that, Your Highness. Herr Rojanow has a poor opinion of our fatherland. He betrayed that to me the day before yesterday in rather an offensive way."

The Prince became attentive. The words at once explained the cold reserve, which was not usually Hartmut's manner toward a beautiful woman, and which had surprised him at the first moment. But he smiled.

"Ah, that was the reason why he did not speak of the encounter. Your Excellency has probably shown him your displeasure. It serves him right. Why does he prevaricate with such persistency? He has irritated me often enough with this assumed depreciation, which I accepted then in good faith; but I know better now."

"You do not believe in it?" Adelaide suddenly turned from the view to the speaker.

"No, I have the proof of it in my hands. He is infatuated with our German land. You look at me incredulously, Your Excellency. May I impart a secret to you?"

"Well?"

"I was looking for Hartmut this morning in his room, but did not find him, I found, instead, a poem upon his desk, which he had probably forgotten to lock up, for it was surely not intended for my eyes. I stole it, without any compunction of conscience, and carry the spoils still with me. Will you permit me to read it?"

"I do not understand the Roumanian language," said Frau von Wallmoden, with cool satire. "Herr Rojanow has scarcely condescended to compose a poem in German."

Instead of answering, Egon drew out the paper and opened it. "You are prejudiced against my friend; I see it. But I do not like you to regard him in the wrong light in which he has placed himself. May I justify him with his own words?"

"If you please."

The words sounded indifferent, and yet Adelaide's gaze was riveted with a strange expectancy upon the paper, which seemed to contain only a few hastily written stanzas. Egon read.

They were German verses, indeed; but of a perfection and harmony which could belong only to a master of the language. The pictures they conjured up before the listener were strangely familiar. Deep, dreamy forest solitude, touched by the first breath of approaching autumn; endless green depths which beckoned and charmed irresistibly with their twilight shadows; aromatic meadows flooded with sunlight; small, still waters, which gleamed in the distance, and the foaming forest brook roaring down from the heights.

And this picture had taken on life and language. That which whispered in it was the old, old song of the forest itself; its murmuring and rustling--its mysterious working gathered into words which enchanted the ear of the listener like melody, while through it all floated and moaned a deep, unspeakable longing for this forest peace.

The Prince read warmly at first, then with great enthusiasm. Now he dropped the sheet and asked triumphantly:

"Well?"

The young Baroness had listened spellbound. She did not look at the reader, but stared motionless into the blue distance. At the question she started slightly and hastily turned.

"What did you say, Your Highness?"

"Is this the language of a depredator of our fatherland? I believe not," said Egon in most decided tones, but greatly as he was engrossed with his friend's poetry, he could still notice how exceptionally beautiful Frau von Wallmoden looked at this moment.

Of course, it must have been the setting sun which lent the rosy coloring to her face and the brilliancy to her eyes, for her bearing was as cold as her answer.

"It is really surprising that a foreigner should command the German language so perfectly."

Egon looked at her in amazement. Was this all? He had expected a different impression. "And what do you think of the poem itself?" he asked.

"Quite excellent. Herr Rojanow seems indeed to possess much poetic talent. But here is your glass, Your Highness. I thank you. I must be thinking of the descent now, as I do not wish to keep my husband waiting too long."

Egon folded up the paper slowly and deposited it in his breast pocket. He felt the icy breath now surround again the beautiful woman, which chilled him to the heart.

"I already have the honor of an acquaintance with His Excellency," he said. "May I renew it today?"

A slight bow gave the permission to accompany her. They left the platform, but the Prince had

grown somewhat monosyllabic. He felt offended for his friend, and now regretted having given this poetry, the beauty of which carried him away, to a lady who had no understanding of, nor appreciation whatever for, poetry.

CHAPTER XVII.

Hartmut descended the stairs slowly after his leave-taking, the lost letter-case resting safely in its usual place. It had served its purpose as a pretext to free its possessor a little while.

Adelaide von Wallmoden had casually mentioned having come with her husband, who remained down at the inn because he disliked the troublesome climbing of the steep stairs.

Hartmut could not therefore evade a meeting with him, but it should at least take place without witnesses. If Wallmoden should recognize the son of his friend, whom he had known only as a boy, he might not be able to master his surprise.

Hartmut did not fear this meeting, even if it were inconvenient and uncomfortable to him. There was but one face in the whole world he feared--only one face to which he would not dare lift his eyes--and that face was far away; probably he would never see it again. Every one else he met with the proud defiance of a man who had only done right in withdrawing from a hated vocation.

He was decided upon not permitting any expression of reproach, but, if he should be recognized, to request the Ambassador in the most decided manner to consider certain old connections, with which he had so totally broken, as no longer existing. With this conclusion he emerged into the open air.

Herbert Wallmoden sat with his sister upon the little veranda of the inn. The Chief Forester had been too much occupied with the approaching arrival of the court, the hunting expeditions of which he had to arrange, to accompany the party. The betrothed couple had also remained at home; but the day for the little trip could not have been more pleasant.

"This Hochberg is really worth seeing," said Frau von Eschenhagen, her eyes roaming over the country. "We have almost the same view here as upon the top of the tower. Why climb and overheat oneself and lose one's breath on those never-ending steps?"

"Adelaide was of a different opinion," replied Wallmoden, with a casual glance at the tower. "She does not know fatigue nor how to get overheated."

"And also how not to catch cold. She proved that the day before yesterday, when she came home drenched through. She did not catch the least cold."

"Nevertheless, I have requested her to take an escort for her future walks," said the Ambassador, calmly. "To get lost in the forest, wade a creek, and be guided to the right path by the first hunter one comes across are things which must not occur again. Adelaide agreed with me and promised immediately to obey my wishes."

"Yes, she is a sensible woman, a thoroughly healthy nature from which anything romantic or adventurous is far removed," complimented Regine. "But there seem to be more visitors upon the tower. I thought we should be the only guests to-day."

Wallmoden looked indifferently at the tall, slender gentleman who now emerged from the small tower door and walked toward the inn. Frau von Eschenhagen also looked at him carelessly; but suddenly her glance grew keener, and she started.

"Herbert--look!"

"Where?"

"That stranger there. What a strange resemblance!"

"To whom?" asked Herbert, growing more attentive and looking sharply at the stranger.

"To--impossible! That is not only a resemblance. It is he himself."

She sprang up, pale with excitement, and her look fastened itself upon the features of the man just now putting his foot upon the first step of the veranda. She met his eyes, those dark, glowing

eyes, which had so often shone upon her from the face of the boy, and the last doubt disappeared.

"Hartmut--Hartmut Falkenried--you----"

She was suddenly silenced by Wallmoden's laying his hand heavily upon her arm and saying slowly, but with emphasis: "You are mistaken, Regine. We do not know this gentleman."

Hartmut stopped short when he caught sight of Frau von Eschenhagen, who had been hidden by the foliage. He was not prepared for her presence. At the moment he recognized her the words of the Ambassador reached his ear. He knew that icy tone only too well; it forced the blood to his brow.

"Herbert!" Regine looked doubtingly at her brother, who still held her by the arm.

"We do not know him," he repeated in the same tone.

"Is it possible that I have to tell you that, Regine?"

She understood now his meaning. With a half threatening, half painful glance, she turned her back upon the son of her friend and said, with deep bitterness:

"You are right. I was mistaken."

Hartmut started, and in rising anger he drew a step nearer.

"Herr von Wallmoden!"

"Did you speak to me?" The tone was as stinging and scornful as before.

"You have anticipated my wishes, Your Excellency," said Hartmut, forcing himself to be calm. "I wished to ask you not to recognize me. We are strangers to each other."

He turned and walked off defiantly, tall and erect, and entered the house by another door.

Wallmoden looked after him with darkened brow. Then he turned to his sister.

"Could you not control yourself better, Regine? Why have a scene at such a meeting? This Hartmut does not exist any longer for us."

Regine's face betrayed only too well how much this encounter had shocked her. Her lips still quivered as she replied:

"I am no practiced diplomat like you, Herbert. I have not learned to be still when one whom I thought dead or ruined suddenly appears before me."

"Dead? that was hardly to be expected at his age. Ruined, corrupted? that might be nearer it. His life up to the present moment has lain in that direction."

"Do you know about it?" Frau von Eschenhagen started with surprise. "Do you know of his life?"

"Partly. Falkenried was too much my friend for me not to investigate what became of his son. Of course, I was silent to him as well as you concerning it; but as soon as I had returned to my office that time, I used our diplomatic relations, which reach everywhere, to inquire about it."

"Well, what did you learn?"

"Principally only that which was to be expected. Zalika had turned her steps directly homeward with her son. You know that her stepfather--our cousin Wallmoden--was already dead when she returned to her mother after the divorce. The connections on our side were thereby broken off, but I learned that shortly before Zalika's reappearance in Germany she had come into the possession of the Rojanow estates."

"Zalika? Did she not have a brother?"

"Yes, he had charge of the estates for ten years, but died, unmarried, from an accident while hunting, and, since his mother's second marriage had resulted in no descendant, Zalika entered now upon the inheritance--at least in name--for through the reckless management of the Bojar, the most of it belonged to the Jews. Nevertheless, she now felt herself master, and planned the *coup* of getting possession of her son. The old, wild life was then continued upon the estates for a few years, with senseless management, until everything was gone. Then mother and son, like a couple of gypsies, went out into the wide world."

Wallmoden narrated this with the same cold contempt which he had shown to Hartmut, and the same horror and aversion were pictured in the face of his sister--that strictly duteous and moral lady. Nevertheless, a certain degree of sympathy was in her voice as she asked: "And you have not heard anything of them since?"

"Yes, several times. A casual mention of the name led me to the track. While I was at the embassy at Florence, they were in Rome; a few years later they appeared in Paris, and there I heard of the death of Frau Zalika Rojanow."

"So she is dead," said Frau von Eschenhagen, in a low voice. "What do you think they have lived on all these years?"

Wallmoden shrugged his shoulders.

"What do all adventurers who wander homeless over the world live on? They may perhaps have saved something from the wreck, perhaps not. At any rate, they visited all the salons in Paris and Rome. A woman like Zalika finds help and protection everywhere. She had the title of nobility as daughter of a Bojar, and the forced sale of the Roumania property was probably not known, so it played a prominent part in their success. Society opens its doors only too quickly to this element if it knows how to keep up appearances, which seems to have been the case here. By what means, that, of course, is another question."

"But Hartmut, whom she forcibly carried into such a life--what of him?"

"An adventurer--what else?" said the Ambassador, with intense harshness. "He always had an inclination that way; he will have developed finely in such a school. I have not heard anything of him since the death of his mother, three years ago."

"And you kept it a secret from me?" said Regine, reproachfully.

"I wished to spare you. You had taken this scoundrel--this Hartmut--too much into your heart. I was afraid you might be carried away in a hint to Falkenried."

"You took unnecessary pains. I have ventured but once to speak of the past to Falkenried. He looked at me--I shall never forget that look--and said, with an awful expression: 'My son is dead--you know that, Regine. Let the dead rest!' I shall certainly not mention that name to him again."

"Then I do not need to caution you when you return home," replied Wallmoden. "But you ought not to speak of it to Willibald, either. His good nature might play him a trick when he learns that his once great friend lives in the neighborhood. It is best for him to hear nothing of it. I shall certainly ignore this *gentleman* at a possible second meeting, and Adelaide does not know him at all. She does not even know that Falkenried had a son."

He broke off and arose, for his young wife now appeared in the door of the tower.

Prince Adelsberg renewed the acquaintance of yesterday and inquired innocently if his friend, Rojanow, had passed by here. He could not explain his absence.

A glance from Wallmoden warned his sister, who was proof this time against surprise. Wallmoden himself regretted not having seen the gentleman, and said that he was just about to leave with his wife and sister, having only awaited the former's return. The order for the carriage was given at once, to which Egon accompanied them, taking leave of them with a deep bow, but following the carriage with attentive eyes.

Hartmut stood alone at a window of the inn, also observing the departure. The same ashy paleness again overspread his face, which had gleamed there at the first mention of the name of Wallmoden; but now it was the whiteness of a wild anger which almost shocked him.

He had expected questions and reproaches, which, of course, he had intended to refute haughtily; but was met instead with a complete ignoring, which was a deadly insult to his pride. Wallmoden's harsh warning to his sister, "We do not know him--have I to remind you of that?" had wrought up his whole being. He felt the annihilation contained in it. And the woman, who had always shown him a mother's love--even Frau von Eschenhagen--had joined her brother in turning her back upon him, as upon a person one is ashamed to have once known. This was too much.

"Well, here you are!" Egon's voice came from the door. "You disappeared as if the earth had swallowed you. Has the unlucky letter-case been found?"

Rojanow turned. He was obliged to recall the pretext he had used.

"Yes, indeed," he answered absently, "it lay upon the stairs."

"Well, the guide would have found it just as well. Why did you not come back? Very polite of you to leave Frau von Wallmoden and me without ceremony. You have not even taken leave of the lady. His Excellency's highest displeasure is sure to fall upon you."

"I shall know how to bear the misfortune," said Hartmut, shrugging his shoulders.

The Prince drew near and laid his hand jestingly upon his friend's shoulder.

"So? It is probably because you fell into disgrace yesterday. It is not your usual way to run off where the entertainment of a beautiful lady is concerned. Oh, I know all about it. Her Excellency

has given you a lecture over your loving tirades against Germany, and the spoiled favorite has been offended. Why, one could afford to be told the truth by such lips."

"You seem to be quite transported," sneered Hartmut. "Beware lest the husband be not jealous in spite of his years."

"It is a strange couple," said Egon musingly, as if lost in thought; "that old diplomat, with his gray hair and immovable face, and his young wife with her brilliant beauty like----"

"An aurora which rises from a sea of ice. It is only a question of which stood furthest below zero."

The young Prince laughed heartily. "Very poetical and very malicious; but you are not far wrong. I have also felt something of this polar breath touching me chillingly several times; but that is my luck. Otherwise I would fall hopelessly in love with the beautiful Excellency. But I think it is time for us to leave, *nicht wahr?*"

He went to the door to call the groom. Hartmut following, threw one more glance out to where, through an opening in the forest, the Ambassador's carriage was again visible, and his hands clinched involuntarily.

"We shall speak yet, Herr Wallmoden," he muttered. "I shall remain now. He shall not think that I fly from his presence. I shall allow Egon to present me at court, and exert my utmost to make my work a success. We shall see then if he dares treat me like a first-class adventurer. He shall pay for that tone and look!"

CHAPTER XVIII.

Everything at Furstenstein was in a state of preparation for the arrival of the Court. Their stay was to be of longer duration than for a short hunting expedition; they were to remain several weeks, for which time the Duchess also was expected. The upper stories of the castle, with their numerous suites of rooms, were being aired and put in order. A portion of the court officials and servants had already arrived. Extensive and festive preparations were also being made in Waldhofen, through which the Court was to pass on its way to the castle.

Wallmoden's stay, which, under ordinary circumstances, would have been short, was prolonged. The Duke, who was pleased to distinguish the Ambassador in every way, had heard of his attending a family fête at Furstenstein, and had expressed a wish to find him and his wife still there. The invitation was equivalent to a command which had to be obeyed.

Frau von Eschenhagen and her son also wished to remain to look at the Court in close proximity; and the Chief Forester, who wished to distinguish himself in the probably extensive hunts, held daily conferences with the Head Forester and his subordinates, and put the whole forestry in motion.

There was much bustle already about the castle. A sound of merry chattering and clear laughter came from Fraulein von Schonan's room. Marietta Volkmar had come to her friend for an hour, and as usual there was no end to the talking and laughing.

Toni sat near the window, and Willibald, who was acting as guard at his mother's command, stood beside her.

Frau von Eschenhagen so far had not had her way about the intercourse of the two girls. Her brother-in-law had remained obstinate, and even her future daughter-in-law, usually so compliant, rendered unexpected resistance when the subject was broached.

"I cannot, dear Aunt," Toni had answered. "Marietta is so sweet and good that I cannot offend her so bitterly."

Sweet and good! Frau Regine shrugged her shoulders over the inexperience of the young girl, whose eyes she did not wish to open, but she felt bound to interfere, and concluded to act diplomatically this time.

Willibald, accustomed to confess everything to his mother, had narrated to a fine point the encounter with the young singer. Frau von Eschenhagen had naturally been beside herself to think that the master of Burgsdorf should have carried a satchel behind the "theatre princess!" On the other hand, she heard the description of his horror upon learning who this lady really was,

and his running away, with high pleasure, and thought it exceedingly praiseworthy that he objected to the rôle of guard over the girl. Of course he disliked every touch with such a person; but since his mother found it beneath her dignity to attend these meetings, he *must* protect his bride-elect.

He was given the curt command to never leave the young ladies alone, but to report explicitly how this Marietta actually behaved herself. After the first report, which would undoubtedly be atrocious, Frau Regine would impress upon her brother-in-law's conscience the frivolous association he had allowed his child; would call upon her son as witness, and request emphatically the breaking off of the friendship.

Willibald had finally consented. He had been present when Fraulein Volkmar made her first visit to Furstenstein. He had accompanied his fiancée when she returned the call at Waldhofen, and now stood at his post to-day.

Antonie and Marietta talked about the expected arrival of the Court, and the former, who had but little taste in dress, asked her friend's advice, which was gladly given.

"What must you wear? Roses, of course," said Marietta; "white or delicate-colored ones. They will look lovely with the dainty blue."

"But I do not like roses," declared Toni. "I intended to wear asters----"

"Then why not sunflowers? Do you wish to appear autumnal in spite of everything, although you are a young girl and a bride-elect? And how can you help liking roses? I love them passionately and use them at every opportunity. I wanted so much to wear a rose in my hair at the Mayor's party to-night, and am quite unhappy because none are to be found anywhere in Waldhofen. Of course it is late in the season."

"The gardener has roses in the hothouse," remarked Antonie in the sleepy manner which was such a sharp contrast to her vivacious friend.

The latter shook her head laughingly.

"They are doubtless for the Duchess' use, and we poor mortals dare not venture to ask for one. What's the use? I must deny myself that pleasure---- But to return to the dress question. You are quite superfluous in this, Herr von Eschenhagen. You do not understand a thing about it and must be bored to death, but in spite of it you do not waver nor move; besides, what is there so remarkable about me that you look at me so constantly?"

The words sounded very ungracious. Willy started, for the last reproach was well founded. He had been meditating upon how a fresh, half-open rose would look in the dark, curly locks, and, of course, had to subject the curls and the head belonging to them to a minute observation, which his fiancée had passed unnoticed.

"Yes, Willy, go," she now said good-naturedly. "You must really feel bored over our dress affairs, and I have much to talk over yet with Marietta."

"Just as you wish, dear Toni," returned the young lord; "but may I not come back?"

"Of course, as soon as you wish."

Willibald left the room, not in the least remembering that he was deserting his post. He was thinking of something quite different as he stood for a few moments in the little ante-room. In consequence of this meditation he finally descended the stairs and turned his steps straight to the house of the castle gardener.

He had scarcely left when Marietta sprang up and exclaimed with comic vehemence: "Gracious heavens! what a tiresome couple you are!"

"But, Marietta----"

"Yes, whether you are offended or not, I declare it is a sacrifice to friendship to stand it in your presence, and I had anticipated such a jolly time when I heard you were engaged. You were never particularly lively, but your betrothed seems to have lost his speech entirely. How did you manage to become engaged? Did he actually speak then, or did his mamma attend to that?"

"Stop your foolishness," replied Antonie, displeased. "Willy is only so silent in your presence. He can be quite entertaining when we are alone."

"Yes, over the new threshing machine he has bought. When I came I listened a moment before I entered. He was singing the praise of the before-mentioned threshing machine, and you were listening attentively. Oh, you will reign as a model couple, but--may heaven protect me in mercy from such a marriageable blessing!"

"You are very naughty. Marietta," said the young Baroness, now really angry, but her mischievous little friend instantly clung to her neck.

"Don't be mad, Toni. I do not mean any harm, and wish you happiness with all my heart, but you see my husband has to be of a different nature."

"Ah, and how, pray?" asked Toni, half pouting, half reconciled by the coaxing plea.

"First, he has to be under my command, and not under his mother's. Second, he must be a genuine man in whose protection I feel safe. He need not talk much--I do that--but he must love me so much--so much that he will not talk about papa or mamma, or his estates, or the new threshing machine, but let them all go if only he has--me."

Toni shrugged her shoulders with compassionate superiority.

"You have very childish views at times, Marietta--but now let us talk about the dresses."

"Yes, we will, before your elect returns and posts himself at our side like a guard. He has a remarkable talent for mounting guard. Now, you wear with the blue silk----"

The pending question was not destined to receive a solution this time, either, for the door opened and Frau von Eschenhagen entered, calling for Antonie, whose presence was desired elsewhere.

Antonie arose obediently and left the room. Frau Regine made no effort to follow her, but took her vacant seat at the window instead.

The reigning mistress of Burgsdorf was not diplomatically inclined like her brother; she had to interfere everywhere with force. She had become impatient, for Willy had as good as reported nothing. He grew red and stammered every time he should have repeated what the "theatre princess" had said and done, and his mother, who would not believe in a harmless girls' chat, concluded to take the affair in her own hands.

Marietta had dutifully risen at the entrance of the older lady, whom she had scarcely seen at the first visit, and whose hostile bearing she had not observed in the joy of the first meeting. She only thought that Toni's future mother-in-law had little friendliness about her, but troubled herself no further about the severe lady who was now measuring her from head to foot, with the stern mien of a judge.

In point of fact this Marietta looked just like other young girls, but she was pretty--very pretty, which was that much worse. She wore her hair in short curls--that was improper; other bad attributes would doubtless make their appearance in the conversation which was now begun.

"You are a friend of the fiancée of my son?"

"Yes, gracious lady," was the unembarrassed rejoinder.

"A friendship which dates from childhood, as you were raised in the house of Dr. Volkmar?"

"Certainly; I lost my parents very early."

"Quite right; my brother-in-law told me so. And to what calling did your father belong?"

"He was a physician like my grandpapa," replied Marietta, more amused than surprised at this examination, the object of which she did not guess. "My mother was also the daughter of a physician--a whole medical family, is it not? Only I have taken a different course."

"Alas, yes," said Frau von Eschenhagen with emphasis.

The young girl looked at her with surprise. Was that a jest? The mien of the lady was not at all mirthful, though, as she continued: "You will admit, my child, that if one has the good fortune to come from an honorable and respected family, one ought to show oneself worthy of it. You ought to have chosen your vocation accordingly."

"Mon Dieu! but I could not study medicine like my father and grandfather," exclaimed Marietta, breaking into an amused laugh. The affair gave her endless fun, but the remark displeased her stern judge, who replied with considerable sharpness:

"There are, God be thanked, plenty of proper vocations for a young girl. You are a singer?"

"Yes, gracious lady, at the Court Theatre."

"I know it. Are you disposed to accept a dismissal?"

The question was put so suddenly, in such a domineering tone, that Marietta involuntarily retreated.

She was still of the opinion that the lord of Burgsdorf, with his obstinate silence and stormy leave-taking, was not quite sane, and now she was struck by the thought that it might be a family failing which he had inherited from his mother, for it was very apparent that everything was not quite right with her.

"A dismissal?" she repeated. "But why?"

"For the sake of morality. I am willing to offer you a helping hand. Turn aside from this path of frivolity and I pledge myself to find a place as companion for you."

Now at last the young singer comprehended the object of the conversation. Half angrily and half scornfully she tossed back the little, curly head.

"I must thank you for it, but I love my work and cannot think of exchanging it for a dependent position. I am not fit, anyway, for an upper maid."

"I have expected this answer," said Frau von Eschenhagen with a grim nod of the head, "but I consider it my duty to once more appeal to your conscience. You are still very young and are therefore not responsible to a great extent for it; the heaviest reproach falls on Doctor Volkmar, who allowed the daughter of his son to accept such a calling."

"Gracious lady, I must beg you to leave my grandfather entirely out of the question," cried Marietta indignantly. "You are Toni's future mother-in-law--otherwise I should not have stood this examination--but I will not suffer an insult to my grandfather from anybody on the earth."

In their excitement the two ladies had not noticed that the door leading to the ante-room had opened quietly, and that Willibald had appeared. He was much surprised when he saw his mother, and hastily thrust in his pocket something that he carried carefully wrapped in paper, but he remained standing in the door.

"I do not intend to argue with you," said Frau von Eschenhagen in lofty tones, "but since I am Toni's future mother-in-law, I have the right to warn her of a friendship which does not seem proper to me. Pray do not misunderstand me. I am not haughty. The granddaughter of Dr. Volkmar would be quite welcome to a continuance of friendship, but a lady from a theatre probably has all of her connections in theatrical circles, and here at Furstenstein---- I hope you understand me?"

"Oh, yes, I understand you, gracious lady," cried Marietta, whose face was suddenly suffused by a deep blush. "You do not need to say anything more. I ask but for one more word. Is Herr von Schonan--is Antonie--of the same opinion as yourself?"

"Chiefly so as to the matter of it, but, of course, they do not wish--with explanations--to----" A very graphic shrug finished the sentence.

The otherwise just and truth-loving woman did not even feel that she was plainly telling an untruth. So taken up with her idea was she that she was firmly convinced that the Chief Forester kept up the intercourse only through a spirit of spite, and Antonie through her good nature, although it must be uncomfortable to them, and she was firmly decided to bring this thing to an end.

CHAPTER XIX.

But something unexpected happened now. Willibald, who still stood upon the threshold, advanced into the room and exclaimed, half entreatingly, half reproachfully: "But, mamma!"

"Is it you, Willy? What do you want here?" demanded Frau von Eschenhagen, noticing him for the first time, and to whom the interruption was very unwelcome.

Willibald saw very well that his mother was very ungraciously inclined, and was accustomed always to retreat when he found her in that mood, but today, with unusual courage, he remained. He drew nearer and repeated, "But, mamma, I beg of you--Toni has never thought of Fraulein Volkmar's----"

"How dare you! do you wish to accuse me of an untruth?" the angered mother flamed. "What is it to you that I speak with Fraulein Volkmar? Your fiancée is not here--you see that--therefore leave us!"

The young lord grew darkly red at this tone, to which he was accustomed; he seemed to feel shame at the treatment because of the young girl, and looked as if he would offer some resistance, but at a threatening, "Well, did you not hear?" the old habit conquered. He turned hesitatingly and actually left the room, but the door remained slightly ajar.

Marietta looked after him with scornfully curled lips, then turned to her opponent.

"You may rest assured, gracious lady, that I have come to Furstenstein for the last time. As the Chief Forester received me with his usual cordiality, and Antonie with the old affection, I did not comprehend that I now bear a stain in their eyes. I certainly would not have made myself troublesome otherwise. It shall not happen again--no, never!"

Her voice faltered; with effort she suppressed the tears, but they trembled bitterly and plaintively around the little mouth, and Frau von Eschenhagen felt that she had gone too far in her management of the case.

"I did not wish to offend you," she said soothingly. "I only intended to make clear to you----"

"You did not wish to offend me and yet tell me such things," interrupted the young girl in an outburst of anger. "You treat me like an outcast, who should not dare to approach decent circles, because I earn my living, and give pleasure to mankind with a gift which God has given me. You abuse my good, dear old grandfather, who has made such painful sacrifices for my education, who has let me go into the world with such a heavy heart. Bitter tears stood in his eyes when he drew me once more into his arms at parting and said: 'Remain good, my Marietta--one can be good in every position. I can leave you nothing. If I should close my eyes in death to-day or to-morrow you would have to struggle for yourself.' And I have remained good, and I will remain good, even if it is not made easy for me as it is for Toni, who is the daughter of a rich father, and only leaves her paternal home to go to the home of her husband. But I do not envy her the good fortune of calling you mother."

"Fraulein Volkmar, you forget yourself," cried Regine, highly offended, rising to her fullest height; but Marietta was not intimidated, she only grew more excited.

"Oh, no; it is not I who forget myself. You are the one--you who insult me without cause, and I know that the Chief Forester and Antonie are under your influence if they turn from me. Nevertheless, I do not want any kindness nor friendship which cannot stand more firmly, and I am done with a friend who gives me up at the request of her mother-in-law--done with her once for all. Tell her so, Frau von Eschenhagen."

She turned and left the room with a stormy gesture, but in the ante-room the carefully preserved composure gave way; pain overcame anger, and the bravely suppressed tears burst forth hotly. The young girl leaned her head against the wall in passionate, bitter sobbing over the insult.

Hearing her name called in a low, timid voice, she looked up and saw Willibald von Eschenhagen standing before her, holding out the paper which he had dropped so hastily into his pocket. It was folded back now, and disclosed a rose branch, bearing a wonderfully beautiful and fragrant blossom with two half-open buds.

"Fraulein Volkmar," he repeated, stammering, "you wished a rose--please accept----"

Mute apology for his mother's rudeness could be plainly seen in his eyes and his whole bearing. Marietta suppressed her sobs, but the tears still glistened in the dark eyes, which looked at him with an inexpressibly contemptuous expression.

"No, I thank you, Herr von Eschenhagen," she replied sharply. "You have probably heard what has been said in there and have also probably received a command to shun me. Why do you not obey?"

"My mother has done you wrong," Willibald said half aloud, "and she also spoke without the knowledge of the others. Toni does not know anything about it, believe me----"

"So you knew that and did not offer a word of contradiction!" the girl interrupted, scarlet with anger. "You listened to your mother insulting and offending a defenseless girl and did not have chivalry enough to oppose it! Oh, yes, you tried it, but were scolded and sent off like a schoolboy and--bore it meekly!"

Willibald stood there as if thunderstruck. He had, indeed, felt the injustice of his mother deeply, and wished to make it good to the best of his ability, and now he was treated like this! He stared at Marietta in deep perplexity, while she only grew angrier at his silence.

"And now you come and bring me flowers," she continued, with increasing passion, "secretly--behind your mother's back, and think that I will accept such an apology! You would better learn first how a *man* deports himself when he is witness to such injustice. But now--now I will show you what I think of your present and of you!"

She tore the paper with its contents out of his hand, threw it on the ground, and in the next second her little foot stamped upon the fragrant blossoms.

"My, Fraulein----" Willibald wavered between shame and indignation, but a stern glance from the hitherto saucy eyes silenced him, and the poor roses were finished by a push from the small foot.

"So--now we are at the end. If Toni really knows nothing of this affair I shall be sorry, but in spite of it I must remain away in the future, for I will not expose myself to fresh insults. May she be happy. I could not be in her place. I am a poor girl, but I would not accept a man who is still afraid of his mother's switch--no, not if he were ten times lord of Burgsdorf!"

With which she disappeared, and left the poor lord standing alone.

"Willy, what does this mean?" demanded the voice of Frau von Eschenhagen, who appeared in the door. As no reply came, she approached her son with threatening mien.

"It was certainly a strange scene which I had to look upon. Will you be so good as to explain what it really meant? That little thing actually glared with anger and said the most impertinent things to your face, and you stood there like a sheep, without defending yourself."

"Because she was right," murmured Willibald, still looking at the roses.

"She was what?" demanded the mother, who could not believe that she had heard aright.

The young lord raised his head and looked at her. He had a peculiar expression on his face.

"She was right, I say, mamma. It is true, you have treated me like a schoolboy. I ought not to have submitted to it."

"Boy, I believe you are not in your senses," said Frau Regine, but Willibald started in irritation:

"I am no boy. I am lord of Burgsdorf and twenty-seven years old. You forget that always, mamma, and I have forgotten it always--but now I recall it."

Frau von Eschenhagen looked with boundless astonishment at her hitherto obedient son, who was now suddenly making resistance.

"I actually believe you would like to be rebellious, my boy. Do not try; you know I will not permit it. What possesses you suddenly to be so arbitrary? While I try to end a highly improper intercourse and put aside this Marietta, you go and, behind my back, actually offer an apology for it--even offer her the roses which you had intended for your betrothed. Although I do not know how you came to do it, it is the first time in your life--but Toni will not thank you for it. It served you right that the little witch crushed them. You will leave such foolishness alone in the future."

She scolded him in the usual tone without taking any notice of his rebellion, but Willibald took it wrongly this time. He who had but ten minutes before hidden the flowers in his pocket with fear now had a touch of heroism. Instead of leaving his mother in her belief and hushing the dangerous storm, he positively challenged it.

"The roses were not destined for Toni at all, but for Fraulein Volkmar," he explained defiantly.

"For----" the word choked the terror-stricken woman.

"For Marietta Volkmar! She wanted to wear a rose in her hair to-night, and since there were none to be had in Waldhofen, I went to the castle gardener and got those flowers. Now you know it all, mamma."

Frau von Eschenhagen stood there like a pillar of salt. She had turned ashy pale, for suddenly a light had dawned upon her, but it showed her something so awful that she lost both speech and motion for a while.

But her old fire returned. She grasped her son's arm as if she meant to have him in any case and said curtly:

"Willy--we leave to-morrow."

"Leave!" he repeated. "For where?"

"Home. We depart to-morrow morning at 8 o'clock, so that we can catch the fast train and arrive at Burgsdorf the day after to-morrow. Go immediately to your room and pack."

But the commanding tone made no impression whatever on Willy this time.

"I shall not pack," he declared sullenly.

"You shall pack. I command you."

"No," defied the young lord. "If you want to leave so badly, mamma, you can leave--I remain here."

This was unheard of, but it dispelled the last doubt and the energetic woman, who still held her son in her grasp, now shook him fiercely.

"Boy, wake up! Come to your senses! I believe you do not know what is the matter with you. I will tell you then. You are in love--in love with this Marietta Volkmar."

She threw the last words at him with annihilating emphasis, but Willibald was not in the least annihilated. He stood quite still from surprise for a moment. He had not thought of that, but now it began to dawn upon him.

"Oh," he said with a deep sigh, and something like a smile flitted over his features.

"'Oh!' is that your whole answer?" burst forth the enraged mother, who had hoped for a denial. "You do not even deny it? And I have to live to see that in my own son whom I have raised--who has never been allowed to leave my side! While I put you there as a guard during those previous visits to your fiancée she bewitches you--that is plain--and even plays the virtuous, deeply offended one before you--this----"

"Mamma, stop; I cannot allow it," interrupted Willibald, irritated beyond silence.

"You cannot allow it? What does it mean----" Frau von Eschenhagen suddenly paused and looked toward the door, listening. "Toni is returning, there--your betrothed, to whom you have pledged your word, who wears your ring. How will you account to her?"

She had finally struck the right chord. The young lord started at this thought and bowed his head mutely when Antonie entered, quite unconcerned.

"You have returned already, Willy?" she asked. "I thought--but what is it? Has anything happened?"

"Yes," answered Frau Regine, grasping the reins, as usual, decisively. "We have just received a communication from Burgsdorf which forces us to depart to-morrow morning. You need not be frightened, my child, it is nothing dangerous--only a foolishness"--she laid sharp emphasis on the word--"a foolishness which has been committed, but which will be removed just as speedily by quick interference. I will tell you all about it later, but for the present nothing can be done but by our departure."

Curiosity was not one of Antonie's faults, and even this quite unexpected news was not able to ruffle her composure. The statement that nothing serious was concerned satisfied her entirely.

"Must Willy leave also?" she asked without particular enthusiasm. "Cannot he at least remain?"

"Answer your fiancée yourself, Willy," said Frau von Eschenhagen, fixing her sharp, gray eyes upon her son. "You know best what the circumstances are. Can you really consent to stay here?"

A short pause. Willibald's glance met his mother's; then he turned away and said in a suppressed voice, "No, Toni, I must go home--nothing else is possible."

Toni accepted the decision, which would have pained another girl deeply, with moderate regret, and began to inquire directly where the travelers would dine to-morrow, since the fast train had no stoppage anywhere. This seemed to grieve her as much as the separation, but she finally concluded that it would be best for them to take a lunch along to eat on the train.

Frau von Eschenhagen felt triumphant when she went to her brother-in-law to notify him of their departure, for which she had already found a pretext.

Many a thing could happen on the large estates to afford an explanation.

Naturally, the Chief Forester must not learn the truth any more than his daughter, although he had caused the whole trouble in his blindness.

Regine did not doubt in the least that as soon as she removed her Willy from the fascinating circle of this "witch" he would return to reason. Had he not shown it just now?

She would not see that honor toward his betrothed alone had conquered, and that it had been a terrible mistake to expose his feelings to another.

"Wait, my boy," she muttered grimly. "I will teach you to commence such things, and to rebel against your mother. When once I have you at Burgsdorf, may God have mercy on you!"

CHAPTER XX.

On the appointed day the Duke, with the Duchess and a numerous suite, arrived at

Furstenstein, and the life full of splendor which had been led in former times began again in the wide, beautiful hunting grounds of the Wald.

The present sovereign was no ardent huntsman, and the hunting lodge of his ancestors had stood deserted for years, or was occupied only at long intervals for a brief visit. Now, when a prolonged stay was anticipated, the spacious castle scarce afforded room enough for the guests; a part of them were quartered in neighboring Waldhofen, which made the little town, as well as the entire vicinity, very festive in joyful excitement.

The owners of the neighboring castles and villas, who, like Prince Adelsberg, belonged to the best families of the land, were induced by the arrival of the Court to take up their fall quarters there, too. Nearly everybody had brought numerous guests, and so an unusual life and bustle developed in the silent Wald, the centre of which activity being, of course, Furstenstein.

The castle shone to-night in fullest splendor; every window of the upper floor was lighted, and in the court torches threw their red light upon the walls and towers gray with age.

It was the occasion of the first large fête since the arrival of the princely family, to which were asked all the nobility of the neighborhood, the higher officials of the district, and, in short, everybody who had any claim upon their sovereign's notice.

The castle, which was built in a grand style, contained a number of gorgeous rooms of state, which, with their old-fashioned but costly furnishings, and the brilliant company moving through them, afforded a decidedly splendid spectacle.

The young wife of the Prussian Ambassador was a new star among the ladies present. Mourning for her father, who had died shortly after her marriage, had kept her from all festivities, and she entered to-day for the first time this brilliant circle, where the position of her husband assured her a prominent place, and where she was being treated by the Duke and Duchess with noticeable distinction.

The rising of this new star was noticed by the ladies, of course, with some displeasure. They found Frau von Wallmoden very haughty in her cool composure, and that she had very little occasion for such bearing; for, of course, they all knew that she was a born burgher, who did not properly belong in this circle, even if her father's wealth and his prominent position with the industries of the country gave her a certain distinction. Nevertheless, she moved upon the foreign soil with a strange ease--the husband must have schooled her well for this first appearance.

The gentlemen were of a different opinion. They found that His Excellency the Ambassador had proved his talent most strikingly in his own cause. He who already stood upon the border of old age had understood how to gain, with the hand of this young, beautiful wife, a fortune extensive enough in itself, but magnified by rumor into the immeasurable. For this he was envied on all sides.

Wallmoden did not seem at all surprised at the impression which the beauty and stateliness of his wife too apparently caused, but accepted it as something natural. He had expected nothing else; the contrary would have surprised him in the highest degree.

At present he was standing in a window recess with his brother-in-law, the Chief Forester, and after exchanging a few indifferent remarks about the fête and the guests, he asked casually: "What sort of person is that whom Prince Adelsberg has introduced? Do you know him?"

"You mean the young Roumanian?" said Schonan. "No; I see him to-day for the first time, but have heard of him before. He is the bosom friend of the Prince, whom he accompanied upon his Eastern travels, and a young man handsome as a picture--his eyes positively sparkle with fire."

"He impresses me as an adventurer," remarked Wallmoden coldly. "How does he happen to have an invitation? Has he been presented to the Duke?"

"Yes, at Rodeck, if I am not mistaken; the Duke was there recently. Prince Adelsberg loves to throw etiquette aside as much as possible. But this invitation to-day signifies no acceptance, since everybody has been asked."

The Ambassador shrugged his shoulders.

"Nevertheless, one should hesitate about bringing such elements near one before they come well recommended."

"Everything must be certified to with letter and seal with you diplomats," laughed the Chief. "This Rojanow has certainly something aristocratic about him, and one is never so strict, anyway, with a foreigner. I can well understand that our sovereigns like to hear and see something different from the usual court circle, which presents the same old tiresome face from year to year. The Duke appears to be quite captivated already with the Roumanian."

"Yes, it seems so," muttered Wallmoden, upon whose brow a cloud gathered.

"But why should this concern us?" remarked Schonan. "I will go now and look for Toni, who has to appear now everywhere without her betrothed. That was another notion of Regine's. She departed from us with her son like a skyrocket. Your sister cannot be detained as soon as the beloved Burgsdorf is brought into question. If she had only left Willy with us! Everybody wonders that my future son-in-law should take his departure before the fête. I cannot understand it at all."

"A stroke of good fortune that they are gone," thought Wallmoden, as his brother-in-law left him. "If Willibald had met his former friend and playmate here unexpectedly another scene similar to that upon the Hochberg might have occurred. But who would have thought that Hartmut would carry his defiance so far as to appear in a circle where he was sure to meet the Ambassador?"

Prince Adelsberg, who held in this circle one of the highest positions through his name and relationship to the reigning house, had, indeed, succeeded with the presentation of his friend, and the Duke seemed to have had a very favorable opinion of him from the first meeting at Rodeck, for he now himself presented this young stranger to the Duchess.

This Rojanow, with the captivating charm of his personality and the foreign air which surrounded him, was, indeed, an extraordinary person, who had only to appear to cause general observation.

To-day he displayed lavishly all the brilliant attributes which were at his command. His conversation sparkled with life and spirit, his fiery temperament, which betrayed itself involuntarily, gave to everything he said and did a peculiar charm, while he proved himself in every respect master of society forms and customs. In short, the prophecy of the Prince was fulfilled.

Hartmut knew how to conquer everybody here by storm, and had hardly put his foot upon the soil when he reigned there by the power of his magnetism.

This could not pass unnoticed by the Ambassador, even if he did not come into direct contact with the Roumanian. It was not difficult to evade each other in the throng of guests, and a meeting was not desired on either side.

Wallmoden walked through a side room, where the Duke's sister, the Princess Sophie, had gathered a large circle around her.

The Princess, who had married the younger son of a princely house, had very early become a widow, and had lived since then at the court of her brother, where she was not in the least popular. While the Duchess charmed everybody who came into her presence by her grace and kindness, the older sister was considered haughty and *intriguante*. Everybody stood in fear of the lady's sharp tongue, which had a habit of saying something disagreeable to each and every one.

Herr von Wallmoden did not escape this fate. He was graciously beckoned to and received flatteries on the beauty of his wife, which was not to be denied.

"I offer you my congratulations, Your Excellency. I was quite surprised when your young wife was presented to me, for I had naturally expected to see an elderly lady."

The "naturally" sounded very malicious, for Princess Sophie had known for months that the wife of the Prussian Ambassador was only nineteen years old, but he smiled in the most amiable way as he replied: "Your Highness is very gracious. I can only be grateful that my wife has had the good fortune to make a favorable impression upon you."

"Oh, you cannot doubt it. The Duke and Duchess are quite of my opinion. Frau von Wallmoden is really a beauty--Prince Adelsberg seems to think so, too. Perhaps you have not observed as yet how very much he admires your wife?"

"Yes, Your Highness, I have observed it."

"Really? And what do you say to it?"

"I?" inquired Wallmoden with perfect tranquillity. "It rests solely with my wife as to whether she will permit the admiration of the Prince. If she finds pleasure in it---- I do not give her any rules in this respect."

"An enviable confidence which our young gentlemen ought to pattern after," said the Princess, vexed that the arrow had missed its aim. "It is surely very agreeable to a young wife if the husband is not jealous. Ah, there is Frau von Wallmoden herself, with her cavalier, of course, at her side. My dear Baroness, we were just speaking of you."

CHAPTER XXI.

Adelaide von Wallmoden, who had just entered in company with Prince Adelsberg, bowed her recognition of the Princess' notice.

She made, indeed, a brilliant picture to-night, for the splendid court toilet enhanced her beauty triumphantly. The costly brocade of the white dress, which fell to her feet in heavy folds, suited the slender figure admirably. The pearls encircling her throat and the diamonds which sparkled in her blond hair were perhaps the most costly of any worn to-night; but more sharply than ever appeared the cold and serious expression of the young wife. She did not in the least resemble others of her age who were also married, but who claimed the right of youth to dress in dainty laces and flowers. She possessed nothing of their brightness--the urbane amiability which was so fully brought to view in them. The severe, serious expression which was an inheritance from her father, and so indelibly stamped in her nature, betrayed itself in her character.

Egon kissed his exalted aunt's hand, and had been honored with a few gracious words, but from the first, the amiable attention of Her Highness was quite taken up by the young Baroness, who was immediately drawn into conversation.

"I was just expressing my pleasure to His Excellency that you find yourself so quickly at home in our court circle, dear Baroness. You enter these circles to-day for the first time, if I understand aright, and have lived hitherto in entirely different surroundings. You were born a----"

"Stahlberg, Your Highness," was the calm rejoinder.

"Quite right. I remember the name, which has been spoken several times in my presence. It is honorably known in your native town, I presume."

"Most gracious aunt, you must permit me to inform you better," joined in Prince Adelsberg, who seldom permitted an opportunity of vexing his most gracious aunt to pass by. "The factories of Stahlberg are world-renowned. They are as well known across the ocean as they are here. I had an opportunity to learn all about them when I was in Northern Germany several years ago, and I can assure you that those works those iron foundries and factories, with their colonies of officers and their army of workmen, can well vie with many a small principality, whose sovereign, though, is not such an absolute ruler as was the father of Her Excellency."

The Princess cast anything but a friendly glance at her nephew; his interference was not desired.

"Indeed! I had no idea of such magnificence," she said in her most caustic tone. "We may, perhaps, then greet His Excellency as such a ruler?"

"Only as administrator, Your Highness," rejoined the Ambassador. "I am only the executor of my father-in-law's will, and guardian of my young brother-in-law, to whom the works will go when he attains his majority."

"Ah, so? The son will probably know how to keep the inheritance. It is really astonishing what the energy of a single man can do in these days, and it is so much more praiseworthy if he, like the father of our dear Baroness, has come from humble circles. At least I believe I have heard so, or am I mistaken?"

Princess Sophie knew very well that these remarks about the origin of his father-in-law were unpleasant to the Ambassador, a man of old Prussian nobility, and it caused her great satisfaction that the surrounding circle did not lose a word of the conversation, which was intended principally to humble the lady of burgher descent.

But she was mistaken if she counted upon the Baroness falling into embarrassment or evasion. Instead of that she drew herself up in all her pride.

"Your Highness is quite correctly informed. My father came to the Capital a poor boy without means. He had to struggle hard, and worked for years as a humble laborer, before he laid the foundation to his later enterprises."

"How proudly Frau von Wallmoden says that!" cried the Princess, smiling. "Oh, I love this filial attachment above everything. So Herr Stahlberg--or perhaps *von* Stahlberg?--the large manufacturers often bear a title----"

"My father did not bear it, Your Highness," replied Adelaide, meeting the glance of the royal lady calmly and openly. "A title had indeed been offered him, but he refused it."

The Ambassador pressed his thin lips together. He could but find the remark of his wife very undiplomatic. The features of the Princess assumed an angry expression, and she returned with biting sarcasm: "Well, then, it is a good thing that this aversion has not descended to the daughter. His Excellency will know how to value it. I beg your escort, Egon. I should like to look for my brother."

She bowed to the circle and glided away on the arm of the Prince, whose bearing plainly said:

"Now comes my turn."

He was not mistaken. Her Highness had no thought of finding the Duke, but took a seat in the adjoining room with her young relative, whom she wished to have to herself.

At first her anger burst forth at the unbearably haughty Frau von Wallmoden, who boasted of her father's burgher pride, while she had married a Baron from vanity, for she could not possibly feel any affection for a man old enough to be her father. Egon was silent as to that, for he had already put the same question to himself, How had this unequal match come to take place? without finding an answer to it; but his silence was now an offence.

"Well, Egon, have you nothing to say? But you seem to have sworn allegiance to this lady; you have been constantly at her side."

"I do homage to beauty wherever I meet it; you know that, most gracious aunt," expostulated the Prince. But alas! he only called forth another storm.

"Yes, alas! I know that. In this respect you are of incomprehensible heedlessness. Perhaps you do not remember all my admonishings and warnings before your departure?"

"Ah, only too well," sighed Egon, who even now felt quite stifled with the remembrance of the endless lecture which he had had to endure at that time.

"Really? But you have not returned any more sensible or sedate. I have heard things---- Egon, there is only one salvation for you--you must marry."

"For heaven's sake, anything but that!" Egon started up so terrified that Princess Sophie opened her fan indignantly.

"What do you mean by that?" she asked in cutting tones.

"Oh, only my un worthiness to enter into that state. Your Highness yourself have often assured me that I was particularly fitted to make a wife *unhappy*."

"If the wife does not succeed in bettering you, of course. I do not despair yet of that. But this is not the place to speak of such things. The Duchess is planning a visit to Rodeck, and I intend to accompany her."

"What a charming idea!" exclaimed Egon, who was almost as much terrified by the proposed visit as by the thought of marriage. "I am really proud that Rodeck, which is usually such a small, tiresome forest nook, can just now furnish you with some curiosities. I brought many things from my travels, among them a lion, two young tigers, several snakes----"

"But not live ones?" interrupted the horrified lady.

"Of course, Your Highness."

"But, mon Dieu! one is not sure of one's life there."

"Oh, it is not so dangerous, although some of the beasts have broken away from us already--the people are so careless at feeding time; but they have always been secured again, and have not done any harm as yet."

"As yet? That is a charming prospect, indeed," said the Princess angrily. "You put the whole neighborhood in danger. The Duke ought to prohibit you such dangerous playthings."

"I hope not, for I am just now seriously occupied in attempting to tame some of them. But besides these I can show you many domestic things that are worth looking at. There are several girls among my servants from this vicinity who look charming in their peasant costumes."

Egon shuddered at the thought of his female servants "with wagging heads," whom he still employed under Stadinger's careful eye, but he had speculated correctly. His gracious aunt was indignant and measured him with an annihilating glance.

"So? You have such as that at Rodeck!"

"Certainly. There is Lena in particular, the granddaughter of my steward, a charming little thing, and when you give me the honor of your visit, most gracious aunt----"

"I shall leave it alone," interrupted the incensed lady, using her fan violently. "It must be a peculiar household which you carry on at Rodeck with the young foreigner whom you have, perhaps, also brought as a curiosity from your travels. He has the face of a perfect brigand."

"My friend Rojanow! He has been pining a long time to be presented to Your Highness. You permit it, I hope?"

Without waiting for an answer he hastened away and took possession of Hartmut.

"Now it is your turn," he whispered, dragging him along unceremoniously. "I have been the victim long enough, and my most precious aunt has to have some one whom she can roast slowly. She insists upon marrying me off-hand, and you have the face of a perfect brigand, but, thank God! she does not come to Rodeck. I have taken care of that!"

In the next moment he stood before Her Highness, introducing his friend with his blandest smile.

CHAPTER XXII.

Herr von Wallmoden had lingered in the circle a few moments after the departure of the Princess; then, with his wife on his arm, he walked slowly through the suite of rooms, greeting an acquaintance here, conversing briefly there, until they finally reached the last of the reception rooms, which was rather deserted.

The tower room, opening directly from this, was not generally used in entertainments, but for tonight it had been transformed into a small, cosy apartment with curtains and carpets and a picturesque group of plants, and, with its dim lights, offered a pleasing contrast to the blinding flood of light and the commotion of the other rooms.

It was quite vacant now, which the Ambassador seemed to have counted upon when he entered with his wife and offered her a seat upon a divan.

"I must draw your attention to the fact, Adelaide, that you did an unwise thing just now," he began in a low tone. "Your remark to the Princess----"

"Was self-defense," finished the young wife. "You must have felt, as well as I did, what the object of the conversation was."

"Nevertheless, at your first appearance you have made for yourself an antagonist whose enmity can materially render your own and my position more difficult."

"Yours?" Adelaide looked at him in surprise. "Are you, the Ambassador of a great power, to ask the grace of a malicious woman who happens to be related to a ducal family?"

"My child, you do not understand," returned Wallmoden coldly. "An intriguing woman can be more dangerous than a political opponent, and Princess Sophie is well known in that line. Even the Duchess is known to be in fear of her malicious tongue."

"That is the Duchess' affair. I am not in fear of it."

"My dear Adelaide," said the Ambassador, with a superior smile, "that proud turn of your head is very becoming to you, and I approve entirely of your making yourself unapproachable with it in other circles, but you will have to leave it off at Court, as well as several other things. One does not give royalty a lesson before so many observers, and you did that when you spoke of the refusal of the title. In any case, it was not necessary for you to lay so much stress upon the descent of your father."

"Should I perhaps have denied it?"

"No, for it is a well-known fact."

"Of which I am as proud as was my father."

"But you are not Adelaide Stahlberg any longer, but the Baroness Wallmoden." The voice of the Ambassador had acquired a certain sharpness. "And you will admit that it is very contradictory to boast of your burgher pride when you have given your hand to a man of the old nobility."

A slight bitterness quivered around the lips of the young wife, and although the conversation had been carried on in low tones, her voice sank even lower as she returned: "Perhaps you have forgotten, Herbert, why I gave you my hand."

"Have you had cause to regret it?" he asked instead of replying.

"No," said Adelaide, drawing a deep breath.

"I should think you could be satisfied with the position you have at my side. Besides, you remember that I did not compel you. I left you perfectly free choice."

The wife was silent, but the bitter expression did not leave her lips.

Wallmoden arose and offered his arm.

"You must permit me, my child, to come to your assistance sometimes in your inexperience," he said in his usual polite tone. "So far I have had every reason to be satisfied with your tact and manner. To-day is the first time I have had to give you a hint. May I ask if you are ready to return?"

"I should like to remain here a few moments longer," said Adelaide in a smothered voice. "It is so insufferably hot in the salons."

"Just as you desire, but I beg that you will not remain too long, as your absence would cause remark."

He saw and felt that she was offended, but found it expedient not to notice it. Baron Wallmoden, in spite of all his politeness and attention, understood that in the training of his wife such kinds of sentiment must not be encouraged. He left the room, and Adelaide remained alone. She leaned her head upon her hand, and with unseeing eyes stared at the group of plants near her, whispering almost inaudibly: "Free choice--O, my God!"

* * * * *

In the meantime Prince Adelsberg and his friend were being most graciously dismissed. They bowed low before the Princess, who arose and left the salon with an unusually mild expression on her sharp features.

"Hartmut, I believe you can magnetize," said Egon under his breath. "I have seen many examples of your irresistibility, but that my most gracious aunt has a regular attack of affability in your presence is something never heard of before. It puts all your other victories into the shade."

"Well, the reception was cool enough," laughed Hartmut. "Her Highness really seemed to take me for a brigand at first."

"But in ten minutes you stood in the full sunshine of her grace, and have been dismissed a prime favorite. Do tell me what you have in you that everybody, without exception, bows to your charm. One might well believe in the old fairy tale of the rat-catcher."

Again the harsh, repulsive sarcasm which took for a moment every beauty from his face, passed over Hartmut's lips, giving him a satanic expression.

"I understand how to play the thing they like best to hear. It has a different sound to every one, but if one knows how to strike the right chord, none can resist it."

"None?" repeated Egon, while his glance passed searchingly through the room.

"Not one, I tell you."

"Yes, you are a pessimist in this respect. I at least recognize some exceptions. If I only knew where Frau von Wallmoden was. I cannot see her anywhere."

"His Excellency is probably reading her a lecture upon the undiplomatic remark of a short time since."

"Did you also hear it?" asked Egon quickly.

"Yes; I stood in the door."

"Well, I do not in the least begrudge our most gracious one the lesson. Naturally she was beside herself about it, but do you really believe that the Ambassador---- Hush! there he is himself."

It was, indeed, the Ambassador before them, just returning from the tower room. An encounter now could not be avoided, and the young Prince, who had no idea of the existing connection, hastened to introduce his friend.

"Allow me, Your Excellency, to make good a neglect which was forced upon me that day upon the Hochberg by the disappearance of my friend. I only found him after your departure. Herr Hartmut Rojanow, Baron von Wallmoden."

The eyes of the two men met. The sharp, penetrating eyes of the one met the expression of challenging defiance in the other, but Wallmoden would not have been the finished diplomat he was if he were not equal to the present moment.

His greeting was cool but polite, only he turned to the Prince alone with his answer, regretting not being able to chat with the gentlemen, since he was called to the Duke.

The whole meeting had lasted but two minutes, but it had taken place.

"His Excellency is more taciturn to-day than usual," remarked Egon, walking on. "Whenever I see this cold, diplomatic face before me I have a chill, and feel a pressing desire to seek warmer zones."

"Therefore we follow so persistently the track of the beautiful, cold aurora," said Hartmut, teasingly. "Whom do we really seek in this walk through the rooms which you continue so untiringly?"

"The Chief Forester," said the Prince, vexed at seeing himself betrayed. "I wish to make you acquainted with him, but you are in one of your railing moods to-day. Perhaps I may find Schonan over yonder in the armory. I shall look there."

He took a speedy departure, and actually turned his steps to the armory, where the ducal couple was at present, and where he also believed Adelaide von Wallmoden to be. But, unfortunately, at the entrance he again crossed the path of his most gracious aunt, who took possession of him. She wished for more particulars of the interesting young Roumanian who stood, indeed, in the sunlight of her favor, and her impatient nephew had to answer all her questions willingly or otherwise.

CHAPTER XXIII.

The fête progressed; the assembly glided to and fro as Hartmut walked slowly and apparently purposelessly through the long suite of reception rooms. He, too, looked for some one, and was more successful than Egon. A hasty glance into the tower room, the entrance of which was partly concealed by heavy portières, showed him the hem of a white train which floated over the floor, and the next moment he had crossed the threshold.

Adelaide von Wallmoden was still sitting in the same position, and slowly turned her head toward the intruder. Suddenly she started, but only for an instant, then with her habitual composure she returned the deep bow of the young man who remained standing at the door.

"I hope I have not disturbed Your Excellency," he said. "I fear you came here for solitude into which I have broken suddenly, but it happens quite unintentionally."

"I only took refuge here from the smothering heat of the salons."

"The same cause brought me here, and since I did not have the honor to-day to greet you, permit me to do so now."

The words sounded very formal. Rojanow had drawn nearer, but remained standing at a respectable distance. Nevertheless, the start at his entrance had not been passed by unobserved by him. A peculiar smile hovered around his lips as he directed his eyes upon the young Baroness.

She had made a gesture as if to rise and leave the room, but seemed to remember in time that so sudden a move would look like flight. She remained seated and leaned over the plants. Absently she picked one of the large crimson japonicas as she replied to the question about her health, but that line of severe will-power appeared again, sharply and distinctly, just as in that moment when she stood in the middle of the brook. That day she had stepped without hesitation into ankle-deep water rather than accept the help which was offered her; but that had occurred in the forest loneliness. No such obstacle had to be overcome here in the ducal castle, filled with the pomp of a fête; but the man with the dark, consuming glance was here, and he did not remove his eyes from her face.

"Shall you remain at Rodeck any length of time?" asked Adelaide in the indifferent tone with which remarks are exchanged in society.

"Probably a few weeks longer. Prince Adelsberg will hardly leave his castle as long as the Duke is at Furstenstein. I intend to accompany him to the Residenz later on."

"And we shall then learn to know you as a poet?"

"Me, Your Excellency?"

"I learned so from the Prince."

"Oh, that is only Egon's idea," said Hartmut, lightly. "He has settled it in his mind that he must see my Arivana upon the stage."

"Arivana! A strange title."

"It is an Oriental name for an Indian legend, whose poetical charm had prepossessed me so strangely that I could not resist the temptation to form it into a drama."

"And the heroine of the drama is Arivana?"

"No; that is only the name of an ancient, sacred spot, around which this legend clings. The name of the heroine is--Ada."

Rojanow uttered the name softly, hesitatingly; but his eyes flamed up triumphantly, as he saw again the same slight quiver he had seen at his entrance. Slowly he approached a few steps, continuing: "I heard the name for the first time upon India's soil, and it had a sweet foreign sound for me, which I retained for my heroine, and now I learn here that the abbreviation of a German name is just like it."

"Of the name Adelaide--yes. I was always called so at home; but it is nothing peculiar that the same sounds return in different languages."

The words sounded repellent, but the young wife did not lift her eyes; she gazed fixedly upon the flower with which her fingers toyed.

"Certainly not," assented Hartmut; "I only noticed it. It was no surprise, since all legends are repeated in all nations. They have a greater or less difference in appearance, but that which lives in them--the passion, the happiness and joy of the people--that is the same everywhere."

Adelaide shrugged her shoulders.

"I cannot argue about that with a poet, but I do believe that our German legends possess other features than the Indian dreams of myths."

"Perhaps so, but if you look deeper you will find these features familiar. This Arivana myth, at least, has similar lines. The hero, a young priest who has consecrated body and soul to his deity--the sacred, burning fire--is overwhelmed by earthly love, with all its fervor and passion, until his priestly vow perishes in its intensity."

He stood quietly and respectfully before her, but his voice had a strangely suppressed sound, as if, hidden behind this narrative, there was another and secret meaning.

Suddenly the Baroness raised her eyes and directed them fully and seriously upon the face of the speaker. "And--the end?"

"The end is death, as in most mystic legends. The breaking of the vow is discovered, and the guilty ones are sacrificed to the offended deity; the priest dies in the flames with the woman he loves."

A short pause followed. Adelaide arose with a rapid movement. She apparently wished to break off the conversation.

"You are right; this legend has something familiar, if it were only the old doctrine of guilt and atonement."

"Do you call that guilt, gracious lady?" Hartmut suddenly dropped the formal title. "Well, yes, by man it is called guilt, and they too punish it with death, without thinking that such punishment can be ecstasy. To perish in the flames after having tasted of the highest earthly happiness, and to embrace this happiness even in death--that is a glorious, divine death, worthy a long life of dull monotony. The eternal, undying right of love glows there like signs of flame in the sky, in spite of all laws of mankind. Do you not think such an end enviable?"

A slight paleness covered the face of the Baroness, but her voice was firm as she answered:

"No; enviable only is death for an exalted, holy duty--the sacrifice of a pure life. One can forgive sin, but one does not admire it."

Hartmut bit his lips, and a threatening glance rested on the white figure which stood so solemn and unapproachable before him. Then he smiled.

"A hard judgment, which strikes my work also, for I have put my whole power into the glorification of this love and death. If the world judge like you---- Ah, permit me, gracious lady."

He quickly approached the divan where she had been sitting, where, with her fan, the japonica

also had been left.

"Thank you," said Adelaide, stretching out her hand; but he gave her only the fan.

"Your pardon. While I was composing my Arivana on the veranda of a small house in India, this flower bloomed and glowed from its dark green foliage everywhere, and now it greets me here in the cold North. May I keep this flower?"

Adelaide made a half reluctant gesture.

"No, why should you?"

"Why should I? For a remembrance of the severe opinion from the lips of a lady who bears the lovely name of my mystic heroine. You see, gracious lady, that the white japonica blooms here also, delicate, snowy flower; but unconsciously you broke the glowing red one, and poets are superstitious. Leave me the flower as a token that my work, in spite of all, may find favor in your eyes after you learn to know it. You have no idea how much it means to me."

"Herr Rojanow--I----" She was about to utter a refusal, but he interrupted her, and continued in low, but passionate, tones:

"What is a single flower to you, broken carelessly, and which you will allow to fade as carelessly? But to me leave me this token, gracious lady; I--I beg for it."

He stood close beside her. The charm which he, as a boy, had unconsciously exerted when he made people "defenseless" with his coaxing, he, as a man, recognized as a power which never failed, and which he knew how to use. His voice bore again that soft, suppressed tone which charmed the ear like music; and his eyes--those dark, mysterious eyes--were fixed upon the girl before him with a half gloomy, half beseeching expression.

The paleness of her face had deepened, but she did not answer.

"I beg of you," he repeated, more lowly, more beseechingly, as he pressed the glowing flower to his lips; but the very gesture broke the spell. Adelaide suddenly drew herself up.

"I must ask you, Herr Rojanow, to return the flower to me. I intended it for my husband."

"Ah, so? I beg your pardon, Your Excellency."

He handed her the flower with a deep bow, which she accepted with a barely noticeable inclination of the head. Then the heavy white train glided past him, and he was alone.

In vain! Everything glided off this icy nature.

Hartmut stamped his foot angrily. Only ten minutes ago he had passed such harsh judgment on all women, without an exception, to the Prince. Now he had sung again that charming tune which he had tried so often successfully, and had found one who resisted it. But the proud, spoiled man would not believe that he could lose the game which he had won so often, when just here he was so anxious to win it.

And would it really remain only a game? He had not as yet accounted to himself for it, but he felt that the passion which drew him to the beautiful woman was mingled at times with hatred.

They were conflicting emotions which had been deeply stirred when he walked by her side through the forest--half admiring, half repellent. But it was just that which made the chase so interesting to the practised huntsman.

Love! The high, pure meaning of the word had remained foreign to the son of Zalika. When he learned to feel, he was living at his mother's side, she who had made such shameful play of her husband's love; and the women with whom she associated were no better. The later life which she led with her son, unsettled and adventurous, with no firm ground under their feet, had finally crushed out the last remnant of idealism in the young man. He learned to despise before he learned to love, and now he felt the merited humiliation given him to be an insult.

"Struggle on," he muttered; "you battle against yourself. I have seen and felt it; and the one who does that, does not conquer in such a struggle."

CHAPTER XXIV.

A slight noise at the entrance caused Hartmut to look up. It was the Ambassador who appeared on the threshold, casting a searching glance into the room. He came for his wife, whom he thought still there.

He started at sight of Hartmut, and for a moment seemed undecided. Then he said, half audibly: "Herr Rojanow."

"Your Excellency."

"I should like to speak to you privately."

"I am at your service."

Wallmoden entered, but took up his position so as to keep the entrance in view. It was hardly necessary, for the doors of the dining room had just been thrown open, and the whole assembly floated there. The salon adjoining the tower room was already empty.

"I am surprised to see you here," the Ambassador began in suppressed tones, but with the same insulting coldness which he had shown at the first meeting, and which brought the blood to the young man's brow. He drew himself up threateningly.

"Why, Your Excellency?"

"The question is superfluous. At any rate, I request you not to again force me into the position I was brought into a short while ago, when Prince Adelsberg introduced you to me."

"The forced position was mine," returned Hartmut, just as sharply. "I will not assert that you consider me an intruder here, for you, best of all, know that I have a right to this intercourse."

"*Hartmut von Falkenried* would have had a right, of course; but that has changed."

"Herr von Wallmoden!"

"Not so loud, if you please," interrupted the Ambassador. "We might be overheard, and it would surely not be desirable to you that the name I just now uttered should be heard by outsiders."

"It is true that at present I carry my mother's name, to which I surely have a right. If I laid aside the other, it happened out of consideration----"

"For your father," finished Wallmoden, with heavy emphasis.

Hartmut started. This was an allusion which he could not bear yet.

"Yes," he replied, curtly. "I confess that it would be painful to me if I were forced to break this consideration."

"And why? Your rôle here would be played out, anyway."

Rojanow stepped close to the Ambassador with a passionate gesture.

"You are the friend of my father, Herr von Wallmoden, and I have called you uncle in my boyhood; but you forget that I am no longer the boy whom you could lecture and master at that time. The grown man looks at it as an insult."

"I intend neither to offend you nor to renew old connections, which neither of us consider as existing," said Wallmoden, coldly. "If I desired this conversation, it was to declare to you that it will not be possible to me, in my official position, to see you in intercourse with the Court, and be silent when it would be my duty to enlighten the Duke."

"Enlighten the Duke! About what?"

"About several things which are not known here and which have probably remained unknown to Prince Adelsberg. Please do not fly into a passion, Herr Rojanow. I would do this only in an extreme case, for I have to spare a friend. I know how a certain incident hurt him ten years ago, which is now forgotten and buried in our country, and, if all this should come up again and be brought into publicity, Colonel Falkenried would die of it."

Hartmut blanched. The defiant reply did not cross his lips. "He would die of it." The awful word, the truth of which he felt only too well, forced aside for the moment even the insult of the remark.

"I owe my father alone an account of that occasion," he replied in a painfully suppressed voice; "only him and nobody else."

"He will hardly ask for it. His son is dead to him; but let that rest. I speak especially now of later years; of your stay at Rome and Paris, where you lived with your mother in lavish style, although the estates in Roumania had had to be sacrificed at a forced sale."

"You seem to be all-knowing, Your Excellency!" hissed Rojanow in great anger. "We had no idea that we were under such conscientious surveillance. We lived upon the balance of our fortune which had been rescued from the wreck."

"Nothing was rescued; the money was entirely lost--to the last penny."

"That is not true," interrupted Hartmut, stormily.

"It is true. Am I really better informed about it than you?" The voice of the Ambassador sounded cuttingly sharp. "It is possible that Frau Rojanow did not want her son informed of the source from which she derived her means, and left him in error about it intentionally. I know the circumstances. If they have remained unknown to you--so much the better for you."

"Take care not to insult my mother," the young man burst forth; "or I shall forget that your hair is gray, and demand satisfaction."

"For what? For a statement for which I can produce the proofs? Lay aside such foolishness, of which I shall take no notice. She was your mother, and is dead now; therefore we will go no deeper into this point. I should only like to put this question to you: Do you intend, even after this conversation, to remain here and appear in the circle into which Prince Adelsberg has introduced you?"

Hartmut had turned deathly pale at the hint of the muddy origin of his mother's means, and the numb terror with which he looked at the speaker betrayed that he indeed knew nothing about it. But at this last question he regained his composure.

His flashing eyes met those of his opponent, and a wild decision sounded in his voice as he replied: "Yes, Herr von Wallmoden, I remain."

The Ambassador did not seem to have expected this defiance; he probably thought to have accomplished the matter more easily, but he retained his composure.

"Really? Well, you are accustomed to playing a high hand, and you seem to wish here also--but hush! Some one is coming. Reconsider the matter, perhaps you will change your mind."

He quickly entered the adjoining room, in which the Chief Forester now appeared.

"Where have you hidden yourself, Herbert?" he asked, when he beheld the Ambassador. "I have looked everywhere for you."

"I wished to find my wife."

"She is already in the dining room, like everybody else, and where you are being missed. Come, it is high time that we get something to eat."

Herr von Schonan took possession of his brother-in-law in his ever jovial manner and went off with him.

Hartmut stood still in his place. He struggled for breath; the excitement threatened to choke him. Shame, hatred, anger, all floated wildly through his heart. That hint of Wallmoden's had hurt him terribly, although he but half understood it. It tore asunder the veil with which he had half unconsciously, half intentionally shrouded the truth. He had, indeed, believed that a remnant of their wealth, rescued from the wreck, had given him and his mother their income. But it was not the first time that he had shut his eyes to what he did not wish to see.

He had enjoyed life in deep draughts without calling himself to account for it when the hand of his mother had so suddenly torn him from the enforced paternal education into unlimited freedom; when he exchanged the routine of the strictest duties for a life full of intoxicating enjoyments. He had then been too young to judge, and later on--it was then too late; habit and example had woven too unyielding a net around him. Now, for the first time, it was being shown him clearly and unmistakably what the life was that he had led so long--the life of an adventurer; and as an adventurer he had been pointed out the exit from society.

But hotter than the shame of that burned the affront which had been given him, and hatred for the man who had forced this indisputable truth upon him. The unfortunate inheritance from his mother, the hot, wild blood which had once been fatal to the boy, welled up like a stream of fire, and every other thought went down in a sensation, wild and limitless, of thirst for revenge.

His handsome features were distorted beyond recognition when he finally left the room, with tightly closed teeth. He knew and felt but one thing--that he must have revenge--revenge at any price!

CHAPTER XXV.

It was very late when the fête came to an end. After the withdrawal of the ducal couple, a general move for departure took place. Carriage after carriage rolled down the Schlossberg; the bright lights were extinguished, and Furstenstein began to shroud itself in darkness and silence.

In the apartments devoted to the Ambassador and his wife, however, the lights still burned.

Adelaide stood at the window in her rich robe of the fête and looked out into the night like one lost in thought, but it was with a peculiar, weary gesture that she leaned her head against the window panes.

Wallmoden sat at the writing table, glancing through some letters and dispatches which had arrived in the last hour. They seemed to contain important news, for he did not lay them aside with other papers to receive attention to-morrow morning, but grasped a pen and hastily wrote a few lines, then arose and quickly approached his wife.

"This comes unexpectedly," he said. "I shall have to go to Berlin."

Adelaide turned in surprise. "So suddenly?"

"Yes; I thought to accomplish this very serious affair by letter, but the Minister expressly desires a personal interview. Therefore I shall take leave of the Duke to-morrow morning for a period of about a week, and depart immediately."

The young bride's features could not be distinguished in the semi-darkness, but her breast heaved with a deep sigh, which betrayed a perhaps unconscious relief.

"At what hour do we leave?" she asked quickly; "I should like to notify my maid."

"We? This is entirely a business trip, and, naturally, I go alone."

"But I could accompany you."

"What for? You understand that it means an absence of only a week or two."

"No matter. I--I should like to see Berlin again."

"What a whim!" said Wallmoden, shrugging his shoulders. "I shall be so occupied this time that I could not accompany you anywhere."

The young wife had approached the table and now stood in the full light of the lamp. She was much paler than usual, and her voice had a suppressed sound as she returned: "Well, then, I shall go home. I should really not like to remain here alone at Furstenstein without you."

"Alone?" The Ambassador looked at her in astonishment. "You will be with our relatives, whose guests we are. How long have you been so desirous of protection? It is a thing I have not observed in you so far. I do not understand you, Adelaide. What is this strange caprice of wishing to accompany me at all hazards?"

"Accept it as a caprice, then, but let me go with you, Herbert; I beg of you."

She laid her hand entreatingly upon his arm, and her eyes were directed with almost an expression of fear upon her husband's face, whose thin lips parted in a sarcastic smile. It was that superior smile, which could be so insulting at times.

"Ah, so? Now I understand. That scene with the Princess has been disagreeable to you. You fear renewed annoyances, which will probably not fail to come. You must lose this sensitiveness, my child. On the contrary, you ought to be aware of the fact that this encounter alone puts you to the necessity of remaining here. Every word, every look is interpreted at Court, and a sudden departure on your part would give rise to all sorts of speculations. You have to hold your own now, if you do not wish to make your connections with the Court forever difficult."

The young wife's hand slipped slowly from his arm, and her look sank to the floor at this cool rejoinder to her almost beseeching entreaty--the first she had uttered in her short marriage.

"Hold my own," she repeated, in a low voice. "I do that, but I hoped you would remain at my side."

"That is not possible just now, as you see; besides, you understand in a masterly manner how to defend yourself. You have shown that to me as well as to the whole Court to-day, but I am sure the hint I gave you will be considered, and that you will be more cautious with your answers in the future. At any rate, you will remain at Furstenstein until I return for you."

Adelaide was silent. She saw that nothing was to be gained here.

Wallmoden stepped back to the writing table and looked at the document just received; then he grasped the sheet on which he had written the answer and folded it.

"One thing more, Adelaide," he said, carelessly; "the young Prince Adelsberg was constantly at your side to-night. He pays homage to you in rather a conspicuous manner."

"Do you wish me to decline these attentions?" she asked, indifferently.

"No; I only ask you to draw the necessary limit, so that no idle talk may ensue. I do not intend to cut short your social victories. We do not live in burgher circumstances, and it would be ridiculous in my position to play the jealous husband who views every attention paid his wife with suspicion. I leave this entirely to your own tact, in which I have unlimited confidence."

All of this sounded so tranquil, so sensible, so boundlessly indifferent, Herr von Wallmoden might, indeed, be exonerated from any thought of jealousy. The openly offered admiration of the young, charming Prince caused him no anxiety; he quietly left his wife to her "tact."

"I shall attend to this dispatch myself," he continued; "as we have a telegraph station in the castle since the Duke's arrival. You should ring for your mail, my child; you look somewhat fatigued and probably feel so. Good night."

He left the room, but Adelaide did not follow the advice. She had drawn near the window again, and a half bitter, half pained expression trembled on her lips. She had never felt so painfully as at this moment that she was nothing more to her husband than a shining jewel which one exhibits, a wife whom one treats with perfect politeness and attention because she brought in her hand a princely fortune, and to whom a request could be denied with equal politeness; a request which might have been so easily granted.

Night rested over the forest; the sky was cloudy and dark, with here and there a solitary star glimmering through the flying clouds. A pale face looked up to the gloomy sky; not with the cold, proud composure the world was accustomed to see, but with an expression of beseeching entreaty.

The young wife pressed both hands to her bosom, as if the pain and unrest were there. She had wished to flee from the dark power whose approach she had felt, and which was drawing the circles nearer and closer around her. She had wished to flee to her husband's protection. In vain! He would go away and leave her alone, and another remained--another, who, with dark, glowing eyes and thrilling voice, wielded such a mysterious, irresistible power. "Ada," the name with its sweet, foreign sound, floated near her like a spirit's breath. It was her name which the legend of the Arivana bore!

CHAPTER XXVI.

October had come, and autumn began to show its reign in a marked manner. The foliage of the trees bore gay tints; the country was wrapped, morning and night, in mist. The nights sometimes brought frost, while the days were unusually fine and sunny.

With the exception of that large fête which had collected the whole community, and the hunts, which were naturally prominent at this time of the year, no particular festivities took place.

The Duke, as well as his wife, loved to entertain small circles, and did not wish to disturb the quiet and freedom of their autumn visit with brilliant entertainments. On that account excursions were more often taken. The forest hills were being explored on horseback and in carriages, and the ducal table daily held a large number of guests. Adelaide von Wallmoden belonged to this small circle. The Duchess, who had learned in what manner her sister-in-law tried to make the position of the young Baroness more difficult, counterbalanced it with greater affability, drawing Adelaide into her presence at every opportunity; and the Duke, who wished to distinguish the Ambassador and his wife, was well satisfied with it.

Wallmoden was still in Berlin. The two weeks he had appointed for his trip had passed away, and yet nothing was said of his return.

One of the most frequent visitors at Furstenstein was Egon von Adelsberg, the pronounced favorite of his princely relatives; and his friend, Rojanow, was always honored with an invitation. The young Prince had prophesied correctly. Hartmut was like a shining meteor, whom all eyes

followed with admiration, and of whom it was not expected that he should follow in the old beaten track of Court life.

He had read his Arivana to them at the request of the Duchess, and with it had gained a perfect triumph. The Duke had immediately promised him a performance of the drama in the Court Theatre, and Princess Sophie turned her special favor upon the young poet.

The surrounding Court circle, of course, followed the example of the princely people in this case only too gladly, for the charm he exercised was universal.

The hunting carriage of Prince Adelsberg stood before the castle of Rodeck. It was still early, and the misty October morning seemed to promise a clear, beautiful day. Egon had just appeared upon the terrace in full hunting costume and was speaking with the castle steward, who followed him.

"And so you wish to look at the hunt also?" he asked. "Of course, Peter Stadinger has to be wherever anything is to be seen. My valet has also asked leave of absence, and I believe the whole population of the Wald will turn out to-day to be at the hunting grounds."

"Yes, Your Highness, such things are not often to be seen," said Stadinger. "The great Court and gala hunts have become rare in our Wald. Hunting goes on everywhere, but then the gentlemen are mostly by themselves, like here at Rodeck, and if the ladies are not there----"

"Then it is unbearably tiresome," completed the Prince. "Quite my opinion; but you are otherwise prejudiced against womankind, and cry out if any one who has not reached a good old age comes within the borders of Rodeck. Have you changed your opinion in your old days?"

"I meant the high princely ladies, Your Highness," declared the old servant, with particular emphasis.

"The high princely ladies could only honor me with a visit upon the occasion of a drive. I cannot invite them, as I am a bachelor."

"And why is Your Highness still a bachelor?" asked Stadinger in reproachful tones.

"Man, I believe you also have matrimonial plans for me as well as the world has," laughed Egon. "Spare your pains; I shall not marry."

"That is not right, Your Highness," persisted Stadinger, who gave his master his title at least once in every sentence because it was "respectable" so to do, while at the same time he took the liberty of lecturing him upon every occasion; "and it is also unchristianlike, for matrimony is a holy state, in which one feels well off. Your sainted father was married--and so was I."

"Oh, of course, you too. You are even grandfather of a most charming granddaughter, whom you have most cruelly sent off. When does she come back, anyhow?"

The steward thought best to lose the last question, but he remained obstinately at his subject.

"Your Highness, the Duchess and the Princess Sophie are of the same opinion. Your Highness should consider the subject seriously."

"Well, since you exhort so paternally, I will consider it. But, concerning the Princess Sophie, she intends to drive to Bucheneck, which is the meeting place of to-day's hunt; it may be possible she will notice you there and may speak to you."

"Very probable, Your Highness," confirmed the old man, complacently. "Her Highness always honors me by speaking to me, because she knows me as the oldest servant of the ducal house."

"Very well. If the Princess should ask casually after the snakes and animals which I have brought back from my travels, you say that they have already been sent to one of my other castles."

"It is not necessary at all, Your Highness," Stadinger assured him, benevolently; "the most illustrious aunt already knows all about it."

"Knows all about what? Have you told her anything?"

"At your service. The day before yesterday, when I was at Furstenstein, Her Highness had just returned from a drive and graciously beckoned me to approach and asked me--Her Highness likes to do that----"

"Yes, Heaven knows!" groaned the young Prince, who already scented mischief. "And what did you answer?"

"'Your Highness may rest easy,' I said; 'we have only monkeys and parrots of the live animals in the castle. Serpents have never been there. A large sea serpent, though, was to have arrived, but he died on the voyage, and the elephants tore themselves lose at the embarking and ran back to the palm forests--at least, so His Highness says. To be sure, we have two tigers, but they are

stuffed; and of the lions, there is only the skin, which lies in the armory. Therefore Your Highness may see that the beasts cannot break loose and do harm.'"

"Oh, but you have fixed things now with your chattering!" cried Egon, exasperated. "And the Princess, what did she say?"

"Her Highness only smiled and inquired what kind of female servants we had at Rodeck, and if the girls of this vicinity were among them; but I said then"--here Stadinger drew himself up consciously--"'The servants in service at the castle I have hired. They are all industrious and reliable; I have looked out for that. But His Highness runs when he puts eyes on them, and Herr Rojanow runs still more; and the gentlemen have never gone back into the kitchen since the first time they went there.' After that Her Highness was most gracious and condescended to praise me and dismissed me in the very highest satisfaction."

"And I should like to run you to perdition in the very highest dissatisfaction," the Prince burst forth, wrathfully. "You unlucky old Waldgeist, what *have* you been doing again?"

The old man, who apparently thought that he had done his part extremely well, looked at his master in perplexity.

"But I have only said the truth, Your Highness."

"There are cases where one must not say the truth."

"So? I did not know that till now."

"Stadinger, you have quite an abominable way of answering. Have you told the Princess also that Lena has been in town for the past four weeks?"

"At your service, Your Highness."

"What is the matter with Stadinger again?" inquired Hartmut, who emerged from the castle, also dressed for the hunt, and who had heard the last of the conversation.

"He has committed a first-class foolishness," grumbled Egon, but he was met with bad success by the "oldest servant of the ducal house," who drew himself up, deeply offended.

"With your permission, Your Highness, I have not committed the foolishness."

"Do you mean perhaps that I have done it?"

Stadinger looked at his master keenly from the corner of his eye, after which he said deliberately: "That I do not know, Your Highness; but it may be so."

"You are a churl!" cried the Prince, hotly.

"Known for that through all the Wald, Your Highness."

"Come, Hartmut; nothing can be done with the old, grumbling bear to-day," said Egon, half laughing, half vexed. "At first he gets me into scrapes, and then he lectures me on top of it. May graciousness help you, Stadinger, if you give any more such reports!"

With which he entered the carriage with Rojanow. Stadinger remained standing in military position and saluted as was demanded by his idea of the respectful, for respect was the main thing, although he did not in the least think of giving in by so doing. His Highness, Prince Egon, had to do that; he could not come up with his Peter Stadinger.

CHAPTER XXVII.

Egon was evidently of the same opinion as he narrated the proceeding to his friend, and concluded with comic despair: "Now you can imagine what a reception will be mine from the most illustrious aunt. She has guessed that I wished to keep her away from Rodeck. My morals are rescued in her eyes, but at the expense of my veracity. Hartmut, do me the favor of showering your sweetest affability upon my revered aunt. If necessary, compose a poem for her as a lightning rod; otherwise the flash of her most high anger will annihilate me."

"Well, I should think you were weather-proof in this respect," quoth Hartmut. "You have had to have forgiveness for many similar escapades. The Duchess and the younger ladies will be at the

chase on horseback, will they not?"

"Yes, they could not see much from a carriage. Do you know that Frau von Wallmoden sits her horse perfectly. I met her the day before yesterday as she returned from a ride with her brother-in-law, the Chief Forester."

"Ah, so? Well, one knows, then, where Prince Adelsberg will be to-day exclusively."

Egon, who had been reclining comfortably, straightened himself and looked at his friend inquiringly.

"Not so much sarcasm, if you please. Although you are not to be found so frequently in the presence of the afore-mentioned lady, and even pretend a certain coldness toward her, I know you too well not to see that we are only too much of the same opinion."

"And if it were so, would you consider it a break in our friendship?"

"Not in this case, where the object is unobtainable to both."

"Unobtainable!" That unpleasant smile again passed over his lips.

"Yes, Hartmut," said the Prince, seriously, "the beautiful, cold Aurora, as you have christened her, remains true to her nature. She stands far removed and unapproachable on the horizon, and the ice sea from which she rises is not to be penetrated. The lady has no heart; she is incapable of a passionate feeling, and this gives her this enviable security. Come, confess that here your power is wrecked. The icy breath has chilled you, and therefore you flee from it."

Hartmut was silent. He thought of those moments in the tower room, when he asked for the brilliant flower. It had been refused him, but it had not been an icy breath which came from the Baroness when she had trembled under the gaze of the beseecher.

He had since seen her almost daily, but had rarely approached her, although he knew that he held her under his spell now as before.

"Nevertheless, I cannot get free from this foolish infatuation," continued Egon, with a half dreamy expression. "It seems to me that life and warmth could grow up in that nature, and change the snow region into a blooming world. If Adelaide von Wallmoden were still free, I believe I should make the attempt."

Rojanow, who had been gazing into the misty forest, lost in thought, turned quickly and sharply:

"What attempt? Does that perhaps mean that you would offer her your hand?"

"You seem really horror-stricken at the idea." The Prince laughed aloud. "I meant that, indeed. I have no prejudice against the manufacturing world, like my most gracious aunt, whom such a possibility would indeed throw into convulsions. Strange to say, you seem to think so, too. Well, both of you may rest easy. His Excellency, the husband, has seized the prize; but he truly does not make a life of roses for her with his tiresome diplomatic face. Ah! but the man has had enviable good luck."

"Call no man happy before his death," muttered Hartmut under his breath.

"A very wise remark, and one not quite new to me. But you sometimes have something in your eyes which frightens me. Do not be offended, Hartmut; but you look like a demon at this moment."

Rojanow made no answer.

The road now left the forest, and yonder Furstenstein rose into view, where the ducal colors floated in the morning breeze. Half an hour later the carriage rolled into the castle court, where an animated scene reigned.

The entire force of servants was at hand; saddle horses and carriages were ready, and the greater number of invited guests had already arrived.

The start took place at the appointed hour, and the bright light of the sun, breaking through the mist, shone resplendent on the imposing cavalcade as it moved down the Schlossberg.

The Duke and Duchess led the party; then followed the numerous suite and the whole assembly of guests, and the grooms in full livery who were permitted to go.

Out through the sunny autumn morning into the forests and heights of the hunting preserves, where it soon became lively. Firing resounded on all sides; the flying game broke through the thickets or sped across the openings, now alone and now in droves, only to be reached finally by a ball; and the usually quiet forest gave back the echo of the chase.

The Chief Forester had ordered out the entire forester staff of the Wald, and had made all

arrangements so excellently that it brought him great honor to lead the chase, which was not marred by any accident.

Toward noon a rendezvous was held at Bucheneck, a small ducal forest lodge situated in the midst of the Wald, and which could afford shelter in case of unfavorable weather. This was not necessary to-day, for the weather had turned out to be fine, only a little too warm for an October day. The sun burned so hotly as to render it unpleasant at luncheon, which was partaken of out of doors; but otherwise all passed off happily and unceremoniously, and a gay scene developed upon the large green meadow, at the border of which Bucheneck was situated.

The entire hunting cortege was assembled here. The Duke, who had been especially fortunate in the chase to-day, was in the very best of spirits. The Duchess chatted with animation to her surrounding ladies, and the Chief Forester beamed with pleasure, for the Duke had expressed his satisfaction in the most flattering manner.

Frau von Wallmoden, who was near the Duchess, was the subject of general admiration to-day. She was, without doubt, the most beautiful of all the assembled ladies, nearly all of whom needed rich dressing and candle-light to bring out their beauty. Here, in the bright, midday sun, in plain, dark riding habits, which permitted no colors or jewels, many an otherwise admired appearance faded. The young Baroness alone remained victorious in this simplicity. Her tall, slender figure looked as if formed for her habit, while the transparent clearness and freshness of her skin, and the shining blondness of her hair were even more to be admired in daylight than at the night fête. Besides, she had really proved herself an able horsewoman, who sat in the saddle with as much ease as security; in short, the "beautiful Aurora," as Frau von Wallmoden was now called in the court circle since Prince Adelsberg had given her that name, was admired on all sides, and received the more attention as it was known that she was to disappear for several weeks.

The Ambassador had notified his wife yesterday that his diplomatic work was now finished, but that he would utilize his presence in North Germany in looking after the Stahlberg works.

Important changes had been planned there, and new improvements spoken of, for which a final decision had to be made, and Wallmoden, as executor and guardian of the heir, had the deciding voice in it. His presence at the conference was indispensable; he had asked leave of absence from his office, and had notified the Duke of a return later.

At the same time he left it to his wife to decide whether she would remain at Furstenstein or take the trip to her old home with him, if she wished to see her brother. Now, after fully two weeks, no one could misconstrue her departure. The young wife had immediately chosen to go with her husband, and had notified the Duchess that she should leave on the morrow.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

Princess Sophie had arrived at Bucheneck with her lady of honor and the elder ladies in carriages, and now attempted, above everything, to lay hands on her illustrious nephew; but he developed an incredible aptness at keeping out of her reach. He was everywhere except in the near presence of his most gracious aunt, until finally she lost patience and ordered a gentleman to call Prince Adelsberg into her presence.

Egon had to obey this command, but he used the precaution of taking the "lightning rod" with him. Rojanow was at his side when he stood before the Princess.

"Well, Egon, do I really get a glimpse of you?" was the not very gracious reception. "You seem to have been taken possession of on all sides to-day."

"I am always ready for the service of my most gracious aunt," declared Egon in honeyed accents; but the sweetness did him no good. The Princess measured him with an annihilating glance.

"As far as your knightly service to Frau von Wallmoden leaves you time. She will give this chivalry a glowing mention to her husband. You may know him, perhaps?"

"Certainly. I revere him highly as a man, as a diplomat and as His Excellency. Your Highness may believe that."

"I believe you unconditionally, Egon. Your love for veracity is far above any doubts with me," said the lady, with stinging sarcasm. "I just happen to remember speaking the day before yesterday with the steward of Rodeck--the old Stadinger--who is still very active for his years."

"But he suffers seriously from failing memory," the Prince hastened to assure her. "I am sorry to say that Stadinger forgets everything. Is it not so, Hartmut? He positively does not know to-day what he saw yesterday."

"On the contrary, I found that his memory was exceptionally fresh. Besides, he is the oldest and truest servant of your house, reliable--careful----"

"And a churl," interrupted Egon, sighing. "Your Highness, you have no idea of the unlimited gruffness which dwells in this Peter Stadinger. He tyrannizes over Herr Rojanow and me shamefully. I have actually thought of retiring him."

Of course, he did not dream of that. His Highness knew better than to make Peter Stadinger such a proposition, and would have fared badly if he had. But Princess Sophie, who had the reputation of being very haughty and relentless toward her servants, now favored a very mild course.

"You should not do that," she remonstrated. "A man who is now serving the third generation of the ducal family may be pardoned such a thing, particularly considering the somewhat loose housekeeping which the young gentlemen lead at Rodeck. It seems that they do not like to see visitors there, preferring the solitude."

"Ah, yes, the solitude!" sighed Egon, sentimentally. "It does one so much good after the stormy life of travel, and we enjoy it in full draughts. I occupy myself mostly----"

"With the taming of your wild animals," finished the Princess maliciously.

"No, with--with my travelling memoirs, which I intend to publish; and Hartmut composes melancholy songs. He has just now the material for a ballad under his pen, to which Your Highness drew his attention."

"Why, Herr Rojanow, have you really utilized the theme?" asked the lady, whose face now suddenly beamed with sunshine, as she turned to the young poet.

"Certainly, Your Highness. I am very grateful to you for the suggestion," said Hartmut, who had not the slightest idea what the subject was, but felt that he had to go into action now.

"I am glad of that. I love poetry and seek it at every opportunity."

"And with what understanding and appreciation!" cried Egon, enthusiastically. But he quickly embraced the opportunity of slipping away, leaving his friend behind as the victim. He hastened to the presence of the Duchess, which meant the presence of Frau von Wallmoden, where he seemed to feel decidedly better than with his most gracious aunt.

The chase was resumed after luncheon was over. It was now a hunt for large game, which was commenced with renewed zeal.

But the hitherto sunny weather changed in the afternoon. The sky grew cloudy and dark, but it remained warm, almost stifling, and a heavy bank of cloud arose in the west. It looked as if one of those late thunderstorms was preparing, which passed at times over the Wald at this season.

The Duchess, with a portion of her attendants, had taken her stand upon a hill which seemed to afford the best view, but soon the chase took another quite unexpected direction, and the onlookers made ready to follow.

Frau von Wallmoden met here with a slight accident. The girth of her saddle suddenly broke and she sprang lightly from the stirrup, thus saving herself from a fall. It was not possible to continue her ride, for although the accompanying groom could have given her a horse, there was no lady's saddle at hand; consequently she had to give up further participation, and decided to walk back to Bucheneck, to where one of the grooms would lead her horse.

Adelaide had requested the servant to precede her, and she lingered on the hill which had become quiet and lonely. It almost seemed that the accident had been welcome to her, since it relieved her from attending the chase to the end.

It is always a relief when one can drop a mask which has deceived the world and can breathe in solitude, if it only brings conviction of the heavy load one had to bear under that mask.

Where had the cold, proud calm vanished with which the young wife had entered her new home upon the arm of her husband? Now, when she knew herself alone and unobserved, it could be plainly seen that she had changed much.

That strong will-line which had made her resemble her father so much had become more pronounced, but besides that there was another line--a painful one--as of a person who has to struggle with secret torture and anxiety. The blue eyes had lost the cold, dispassionate expression. A deep shadow rested within them which also told of struggle and pain, and the blonde head drooped as if under an invisible but heavy load.

And yet Adelaide drew a breath of relief at the thought that this would be the last day she

should spend at Furstenstein. By to-morrow she would be far from here. Perhaps there would be rest in the far removal of the dark power against which she had struggled now for weeks so painfully, and yet so vainly.

Perhaps she would get better if she did not see those eyes day after day, nor hear that voice.

When she should have fled from the enchanted circle the charm would have to break, and now at last she could flee--oh, the happiness of it!

The noise of the chase sounded in ever-increasing distance, and was finally lost, but steps now sounded in the forest which encircled the hill closely, and warned the young Baroness that she was no longer alone. She started to leave, but at the moment she turned the one approaching emerged from under the trees.

Hartmut Rojanow stood before her.

The meeting was so sudden and unexpected that Adelaide's composure was not proof against it. She retreated to the trunk of the tree, under the boughs of which she had been standing, as if seeking there a protection from this man, upon whom she gazed with fixed, fearful eyes--with the gaze of a wounded animal which sees the huntsman approach.

Rojanow did not seem to notice it. He saluted her and asked hastily: "You are alone, Your Excellency? The accident did not have any serious consequences?"

"What accident?"

"It was said you had a fall from your horse."

"What exaggeration! The girth broke, but I knew it in time to spring from the stirrup, while the horse stood perfectly still--that was the accident."

"God be praised! I heard something of a fall--an injury--and as you did not reappear at the chase I feared----"

He paused, for Adelaide's glance showed him plainly that she did not believe this pretense; probably he knew the whole occurrence and had learned why and where Frau von Wallmoden had been left behind. She now regained her composure.

"I thank you, Herr Rojanow, but your being at all concerned was not necessary," she said coldly. "You could have told yourself that had there been a real accident the Duchess and the other ladies would not have left me helpless in the forest. I am on my way to Bucheneck."

She attempted to pass him. He bowed and stepped aside as if to let her pass, but said in a low voice:

"Gracious lady, I have yet to ask your pardon."

"My pardon! For what?"

"For a request which I uttered thoughtlessly and for which I have had to suffer seriously. I only asked for a flower. Is that, then, so severe a transgression that one should be angry over it for weeks?"

Adelaide had paused almost without knowing it.

Again she was under the charm of these eyes--this voice, which held her fast as with magnetism.

"You are mistaken, Herr Rojanow. I am not angry with you."

"Not? And yet it is this icy tone I have always to hear since I dared approach you in that hour. You have learned, too, to know my work, for which I begged a recognition. You were present when I read it at Furstenstein. My Arivana was praised overwhelmingly on all sides, but from your mouth alone I heard no word--not one. Will you refuse it even now?"

"I thought we were hunting to-day," said Adelaide with an attempt to pass the subject by, "where it is surely not admissible to speak of poetical works."

"We have both left the chase; it is running now toward the Rodeck forest. There is only forest solitude here. Look at this autumn-tinted foliage which warns so mournfully of fleeting existence--the silent water down there, those thunder clouds in the distance. I believe there is a more endless amount of poetry in all this than in the halls of Furstenstein."

He pointed to the landscape which spread out before them, but no longer in the bright sunlight that had favored the chase at the beginning. Now it lay in the dim light of an overcast sky, which made even the gay foliage appear withered and dull.

They could see far out into the mountains, which, retreating on both sides, left the distance

free. The endless ocean of forest crowns which only a few weeks ago waved green and airily in the breeze, now bore the color of the fall. They shone from the darkest brown to brilliant golden yellow in every shade all around, and shining red gleamed from the bushes and shrubs.

The dying forest adorned itself once more with deceptive splendor, but it was only the coloring of the passing away and dying. All life and bloom were at an end.

Deep in the ravine lay a little forest lake, which, dark and motionless, seemed to dream in the wreath of reeds and rushes which surrounded it. It resembled strangely another pond that, far away in North Germany, lay in the midst of a pine forest--the Burgsdorf pond--which, like this one, ended in a meadow where rich green beckoned, nourished by the swamp and bog, hiding itself deceitfully beneath it, and drawing the ignorant one into its depth without hope of rescue.

Even now in daylight it seemed to breathe fog and twilight, and when night should descend the will-o'-the-wisp probably commenced here also its ghostly play.

At the horizon, where in clear weather the summits of the mountains were visible, towered now a dark bank of clouds. As yet in the distance, its stifling breath rested already over the Wald, and at times a dull light flashed from it.

Adelaide had not answered Hartmut's question. She gazed out over the country to avoid looking into the face of the man who stood before her, but she felt the dark, passionate look which rested upon her face, as she had always felt it in the last weeks, as soon as Rojanow was in her presence.

"You are going away to-morrow, gracious lady," he commenced again. "Who knows when you will return and when I shall see you again? May not I beg for your opinion? May I not ask if my work has found grace in the eyes of--Ada?"

Her name again upon his lips; again that soft, veiled, yet passionate, tone which she feared, and yet to which she listened as to enchanting music!

Adelaide felt that here she was a prisoner; there was no chance for flight. She had to look the danger full in the face.

CHAPTER XXIX.

Adelaide von Wallmoden turned slowly toward her questioner, and her features betrayed that she was determined to end the hard struggle the struggle with her own self.

"You play strangely with this name, Herr Rojanow," she said emphatically and proudly. "It stood over the poem which was put into my possession in a mysterious manner last week, written in a strange hand, without signature----"

"And which you read, nevertheless," he interrupted triumphantly.

"Yes, and burned."

"Burned!"

From Hartmut's eyes flashed again the uncanny look which had startled even Egon and made him exclaim, "You look like a demon!"

The demon of hate and revenge had risen wildly against the man who had insulted him unto death and whom he therefore wished to hurt unto death, and yet he loved that man's wife as the son of Zalika alone could love--with wild, consuming passion; but that which he felt at this moment resembled hatred more than love.

"The poor leaf," he said with ill-concealed bitterness. "And so it had to suffer death in the flames--perhaps it deserved a better fate."

"You ought not to have sent it to me, then. I dare not and will not accept such poetry."

"You dare not, gracious lady? It is the homage of a poet which he lays at the feet of the woman who has been his from the beginning of time--and you will concede that to him also."

The words came but half-aloud from his lips, but so hot and passionate that Adelaide shuddered.

"You may pay homage like that to the women of your country, and in such words," she said. "A German woman does not understand it."

"But you have understood it, nevertheless," Hartmut burst forth, "and you also understood the doctrine of the intense ardor of my Arivana, which bears off the victory over all human laws. I saw it that evening when you turned your back apparently so coldly upon me, while all the others overwhelmed me with admiration. Do not deceive yourself, Ada. When the divine spark falls into two souls it flames up, in the cold north as well as the fervent south, and it already burns within us. In this breath of fire, will and will-power die the death; it smothers everything that has existed, and nothing remains but the holy, blazing flame which shines and makes happy, even if it destroys. You love me, Ada--I know it--do not attempt to deny it, and I--I love you boundlessly."

He stood before her in the stormy triumph of the victor, and his dark, demoniacal beauty had, perhaps, never been as captivating as at this moment, when the fire which breathed in his words burst also from his eyes--his whole being.

And he did speak the truth!

The woman who leaned there against the trunk of the tree so deathly white, loved him as only a pure, proud nature can love; that nature which so far had lived in the delusion that her emotions would forever lie in slumber, called by the world coldness of heart.

Now she saw herself awaking before a passion which found a thousand-fold echo in her own breast; now that breath of flame floated around her also with its scorching glow; now came the test!

"Leave me, Herr Rojanow, instantly!" cried Adelaide.

Her voice sounded half smothered, almost inaudible, and she addressed a man who was not wont to yield when he felt himself victorious.

He started to approach her hastily--he suddenly stood still. There was something in the eyes--in the bearing of the young Baroness which kept him within bounds, but again he breathed her name in that tone, the power of which perhaps he knew best--"Ada."

She shuddered and made a repellent gesture.

"Not that name. For you I am Adelaide von Wallmoden. I am married--you know that."

"Married to a man who stands on the border of old age, whom you do not love, and who could not give you any love if he were young. That cold, calculating nature knows no emotion of passion. The Court, his position, his promotion, are everything to him--his wife, nothing. He perhaps boasts of the possession of a jewel which he does not know how to value, and for which another would give his soul's eternal bliss."

Adelaide's lips quivered. She knew only too well that he was right, but she did not answer.

"And what binds you to this man?" continued Rojanow, still more impressively. "A word--a single 'Yes' uttered by you without knowing its full meaning--without knowing yourself. Shall it bind you for your life? Shall it make us both miserable? No, Ada, love the eternal, undying right of the human heart does not bow before that. People may call it guilt, they may call it doom. We stand now under this doom, and must follow it; a single word shall not part us."

Far off at the horizon the flame burst up with such glaring light that it shone also over the opening on the hill.

Hartmut stood for a moment in this light. He was now so fully the son of his mother; resembling so closely her beautiful but pernicious features; but it was that flash of lightning that brought Adelaide back to consciousness; or had it shown her the unholy fire which burned in his eyes? She retreated with an expression of unveiled horror.

"A solemnly given and accepted word is a vow," she said slowly, "and he who breaks it breaks his honor."

Hartmut started. Sudden and glaring like that flash of lightning flamed up a remembrance in his mind--the resemblance of that hour when he had given a solemn word--a word of honor, and--had broken it!

Adelaide von Wallmoden straightened her slender figure; her features still showed the deathly pallor as she continued in a low but steady tone to Rojanow:

"Abandon this persecution which I have felt for weeks. I shudder before you--at your eyes, your words. I feel that it is destruction that goes out from you, and one does not love that."

"Ada!"

Passionate entreaty sounded in the word, but the low voice of Adelaide gained firmness quickly as she continued:

"And you do not love me. It has often seemed to me as if it were your hatred that pursued me. You and your kind cannot love."

Rojanow kept silence in bewilderment. Who taught this young woman, still so inexperienced in life, to look so deeply into his inmost heart? He had not made clear to himself yet how inseparably hate and love were combined in his passion.

"And you tell this to the writer of Arivana!" he burst out in bitterness. "They have called my work the high song of love----"

"Then they have let themselves be deceived by the veil of the Oriental legend in which you shrouded your characters. They saw then only the East Indian priest sink with his beloved one under an iron, inhuman law. You are perhaps a great poet, and perhaps the world overwhelms you with praise, but it tells me something different--this fervent, ardent doctrine of your Arivana. It has taught me to know its creator--a man who does not believe in anything, and to whom nothing in the world is sacred; no duty and no vow; no man's honor and no woman's virtue--who would not hesitate to drag the highest into the dust as play for his passion. I still believe in duty and honor; I still believe in myself, and with this faith I offer defiance to the doom you hold so triumphantly before me. I could force myself to death, but never to your arms!"

She stood before him, not as just now in trembling fear--in the tortured wrestling with a secret struggle, It seemed as if, with each of the annihilating words, one ring of the chain which held possession of her so mysteriously was broken. Her eyes met fully and freely the dark look which had kept her a prisoner so long; the charm was broken now and she felt it, and breathed like one rescued.

Again that flash in the distance--noiseless, without the rumbling of thunder--but it was as if heaven had opened in all its vastness. Fantastic formation of clouds was in this flaring light--forms which seemed to wrestle and struggle with each other, born of the storm, and yet that bank of cloud stood motionless at the horizon--and just as motionless stood the man, whose dark features showed now an ashy paleness in the glare of the lightning.

His eyes were fixed upon the young woman, but the wild fire in them had died out, and his voice had a strange sound as he said: "And this is the opinion I asked for? I am nothing more in your eyes than an--outcast?"

"A lost man, perhaps. You have forced me to this confession."

Hartmut slowly retreated a few steps.

"Lost!" he repeated hoarsely. "In your meaning, perhaps, yes. You may rest assured, gracious lady, I shall not approach you any more. One does not desire to hear such words a second time--you stand so high and proud upon your virtue and, judge so severely. Of course you have no idea what a hot, wild life can make of a person who wanders restlessly, without home and family, through the world. You are right--I have not believed in anything, either upon high or here upon the earth--until this hour."

There was something in his tone, in his whole bearing, that disarmed Adelaide. She felt that she would not have to fear another burst of his passion, and her voice softened involuntarily at her answer.

"I do not judge anybody; but with my whole mind and being I belong to another world, with other laws than yours. I am the daughter of an idolized father, who, all of his life, knew but one road that of earnest, severe duty. On that he worked himself up from poverty and want to wealth and honor. He led his children along this road, and his memory is the shield which covers me in every hard hour. I could not bear it if I had to cast down my eyes before the picture of my memory. You probably have no father?"----

A long, heavy pause ensued. Hartmut did not answer, but his head sank under those words, the crushing weight of which the Baroness had no idea, and his eyes were upon the ground.

"No," he at last replied, hoarsely.

"But you have the memory of him and your mother."

"My mother!" Rojanow started up suddenly and violently. "Do not speak of her in this hour--do not speak to me of my mother."

It was an outburst of mingled bitterness, of accusation and despair. The mother was being judged by her son in this exclamation. He rejected her memory as a desecration of this hour.

Adelaide did not understand him; she saw only that she had touched a topic which did not admit of explanation, and she also saw that the man who stood before her now with this dark look--with this tone of despair--was a different being from that one who had approached her a quarter of an hour ago. It was a dark, mysterious depth into which she gazed, but it no longer caused her fear.

"Let us end this conversation," she said earnestly. "You will not seek a second one--I trust you. But one more word before we part. You are a poet. I felt it in spite of all when I heard your work, and poets are teachers of mankind. They can lead to happiness or destruction. The wild flames of your Arivana seem to burst forth from the depths of a life which you yourself seem to hate. Look there!" She pointed into the distance, which was now lighted up again in a flaming glow. "Those are also signs of flame, but they come from on high, and they point to another road---- Farewell!"

* * * * *

She had disappeared long ago, but Hartmut still stood as if rooted to the ground. He had not replied with one word--had made no motion; he only looked with hot, fixed eyes to where now one flash of lightning after another tore the clouds asunder, shrouding the whole country with a fiery cloak, and then he looked at the little forest lake which resembled so closely that one at Burgsdorf, with its waving reed and the deceiving, foggy meadow, which here also pressed so close to the water.

The boy had once dreamed among such whispering rushes of soaring up like the falcon of which his race bore the name, in boundless freedom--ever higher toward the sun--and at the same place the decision over his fate had been made on that dark autumn night, when the will-o'-the-wisp led its ghostly dance.

But the deserter had not risen to the sun--the earth had held him fast; the rich, green meadow had drawn him down deeper and deeper. He had felt at times that the intoxicating cup of freedom and life which the hand of his mother gave him was poisoned, but no precious memory shielded him; he did not dare to think of his father.

Over there in the distance the forms of cloud struggled and wrestled wilder and wilder; closer and closer together they drew, and in the midst of this struggle and this darkness the flames again burst victoriously--the powerful flames from on high.

CHAPTER XXX.

The winter social life had commenced at the Residenz, where the professional element played a conspicuous rôle. The Duke, who loved and encouraged art, took great pride in gathering renowned members of it into his presence, seeking to retain them in his capitol, and, of course, society followed largely in the same direction.

The young poet who was being so highly favored by the Court, and whose first large work was to appear on the court stage, was from the first an interesting person to everybody, and the tales which were told about him served to increase this interest.

It was very unusual for a Roumanian to compose his work in the German language, even when it was whispered that he had received his education in Germany. Besides that, he was the bosom friend, and the guest here in town also, of Prince Adelsberg, and all sorts of touching and wonderful stories were narrated about this friendship.

Above all, Hartmut's personality gave him a favored position wherever he went. The young, handsome, highly-gifted stranger, whom a half-romantic, half-mysterious air surrounded, had only to make his appearance even here to draw all eyes upon him.

The rehearsal of Arivana had commenced immediately after the return of the ducal party to the Residenz, under the personal supervision of the poet; while Prince Adelsberg, who in his enthusiasm for the work of his friend, had changed into a kind of manager, made life hard to the performers by all sorts of requests in regard to the filling of characters and the setting of the play.

He knew how to get his way, and the scenery and setting were brilliant; the rôles were all filled by the first talent of the Court Theatre, and even the opera singers were called into service, since one of the rôles required a rather extensive part of song. One could not expect this from an actress, therefore a young singer--Marietta Volkmar--was entrusted with it.

The performance of the play, which was to have taken place at a later date, was being hastened as much as possible, as guests were expected at Court, and the new drama, which toyed so poetically and airily with the Indian legend as a background, was to be performed before the illustrious guests. An unusual success was anticipated.

This was the state of affairs at the return of Herbert von Wallmoden, who was naturally

painfully surprised. Although he had learned from a casual question to his wife that Rojanow still kept up his intercourse at Furstenstein, and although he had not counted upon a sudden disappearance on Rojanow's part which would necessarily have caused comment, still he had been of the firm opinion that in spite of his haughty decision to remain, Hartmut would consider it again and make his retreat as soon as Prince Adelsberg left Rodeck. Surely he would not dare to appear at the Prince's side at the Residenz, where his stay might be made impossible through those threatened "explanations."

But the Ambassador had not counted upon the unyielding defiance of the man who ventured and dared a high game here. Now, after a few weeks, he found him in a favored position in every respect and in closest intercourse with the court society.

If now, just before the performance of the drama which the Duke favored so decidedly, and of which the whole town was already talking, one should publish the disclosures of the former life of the poet, it would touch all circles unpleasantly and appear malicious.

The experienced diplomat did not deceive himself about the fact that the deep displeasure which would doubtless take possession of the Duke would then fall back upon himself, because he had not spoken before at the first appearance of Rojanow. Nothing was left for him to do but to keep silence and await developments.

Wallmoden was far from having an idea that a heavy danger had threatened himself from that quarter. He supposed that his wife knew Hartmut only as a companion of Prince Adelsberg. She had never mentioned the name since, after her arrival in Berlin, she answered a seemingly careless question just as carelessly, and he had also kept silence. She must not and should not learn anything of those old connections which he had kept from her from the beginning.

But he dared not be silent toward his nephew, Willibald, if he did not wish to live to see another scene of recognition like that upon the Hochberg.

The young lord had accompanied his relatives to South Germany; was to remain but a few days at the Residenz, and go from there to Furstenstein to his betrothed, for the Chief Forester had specially requested that the visit, which was so suddenly broken off in September, should be finished now.

"You were here barely a week," he wrote to his sister-in-law, "and now I beg for my son-in-law a little longer. Everything has been put in order now at your much-loved Burgsdorf, and there is not much to do in November. Therefore at least send us Willy if you cannot get off. A refusal will not be accepted. Toni expects her betrothed."

Frau von Eschenhagen saw that he was right and was willing to send Willy--for she, of course, decided the matter. He had made no new attempt to rebel against the maternal ruling, and seemed, anyway, to have come to his senses completely again. He was, perhaps, more quiet than before, and threw himself with quite unusual zeal into his agricultural work after his return, but otherwise bore himself especially well.

He remained obstinate only upon one point: he would not speak with his mother about that "silliness" which had caused the sudden departure, and avoided every explanation concerning it. Apparently he was ashamed of that quickly-flaming affection, which probably had never been serious, and did not wish to be reminded of it.

He wrote frequently to his fiancée, and received just as punctual replies. The correspondence, however, was more of a practical than a tender nature, and mostly concerned plans for their future lives and farm arrangements; but one saw from this that the young lord considered his marriage, for which the day had been set, as quite decided, and Frau Regine, who deemed it her indisputable right to read all of the letters of the engaged couple, declared herself satisfied with them.

So Willibald received a gracious permission to visit his betrothed, which was now so much less hazardous since the dangerous little person--Marietta Volkmar--was at present at the Residenz, where her position kept her. But to be quite sure, Frau von Eschenhagen put her son under the protection of her brother, who, with his wife, had paid a brief visit to Burgsdorf upon his return from the Stahlberg works.

If Willibald, during the two or three days of his visit at the Residenz, remained at Wallmoden's house and went with them exclusively, no danger was to be feared.

The Ambassador saw soon after his arrival that he would be forced to enlighten his nephew regarding Hartmut Rojanow, for the name was mentioned on all sides already the first day. Willy, who at that former time had been the confidant of the secret rendezvous of Hartmut and his mother, and knew her name, started upon hearing it, coupled with a remark that a young Roumanian was the gifted poet, which made him still more suspicious.

He glanced in perplexity at his uncle, who managed to signal to him just in time not to question any further, and who then embraced the first opportunity to tell him the truth.

He did this, of course, in the most inconsiderate manner, and presented Hartmut as an

adventurer of the worst kind, whom he would in a very short time force to give up the rôle which he was playing here, without being in the least entitled to it.

Poor Willibald's head swam at the news. His bosom friend--to whom he had always been attached with the fondest affection, and to whom he still clung in spite of the harsh sentence which was being pronounced upon him--was here in his immediate vicinity, and he was not to go to see him--was not even to recognize him if chance should bring about a meeting. Wallmoden especially impressed the latter upon his nephew, who, quite stunned, promised obedience and silence, as well toward Adelaide as to his fiancée and the Chief Forester; but he could not understand the thing by a long shot yet. He needed time for that as for everything.

CHAPTER XXXI.

The day upon which Arivana was to be presented had arrived. It was the first work of a young author and quite unknown poet, but the circumstances made it a professional event, which was viewed by everybody with intensest interest.

From the earliest hour the Court Theatre was filled to its utmost capacity, and now the ducal couple also appeared with their guests to occupy the large court box. Although not formally announced, the performance had the character of a benefit, to which the brilliantly lighted house and the rich costumes and uniforms bore witness.

Prince Adelsberg, who appeared in the court box, was as excited as if he had written the drama himself. Besides, he found himself in as rare as joyful accord with his most gracious aunt, who had called him to her, and was speaking about the work of the poet.

"Our young friend seems to have caprices like all poets," she remarked. "What a notion to change the name of the heroine at the last moment!"

"It did not happen at exactly the last moment," replied Egon. "The change was made at Rodeck. Hartmut suddenly took a notion that the name 'Ada' was too cold and pure for his fiery heroine, and so her name was changed forthwith."

"But the name Ada stands on the programme," said the Princess.

"Yes, but it has been turned over to an entirely different character of the drama, who appears only in one scene."

"So Rojanow has made changes since his reading at Furstenstein?"

"Only a few; the piece itself has remained quite the same, except the changing of names and that short appearance of Ada; but I assure Your Highness this scene which Hartmut has added to the play is the most beautiful thing he has ever written."

"Yes, of course, you find everything beautiful which comes from the pen of your friend," said the Princess, but the indulgent smile with which she dismissed the Prince showed that she was of the same opinion.

In one of the proscenium boxes were seen the Prussian Ambassador and his wife--returned only a day or two from his vacation. His presence at the theatre to-day was indeed not of his free will, for he would gladly have remained away from this performance, but dared not out of consideration for his position. The Duke himself had disposed of the boxes, and had invited the foreign diplomats and their ladies; there was no possibility of remaining away, particularly as Herr and Frau von Wallmoden had, only a few hours previously, participated in a large dinner at the ducal palace.

Willibald, who had won permission from his uncle to at least get acquainted with the work of his friend, sat in the parquette. Wallmoden was not pleased with his presence here, but could not well forbid him what he was going to do himself. Willy, who with difficulty had found a seat, had not thought that a member of the opera could be employed in the theatre, but when he opened the programme and came suddenly upon the name of "Marietta Volkmar," whom he was to see to-night, he folded the paper with a quick gesture and hid it in his pocket, regretting now sorely having come to the theatre.

The performance now commenced. The curtain rose and the first scene passed quickly. It was a kind of preface, to acquaint the audience with the strange, fantastic world into which they were to be introduced.

Arivana, the ancient, sacred place of sacrifice, appeared in a magnificent and appropriate setting. The most prominent character of the piece, the young priest, who, in the fanaticism of his belief, renounces utterly everything worldly and unholy, enters, and the vow which removes him for time and eternity from the world, and binds him body and soul to his deity, resounds in powerful, soulful verse.

The vow was offered--the sacred fire flamed high, and the curtain fell.

Applause, for which the Duke gave the signal, came from all sides. Although it was assured that a work which was encouraged and favored so by all should have a certain success, at least upon its opening night, there was something else mingled in the applause. The audience already felt that a poet spoke to them; his creation had perhaps needed the approval of the Court, but now, since it was before them, it sustained itself. One was attracted and held by the language--the characters--by the theme of the drama, which already betrayed itself in its principal features, and when the curtain rose afresh, intense, expectant silence rested over the vast audience hall.

And now the drama developed upon a background as rich and glowing in color as were its language and its characters. The magnificent verdure, the fairy-like splendor of its temples and palaces, the people with their wild hatred and wilder love, and the severe, iron laws of their belief--all, all, was fantastic and strange; but the feeling and acting of these people were familiar to every one, for they stood under the power which was the same centuries ago, as to-day, and which takes root the same under the glowing sky of the tropics as in the cold North--the passion and power of the human heart.

This was indeed a "glowing doctrine," and it preached without restraint the right of the passions to storm over law and institutions--over oaths and vows--to reach their aims; a right such as Hartmut Rojanow had understood and practised with his unreined will, who recognized no law or duty, but who was all in all unto himself.

The awakening of the passion--its powerful growth, its final triumph--were all depicted in transporting language, in words and acts which seemed to originate, now from the pure heights of the ideal, and now from the depths of an abyss.

Not in vain had the poet shrouded his characters in the veil of Oriental legend, but under this veil he dared to speak and indorse that which would hardly have been permitted him, and he did it with a boldness which threw igniting sparks into the hearts of the listeners, enchaining them demoniacally.

Arivana's success was assured already at the second act. The work was done by artists who belonged to the best on the stage, and they were doing the best playing ever witnessed. Those taking the principal rôles especially acted with the perfection of abandon which only real enthusiasm can give.

The heroine's name was no longer Ada. Another form now bore this name--one who was strangely foreign to this excited picture of passions; one of those tender, half-fairy-like beings with whom the Indian legends inhabit the snow dwellings upon the icy heights of the Himalayas--cold and pure as the eternal snow which shines upon them.

Only in one single instance, in the parting scene, she floated on spirit's wings through the stormy, excited gathering, remonstrating, entreating, warning; and Egon was right. The words which the poet had put into her lips were, perhaps, the most beautiful of the entire drama. It burst suddenly like pure, heavenly light into the flaming glow of a crater; but the scene was as short as beautiful. Quick as a breath the apparition disappeared again into her snow dwelling, and down yonder at the moonlit bank of the river floated the entrancing song of the Hindoo girl--Marietta Volkmar's soft, swelling voice--under the coaxing charm of which the cry of warning from the heights was dispelled and unheeded.

The last act brought the tragic end; the breaking of the doom over the guilty pair; the death in the flames. This death was no atonement, but a triumph--"a shining, divine death," and with the flames there also flared up to heaven the demoniacal doctrine of the unconditional right of the passions.

The curtain sank for the last time, and the applause, which had increased after every act, now grew to a storm. Usually the applause at the court performances was kept within measured bounds, but to-day it broke over the barriers. The flames of Arivana had kindled the enthusiasm with which the whole house demanded the appearance of the author.

Hartmut finally appeared--without embarrassment or timidity--glowing with pride and joy; he bowed acknowledgment to the audience, which today offered him a drink he had never yet tasted in his wildly tossed life. They were intoxicating, these first sips from the cup of fame, and with this intoxicating knowledge, the celebrated poet now looked up to the proscenium box, whose occupants he had long ago recognized. He did not find, however, what he sought. Adelaide was leaning back in her chair, and her face was hidden by her open fan. He saw only the cold, unmoved face of the man who had insulted him so deeply, and who was now a witness of his triumph.

Wallmoden understood only too well what the flash of those dark eyes told him: "Do you dare

yet to despise me?"

CHAPTER XXXII.

The following morning at an early hour Willibald von Eschenhagen walked through the park, which he wanted to see--at least so he had told his uncle.

The large, forest-like park which was situated directly before the city, was indeed worth seeing, but Willibald paid no attention to the landscape, which did not look very inviting this bleak November day.

Without a glance to right or left he walked quickly forward, taking aimlessly now this and now that path, without noticing that he repeatedly returned to the same spot. It seemed as if he wished with this stormy walk to calm an inner unrest; he had really gone out to be alone in the free, open air.

The young lord tried to persuade himself that it was only the meeting again with the friend of his youth that had taken him so completely out of his composure. He had not heard anything of Hartmut for fully ten years--did not even dare to mention him at home, and now he suddenly saw the lost one again, with the halo of a growing poetical glory around his head. Deeply and wonderfully changed in appearance and manner, in spite of all he was still the Hartmut with whom he had played his boyish games so often. He should have recognized him at the first glance without having been prepared for the meeting.

Wallmoden, on the contrary, seemed to be disagreeably surprised at yesterday's success. He had hardly spoken during the drive home; his wife as little. She had stated in the carriage that the hot air of the theatre had given her an intolerable headache, and retired immediately upon their arrival home. The Ambassador followed her example, and when he gave his hand to his nephew, who wished him good-night, he said curtly: "Our understanding remains the same, Willibald. You are to keep silence toward everybody, whoever it be. Look out that you do not betray yourself, for the name Rojanow will be in everybody's mouth during the next few days. He has had luck again this time--like all adventurers."

Willibald had accepted the remark silently, but he still felt that it was something else which gave the author of Arivana this success.

Under other circumstances he would have considered this work as something unheard of--incomprehensible--without understanding it, but, strange to say, the understanding for it had dawned upon him yesterday.

One could fall in love without the solemn approval of the respected parents, guardians and relations; it happened not only in India, but it happened here sometimes, too. One could also incautiously and hastily burden oneself with a vow and break it--but what then?

Yes, then came the doom which Hartmut had pictured so horribly and yet so fascinatingly. Willy was transporting in earnest the highly romantic teachings of Arivana into Burgsdorf affairs, and the doom suddenly assumed the features of Frau von Eschenhagen, who, in her wrath, was surely worse than an angry caste of priests.

The young lord heaved a deep sigh. He thought of the second act of the play, when, from the circle of Hindoo girls who marched to the place of sacrifice, a delicate figure had stepped forth, inexpressibly charming in the white, flowing garments, and the wreath of flowers in her curls. His eyes had hung riveted upon her, who appeared but twice or thrice upon the stage, but after that her song had sounded from the banks of the moonlit river. It was the same clear, sweet voice which had enchanted the listener at Waldhofen, and now the old mischief, which he had struggled down and thought forgotten, was back again. It stood before him with giant size, and the worst of it was that he did not even consider it longer as a mischief.

The tireless walker now came for the third time to a small temple, open in front, and in which stood a statue, while a bench in the background invited one to rest.

Willibald entered this time and sat down, less from a desire to rest than to be able to follow his thoughts undisturbed.

It was, perhaps, ten o'clock in the morning, and the paths were at this hour almost deserted. Only a solitary pedestrian--a young man elegantly dressed--walked leisurely and with apparent aimlessness along the paths. He seemed to be expecting some one, for he glanced impatiently

now toward town, and now toward the Parkstrasse which bordered the park for some distance.

Suddenly he came toward the temple and took his stand behind it, where he could keep the path in view without being seen.

In about five minutes a young lady came from the city--a delicate, graceful figure, in dark cloak and fur cape, with her fur cap pressed closely down upon her curly head, and a muff in her hand, from which peeped a roll of music. She was passing the temple quickly, when suddenly she uttered an ejaculation of displeased surprise:

"Ah--Count Westerburg!"

The young man had approached and bowed.

"What a happy coincidence! How could I hope that Fraulein Marietta Volkmar would take so early a walk in the park!"

Marietta stood still and measured the speaker from head to foot. Her voice had a half-angry, half-contemptuous sound as she answered:

"I do not believe in this coincidence, Herr Count. You cross my path too often and persistently for that, although I have shown you sufficiently how annoying your attentions are to me."

"Yes, you are endlessly cruel to me," said the Count, reproachfully, but with undeniable impertinence. "You do not accept my calls, refuse my flowers and offerings, and do not even return my greetings when I pass you by. What have I done to you? I have ventured to lay homage at your feet in the form of jewels, which you returned to me----"

"With the request that you discontinue such impertinences once for all," interrupted the young girl vehemently. "I protest, besides, against your continued advances. You have actually lain in wait for me here."

"Mon Dieu! I only wished to beg your pardon for that boldness," assured Count Westerburg, apparently submissive, but at the same time he stepped into the middle of the narrow path, so that it was impossible to pass. "I might have known that you are unapproachable, for everybody protests that none protects her name so jealously as you, beautiful Marietta."

"My name is Fraulein Volkmar!" cried Marietta, angrily. "Keep your flattering speeches for those who allow such things to be told them. I shall not do it, and if your advances do not cease I shall have to call in protection."

"Whose protection?" sneered the Count. "Perhaps that of the old lady with whom you live and who is always and everywhere at your side, except in your walk to Professor Marani. The singing studies at the old gentleman's are not dangerous, and that is the only walk you take alone."

"Then you knew that I went to the Parkstrasse at this hour! Then it is actually an attack! Please let me pass. I wish to go."

She tried to pass by him, but the young man stretched out his arms so that he filled the path.

"You will assuredly permit me to accompany you, mein Fraulein. Only look, the path is quite lonely and deserted; there is not a soul around. I really must offer you my escort."

The path seemed, indeed, quite deserted, and another girl might have been intimidated by this reference to her defencelessness, but the little Marietta only drew herself up undauntedly.

"Do not dare to attempt to follow me by even a step." she cried in deepest anger. "Your escort is just as unbearable to me as your presence. How often must I tell you that?"

"Ah, so angry!" cried the Count with a malicious smile. "Well, I shall not have ventured this attack for nothing. I shall at least repay myself with a kiss from those charming, angry lips."

He actually prepared to fulfil his threat, approaching the quickly retreating girl, but at that moment, propelled by an awful blow, he flew to one side and fell full length upon the damp ground, where he remained lying in a very pitiable plight.

Startled at this unexpected and stormy succor, Marietta turned around, and her face, flushed from insult and anger, bore expression of great amazement as she recognized her deliverer, who now stood at her side, looking wrathfully at the form upon the ground, as if it were his highest desire to quite finish him.

"Herr von Eschenhagen--you!"

In the meantime Count Westerburg had struggled painfully to his feet and now drew near his aggressor threateningly.

"How dare you! Who gives you the right----"

"I advise you to remain ten feet away from this young lady," interrupted Willibald, placing himself in front of Marietta, "or you will fly off again, and the second blow might not prove as soft as the first."

The Count, a slender, far from powerful man, measured the giant before him, whose fist he had already felt, but one look was enough to convince him that he would come out second best in an encounter.

"You will give me satisfaction--if you are worth it," he hissed in a half-choked voice. "Probably you do not know whom you have before you----"

"An impudent fellow whom one chastises with pleasure," said Willy stolidly. "Please remain standing where you are, or I will do it now. My name is Willibald von Eschenhagen. I am lord of Burgsdorf, and can be found at the mansion of the Prussian Ambassador if you should have more to tell me---- If you please, mein Fraulein, you may trust yourself unhesitatingly to my protection. I pledge myself that you will not be molested further."

And now something unprecedented, unheard of, happened. Herr von Eschenhagen, without stammering, without showing embarrassment of any kind, offered his arm with a genuinely chivalrous movement to the young lady, and carried her off without concerning himself further about the Count.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

Marietta had accepted the proffered arm without speaking a word until, having reached a considerable distance, she commenced, with a timidity otherwise foreign to her manner: "Herr von Eschenhagen----"

"Mein Fraulein."

"I--I am very grateful for your protection, but the Count--you have insulted him--even with a blow. He will challenge you and you will have to accept it."

"Of course, with the greatest pleasure," said Willy, and his face was beaming as if the prospect gave him unmixed delight.

His awkward, embarrassed manner had suddenly disappeared; he felt himself a hero and deliverer, and enjoyed the new position immensely.

Marietta looked at him in speechless amazement.

"But it is awful that this should happen for my sake!" she commenced again, "and that it should be just you."

"Perhaps that is not agreeable to you," said the young lord, who in his present elated mood took offence at the last remark. "But Fraulein, in such a case one has no choice. Forced by necessity, you had to accept me as protector, even if I did not stand very high in your esteem."

A burning blush spread over Marietta's face at the remembrance of that hour when she had poured out her supreme contempt on the man who now took her part so gallantly.

"I thought only of Toni and her father," she returned in a low voice. "I am blameless in this matter, but if I should be the cause of your being torn from your fiancée----"

"Toni must accept it then as providential," said Willy, upon whom the mention of his betrothed made little impression. "One can lose his life anywhere, and one must not always expect the worst consequences----Where shall I carry you, Fraulein? To the Parkstrasse? I believe I heard that you wished to go there."

She shook her head quickly.

"No, no! I intended going to Professor Marani, who is teaching me a new rôle, but I cannot sing now--it is impossible. Let us look for a carriage; we may find one over there. I would like to go home."

Willibald turned his steps at once in the appointed direction, and they walked on silently to the edge of the park, where several cabs were standing.

The young girl stopped here and looked anxiously and entreatingly at her companion.

"Herr von Eschenhagen must it really be? Cannot the matter be smoothed over?"

"Hardly: I have given the Count a heavy blow and called him an impudent fellow, and shall stand to that, of course, if it should come to any explanation; but do not worry about that. The affair will probably be settled with a few scratches by tomorrow or the day after."

"And must I remain two or three days in this anxious uncertainty? Will you not at least send me word about it?"

Willibald looked into the dark, tearful eyes, and with that look there came into his eyes that strange sudden glow as on that day when he heard the voice of the "*singvögelchen*" for the first time.

"If everything passes off happily I shall come myself and bring you word," he replied. "May I?"

"Oh, certainly, certainly. But if an accident occurs--if you should fall?"

"Then keep me in better remembrance than heretofore, mein Fraulein," said Willibald, earnestly and cordially. "You must have considered me a great coward--oh, do not say anything! You were right. I felt it myself bitterly enough--but it was my mother whom I was accustomed to obey, and who loves me very much. But you shall see now that I know how a man must act when a defenceless girl is being insulted in his presence. I will now erase, if need be, with my blood, that bad hour."

Without giving her time to reply he called one of the waiting cabs, opened the door, and gave the driver the street and number which Marietta had given him. She entered the carriage and stretched out her little hand to him once more. He held it for a moment, then the young girl threw herself back upon the cushion with a stifled sob, and the carriage rolled away.

Willy followed it with his eyes until nothing more could be seen of it, then he drew himself up and said with a kind of grim satisfaction: "Now take care, Herr Count! It will be a real pleasure to me now to fire until sight and hearing leave me."

CHAPTER XXXIV.

Twilight came on early this bleak November day, and the Adelsberg palace was already lighted when the Prince, returning from a short drive, reached the portal.

"Is Herr Rojanow in his rooms?" he inquired of the servant who hastened up.

"At your service, Your Highness," the man replied, bowing low.

"Order the carriage at nine o'clock. We drive to the ducal palace."

Egon mounted the stairs and entered the apartments of his friend, which adjoined his own on the first floor, and which, like all the rest of the princely house, were furnished with antique splendor.

A lamp burned upon the table of the sitting-room. Hartmut lay stretched upon a lounge in a position indicative of utter weariness and exhaustion.

"Are you resting upon your laurels?" asked the Prince, laughing and drawing near. "I cannot blame you, for you have not had a moment's peace to-day. It is really a rather trying business to be a new rising star in the poetical firmament; nerve is required for it. The people actually fight each other for the honor of being allowed to tell you flatteries. You have held a grand reception today."

"Yes, and now we have to go to the Court besides," said Hartmut in a weary voice. The prospect seemed to have no charm for him.

"We must, indeed. The illustrious ladies and gentlemen wish also to bring their homage to the poet--my most gracious aunt at their head. You know she is a kind of *bel-esprit,* and believes to have found a kindred soul in you. Thank God, she does not order me to her side so continually, and perhaps through this she will forget those unfortunate schemes for my marriage. But you seem to be very unappreciative of the ducal favors which rained upon you yesterday. What is the

matter? You hardly answer. Are you not well?"

"I am tired. I wish I could escape all this noise and flee to the quiet of Rodeck."

"Rodeck! Ah, it must be charming there at present, with the November fogs, and the wet, leafless forests! Brrr! a real spook's haunt!"

"Nevertheless, I have a real longing for that gloomy solitude, and I shall go there soon for a few days. I hope you have no objections?"

"I have very many objections to it," exclaimed Egon, indignantly. "What notion is this, I beg of you? Now, when the whole town lifts the poet of Arivana upon the shield, will you withdraw your honored presence and escape all the triumphs and attentions to bury yourself alive in a haunted little forest nook, which is only bearable in sunshine! Everybody will find it incomprehensible."

"I don't care. I need solitude now. I go to Rodeck."

Egon shook his head. Although he was accustomed to seeing his friend act in this domineering, inconsiderate manner whenever the notion seized him, and had himself spoiled him in this respect with all his might, the present idea seemed too preposterous.

"I believe my most gracious aunt is right," he said half reproachfully, half jestingly. "She remarked yesterday at the theatre, 'Our young poet has caprices like all of his class.' I think so, too. What is the matter now, really, Hartmut? Yesterday and to-day you beamed with triumph, and now I have left you hardly an hour, when I find you in a regular attack of melancholy. Have the papers annoyed you? Perhaps it is some malicious, envious critic?"

He pointed to the writing table, where the evening papers lay.

"No, no," returned Rojanow quickly. But he turned his head so that his face was in shadow. "The papers contain only general remarks so far, and they are all flattering. You know that I am subject to such moods, which often overcome me without cause."

"Yes, I know that, but now that good luck overwhelms you on all sides, those moods should absent themselves. But you really look haggard--that comes from the excitement through which both of us have passed during these last few weeks."

He bent over his friend with concern, and Hartmut, in rising regret for his brusque manner, stretched out his hand.

"Forgive me, Egon. You must have patience with me--it will pass off."

"I hope so, for I want to do proud with my poet to-night. But I will go now, so that you can rest. Do not let anybody disturb you. We have still three hours before we have to go."

The Prince left the room. He had not seen the bitter expression trembling around Hartmut's mouth when he spoke of his overwhelming good fortune, and yet he had spoken the truth. Fame was happiness--perhaps the highest in life--and to-day had confirmed the triumph of yesterday, until suddenly, an hour ago, a sharp discord had fallen into the flattering tune.

The young poet had scanned the papers which he found upon his table on his return. They did not contain explicit remarks about Arivana, but recognized unanimously the great success and powerful impression of the work, and promised detailed criticism the next day.

Suddenly, in turning to the last page, Hartmut came upon a name, at the sight of which intense, anxious surprise overwhelmed him.

The next moment, however, he recognized that he was not the one concerned in the article. It stated that the last journey of the Prussian Ambassador to Berlin seemed to have been of greater importance than was at first supposed. In an audience with the Duke immediately after his return, Herr von Wallmoden had apparently brought some very important things to light; and now, a high-standing Prussian officer, who was the bearer of important messages to His Highness, was expected. It doubtless concerned military matters, and Colonel Hartmut von Falkenried would arrive in a few days.

Hartmut dropped the paper as if it had suddenly become red-hot iron. His father would come to this place and would certainly hear everything from Wallmoden--*must* hear everything. The chance of meeting was then very probable.

"When you shall have gained a great, proud future, approach him again and ask if he still dares to despise you."

Zalika had whispered it to her son when he struggled against flight--against the breaking of his word of honor. Now the beginning of his future was made. The name Rojanow already bore the laurel of the poet, and with that the whole past was erased. It should be--it must be! This conviction flashed in the glance which Hartmut had thrown so triumphantly up to the Ambassador's box yesterday.

But now, when it meant the meeting of his father's eyes, the defiant one trembled. Those eyes were the only thing upon earth that he feared.

Hartmut was half decided to go to Rodeck and return only when he heard through the papers that "the high-standing officer" had left the Residenz.

Yet something kept him here--a secret but burning longing. Perhaps the hour of reconciliation had now come when the poet's fame rose so brilliantly; perhaps Falkenried would see now that such a power needed liberty and life to develop, and would pardon the unfortunate, boyish folly which, with his views, had hurt him so deeply.

Was he not his child? his only son, whom he had embraced with such passionate tenderness that night at Burgsdorf? At this remembrance a longing for those all-powerful arms, for the home which should no longer be lost to him, for the whole boyhood which, although constrained, had yet been so happy, pure and guiltless, flooded Hartmut's inmost heart.

CHAPTER XXXV.

At this moment the door opened and the butler entered, bearing upon a waiter a card. He presented it to Hartmut, who refused it with an impatient gesture.

"Did I not tell you that I did not wish to see any one else to-day? I wish to remain undisturbed."

"I told the gentleman so," replied the servant, "but he begged me to at least give you his name--Willibald von Eschenhagen."

Hartmut started suddenly from his reclining position. He could not believe that he had heard aright.

"What is the gentleman's name?"

"Von Eschenhagen--here is the card."

"Ah, let him enter, instantly!"

The servant departed, and Willibald entered the next moment, but remained standing at the door in uncertainty. Hartmut had sprung up and looked toward him. Yes, there were the same familiar features--the dear, well-known face, the honest blue eyes of his friend, and with the passionate cry, "Willy--my dear old Willy, is it you! You come to me?" he threw himself stormily upon his breast.

The young lord, who had no idea how strangely his appearance at this moment fitted into his friend's dreams of his youth, was most perplexed over this reception. He remembered how domineering Hartmut had always been to him, and how he had made him feel his mental inferiority at every opportunity. He had thought yesterday that the highly honored author of Arivana would be still more imperious and haughty, and now he found an overflowing tenderness.

"Are you glad, then, at my coming, Hartmut?" he asked, still somewhat doubtful. "I was almost afraid it would not be acceptable."

"Not acceptable, when I see you now after a lapse of ten long years!" cried Hartmut reproachfully, and he drew his friend down beside him, questioning him and covering him so with affection that Willy lost all embarrassment and also returned to the old familiarity. He said that he was in town for only three days and that he was on his way to Furstenstein.

"Oh, yes; you are betrothed," joined in Rojanow. "I heard at Rodeck who was to be the Chief Forester's son-in-law, and have also seen Fraulein von Schonan. Let me congratulate you with all my heart."

Willibald accepted the good wishes with a peculiar face, and looked to the floor as he replied, half audibly: "Yes, but to tell the truth, mamma made the engagement."

"I should have known that," said Hartmut, laughing, "but you have at least said 'Yes' without being forced?"

Willy did not answer. He studied the carpet intently and suddenly asked quite disconnectedly: "Hartmut, how do you do when you compose poetry?"

"How do I do?" Hartmut with an effort suppressed his laughter. "Really that is not easy to tell. I do not believe that I can explain it sufficiently."

"Yes, it is a funny condition to make poetry," assented the young man with a sad shake of the head. "I experienced it last night when I returned from the theatre."

"What! You compose poetry?"

"And such poetry!" cried Willy in high satisfaction, but added in somewhat subdued tones: "Only I cannot find rhymes, and it also sounds quite different from your verses. To tell the truth, it did not run right, and I want to ask you how you do the affair. You know it is not to be anything grand like your Arivana--only just a little poem."

"Of course to 'her,'" finished Hartmut.

"Yes, to her," assented the young lord with a deep breath, and now his listener laughed aloud.

"You are a model son, Willy, one must confess. It does happen sometimes that one is betrothed at paternal or maternal command, but you dutifully fall in love with your bride-elect besides, and even compose poetry to her."

"But it is not to the right one," exclaimed Willibald suddenly, with such a strained expression that Rojanow looked at him in perplexity. He really believed that his friend was not in his senses; and Willibald must also have felt that he was making a peculiar impression. He therefore began an explanation, but anticipated himself so much and was so vague, that the affair became only the more tangled.

"In fact, I have had an encounter with a fellow this morning who dared to insult a young lady--Fraulein Marietta Volkmar, from the Court Theatre. I knocked him to the ground and I would do it again to him or to anybody who gets too near Fraulein Volkmar."

He stretched out his arm so threateningly that Hartmut caught it quickly and restrained him.

"Well, I do not intend to get near her--you can spare me for the present. But what is Marietta Volkmar to you--the little mirror of virtue of our opera--who has so far been considered unapproachable?"

"Hartmut, I request that you speak of this lady with reverence. In short, this Count Westerburg has challenged me. I am going to exchange shots with him, and hope to give him a good reminder."

"Well, you really are making good progress in romance," said Hartmut, who listened with ever-increasing interest. "You have been here only three days and have commenced with a quarrel which ends in a challenge, and are the knight and protector of a young singer--have a duel for her sake. Willy, for heaven's sake, what will your mother say?"

"This concerns an affair of honor, and my mother cannot interfere here," declared Willy with a really heroic effect, "but now I must get a second here, where I am quite a stranger and do not know a soul. Uncle Herbert must not hear anything about it, of course, or he would interfere with the police. So I decided to come to you and ask you if you would render me this service."

"That was what brought you," said Rojanow, in a tone of painful disappointment. "I really believed old friendship had done it; but, nevertheless, of course, I am at your command. What weapons does the challenge demand?"

"Pistols!"

"Well, you know what to do with them. We practiced often enough with a target at Burgsdorf, and you were a good shot. I shall look up the second of your opponent to-morrow morning and send you word then. I have to do that in writing, as I do not enter the house of Herr von Wallmoden."

Willy only nodded. He thought Wallmoden's hostility was being reciprocated, but deemed it best not to make any inquiries upon this point.

"Very well, just write me," he replied. "Arrange things as seems best to you; I shall be satisfied with everything; I have no experience in such things. Here is the address of the second, and now I must go. I have several things to put in order yet, in case the worst happens."

He arose and extended his hand to his friend in farewell, but Hartmut took no notice of it. His eyes were fixed on the floor, as he said in low, hesitating tones: "One thing more, Willy. Burgsdorf is so near Berlin. Perhaps you often see----"

"Whom?" asked Willibald, as Hartmut paused.

"My--my father."

The young lord became visibly embarrassed at the question. He had avoided the mention of

Falkenried during the conversation, but did not seem to be aware of his near arrival.

"No," he said, finally; "we hardly ever see the Colonel."

"But does he not come to Burgsdorf as of old?"

"No, he has become very unsocial. But I happened to see him in Berlin when I went to meet Uncle Herbert."

"And how does he look? Has he aged any during these last years?"

Willibald shrugged his shoulders.

"Of course he has aged; you would hardly recognize him with his white, hair."

"White hair!" Hartmut burst forth. "He is hardly fifty-two years old. Has he been ill?"

"Not that I know of. It came quite suddenly--in a few months--at the time when he asked for his discharge."

Hartmut blanched, and his eyes were strained fixedly upon the speaker.

"My father sought a discharge? He who is a soldier through, body and soul; to whom his vocation---- In what year was it?"

"It did not come to an issue," said Willy, pacifyingly; "they did not let him go, but removed him to a distant garrison, and he has been in the Ministry of War for three years."

"But he wanted to leave--in what year?" panted Rojanow, in a sinking voice.

"Well, at the time of your disappearance. He believed his honor demanded it, and, Hartmut, you ought not to have done that to your father--not that. He almost died from it."

Hartmut made no answer, no attempt to defend himself; but his breast heaved in deep, unsteady breaths.

"We will not speak of it," said Willibald, stopping short; "it cannot be changed now. I shall expect your letter to-morrow. Get everything in order. Good night."

Hartmut did not seem to hear the words--did not notice the departure of his friend. He stood there immovable, with eyes on the floor, and only after Willibald had long disappeared did he straighten himself slowly and draw his hand across his brow.

"He wished to leave!" he murmured; "to leave the army because he thought his honor demanded it. No--no, not yet. I must go to Rodeck."

The honored poet, upon whose brow Fate was pressing the first laurel wreath--who only yesterday had challenged the whole world in this victorious knowledge--dared not meet the eye of his father. He fled into solitude.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

In one of the quieter streets, whose modest but pleasant houses were mostly surrounded by gardens, Marietta Volkmar lived with an old lady--a distant relative of her grandfather--who was alone, but willing and glad to be protection and company to the young singer.

The two ladies led a life about which the ever-busy tongue of gossip could find nothing to say, and were much beloved by other members of the house. Fraulein Marietta, with her pleasant, happy face, was an especial favorite, and when her clear voice rang through the house everybody stopped to listen. But the *singvögelchen* had grown mute in the past two days, and showed pale cheeks and eyes red from weeping. The people shook their heads and could not understand it until they heard from old Fraulein Berger that Dr. Volkmar was sick, and his granddaughter was worried about him, but could not obtain leave of absence without a more forcible reason.

This was, indeed, no falsehood, for the old doctor had really been suffering for several days from a severe cold, but it offered no occasion for serious concern. It was only a plausible explanation of Marietta's changed demeanor, which was noticed even by her colleagues at the theatre.

The singer was standing at the window, gazing steadily out, in her plain but cosily furnished sitting room, having just returned from a rehearsal, while Fraulein Berger sat at a little table with her needlework, casting anxious glances at her protegée.

"But, dear child, do not take this affair so sorely to heart," she admonished. "You will wear yourself out with this anxiety and excitement. Why anticipate the worst at once?"

Marietta did not turn. She was painfully pale, and a suppressed sob was in her voice as she replied:

"This is now the third day, and yet I cannot learn anything. Oh, it is awful to have to wait like this, hour after hour, for bad news."

"But why must it be bad news?" the old lady spoke consolingly. "Herr von Eschenhagen was still well and bright yesterday afternoon. I inquired about him at your special request. He went to drive with Herr and Frau von Wallmoden. The affair has probably been settled amicably."

"I should have heard of it," said the young girl, in a heartbroken way. "He promised me, and he would have kept his word, I know. If misfortune has really happened to him--if he has fallen--I believe I could not live!"

The last words were spoken so passionately that Fraulein Berger looked at the speaker in dismay.

"Do be reasonable, Marietta," she entreated. "How are you responsible for an impertinent man insulting you, or the betrothed of your friend stepping in to your rescue? You really could not act more despairingly if your own betrothed stood before the pistol."

The cheeks, just now so pale, flushed redly, and Marietta turned to the window with a quick gesture.

"You do not understand, auntie," she said, in a low voice; "you do not know how much love and kindness have been shown me in the house of the Chief Forester--how earnestly Toni begged my forgiveness when she learned how deeply her future mother-in-law had offended me. What will she think of me when she hears that her betrothed has been in a duel for my sake? What will Frau von Eschenhagen say?"

"Well, they will at least be open to the conviction that you are quite innocent in this affair, which, if it ends well, they will not hear of. I do not recognize or understand you in all this. You used to laugh away every care and anxiety, but this time you exaggerate it in a really incomprehensible manner. You have scarcely eaten or drunk in two days in your excitement; you must not sit at my table to-day as you did yesterday and the day before. I tell you that; and now I will look after the dinner."

The kind old lady arose and left the room to prepare some extra dainty with which to tempt her protegée's fleeting appetite.

She was right; the merry, bright Marietta would not now be recognized. Beyond a doubt it gave a painful, depressed feeling to be brought before the people of Furstenstein in so bad a light through that occurrence in the park, and even here in town her name, so carefully protected, might suffer if something of it should be heard; but, strange to say, these possibilities remained in the background because of a fear which grew with every hour and was hardly to be borne any longer.

"With my blood, if it must be."

Unconsciously she whispered Willibald's last words, and pressed her hot brow against the window pane. "Oh, my God, not that!"

Suddenly at the street corner a figure appeared, which attracted attention on account of its unusual size. He came nearer with rapid steps and looked searchingly at the house numbers.

With a suppressed cry of joy, Marietta sprang from the window. She had recognized Herr von Eschenhagen. She did not wait until he pulled the bell, but hastened to open the door. Tears shimmered yet in her eyes, but her voice was jubilant as she cried: "You come at last! God be praised!"

"Yes, here I am, well and whole," assured Willibald, whose face lighted up at his reception.

Neither knew how they reached the sitting room. To the young man it seemed as if a small, soft hand had been laid upon his arm and had drawn him along, all unresisting. But when they stood before each other, Marietta noticed that a broad, black bandage was around his right hand.

"Mon Dieu, you are injured!" she cried in fear.

"A slight scratch--not worth mentioning," Willibald said merrily, waving the hand. "I have given the Count a more severe reminder, but it is also only a glance shot in the shoulder, and not in the least dangerous to his precious life. That man could not even shoot right."

"Then you did have the duel? I knew it."

"This morning at 8 o'clock. But you need fear nothing more, mein Fraulein. You see everything has passed off well."

The young singer drew a deep breath, as if relieved of a mountain load.

"I thank you, Herr von Eschenhagen. No--no, do not refuse my thanks. You have endangered your life for my sake. I thank you a thousand times."

"There is no cause, Fraulein; I did it gladly," said Willibald, cordially. "But, since I have stood before the pistol now for your sake, you must permit me to bring you a little token of remembrance. You will not throw it at my feet again?"

He somewhat awkwardly--because of his left hand--drew out from his pocket a white tissue paper, and, opening it, disclosed a full-blown rose with two buds.

Marietta dropped her eyes in confusion. Mutely she accepted the flowers and fastened one of them at her throat. Then she stretched out her hand to the giver just as mutely.

He fully understood the apology.

"Of course you are accustomed to different floral offerings," he said, apologetically. "I hear a great deal of the homage people pay you."

The young girl smiled, but with a more pathetic than happy expression.

"You have been a witness to what this homage is at times, and it was not the first time it has happened. The gentlemen seem to think they are permitted to venture anything when one is on the stage. Believe me, Herr von Eschenhagen, it is often hard to bear this lot, for which I am envied by so many."

Willibald listened intently to these words.

"Hard to bear? I thought you loved your vocation above everything, and would not leave it at any price."

"Oh, surely I love it; but I had not thought that so much bitterness and hardship were connected with it. My teacher, Professor Marani, says: 'One must rise as on eagle's wings; then all the low and vulgar will remain far below.' He may be right, but one must be an eagle for that, and I am only a '*singvögelchen*,' as my grandfather calls me, which has nothing but its voice and cannot rise so high. The critics often tell me that fire and strength are wanting in my rendering. I feel myself that I have no real dramatic talent. I can only sing, and would rather do that at home in our green forests than here in this golden cage."

The voice of the usually bright, cheery girl sounded full of deeply suppressed emotion. This last occurrence had shown her again very plainly her unprotected position, and now her heart opened to the man who had interfered so bravely for her.

He listened in rapt attention and seemed to read the words from her lips, but at this truly sad report his face beamed as if something very joyful was being related, and now he interrupted vehemently:

"You long to get away from here? You would like to leave the stage?"

Marietta laughed aloud, in spite of her sorrow.

"No, I really do not think of that, for what should I do then? My grandfather saved and economized for years to make my education as a singer possible, and it would be poor gratitude if I should be a burden to him in his old age. He does not know that at times his little *singvogel* longs for its nest, or that life is made hard for her here. I am not usually without courage. I persevere and stand strong whenever it must be so. Do not let these, my laments, be heard at Furstenstein. You are going there?"

A shadow passed over the beaming face of young Eschenhagen, and he was the one now to lower his eyes.

"I, indeed, go to Furstenstein this afternoon," he replied, in a strangely suppressed tone.

"Oh, I ask this one thing more. You must tell your betrothed everything--you hear?--everything. We owe it to her. I shall write her to-day about the occurrence, and you will confirm my letter with your words--yes?"

Willibald raised his eyes slowly and looked at the speaker. "You are right, Fraulein. Toni must hear everything the whole truth. I had already decided on that before I came here; but it will be a hard hour for me."

"Oh, surely not," said Marietta, encouragingly. "Toni is good and full of trust. She will believe

your word and my word, that we are both innocent in this affair."

"But I am not without guilt--at least toward my bride-elect," declared Willibald, earnestly. "Do not look at me in such affright. You must hear it later, anyway, and it is perhaps better that I tell you myself. I am going to Furstenstein only to ask Toni"--he stopped short and drew a deep breath--"to give me back my troth."

"For heaven's sake, why?" cried the young girl, horrified at this explanation.

"Why? Because it would be wrong should I offer Toni my hand and stand with her at the altar, with my heart as it is now. Because only now do I see what the principal thing is for betrothal and marriage--because----" He did not finish, but his eyes spoke so plainly that Marietta fully understood the rest.

Her face suddenly colored crimson. She drew back and made a violently repellent gesture.

"Herr von Eschenhagen, be silent; do not speak another word."

"But it is not my fault," Willibald continued, in spite of the command. "I have struggled manfully and tried truly to keep my promise during the whole time I was at Burgsdorf. I believed it would be possible; but then I came here and saw you again in 'Arivana' on that evening, and knew that the struggle had been in vain. I had not forgotten you, Fraulein Marietta--not for an hour--as often as I had tried to make myself believe it, and I shall not forget you all my life long. I shall confess this to Toni openly, and shall also tell my mother when I return to her."

The confession was made. The young lord, who could not manage the first proposal at Furstenstein alone, but had to be helped by his mother, now spoke as warmly and heartily--as openly and as truly--as a man must speak in such an hour. He had learned it suddenly, and with the helplessness which he shook off with such decision, there seemed to fall off, too, all his awkwardness and ridiculous manner.

He quickly approached Marietta, who had fled to the window, and his firm voice grew unsteady as he continued: "And now one question. You looked so pale when you opened the door for me, and your eyes spoke of tears. The affair may have been painful and mortifying to you; I can understand that, but did you also fear a little for my welfare?"

No answer, but low sobs.

"Did you fear for me? Only a little 'yes,' Marietta. You have no idea how happy you would make me."

He bent low over the young girl, who now slowly raised the small, bowed head. In her dark eyes there glowed a spark as of secret happiness. The answer was almost inaudible.

"I? Ach, I have almost *died* of fear these last two days."

Willibald gave a joyful exclamation and drew her to his breast; but only for a moment, then she struggled from his embrace.

"No--not now. Go now, please."

He released her at once and stepped back.

"You are right, Marietta; not yet. But, after I have freed myself, I shall come again and ask for another 'yes.' Farewell."

He hastened away before Marietta had scarce recovered control of herself. She was aroused by the voice of Fraulein Berger, who, unnoticed by the two, had stood upon the threshold of the adjoining room for several moments, and who now approached in a state of horror.

"Child, for mercy's sake, what does it mean? Do you not consider----"

The young girl did not let her finish, but threw both arms around her neck and wept passionately.

"Ah, now I know why I was so enraged at the time he suffered his mother to insult me. It hurt me so inexpressibly to believe him a coward; I have loved him from the first."

CHAPTER XXXVII.

In the house of the Prussian Ambassador everything was in a state of preparation for the winter festivities. When Wallmoden had entered his present position, in the spring, society was already scattered in all directions for the summer, and immediately afterward occurred the sad event which had put an end to all festivities for them. These causes, however, were done with now.

The many halls and apartments of the Ambassador's palace had been furnished with such splendor as Herbert's circumstances, made brilliant by his marriage, permitted; and it was his intention to have as magnificent a home as was possible to obtain. Their first grand reception was to take place next week, and in the meantime numerous calls were being made and returned.

The Ambassador was also much occupied with his official duties, and, besides, there was one thing which ruined his peace of mind completely--the success of Arivana. If he had had doubts before about opposing Rojanow's publicity, it had now become quite impossible. The "adventurer" was raised upon the shield and his poetical spirit was being praised everywhere. The Court and society generally could not be forced now to drop him without subjecting themselves to mortification, and it was questionable, besides, if they would drop him at all, since only hints and vague remarks could be given. That grand success had made Hartmut almost unapproachable.

To add to the embarrassment of the Ambassador's position, Falkenried's arrival was expected in the near future, from whom the truth could not be kept, for fear he should hear it from outsiders.

The Colonel, of whose present trip nothing was known when Wallmoden had seen him in Berlin a short time ago, would be here in a few days and would make his headquarters at the Ambassador's palace, since he was no stranger to Adelaide. She and her brother had, in a measure, grown up under his eyes.

When, ten years ago, the then Major Falkenried had been removed to the distant province, he had been stationed at a post in the small town lying in the immediate vicinity of the great Stahlberg works and dependent almost entirely upon them. The new Major was considered an excellent soldier, but a pronounced man-hater, who enjoyed his duties only, occupying all his spare time with military studies, and who hated everything that came under the head of society.

As he was alone, he was excused from keeping an open house, and he exhibited himself only at houses where his position imperatively demanded it. Such consideration had to be shown the great manufacturer, who was the leader of the whole vicinity, and who received and entertained as guests the first and highest personages.

Stahlberg had been the only one whom the military man approached. Although the grave and gloomy reticence of the Major excluded real friendship, yet the two men felt the highest esteem for each other, and the Stahlberg home was the only place where Falkenried appeared occasionally of his own free will.

He had had intercourse there for years and seen the two children grow up. Therefore Wallmoden was the more offended that Falkenried did not attend his wedding, but excused himself through pressure of official duties.

Adelaide knew little or nothing about the life of the Colonel. She considered him childless and heard only from her husband that he had been married early in life, but had been separated from his wife and was now a widower.

It was about a week after the return of the Wallmodens that Falkenried's arrival was announced to the young wife as she sat one day at her writing table. She threw aside her pen, arose quickly and hastened to her friend.

"You are heartily welcome, Colonel Falkenried. We received your telegram, and Herbert intended to meet you at the depot, but just at this hour he has an audience with the Duke, and is still at the palace, so we could only send the carriage."

Her greeting had all the cordiality which an old friend of her father's could wish, but Falkenried's response was not of a like kind. Coldly and seriously he accepted the offered hand and the invitation to be seated, as he thanked her for her welcome.

The Colonel had indeed changed, so much as scarcely to be recognized. Were it not for the tall, muscular form and strong, firm carriage, one could have taken him for an old man. His hair--the hair of a man barely fifty years old--was white as snow, the brow furrowed deeply, and sharp lines were buried in the face, making it look ten years older. The features, once so expressive, appeared fixed and immovable now; the entire appearance and bearing bespoke stern, impenetrable reticence.

Regine's words, "The man is turned to stone," were only too true. One involuntarily gained the impression that he had become a total stranger to the world, and that all mankind had died off for aught that moved him--nothing was left except the duties of his vocation.

"Perhaps I have disturbed you, Ada," he said, using her old home name as he glanced at the writing table where lay a half-finished letter.

"There is plenty of time for that," replied the young wife, lightly. "I was only writing to Eugene."

"Ah? I am the bearer of love from your brother. I saw him the day before yesterday."

"I knew that he intended going to Berlin and to see you. He has not seen you for nearly two years now, and I, too, saw but little of you during our journey through Berlin. We hoped you would come to Burgsdorf, where we stayed for a few days, and I believe that Regine felt very hurt that you did not accept her invitation for this time, either."

The Colonel looked to the floor; he knew why he avoided Burgsdorf and its reminiscences. He had hardly been there twice since his return to the Capital.

"Regine knows how economical I have to be with my time," he replied, evasively. "But, to return to your brother, Ada; I should like to speak to you, and therefore I am glad to find you alone. What is the difficulty between Eugene and his brother-in-law? Has something happened to alienate them?"

A certain embarrassment was visible in Adelaide's face at the question, but she answered lightly:

"Nothing especial; the two are not very congenial."

"Not very congenial? Wallmoden is nearly forty years his senior, and his guardian besides. Your brother will not be of age for several years. In such case the younger one must submit unconditionally."

"Certainly; but Eugene, although as good as gold, is only too often rash and passionate as he has always been."

"Alas, so he is. He will have to change considerably if he wishes to fill, half as well as his father did, the important and responsible position which awaits him. But something else seems to be the trouble here. I made a casual remark about your marriage, Ada--which event, to tell the truth, surprised me, although I am on friendly terms with your husband--and said that I had not thought you had so much ambition; but at this Eugene burst out and defended you in the most passionate manner, and spoke of a sacrifice which his sister had made for him. In short, he allowed himself to be carried away into words and hints which surprised me in the highest degree."

"You should not have paid any attention to it," said Adelaide, with visible emotion. "A young, hot head takes everything tragically. What did he tell you?"

"In fact, nothing definite. He seems to have given you his word to keep silent and not speak without your permission; but he seems to almost hate his brother-in-law. What does all this mean?"

The young wife was silent; the conversation seemed painful to her in the highest degree.

Falkenried looked at her searchingly as he continued: "You know it is not my way to inquire into the secrets of others. I take but little interest in the doings of people around me, but my friend's honor comes into consideration here; those remarks contain a crimination. Of course, I could not allow that, but when I remonstrated with your brother and threatened to speak to Wallmoden about it, he said: 'My Herr brother-in-law will explain the affair diplomatically to you. He has proved a very diplomat in it all. Ask Ada if you wish to learn the truth.' I ask you first, therefore; but if you cannot and will not answer, then I must speak to your husband, from whom I cannot keep such remarks."

He spoke in a cold and measured tone, without any excitement. The affair, apparently, caused him no interest whatever. He considered it necessary to take it up solely because a point of honor came in question.

"Do not speak to Herbert about it, I beg of you," interrupted Adelaide, quickly. "I shall have to explain to you, since Eugene allowed himself to be carried away so far; but he has taken the matter too hard from the beginning. There is nothing dishonorable about it."

"I hope so, since Wallmoden is concerned," said the Colonel, with emphasis.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

The young Baroness lowered her voice and evaded the eyes of her listener as she commenced.

"You know that my engagement happened a year ago at Florence. My father was even then very ailing, and the physicians desired that he should remain in Italy during the winter. We went to Florence, intending to stay two months, and then make further plans according to the wish of the invalid. My brother had accompanied us, but was to return home at the beginning of winter.

"We took a villa outside the city, and, of course, lived quite secluded. Eugene saw Italy for the first time, and it was so mournful for him to sit day after day in the lonely sick room, that I seconded his request to go to Rome for a short time. He finally received permission. Oh, if I had never done it! But I could not know how deeply his inexperience would involve him then."

"That means that he followed up adventures, although his father was at death's door."

"Do not judge so harshly. My brother was scarcely twenty years old then, and had always lived under the eyes of a loving but very strict father. The short freedom proved dangerous to him. The young German, who had no knowledge of the world whatever, was enticed into circles where high--and as it was afterward proved--false gambling was the order of the day, and where a number of bad, but outwardly charming, elements met. Eugene, in his ignorance, did not understand it, and lost heavily, until suddenly the party was raided by the police. The Italians defended themselves, and it ended in a fight, into which Eugene, too, was drawn. He only defended himself, but he had the misfortune to injure a policeman severely, and was arrested with the others."

The Colonel had listened silently, with impassive face, and his voice was as harsh as before as he said: "And Stahlberg had to live to see this of his son, who had been a model until then?"

"He never heard of it; it was only a momentary losing of one's self--a case of one misled, rather than guilty, and it will not happen again. Eugene has given me his word of honor for that."

Falkenried laughed so scornfully that his companion looked at him in consternation.

"His word of honor! Yes, why not? That is given as easily as it is broken. Are you truly so trusting as to believe in the word of such a young lad?"

"Yes, that I am," asserted Adelaide, in an injured tone, while her eyes, earnest and reproachful, met the gaze of the man whose awful bitterness she could not explain. "I know my brother. In spite of this escapade, he is the son of his father, and he will keep his word to me and to himself--I know it."

"It is well for you if you can still believe and trust. I have long forgotten how," said Falkenried, in a low but milder tone. "And what happened then?"

"My brother succeeded in being allowed to send me word immediately. 'Keep it from father, it would be his death,' he wrote. I knew better than he did that our desperately ill father could not stand such news. But we were alone in a foreign country, without friends or acquaintances, and help had to be had instantly. In this extremity I thought of Herr von Wallmoden, who at the time was at the embassy at Florence. We had known him slightly before, and he had called directly after our arrival and placed himself at our command, should we need the help of the Ambassador. He had come to our house frequently, and now hastened to me immediately upon receiving my request. I told him all, and trusted him, beseeching his advice and help--and received it."

"At what price?" demanded the Colonel, with darkly contracted brows.

Adelaide shook her head.

"No, no; it is not as you think--as Eugene also believed. I was not forced. Herbert gave me free choice, although he did not hide from me that the occurrence was much worse than I feared; that those sums lost in play must, nevertheless, be paid if one wished to keep the affair from publicity; that, in spite of all, it might get into the courts, on account of the injury to the policeman. He explained to me that he might be brought into a wrong light if he mixed himself up in such affairs. 'You desire me to save your brother,' said he; 'perhaps I can do it, but I jeopardize my position--my whole future thereby. One makes such a sacrifice, perhaps, only for his own brother, or--his brother-in-law."

Falkenried arose suddenly and took a turn through the room. Then he stood still before the young wife and said, in angry tones: "And you, of course, believed that in your anxiety?"

"Do you mean that it was not so?" asked Adelaide, startled.

He shrugged his shoulders with a half-contemptuous expression.

"Possibly. I do not know these diplomatic reasons. I know only one thing; Wallmoden has,

indeed, proved himself a great diplomat in the whole affair. What did you answer him?"

"I asked for time to think, everything had burst so upon me. But I knew, that no moment was to be lost, and that same evening I gave Herbert the right to act--for his brother-in-law."

"Of course," muttered the Colonel, with deep disdain; "the wise, shrewd Herbert!"

"He obtained leave of absence immediately, and went to Rome," continued the young Baroness, "returning in a week, accompanied by my brother. He had succeeded in freeing Eugene and withdrawing him from the whole affair. Even the newspapers did not mention the name of the young German who had been involved in it. I do not know by what means it was done. If one has powerful friends and does not need to spare money, much is possible. Herbert had spent money lavishly on all sides and had brought into use every advantage made possible to him through his long years of diplomatic work. He also cancelled the gambling debts, although with his own bond. He told me later that he had given half his fortune for that purpose."

"It was very magnanimous, since by this sacrifice he won a cool million. And what did Eugene say to this--trade?"

"He knew nothing of it, and soon returned to Germany, as had been decided at first. From that time Herbert came to our house daily and knew how to prepossess my sick father so well, that father finally felt a desire for the union himself. Only then did Herbert begin his wooing. I was grateful to him for giving it this turn, only Eugene was not deceived. He guessed everything, and forced the truth from me. Since then he has tortured himself with self-reproach and almost feels hostility toward his brother-in-law, in spite of my repeated assurance that I have never had cause to rue that step, and that I have in Herbert the most attentive and considerate husband."

Falkenried's eyes rested intently upon the face of the young wife, as if he wished to read her most secret thoughts.

"Are you happy?" he asked, slowly.

"I am content."

"That is much in this life," said the Colonel in the old, harsh tone. "We were not born to be happy. I have done you wrong, Ada. I believed the splendor of a high position, the desire to play a first rôle in society as wife of the Ambassador, had made you Frau von Wallmoden, but--I am glad that t judged you wrongly."

He stretched forth his hand. Some expression was now in the icy gaze and an apology in the grasp of the hand.

"You know everything now," concluded Adelaide, with a deep breath, "and I beg that you will not touch upon the subject before Herbert. You see, there was nothing dishonorable in his dealings. I repeat to you that he used neither force nor persuasion. I was forced only by the power of circumstances. I could not expect that he would make such sacrifices for a stranger."

"If a lady had sought me in such anxiety, I would have made the sacrifices--unconditionally," declared Falkenried.

"Yes, you! I would have followed you also with a lighter heart."

The avowal betrayed, unconsciously, how hard had been the struggle which the young wife had not mentioned by a word. But she spoke the truth.

She would much rather have given herself to the gloomy, reticent man, with his harsh and often offensive manner, if the sacrifice had to be made, than to the ever polite and attentive husband, who, in the face of her extremity--had traded with it.

"You would have had a hard lot then, Ada," said the Colonel, with a grave shake of the head. "I am one of the men who cannot give or receive anything more in this life. I have finished with it long ago. But you are right; it is better to let that subject remain untouched between Wallmoden and me, for if I wished to tell him my true opinion about it--well, he will always be a diplomat."

Adelaide arose, breaking off the conversation, and tried to assume a lighter tone.

"And now let me take you to your rooms at last. You must be exhausted by the long trip."

"No, a single night's journey will not tire a soldier. Duty makes harsher demands than that on us."

He drew himself up straight and firm; one could see that his physical strength was yet unbroken. Those muscles and sinews seemed like steel. It was the features alone that bore the mark of age.

The eyes of the Baroness lingered upon them thoughtfully, especially upon the brow which was so deeply and heavily furrowed and yet was formed so high and powerful under the white hair.

It seemed to her as if she had seen that brow somewhere else, under dark locks; but there could not be a sharper contrast than between this too early aged, care-lined face and that youthful head with the foreign, southern beauty and the uncanny light in the eyes. Yet it had been the same brow over which the lightnings had flamed on that lonely forest height; the same high, powerful curve; even the blue veins which were so pronounced at the temples--a strange, incomprehensible likeness!

CHAPTER XXXIX.

After some hours the two friends were alone together in Wallmoden's study. The latter had just made the unavoidable as well as painful disclosure. He had told the Colonel under what circumstances Rojanow was in the city, and had unveiled to him uncompromisingly everything he knew of Hartmut's life and that of his mother, finally informing him of her death.

He had feared this hour, but the result was quite different from what he had expected. Mutely Falkenried leaned against the window with folded arms and listened to the long explanations, without interrupting by a word or gesture. His face remained cold and impassive; no quiver, no motion betrayed that he heard those things which must bring anguish to his heart. He was now also "a man of stone."

"I believed I owed these explanations to you," concluded the Ambassador finally. "If I have kept what I knew of the fate of the two from you so long, it was done solely that you might not be tortured unnecessarily with what was hard enough for you to overcome. But you had to learn now what has happened, and how matters stand at present."

The Colonel retained his position and his voice betrayed no mental excitement as he replied:

"I thank you for your good will, but you could have spared yourself these explanations. What is that adventurer to me?"

Wallmoden looked up amazed; he had not expected such a response.

"I thought it necessary to prepare you for the possibility of meeting him," he returned. "As you have heard, Rojanow now plays an important rôle; he is celebrated everywhere. The Duke is deeply wrapped up in him. You might meet him at the castle."

"And what then? I do not know anybody by the name of Rojanow, and he will not dare to know me. We should pass each other as strangers."

The Ambassador's gaze rested searchingly upon Falkenried's features as if to fathom this real coldness or incomprehensible self-command.

"I thought you would receive the news of the reappearance of your son very differently," he said, half aloud.

For the first time he intentionally used this title; hitherto he had merely said Rojanow. But now, for the first time also, an emotion was visible in the calm figure at the window. But it was an emotion of anger.

"I have no son--remember that, Wallmoden. He died to me that night at Burgsdorf, and the dead do not rise."

Wallmoden was silent; the Colonel approached him and laid his hand heavily upon his arm.

"You said just now that it was your duty to enlighten the Duke, and that you had not done so solely out of consideration for me. I have, indeed, but one thing to guard in the world--the honor of my name--which, through that exposition, would be at the mercy of the world's raillery and scorn. Do what you think you must do--I shall not hinder you. But--I shall also do what I have to do."

His voice sounded as cold as before, but it contained something so awful that the Ambassador started up in affright.

"Falkenried, for heaven's sake, what do you mean? How am I to interpret those words?"

"As you like. You diplomats define honor differently at times from us. I am very one-sided about it."

"I shall keep silence inviolably, I pledge you my word," assured Wallmoden, who did not understand the last bitter hint, for he had no idea of Adelaide's confession. "I had decided on that before you came; the name of Falkenried shall not be sacrificed by me."

"Enough, and now no more of it. You have prepared the Duke for what I bring?" asked Falkenried, passing on to an entirely different subject after a short pause. "What has he to say to it?"

Here again was the old iron, unbending will, which put aside all questioning; but the sudden change seemed to be acceptable to the Ambassador. He was, here as well as elsewhere, the wise diplomat who dreaded nothing so much as public exposure, and who would never have thought of exposing Hartmut, had he not feared that by a possible leaking out of the truth later and of his knowledge of it, it might be counted against him. Now, in the worst case, he could cover himself with the promise he had given the father. Even the Duke must acknowledge that he--Wallmoden--had had to spare his friend. The shrewd Herbert knew how to calculate here, too.

The stay of Colonel Falkenried was only of short duration, and during the time he had no rest. Audience with the Duke--conferences with high military dignitaries, communications with his own embassy--all were crowded within a few days.

Wallmoden was hardly less occupied, until finally everything was settled. The Ambassador, and especially Colonel Falkenried, had reason to be satisfied with the results, for everything had been successful that was expected and desired by their government, and they could be sure of the highest appreciation at home.

Only the most nearly connected circles knew that something important was going on, and even in these circles only a few knew the full importance of the conferences. Scarcely anything was noticed in public, which, therefore, occupied itself only the more with its present favorite, the poet of Arivana, whose incomprehensible behavior made him so much more interesting in the Residenz.

Almost immediately after that brilliant triumph of his work he had withdrawn from all praise and homage, and had gone into "forest solitude," as Prince Adelsberg laughingly informed all questioners. Where this solitude was, nobody learned. Egon assured them that he had given his word not to betray the place of his friend's seclusion, for he needed rest after all his excitement, but would return in a few days. Nobody knew that Hartmut was at Rodeck.

* * * * *

Within the week, one cold winter morning, the carriage of Herr von Wallmoden stood at his palace door. It seemed to be preparing for a long excursion, for servants were carrying furs and travelling rugs to it, while upstairs in the room where they had just breakfasted, the Ambassador was taking leave of Colonel Falkenried.

"Until to-morrow evening, *auf wiedersehen*," he was saying as he shook hands. "We shall be back by that time without fail, and you will surely remain a few days longer?"

"Yes, since the Duke wishes it so particularly," answered the Colonel. "I have so reported it to Berlin, and my report left on the same train that carried yours."

"Yes, I believe they will be satisfied with these reports; but it has been a hot time. We had no rest all those days. Now, fortunately, everything is arranged, and I can afford to absent myself for twenty-four hours to drive to Ostwalden with Adelaide."

"Ostwalden is the name of your new country home? I remember that you spoke of it yesterday. Where is it situated?"

"About two miles from Furstenstein. Schonan drew my attention to it while we were with him and I looked at the place at that time. It is rather an extensive possession in the famous Wald, beautifully situated, but the price was too high at first, which has delayed the settlement. We have but now come to a final understanding."

"I believe Ada is not quite satisfied with your selection. She seems to have something against the vicinity of Furstenstein," interrupted Falkenried, but the Ambassador only shrugged his shoulders carelessly.

"A caprice, nothing more. At first Adelaide was quite delighted with Ostwalden, but later she raised all sorts of objections--but I cannot pay any attention to that. I shall probably remain there for considerable periods, as I no longer like to travel far in the summer. A country seat which is only four hours removed from town is therefore of great value to me. The castle itself is in rather a dilapidated condition at present, but something can be made of it. With appropriate changes and additions it can be made a really superb residence, and I intend doing that. I shall therefore look it over carefully, so that the plans can be finished as soon as possible. I have not been there as yet since I bought it."

He made his statements with much evident satisfaction over his plans. Herbert von Wallmoden, who had originally possessed only a limited fortune, and was compelled to expend it

with great care, had suddenly found it necessary to buy a sumptuous place in town, where he lived only temporarily, and to have a princely villa for his summer residence. But he did not find it necessary to consider the wishes of his wife, whose wealth made it possible to him to play the great land-owner.

Falkenried may have had such ideas while listening, but he did not speak of them. He had turned graver and stonier, if possible, in the last few days, and if he really asked a question or made a remark during the conversation, one could see it was but mechanical, and because he had to say something.

Only when Adelaide entered, perfectly equipped for the journey, he arose promptly and offered his arm to lead her to the carriage. He lifted her in, and Wallmoden, who followed her, leaned once more from the carriage door. "We shall assuredly return to-morrow. Au revoir."

Falkenried bowed and stepped back; It was indifferent to him whether he saw the friend of his youth again. This, too, had lost its interest; but when he ascended the steps, he murmured half aloud; "Poor Ada, she deserved a better fate!"

CHAPTER XL.

In the meanwhile everything pursued its usual course at Furstenstein. Willibald had been there a week. He had arrived two days later than had been expected, but the injury to his hand was the cause of that. According to his explanation it had happened through his own carelessness, and the hand was already rapidly getting well.

The Chief Forester found that his future son-in-law had changed much for the better during the short intervening time of his absence, and that he had become much more earnest and decided; and he remarked to his daughter with the highest satisfaction: "I believe that Willy is only now commencing to be human. One notices directly when his lady mamma is not standing commandingly at his side."

But Herr von Schonan did not have much time at his disposal to notice the engaged couple, as he was at present overwhelmed with official duties. The Duke had ordered several changes in the forest government to be made according to the suggestions of the Chief Forester, who was now zealously occupied in executing all of them.

He saw and heard daily that Antonie and Willy were on the best terms, so he left them mostly to themselves.

Meanwhile in the house of the doctor at Waldhofen care and anxiety had made their appearance. The sickness of the doctor, which at first had given no cause for fear, suddenly took a dangerous turn, which was augmented greatly by the age of the patient. He had called persistently for his granddaughter, and she had been telegraphed for. She had at once obtained leave of absence--her rôle in Arivana was filled by another--and she hastened without delay to Waldhofen.

Antonie showed a touching fidelity to her friend at this time. Day after day found her at the home of the Volkmars to console and cheer Marietta, who clung to her grandfather with her whole soul.

Willibald seemed to be likewise necessary at these consolations, for he accompanied Toni regularly, and the Chief Forester thought it quite natural that "the poor little thing" was being consoled and helped to the best of their ability, more especially as she had suffered so unmerited an insult in his house, for which he could not to this day forgive his sister-in-law.

Finally, after three long, sorrowful days and nights, the doctor's strong constitution conquered; the danger was passed, and hopes of a full recovery were entertained.

Herr von Schonan, who was cordially attached to the doctor, was heartily glad of it, and so everything seemed to have come into the best of order.

But threatening weather arose from the north. Without a word of warning Frau von Eschenhagen suddenly appeared at Furstenstein. She had not taken time to stop in town where her brother lived, but came directly from Burgsdorf, and burst like a hurricane upon her brother-in-law, who sat in his room very comfortably reading the paper.

"All good spirits--is it you, Regine?" he cried, amazed. "This is what I call a surprise; you ought

to have sent us word."

"Where is Willibald?" demanded Regine in a dangerous tone, by way of answer. "Is he at Furstenstein?"

"Of course, where else should he be? I believe he has announced his arrival here to you."

"Let him be called--immediately."

"But what is the matter?" asked Schonan, noticing now for the first time his sister-in-law's excitement. "Is there a fire at Burgsdorf, or what? I cannot call Willy to you this moment, for he is at Waldhofen----"

"Probably at Dr. Volkmar's--and she is probably there, too."

"Who is 'she'? Toni has, of course, gone with him. They visit that poor little thing daily--Marietta--who was quite despairing at first. I must speak a word with you on this point, Regine. How could you offend the dear girl so deeply, and in my house besides? I only heard of it afterward, or----"

A loud, angry laugh interrupted him. Frau von Eschenhagen had thrown hat and cloak upon a chair and now drew close to her brother-in-law.

"Are you to reproach me because I tried to avert the evil which you have brought upon yourself? Of course you have always been blind and would never listen to my warnings--now it is too late."

"I believe you are not in your right mind, Regine," said the Forester, who really did not know what to think of it all. "Will you be so kind as to tell me what you mean?"

Regine drew forth a newspaper and handed it to him, pointing with her finger to a paragraph.

"Read!"

Schonan obeyed, and now his face also grew red in angry surprise. The article, which was dated from the South German Residenz, read as follows:

"We have just learned that a duel with pistols took place last Monday, very early in the morning, in a remote part of our park. The opponents were a well-known resident, Count W--, and a young North German landowner, W--v. E--, who is visiting his relative here--a high and distinguished diplomat. The cause of the duel is reported to be a member of our Court Theatre, a young singer who bears the best of reputations. Count W-- was injured in the shoulder. Herr v. E-- carried off a slight wound in the hand, and departed immediately."

"Thunder and lightning!" burst forth the Chief Forester, violently. "The betrothed of my Toni has a duel for Marietta's sake! So this is the cause of the injured hand which he brought with him! This is charming, indeed! What else do you know about it, Regine? My paper did not notice it."

"But mine did; it was copied from one of your papers, as you see. I read it yesterday and hastened here at once. I did not even stop to see Herbert, who cannot have known anything about it, or he would have notified me."

"Herbert will be here at noon," said Schonan, throwing the paper angrily upon the table. "He is at Ostwalden with Adelaide, and has written that he will return by Furstenstein and stop over a few hours. Perhaps he is coming on this account, but that does not change anything in the matter. Has that boy--that Willibald--gone crazy?"

"Yes, that he has," assented Frau von Eschenhagen in like anger. "You made fun of me, Moritz, when I exhorted you not to let your child associate with an actress. Indeed, I had no idea that matters could take such a turn until the moment I discovered that Willy--that my son--was in love with Marietta Volkmar. I snatched him instantly from the danger and returned to Burgsdorf. This was the reason of our sudden departure, which I kept from you, because I considered Willy's condition as a passing fancy. The boy seemed to have returned to his senses completely. I would not otherwise have permitted him this journey; and to be surer still, I placed him under the protection of my brother. He cannot have been more than three or four days in town, and now we must live to see this!"

Quite exhausted, she threw herself into an arm-chair. The Chief Forester began to stride about the room vehemently. "And this is not the worst yet," he cried. "The worst is the farce which the boy is playing with his betrothed here. My child goes to Waldhofen day after day, consoling and helping wherever she can, and the Herr Willy always runs along, and uses the opportunity as a rendezvous. That is too outrageous! You have raised something nice in that son, Regine."

"Do you think I make excuses for him?" demanded Regine. "He shall answer to us both--I have come for that. He shall learn to know me."

She lifted her hand as if making a vow, and Schonan, who was still racing through the room, repeated angrily: "Yes, he shall learn to know us."

Then and there the door opened, and the betrayed bride-elect entered into this wild excitement--calm and serene as usual, and saying in the most innocent way: "I have just heard of your arrival, dear aunt; you are very welcome."

She received no answer, but from both sides instead sounded the question: "Where is Willibald?"

"He will be here directly; he has gone to the castle gardener for a few moments, as he did not know of his mother's arrival."

"To the gardener! Perhaps to get roses as before," burst forth Frau von Eschenhagen; but the Chief Forester opened his arms and cried in pathetic tones:

"My child! my poor betrayed child! Come to me come into your father's arms."

He attempted to draw his daughter to his heart, but Regine came upon the other side and also attempted to draw her to her breast, crying out in just as pathetic tones: "Compose yourself, Toni. An awful blow confronts you, but you must bear it. You must show your betrothed that he and his betrayal are an abomination to your deepest soul."

This stormy sympathy was rather startling, but fortunately Antonie had strong nerves. So she freed herself from the double embrace, stepped back, and said with calm decision: "I do not think it so. I begin only now to really like Willy."

"So much the worse," said Schonan. "Poor child, you do not know yet; you have no idea of anything! Your betrothed has had a duel for another's sake."

"I know that, papa."

"For Marietta's sake," explained Frau von Eschenhagen.

"I know it, dear aunt."

"But he loves Marietta!" cried both in accord.

"I know that, too," replied Toni, with superior mien. "I have known it for a week."

The effect of this explanation was so crushing that the two furious people became silent and looked at each other in consternation. Toni continued with imperturbable composure:

"Willy told me everything directly upon his arrival. He spoke so beautifully and truly that I wept with emotion. At the same time a letter arrived from Marietta, in which she begged my pardon, and that was still more touching. So nothing was left to me but to give back to Willy his promise and freedom."

"Without asking us?" exclaimed Regine.

"The asking would not have been of any use here," said Toni, calmly, "for I could not marry a man who tells me that he loves another. We have therefore quietly dissolved our engagement."

"So? And I learn it only now? You have become very independent suddenly," cried her father angrily.

"Willy intended to speak to you the next day, papa, but he could not have remained here any longer after such an explanation, and just then occurred the serious illness of Dr. Volkmar and Marietta's arrival. She was in despair poor Marietta! and Willy's heart almost broke at the thought of leaving her alone in this anxiety and of going away without knowing what turn the illness would take; so I proposed to him to keep quiet for the present, until the danger should be past; but I went with him to Waldhofen daily, so that he could see and console Marietta. They have been so grateful to me--those two. They have called me the guardian angel of their love."

The young lady seemed to find this very touching, too, for she carried her handkerchief to her eyes.

Frau von Eschenhagen stood stiff and rigid as a statue, but Schonan folded his hands and said with a resigned sigh: "May God bless your kindness, my child! but such a thing has never happened before. And you have arranged the affair very smoothly, I must confess. You have sat and looked quietly on while your betrothed made love to another girl."

Antonie shook her head impatiently. Apparently she liked the rôle of guardian angel, and found her position one she could fill without any great exertion, since her affection for her betrothed had always been a very cool one.

"There was no sign of love-making, as the doctor was too seriously ill," she returned. "Marietta cried incessantly and we had plenty to do to console her. Now you see and understand that I am not at all betrayed, and that Willy has acted openly and honestly. I asked him myself to be silent to you, and, in fact, the matter concerns us only----"

"Do you think so? It is therefore of no concern to us?" interrupted the Chief Forester furiously.

"No, papa. Willy is of the opinion that we need not mind our parents in this matter at all."

"What does Willibald mean?" demanded Frau von Eschenhagen, who regained her speech at this unheard-of assertion.

"That each must love the other before marrying, and he is right," declared Toni, with unusual vivacity. "It was not in our engagement at all--in fact, we were not even consulted--but I shall not permit it another time. I see now what it means for two people to love each other with all their heart, and how remarkably Willy has changed through it. I, too, want to be loved as Marietta is loved, and if I do not find a man who loves me exactly like that--then I shall not marry at all."

And after this remark Fraulein Antonie walked out of the room with much decision and a highly elevated head, leaving father and aunt in an indescribable condition.

The Chief Forester was the first to regain composure, but suppressed vexation was still in his voice as he turned to his sister-in-law and said: "Your boy has managed nicely, I must confess, Regine. Now Toni wants to be loved also, and begins to get romantic ideas in her head, and Willy seems to be far gone already in that respect. I actually believe he has managed to make this second proposal by himself."

Frau von Eschenhagen paid no attention to this bitter hint of her interference at the former time. Her face bore an expression which promised nothing good.

"You seem to look upon this affair from a comic standpoint," she said. "I take it differently."

"That will not help you any," returned Schonan. "When such a model son commences to rebel, the affair is usually hopeless, especially when he is in love. But I am curious to know how Willy behaves himself as a lover--it must be a remarkable sight!"

CHAPTER XLI.

Herr von Schonan's curiosity was to be immediately satisfied, for Willy now appeared. He had heard of the arrival of his mother and was therefore prepared for anything, for that there must be something especial to bring her to Furstenstein so unexpectedly, he knew. But the young lord did not shrink back this time as he did two months ago, when he timidly concealed the rose in his pocket. His bearing betrayed that he was determined to take up the unavoidable contest.

"Here is your mother, Willy," commenced the Chief Forester. "I suppose you are very much surprised to see her here?"

"No, uncle, I am not," was the answer, but the young man made no attempt to approach his mother, for she stood there like a threatening storm cloud, and her voice rumbled like distant thunder as she said: "So you know why I have come?"

"I at least guess it, mamma, even if I cannot understand how you have heard----"

"The papers have told all--there it lies," interrupted Frau von Eschenhagen, pointing to the table, "and, besides, Toni has told us everything--do you hear? everything!"

She pronounced this last word in an annihilating tone. Willy was not moved from his composure, but replied tranquilly:

"Well, I shall not have to tell you, then. I should have spoken to uncle to-day about it."

This was too much. The storm cloud burst now with thunder and lightning; it loaded and discharged with such vehemence over the head of the young lord that really nothing seemed left for him to do but to disappear quickly under the ground, which could not bear a person of his kind any longer.

But he did not disappear; he only bowed his head to the storm, and when it finally subsided--

for Frau Regine had necessarily to draw breath some time--he drew himself up and said: "Mamma, please let me talk."

"You want to talk? that is remarkable," declared Schonan, who was not used to such efforts from his daughter's betrothed; but Willibald actually began, hesitatingly and uncertainly at first, but he gradually acquired firmness in speech and bearing.

"I am sorry that I have to offend you, but it could not be helped. I am just as innocent about the duel as Marietta is. She was being followed by an impertinent fellow persistently. I protected her and chastised the offender, who sent me a challenge, which I never could nor would decline. I have to beg Toni's pardon alone for loving Marietta, and I did that immediately upon my arrival. She heard everything and gave me back my pledge. Indeed, we have broken our engagement much more independently than we formed it."

"Oh, ho, is that meant for us?" cried the Forester angrily. "We did not force you--both of you could have said no if you had wished."

"Well, we do that now as a supplement," returned Willibald, so quickly that Schonan looked at him amazed. "Toni came to the same conclusion that custom alone is not sufficient for marriage, and if one has learned to know happiness, one wants to possess it also."

Fran von Eschenhagen, who had not yet quite regained her breath, started at these words as if bitten by a snake. It had never entered her mind that a second engagement would follow the first, now broken. She had never contemplated this most awful of possibilities.

"Possess it," she repeated. "What do you wish to possess? Does that mean perhaps that you want to marry this Marietta--this creature----"

"Mamma, I beg you to speak in a different tone of my future wife," her son interrupted her, so gravely and decidedly that the angry mother stopped indeed. "Toni has given me freedom; therefore there is no wrong in my love for Marietta, and Marietta's reputation is blameless--I am convinced of that. Whoever hurts or offends her has to answer to me, even if it should be my own mother."

"Hear, hear! the boy is coming out," murmured the Chief Forester, with whom the sense of justice overpowered his vexation, but Frau von Eschenhagen was far from listening to justice.

She had thought to crush her son with her appearance, and now he offered her resistance in this never before heard of manner.

His manly behavior tried her most, as she recognized by it how deep and powerful was the feeling which could change him so completely.

"I will spare you the enforcement of it toward your mother," she said with boundless bitterness. "You are of age, and master of Burgsdorf. I cannot prevent you, but if you really bring this Marietta Volkmar there as your wife--then I leave."

This threat did not miss its aim. Willibald started and drew back.

"Mamma, you speak in anger."

"I speak in deepest earnestness. As soon as an actress enters the house where I have lived and worked for thirty years--where I had hoped to lay my head down for its final rest--I shall leave the house forever. She may reign there then. You have the choice between her and your mother."

"But, Regine, do not force it to such a conclusion," Schonan tried to pacify her. "You torture the poor boy with this cruel 'either--or.'"

Regine did not listen to the exhortation. She stood there white to the lips, her eyes immovably fixed upon her son, and she repeated unyieldingly:

"Decide for yourself--this girl or me."

Willibald had also turned pale, and his lips quivered painfully and bitterly as he said in a low tone:

"That's hard, mamma; you know how I love you, and how you hurt me with your going away; but if you really are so cruel as to force me to choose, well then"--he straightened himself with decision--"then I choose my betrothed."

"Bravo!" cried the Chief Forester, forgetting entirely that he was one of the offended ones. "Willy, I feel like Toni. I begin only now to really like you. I am positively sorry now that you will not be my son-in-law."

Frau von Eschenhagen had not expected such a turn of affairs. She had trusted in her old power, which she now saw fall into fragments, but she was not the woman to give in. She would not have bent her obstinate will even if her life had depended upon it.

"Good! then we have finished with each other," she said curtly, and turned to go without heeding her brother-in-law, who followed her, trying to pacify her; but before they reached the door it was opened and a servant entered with a hasty announcement:

"The steward of Rodeck is outside and begs----"

"I have no time now," stormed the impulsive Schonan. "Tell Stadinger I cannot speak with him at present. I have important family affairs----"

He did not finish, for Stadinger already stood upon the threshold, having followed the servant closely, and said in a peculiarly suppressed tone: "I come about a family affair also, Herr Chief Forester, but it is a sad one. I cannot wait, but must speak to you immediately."

"But what is it?" asked Schonan, mystified. "Has something happened? The Prince is not at Rodeck so far as I know."

"No, mein Herr. His Highness is in town, but Herr Rojanow is there and sends me. He begs you and Herr von Eschenhagen to come to Rodeck immediately, and you, gracious lady"--he glanced at Frau von Eschenhagen, whom he knew from her former visits to Furstenstein--"you would do well to come likewise."

"But why? What has happened?" cried Schonan, now really disturbed.

The old man hesitated; he had apparently been charged to break the news gradually. Finally he said: "His Excellency, Herr von Wallmoden, is at the castle, and the Frau Baroness also."

"My brother!" interrupted Regine with apprehension.

"Yes, gracious lady. His Excellency fell out of the carriage, and now he lies there unconscious, which means to the physician we called in great haste that the matter is dangerous."

"In God's name! we must go at once, Moritz," cried the frightened lady.

Herr von Schonan had already grasped the bell rope and pulled it.

"The carriage as quick as possible!" he cried to the servant. "How did it happen, Stadinger? Tell us what you know."

"The Herr Baron was coming from Ostwalden with the gracious lady, intending to come to Furstenstein," responded Stadinger. "The road, you know, leads through the Rodeck tract not far from the castle. Our Forester, who was with some of his subordinates in the Wald, fired a few shots, and a wounded deer dashed across the road in wild flight just by the carriage. The horses took fright and ran--the driver could not hold them. The two Foresters who saw it ran after them. They heard the Frau Baroness beg her husband: 'Remain seated. Herbert! for God's sake, no, do not jump,' but His Excellency seemed to have lost his head entirely. He tore the door open and jumped. At the wild pace they were going he fell, of course, with full force, and against a tree. The driver succeeded in bringing his horses to a standstill not far at a bend of the road. The Frau Baroness, who was not hurt, hastened to the place of misfortune as quickly as possible, and she found the poor gentleman there seriously injured and unconscious. The Forester's people carried him to Rodeck, which was near by. Herr Rojanow has looked after everything that could be done at the moment, and now he sends me to bring you the news."

It was natural that under the pressure of this heart-rending news the recent bitter family quarrel should cease instantly. In great haste they made ready for departure. Antonie was called and informed, and as soon as the carriage drove up the Chief Forester and his sister-in-law hastened downstairs.

Willibald, who followed with Stadinger, detained him on the steps for a moment and asked in a low tone: "Has the doctor given his opinion? Do you know anything more about it?"

The old man nodded sadly, and answered also in low tones: "I stood near when Herr Rojanow asked him in the ante-room. There is no hope--the poor Excellency will not live through the day."

CHAPTER XLII.

The little hunting castle of Rodeck, which lay so cold and lonely in the first December snowy days, had seldom seen such excitement as to-day.

It was about noon when the two Foresters, whose firing was the innocent cause of the disaster, brought the injured Ambassador to the house. They had known that the longer march to Furstenstein was impossible, so they turned toward Rodeck, which lay scarcely a quarter of an hour's walk from the place of the accident.

Hartmut Rojanow, who was at the castle, was immediately called, and had made the necessary arrangements with quick decision. The rooms which Prince Adelsberg usually occupied were put at the disposal of the Baroness, and a messenger was despatched on horseback for the nearest physician, who, fortunately, was easy to reach.

When the doctor's statement allowed no hope, Stadinger was sent to Furstenstein to summon the relatives, who soon arrived, but only to find Herr von Wallmoden dying. He did not regain the consciousness which he had lost in that awful fall; he lay there immovable, recognizing no one; and when the day drew to a close all was over.

The Chief Forester, with Willibald, returned to Furstenstein toward night. He had sent a telegram before leaving Furstenstein, to notify the Embassy of the sad accident which had befallen its chief, and now had to follow it with the announcement of his death.

Frau von Eschenhagen had remained at Rodeck with her brother's widow. To-morrow preparations would be made to carry the body to the Residenz, and the two ladies wished to remain at his side until then.

Adelaide, who had proved so courageous during the danger, and who had done her full duty at the bedside of her husband, seemed, now that this duty was over, to give way entirely under the sudden and prostrating blow. She was stunned and dazed by the awful accident.

* * * * *

At the window of his room, which was in an upper story, stood Hartmut, gazing out into the desolate forest, which glittered so ghostly in the dim starlight. Yesterday had brought the first snow, and now everything was stiff in its cold embrace. The large lawn in front of the castle was deeply covered; the trees bent heavily under their white burden, and the broad branches of the firs were bowed to the ground.

Up there in the dark night sky, star after star shone in calm splendor, and far off on the northern horizon dawned a slight rosy light, like the first greeting of the dawn. And yet it was night cold, icy cold, winter night, in which as yet no ray of the coming day could fall.

Hartmut's eyes were riveted upon the mysterious glow. In his heart, too, it was dark, and yet something dawned there, fair and low, like the dawn of the morn. He had not seen Adelaide von Wallmoden since that fatal hour upon the forest height, until he met her to-day at the side of her husband, who had been borne, bleeding and unconscious--dying--into the castle.

This sight forced back every remembrance, and demanded assistance to the extent of his power. He had not entered the death chamber, and had only received the doctor's report; neither had he appeared upon Frau von Eschenhagen's arrival, but later on had spoken with the Chief Forester and Willibald. Now everything was decided. Herbert von Wallmoden was no longer among the living, and his wife was a widow--was free.

A deep breath agitated Hartmut's breast at the thought, and yet nothing joyful was in it, although his feelings had undergone a change since the hour he ventured his highest stake and--lost.

But that hour had proved to him the deep abyss which was open between them even now that the bond of Adelaide's marriage was broken. She had "shuddered" before the man who believed in nothing--to whom nothing was sacred, and he was the same man he had been then.

He had offered an apology without words in the creation of the added portion of Arivana which bore her name, but Ada had floated back to the heights from which she had come with her cry of warning, and mankind, with their glowing hate and love, remained upon earth.

Hartmut Rojanow could not force the hot, wild blood which flowed in his veins into a quiet movement; he could not bow to a life full of strict obedience and duty--neither did he wish to. For what had the genius which won his way everywhere been given him, if it could not lift him over the duties and barriers of every-day life?

And yet he knew that those large, blue eyes pointed inexorably to the hated path--that would never do.

The red glimmer over the forest yonder had turned darker and risen higher. It looked like the reflection of a powerful fire; but that calm, steady light came from no fire. Immovable it stood in the north; mysterious, high, and far removed--an aurora in approaching splendor.

The rolling of a carriage coming near in great haste broke Hartmut from his revery. It was past nine o'clock; who could arrive at such an hour? Perhaps it was the second physician who had been sent for in the afternoon, but who had been away from home; perhaps some one from

Ostwalden, where the news may have already been carried.

Now the carriage turned the corner of the lawn; the wheels crunched upon the hard, frozen ground, and the vehicle reached the main entrance of the castle.

Rojanow, who to-day represented the master of the house, left his room and started to meet the new arrival. He had reached the stairs which led down to the entrance hall, and put his foot upon the first step, when he suddenly shuddered and remained rooted to the spot.

Down there a voice spoke which he had not heard for ten long years; it was suppressed, and yet he recognized it at the first moment.

"I come from the Embassy. We received a dispatch this afternoon, and I took the first train to hasten here. How is he? Can I see Herr von Wallmoden?"

Stadinger, who had received the newcomer, replied in such low tones that the import of his words was lost to Hartmut, but the stranger asked hastily: "I do not come too late?"

"Yes, mein Herr. Herr von Wallmoden died this afternoon."

A short pause followed, then the stranger said, huskily but firmly: "Lead me to the widow--announce Colonel von Falkenried."

Stadinger turned to go, followed by a tall figure in a military cloak, of which one could see only the outlines in the dimly-lighted hall.

The two figures had long ago disappeared in the lower rooms, and still Hartmut stood leaning on the baluster, looking downward. Only when Stadinger returned alone did he collect himself and retire to his room.

Here he walked restlessly for a quarter of an hour. It was a hard, silent conflict which he waged. He had never been able to bend his pride; had never humbled himself, but he had to bow low before his deeply offended father--he knew that. But again a burning, absorbing longing overcame him, becoming all-powerful and finally conquering. He drew himself up resolutely.

"No, I will not shrink like a coward now. We are under one roof; the same walls surround us; now it shall be ventured. He is my father and I am his son."

CHAPTER XLIII.

The castle clock struck twelve in slow, hollow strokes. Deathlike stillness lay over the forest outside, and it was as still in the house where a corpse lay. The steward and servants had retired, as had Frau von Eschenhagen. Exhausted nature demanded its due. She had made the long, tedious journey from Burgsdorf without stop, and had lived through the hard, trying day.

Only a few windows were dimly lighted; they belonged to the rooms which had been appointed to Frau von Wallmoden and Colonel Falkenried, which lay near together, separated only by an ante-room.

Falkenried intended to accompany the widow back to the Residenz on the morrow. He had spoken with her and Regine, and had stood for a long time beside the body of his friend, who only yesterday had called to him so confidently, "*auf wiedersehen*"--who had been so full of his projects and plans for his future and his newly acquired possessions. Now all this had come to an end. Cold and stiff he lay upon his bier, and cold and gloomy Falkenried now stood at the window of his room. Even this awful accident was not able to shake his stony composure, for he had long ago forgotten to consider death a misfortune. *Life* was hard--but not death.

He looked silently out into the winter night and he, too, saw the ghostly glimmer which lighted the darkness out there. Dark-red it now glowed upon the distant horizon, and the whole of the northern sky seemed penetrated by invisible flames.

Redlike, as through a purple veil, twinkled the stars. Now a few distant rays shot up, growing more numerous, and rising always higher to the zenith.

Beneath this flaming sky the snow-covered world lay cold and white. The aurora was shining in the fulness of its splendor!

Falkenried was so lost in the glory of the sight that he did not hear the opening and closing of the door of the ante-room. Carefully the partly closed door of his own room was now opened, but the one entering did not bring himself into view, but remained motionless upon the threshold.

Colonel Falkenried still stood at the window half-averted, but the flickering light of the candles which burned upon the table lighted his face distinctly; the strong, deep lines of the features, and the gloomy, careworn brow beneath the white hair.

Hartmut shivered involuntarily; he had not anticipated such a deep and awful change. The man standing in his prime, looked aged, and who had brought this premature age upon him?

A few moments passed in this deep silence, then a voice vibrated through the room half-audible, beseeching, and full of a tenderness suppressed with difficulty--a single word pregnant with meaning.

"Father!"

Falkenried started as if a spirit voice had reached his ear. Slowly he turned as if really believing he heard a spirit-haunting voice.

Hartmut quickly approached a few steps, then stood still.

"Father, it is I--I come----"

He stopped short, for now he met his father's eyes; those eyes which he had feared so much, and what they now expressed robbed him of the courage to speak further. He bowed his head in silence.

Every drop of blood seemed to have left the face of Colonel Falkenried. He had not known--he had no idea that his son was under the same roof with him; the meeting found him totally unprepared, but it did not tear from him one exclamation, nor sign of anger or weakness. Rigid and mute he stood there and looked upon him who had once been his all. At last he raised his hand and pointed to the door.

"Go!"

"Father, listen to me----"

"Go, I say." The command now sounded threatening.

"No, I shall not go!" cried Hartmut passionately. "I know that reconciliation with you depends upon this hour. I have offended you--how deeply and seriously I feel only now--but I was a boy of seventeen, and it was my mother whom I followed. Think of that, father, and pardon me--grant pardon to your son."

"You are the son of the woman whose name you bear--not mine!" said the Colonel with cutting scorn. "A Falkenried has no son without honor."

Hartmut was about to burst forth at this awful word; the blood rose hot and wild to his brow, but he looked upon that other brow beneath the hair bleached like snow, and with superhuman effort controlled himself.

The two believed themselves alone during this interview in the stillness of the night--surely everything was sleeping in the castle. They had no idea that a witness was there.

Adelaide von Wallmoden had not retired to rest. She knew that she could find no sleep after this day which had so suddenly and disastrously made her a widow. Dressed still in the dark traveling suit which she had worn on the unfortunate drive, she sat in her room, when suddenly Colonel Falkenried's voice reached her ear.

With whom could he be speaking at such an hour? Was he not a total stranger here? And the voice sounded so strangely hollow and threatening.

She arose in alarm and entered the ante-room which separated the two sleeping apartments--for only a moment, she thought--only to see that nothing had happened; then she heard another voice which she knew--heard the word "Father," and like lightning the truth flashed upon her, which the next words confirmed. As if paralyzed, she remained standing there, every word reaching her through the partly closed door.

"You make this hour hard for me," said Hartmut with painfully sustained composure. "Be it so--I have not expected it otherwise. Wallmoden has told you everything. I might have known it, but then he could not keep from you what I have sought and won. I bring to you the laurel of the poet, father--the first laurel which has come to me. Learn to know my work; let it speak to you, then you will feel that its creator could not live and breathe in the constraint of a vocation which kills every poetical emotion; then you will forget the unfortunate error of the boy."

Here again it was Hartmut Rojanow who spoke thus with his overweening self-consciousness and pride, which did not leave him even in this hour; the poet of Arivana, for whom there existed

no duties--no barriers; but he encountered a rock here, upon which he shattered.

"The boy's error!" repeated Falkenried, just as harshly as before. "Yes, they called it so to make it possible for me to remain in the army. I name it differently, and so does every one of my comrades. You were to have been an ensign. In a few weeks it would have been desertion of the standard by law also. I have never considered it anything else. You had been raised in the strict discipline of honor of our caste, and knew what you did, for you were no longer a boy. *He who flees secretly from the military service which he owes his fatherland is a deserter; he who breaks a vow--a given word--is without honor. You did both!* But of course you and your kind pass over such things easily."

Hartmut clenched his teeth; his whole body trembled at these merciless words, and his voice sounded hollow, choked, as he answered:

"Enough, father. I cannot bear it. I wished to bow before you--wished to submit--but you yourself drive me from you. This is the same cruel sternness with which you drove my mother from you. I know it from her own lips. Whatever her later life was, and however through it my own has developed--this severity alone has been the cause of it."

The Colonel folded his arms, and an expression of unspeakable disdain quivered around his mouth.

"From her own lips you know? Possibly. No woman has sunk so deeply but she would try to veil such a truth from her son. I did not wish to pollute your ears at that time with this truth, for you were innocent and pure. Now you will probably understand me when I tell you that the separation was a demand of honor. The man who stained my honor fell by my bullet, and she who betrayed me--I pushed from me."

Hartmut became white as death at this disclosure. He had never thought that. He had fully believed that only the harshness which lay in his father's character had caused the separation. The remembrance of his mother fell lower and lower; he had loved her just as ardently as she had loved him, even when he felt at times that she was his ruin.

"I wished to protect you from the poisonous breath of this presence and influence," continued Falkenried. "Fool that I was! You were lost to me even without the coming of your mother. You bear her features; it is her blood that courses through your veins, and it would have demanded its dominion sooner or later. You would have become anyway what you are now--a homeless adventurer, who does not recognize his fatherland and his honor."

"This is too much!" burst forth Hartmut wildly. "I shall not permit myself to be so abused, even by you. I see now that no reconciliation between us is possible. I go, but the world will judge differently from you. It has already crowned my first work, and I shall force from it the appreciation which my own father keeps from me."

The Colonel looked at his son--something awful was in the glance; then he said icily and slowly, emphasizing each word: "Then take care also that the world does not learn that the 'crowned poet' did a spy's service two years ago at Paris."

Hartmut shrank as if hit by a bullet.

"I? In Paris? Are you out of your senses?"

Falkenried shrugged his shoulders contemptuously.

"Acting besides? Do not trouble yourself--I know all. Wallmoden proved to me what rôle Zalika Rojanow and her son played at Paris. I know the origin of the means by which they continued the life they were accustomed to when their wealth was lost. They were very much sought after by the commissioners, for they were exceedingly apt, and they who bought their services received them."

Hartmut stood as if lifeless. So this was the awful solution of the problem which Wallmoden had given him that night in his hint. He had not understood its meaning then, but sought the solution in another direction. This was it, then, which his mother kept from him--from which she had diverted him with caresses and coaxings whenever he put a suspicious question. She had sunk to the last, most disgraceful lot--and her son was branded with her.

The silence which now ensued was awful; it lasted for minutes, and when Hartmut finally spoke again his voice had lost its sound--the words came brokenly, almost inaudibly, from his lips:

"And you believe--that I--that I knew about this?"

"Yes," said the Colonel, coldly and firmly.

"Father, you cannot--must not do that. The punishment would be too terrible. You must believe me when I tell you that I had no idea of this disgrace--that I believed a part of our wealth had been saved--that--you will believe me, father?"

"No." Falkenried remained rigid and unbending as before.

Beside himself with anguish, Hartmut fell upon his knees.

"Father, before everything that is sacred to you in heaven or in earth--oh, do not look at me so terribly. You drive me frantic with that look! Father, I give you my word of honor----"

An awful, wild laugh from his father interrupted him.

"Your word of honor as at that time at Burgsdorf. Get up--abandon acting; you do not deceive me by it. You went from me with a breaking of your word--*you return with a lie*. Go your own way--I go mine. Only one thing I request of you--command you. Do not dare to use the name of Falkenried by the side of the branded one of Rojanow. Never let the world know who you are. When that happens my blood will be upon you, for then--I end with life!"

With a loud cry Hartmut sprang to his feet and approached his father, but Falkenried repelled him by a commanding gesture.

"Do you think that I still love life? I have borne it because I had to--perhaps I considered it my duty; but there is one point where this duty ends; you know it now--act accordingly."

He turned his back upon his son and walked to the window. Hartmut did not speak another word. Mutely he turned to go.

The ante-room was not lighted, yet it was filled with the glow of the blazing skies outside, and in this glow stood a woman--deathly pale--with eyes fixed with an indescribable expression upon the one approaching.

He glanced up and a single look showed him that she knew all. This was the last. He had received his mortal humiliation before the woman he loved--had been thrown into the dust before her!

Hartmut did not know how he left the castle, how he reached the open air. He only felt that he should stifle in those walls--that he was driven forth with fury and power. He found himself at last under a fir tree, which bowed its snow-covered limbs over him. It was night in the forest--cold, icy winter night, but up there in the sky the mysterious light shone on and on with purple power, with quivering rays, which united at the zenith into a crown.

CHAPTER XLIV.

It was summer again. July had commenced, and in the hot, sun-parched days the forest mountains beckoned irresistibly with their cool shadows, and the green, airy splendor of their dales and heights.

Ostwalden, the estate which Herbert von Wallmoden had purchased immediately before his death, and had not been permitted to live in for even one summer, had since then rested in solitude. But a few days ago the young widow had arrived there in company with her sister-in-law, Frau von Eschenhagen.

Adelaide had left the South German Residenz shortly after the death of her husband and returned home with her brother, who had hastened to her side at the news of her husband's death. Her short married life had lasted but eight months, and now the wife, not yet twenty years old, wore the widow's veil.

Regine had been easily persuaded to accompany her sister-in-law. The once absolute mistress of Burgsdorf had stood to her "either--or," and as Willibald proved just as obstinate, she had made her threat true, and had moved to town even during the first period of mourning for her brother.

But Frau von Eschenhagen deceived herself if she thought to gain her end by this last move. She had hoped that her son would not let it come to a real separation, but it was in vain that she let him feel the full bitterness of the separation. The young master had had full opportunity to prove that his newly awakened independence and love were not mere momentary feelings.

He tried everything to make his mother reconsider, but when he did not succeed, he showed a like stubbornness, and mother and son had not seen each other for months.

However, his engagement with Marietta had not been made public as yet. He believed he owed his former fiancée and her father too much respect to allow a second betrothal to follow too

soon upon the heels of the first. Besides, Marietta was bound by contract to the theatre for fully six months, and as her betrothal was to remain a secret for the present, she could not obtain an earlier release. Only now had the young girl returned to her grandfather at Waldhofen, where Willibald was also expected.

Of course Frau von Eschenhagen knew nothing about this or she would hardly have accepted the invitation which brought her into the neighborhood.

The day had been so warm and sunny that only late afternoon brought cooler air, but the road to Ostwalden was mostly shady, as it lay through the forests of Rodeck.

Two horsemen were now on this road; one in gray hunting jacket and hat--the Chief Forester, von Schonan; the other a slender, youthful form clad in a distinguished looking summer suit--Prince Adelsberg. They had met by chance and learned that both were bound for the same, destination.

"I should not have dreamed of meeting you here, Your Highness," said Schonan. "It was said that you would not visit Rodeck at all this summer, and Stadinger, with whom I spoke the day before yesterday, did not know a syllable of your near arrival."

"No; and he cried Ach! and Weh! when I fell upon the house so unexpectedly," replied Egon. "It would not have needed much to make him show me from my own door, because I followed my dispatch instantly, and nothing was prepared for me. But the heat at Ostend was well-nigh unbearable. I could not stand the glowing sands of the beach any longer, and was overcome by an irrepressible longing for my cool, quiet forest nook. God be thanked that I have gotten away from the heat and fuss of a watering place!"

His Highness was pleased not to tell the truth in this case. He had hastened here from the beach of the North Sea to enjoy a certain "neighborhood" of which he happened to hear. Stadinger had mentioned in a report, in which he asked for permission to make some changes at Rodeck, that these same arrangements had already been made at Ostwalden, where Frau von Wallmoden dwelt at present.

To his surprise, instead of the expected permission, his young master arrived in person after three days. The Prince had not known anything better after this news than to throw over all his summer plans.

The Chief Forester did not seem to believe the pretext, for he remarked somewhat sarcastically: "It surprises me, indeed then, that our Court stays at Ostend so long. The Duke and Duchess are there; also Princess Sophie, with a niece--a relative of her late husband, I hear."

"Yes, a niece." Egon turned suddenly and looked at the speaker. "Herr Chief Forester, you, too, want to deliver congratulations to me--I see it in your face--but if you do that I shall challenge you instantly here in the midst of the forest."

"Well, Your Highness, I do not intend to bring a duel upon myself," laughed Schonan, "but the newspapers already speak quite openly of an approaching or already consummated engagement, which suits the wishes of the princely ladies."

"My most gracious aunts wish many things," said Egon coolly. "Their most obedient nephew, though, is often of a different opinion, alas; and it has been the case this time also. I went to Ostend upon the invitation of the Duke, which I could not refuse, but the air did not agree with me at all, and I cannot risk my health so recklessly. I felt the first symptoms of sunstroke, which would certainly have taken me off, so I decided, then, in good time----"

"To take yourself off," finished Schonan. "This is like Your Highness, but now you can count upon a three-fold displeasure."

"Possibly. I shall bear it in solitude and self-banishment. I intend, besides"--here the young Prince drew a very solemn face--"to give all my attention this summer to my estates--especially Rodeck. A change in the building shall be made there--Stadinger has already written me about it, but I considered a personal surveillance necessary."

"On account of the chimneys?" asked Schonan dryly. "Stadinger thought that as the chimneys smoked last winter, he would like to have new ones built."

"What does Stadinger know about it?" cried Egon, vexed that his old "Waldgeist" had again gotten ahead of him with his most uncomfortable love for truth. "I have very grand plans for beautifying---- Ah, here we are!"

He started his horse into a quicker gait and the Chief Forester followed his example, for Ostwalden indeed lay before them.

The extensive changes with which the late Wallmoden had intended to convert Ostwalden into a splendid show place had not been made; but the old ivy-covered castle, with its two side turrets, and the shady, although somewhat neglected park, possessed a picturesque charm. It was understood that the present mistress intended neither changes nor a sale of the property, for

to the heiress of the Stahlberg wealth a villa more or less was of no consequence.

Upon their arrival the gentlemen learned that Frau von Wallmoden was in the park; but Frau von Eschenhagen was in her room. The Prince allowed himself to be announced to the lady of the house, while the Chief Forester first looked up his sister-in-law, whom he had not seen since the previous winter. He went to her apartments and entered without more ado.

"Here I am," he announced in his usual unceremonious manner. "I don't need to be announced to my Frau sister, even if she seems to hold me at arm's length. Why did you not come along, Regine, when Adelaide drove to Furstenstein the day before yesterday? Of course, I do not believe the excuse which she brought me in your name, and have now come two hours' riding on horseback to ask for an explanation."

Regine offered him her hand. She had not changed outwardly in these six or seven months. She still bore the same strong, self-reliant appearance and decided way, but her former serenity and cheerfulness, which, in spite of her brusquerie, were so winning, had disappeared from her manner. If she never acknowledged it under any circumstances, it was plainly to be seen that she suffered because her only son grew strange to her--the son to whom once his mother's love and will had been all things.

"I have nothing against you, Moritz," she replied. "I know that you have retained the old friendship for me in spite of all that has been done to you and your daughter; but you ought to understand how embarrassing it is to me to visit Furstenstein again."

"On account of the dissolved engagement? You ought to be consoled about it at last. You were present and saw and heard how easily Toni took matters. She was decidedly better pleased with her rôle of 'guardian angel' than with that of fiancée; and she has tried several times to change your mind by her letters, just as I have; but we both have been unsuccessful."

"No; I know how to value your rare magnanimity."

"Rare magnanimity!" repeated Schonan, laughing. "Well, yes, it might not happen often that the former fiancée and prospective father-in-law put in a good word for the recreant betrothed, so that he and his sweetheart may gain the maternal blessing. But for once we are thus superior in our frankness; and besides, both of us came to the conclusion that Willy, in fact, has only now become a sensible person, and this has been accomplished solely and alone by--yes, I cannot help it, Regine--by the little Marietta."

Frau von Eschenhagen frowned at this remark. She did not consider it best to answer it, but asked in a tone that plainly betrayed her wish to change the subject: "Has Toni returned? I learned through Adelaide that she had been at the Residenz, but was daily expected home."

The Chief Forester, who had accepted a seat in the meantime, leaned back comfortably in his chair.

"Yes, she returned yesterday, but with a second shadow, for she brought some one along, who she insists must and shall be her future husband, and he insists upon it likewise with such emphasis, that really nothing is left for me to do but to say Yes--Amen!"

"What! Toni engaged again?" asked Frau von Eschenhagen in surprise.

"Yes, but this time she managed it all by herself; I did not have an inkling of it. You will remember that she took it into her head at that time that she, too, wanted to be loved in a surpassing manner, and enjoy the usual romance of it. Herr Lieutenant von Waldorf seems to have attended to that. He has, as she told me with highest satisfaction, sunk on his knees before her, and declared he could not and would not live without her, while she gave him a similar touching assurance, and so forth. Yes, Regine, it will not do any longer to lead the children by the apron strings when they become of age. They imagine that marriage is solely their affair, and really they are not so far wrong about it."

The last remark sounded very suggestive, but Regine overlooked it completely. She repeated thoughtfully:

"Waldorf? the name is quite strange to me. Where did Toni get acquainted with the young officer?"

"He is my son's friend and he brought him home with him at his last visit. In consequence of that an acquaintance with his mother was begun, which ripened until she invited Toni to visit her some weeks, and there and then the falling in love and engagement took place. I have nothing to say against it. Waldorf is handsome, jolly, and in love up to his ears. He does seem to be a little volatile, but he will settle down when he gets a sensible wife. The model boys are not after my taste; they are the very worst when they do get wild, as we have seen in your Willy. Waldorf will get his discharge in the fall, for my daughter is not suited for a lieutenant's wife. I will buy an estate for the young couple, and the wedding will occur at Christmas."

"I am so glad for Toni's sake," said Frau von Eschenhagen, cordially. "You take a burden from my heart by this news."

"I am glad, too," nodded the Chief Forester, "but now you ought to follow my example and take a burden from the hearts of a certain other couple. Be reasonable, Regine, and give in! The little Marietta has remained true, although she was on the stage. Everybody praises her blameless conduct. You do not need to be ashamed of your daughter-in-law."

Regine arose suddenly and pushed her chair back.

"I beg you once for all, Moritz, to spare me such requests. I shall stand firm at my word. Willibald knows the condition under which alone I will return to Burgsdorf. If he does not fulfil it--the separation remains."

"He knows better," said Schonan dryly, "than to give up his bride-elect and marriage solely because she does not suit his Frau mamma. Such conditions are never fulfilled."

"You express yourself very amiably indeed," returned Frau von Eschenhagen angrily. "Of course, what do you know of the love and anxiety of a mother, or of the gratitude her children owe her? All of you are ungrateful, inconsiderate, selfish----"

"Oho! I beg you, in the name of my sex, to refrain from such vituperations," interrupted the Chief Forester hotly; but suddenly he reconsidered and said: "We have not seen each other for seven months, Regine; we really ought not to quarrel the first day again--we can do that later on. Let us therefore leave your refractory son alone for the present, and speak of ourselves. How do you like it in town? You do not exactly look so very well satisfied."

"I am exceptionally satisfied," declared Regine with great decision. "What I need only is work. I am not used to idleness."

"Then create work for yourself. It rests solely with you to again step to the head of a large household."

"Are you commencing again----"

"I did not mean Burgsdorf this time," said Schonan, playing with his riding whip. "I only meant--you sit all alone in town, and I shall sit all alone at Furstenstein when Toni marries--that is very tiresome! How would it be--well, I have already explained it to you once before, but you did not want me then. Perhaps you have bethought yourself better now. How would it be if we should make the third couple at this double wedding?"

Frau von Eschenhagen looked gloomily to the floor and shook her head.

"No, Moritz. I feel less like marrying now than ever."

"Already a 'No' again!" shouted the Chief Forester wrathfully. "Is this a second refusal you give me? At first you did not want me because your son and your beloved Burgsdorf had grown too near your heart, and now when you see that both get along very well without you, you do not want me because you do not '*feel like it*.' Feeling does not belong to marrying, anyhow only some sense is wanted; but if one is unreasonableness and obstinacy personified----"

"You woo me in a very flattering manner, indeed," interrupted Regine, now wrathful also. "It would be an exceedingly peaceful marriage if you act like this as a suitor."

"It would not be peaceful, but neither would it be tiresome," declared Schonan. "I believe we could both stand it. Once more, Regine, do you want me or do you not want me?"

"No; I do not care to '*stand*' a married life."

"Then let it alone!" cried the Chief Forester furiously, jumping up and snatching his hat. "If it gives you so much pleasure to say 'No' forever, then say it. But Willy will marry in spite of you, and he is right; and now I shall be the best man at the wedding just to spite you."

With which he rushed off, quite beside himself at this second jilting, and Frau von Eschenhagen remained behind in a similar frame of mind. They had really quarrelled again at the first *Wiedersehen*, and even the second refusal could not be left out of this friendly habit.

CHAPTER XLV.

Meantime Prince Adelsberg was with Frau von Wallmoden in the park. He had begged her not

to interrupt her outing, and so they both walked in the shade of the huge trees in the cool, green twilight, while out on the meadow lay still the glaring sunlight.

Egon had not seen the young widow since the death of her husband. The formal visit of condolence, which he had made after the accident, had been received by Eugene Stahlberg in the name of his sister, and then they had left the city immediately.

Adelaide wore, of course, the widow's mourning; but her companion thought he had never seen her so beautiful as to-day in the deep, sombre black and crepe veil, beneath which the blonde hair glimmered. His glance passed repeatedly over this beautiful blonde head, and always the question recurred: What has really happened to these features that they look so entirely different?

Egon had only known the lady at whose side he now walked in that cool, haughty composure which had made her so unapproachable to him and the world. Now this coldness had disappeared, and he saw and felt but could not decipher the strange change which had taken its place.

The young widow could not possibly mourn so deeply and seriously for a husband who was so far removed from her in age, and who, even had he been young, could never have given her the love youth demands, with his practical, coldly calculating nature. And yet there lay over her whole appearance the expression of secret suffering--of a sorrow which was mutely but painfully borne.

Where did this mysterious line come from, this soft light of the eyes which seemed to have learned but now to know tears?

"It always seems to me as if life and fire could glow there and transform the snow region into a blooming world," Prince Adelsberg had once exclaimed in jest. Now this transformation had taken place, slowly, almost imperceptibly. But this soft, half-painful expression which replaced the former seriousness, this dreamy look, gave a charm to the young woman which, with all her beauty, had been missing before--a charming, gentle grace.

At first the conversation touched upon indifferent things only, the questions and answers that were customary and formal. Egon narrated incidents of happenings during the winter at Court and in town, and then offered the same explanation of his sudden arrival which he had given the Chief Forester, speaking of the unendurable heat at Ostend and of his longing for the cool, still forest solitude.

A fleeting smile which quivered over the lips of his companion told him that she believed this pretext as little as had the Chief Forester, and that the notice in the papers had also been seen by her. He grew unaccountably vexed about it and studied how he could remedy the mistake, here where he could not be so plain-spoken, when Adelaide suddenly asked: "Shall you remain alone at Rodeck, Your Highness? Last summer you had a--guest with you."

A shadow passed over the face of the young Prince. He forgot the rumor of his engagement and his anger about it at this remark.

"You mean Hartmut Rojanow?" he asked, gravely. "He will hardly come, as he is in Sicily at present, or at least was there two months ago. I have had no news from him since, and do not even know where to write him."

Frau von Wallmoden bent down and picked some flowers growing at the wayside as she remarked: "I thought you were in lively correspondence with each other."

"I hoped so at the beginning of our separation, and it is not my fault; but Hartmut has become a perfect mystery to me lately. You were witness of the brilliant success of his 'Arivana' at our Court Theatre; it has since then been reproduced at several other theatres. The play is conquering by storm wherever it appears, and the author withdraws from all these triumphs--almost flees from his rising fame--hides from all the world, even from me. Let who can comprehend it!"

Adelaide had regained her former erect carriage, but the hand which held the flowers trembled slightly, while her eyes were directed upon the Prince in breathless expectancy.

"And when did Herr Rojanow leave Germany?" she asked.

"At the beginning of December. Shortly before that he had gone to Rodeck for a few days immediately after the first appearance of his drama. I considered it a caprice and yielded. Then he suddenly returned to my house, in town, in a condition of mind and body which really frightened me, and announced his departure; listened to no entreaties, answered no questions, but remained firm about going, and really left like a whirlwind. Weeks passed before I heard of him; then he sent me occasional letters, which, if rare enough, at least kept me aware of his whereabouts, and I could answer him. He went to Greece, where he strayed now here, now there. After that he went to Sicily, but now all information has stopped, and I am in the greatest alarm."

Egon spoke with suppressed excitement. One could see how deeply the separation from his

passionately loved friend hurt him. He did not dream that the young widow at his side could have given him an explanation of the mystery. She knew what drove Hartmut to wander restlessly from land to land; what made him shudder before the famous poet's name which bore that secret but awful stain. But it was the first news she had heard of him since that disastrous night at Rodeck, which had discovered everything to her.

"Poets are sometimes differently constituted from common mortals," she said, slowly plucking to pieces one of her flowers. "They have the right sometimes to be incomprehensible."

The Prince shook his head, incredulously and sadly.

"No, it is not that; this comes from an entirely different source. I felt long ago that something dark--mysterious--lay in Hartmut's life, but I never inquired into it, for he would not suffer the slightest touch on this point, and he kept silent persistently. It is as if he stands under a doom, which gives him no peace or rest anywhere, and which springs upon him suddenly when one thinks it buried and forgotten. I received this impression anew when he took leave of me in wild agitation; it was impossible to hold him. But you cannot imagine how I miss him! He has spoiled me with his presence for over two years and with all the advantages of his rich, fiery nature which he gave lavishly. Now everything has become desolate and colorless to me, and I do not know at times how I can bear life without him."

They came to a standstill, for they had reached the limit of the park. Green meadows lay before them in the sunlight, and over yonder rose the heights of the forest mountains. Adelaide had listened in silence, while her gaze was lost in the far distance; but now she turned suddenly and stretched out her hand to her companion.

"I believe you can be a very sacrificing friend, Your Highness. Herr Rojanow ought not to have left you; perhaps you could have saved him from this--doom."

Egon could not believe his senses; the warmth of the heartfelt tone--the eyes in which a tear glimmered--the whole, almost passionate, sympathy with his sorrow surprised as much as it delighted him. He grasped the hand fervently and pressed his lips upon it.

"If anything can console me for Hartmut's departure, it is your sympathy!" he cried. "You will permit me to use the privilege of a neighbor and come occasionally to Ostwalden? Do not deny me this, as I am so lonely at Rodeck, and I came here only and solely----"

He checked himself suddenly, for he felt that such a confession was not appropriate but an offense, as he saw plainly.

The young widow withdrew her hand quickly and drew back. It had required only this moment to transform her again into "Aurora."

"To flee from the heat and noise of a watering place like Ostend," she finished coolly. "You said so, at least, a little while ago, Your Highness."

"It was a pretext," declared the Prince, gravely. "I left Ostend only to put an end to certain rumors which were connected with my stay there, and which even found their way into the papers. They were positively without foundation so far as I am concerned, I give you my word, Your Excellency."

He had quickly embraced the opportunity to dispel the error which he did not wish to suffer at this place at any price, but the result did not come up to his expectation. Frau von Wallmoden had again wrapped herself up in her old, unapproachable manner and made him suffer for his premature haste.

"Why this solemn explanation, Your Highness? As it was only a rumor, I understand just as fully as your other neighbors that you wish to retain the privilege of choice. But I believe we must return to the castle, as you said that my brother-in-law had come with you, and I should like to see him before he leaves."

Egon bowed assent, and tried obediently to accept the indifferent and every-day tone by which he was made aware that he should not be anything more here than a "neighbor." He took the first favorable moment at the castle to make his excuses, which were immediately accepted, but not without an invitation to come again had been given, and that was at present the most important thing.

"Blamed haste!" he muttered as he galloped away. "Now I shall be kept as distant as ever, perhaps for weeks. As soon as one tries to approach the woman a little nearer--the ice stares into one's face. But"--and here the face of the Prince lit up--"but at last the ice commences to melt. I saw and felt it in that tone and look. I must be patient here--the prize is worthy one's perseverance."

Egon von Adelsberg did not dream that this look and tone, upon which he built his hopes, were for another, and that she wished only to hear from that other when the permission to call again had been given.

CHAPTER XLVI.

July had only half gone when the world, which seemed but now to repose in deepest calm, was suddenly startled from this peace. A lightning had flamed up on the Rhine, the glare and uncanny light of which reached from ocean to the Alps. A war-cloud stood heavy and threatening in the west, and soon the cry of war resounded through the land.

It broke over Southern Germany like a whirlwind--tore men from their field of action, changed all conditions and overthrew all plans. Where a week ago comfort and security reigned, men were now grasped and carried away by storm.

At Furstenstein the daughter of the house was celebrating her betrothal, but she had to take leave of her betrothed, who hastened to his regiment.

At Waldhofen, where Willibald was expected for a long visit, he appeared suddenly in stormy haste to see Marietta once more in the few days which remained before he, too, should be called away.

At Ostwalden, Adelaide prepared for departure, to once more embrace the brother who had hastened to join the standard.

Prince Adelsberg had left Rodeck at the first news of war, and hurried to the Residenz, which he reached at the same hour as the Duke. The world seemed all at once to have gotten an entirely changed face, and the people with it.

In the little garden of Dr. Volkmar's house stood Willibald von Eschenhagen, talking earnestly and impressively with the grandfather of his fiancée, who sat before him upon a bench, and did not seem to be acquiescent to what Willy was explaining.

"But, my dear Willy, this is precipitation without an equal," the good doctor said, shaking his head. "Your engagement with Marietta has not yet been made public, and now you want to be married heels over head. What will the world say to it?"

"The world finds everything explained under the present circumstances," returned Willibald; "and we cannot go after outside considerations. I have to go to war, and it is my duty to secure Marietta's future in any case. I cannot bear the thought that she should have to return to the stage after my death, or should be dependent upon my mother's mercy. The fortune to which I am heir is in my mother's hands, who disposes of it exclusively. I possess as yet only the entailed estates which, in case I die, go over to a side branch of the family; but our family law secures the widow of the lord of the estates a rich dowry. If it should not be granted me to return from battle, I want to give my fiancée at least the name and position in life to which she has a right. I cannot go to the war contentedly until this has been arranged first."

He spoke quietly, but with much decision. The awkward, timid Willibald could not be recognized in this young man, who overlooked the situation so clearly and pleaded so earnestly for his wishes to be granted.

He had had, however, a school of independence in those last six months, when he had been put entirely upon his own resources, and had his firmness continually tried in the contest with his mother; and one could see that he had learned something in this school.

His outward appearance was also more prepossessing; in fact, as the Chief Forester expressed it, he had only now become a man.

Dr. Volkmar could not resist these arguments. He well knew that if the war took away her betrothed, Marietta would again be without means and without protection; and a burden fell from his heart at the thought of her secure future. Therefore he gave up all argument and only asked: "What does Marietta say to it? Has she given her consent?"

"Yes; we decided on it last night, directly after my arrival. Of course, I did not speak to her about security and widowhood, for she would have been beside herself if I had dwelt at length upon the case of my death; but I told her that in case of my being wounded, she, as my wife, could hasten to me without preliminaries or companions, and could remain with me, and this decided her. We should have had but a quiet wedding, anyway."

His face clouded at the last words, and the doctor said, with a sigh: "Yes, indeed, none of us would have been inclined to celebrate the wedding with festivities if the couple had to go to the

altar without the blessing of the mother. Have you really tried every way with her, Willy?"

"Everything," replied the young lord, solemnly. "Do you think it will be easy for me to miss my mother on such a day? But she has left me no choice, therefore I must bear it. I shall now take the necessary steps instantly, and in anticipation thereof have brought my papers with me."

"And do you believe that a marriage can be possible on such short notice?" asked the doctor, doubtfully.

"At this time, yes. The formalities have been reduced to the necessities, and all preliminaries are dispensed with where a hasty marriage is desired. As soon as Marietta is my wife, she will accompany me to Berlin, where she will remain until my regiment leaves. Then she will return to you until the close of the war."

Volkmar arose and gave Willibald his hand.

"You are right; it is perhaps best so under the present circumstances. Well, my little *singvogel*, so you will really marry as quickly as your betrothed wishes?"

The question was addressed to Marietta, who now entered the garden. Her pale cheeks showed the trace of tears, but it was with an exceedingly happy look that she flew into Willibald's open arms.

"I am ready at any time, grandpapa," she said, simply. "The leave-taking will be easier to us after we belong to each other and you give your blessing."

The old gentleman looked half sadly, half happily upon the young couple, who wished to be united before their sad separation should so quickly take place. Then he said, with emotion: "Well, so be it: marry then with my blessing. I give it to you from my inmost heart."

Everything necessary was then quickly discussed. The marriage was to take place as soon as possible, and, of course, quietly and simply. Willibald intended to go to Furstenstein to-day to notify the Chief Forester of the settled plan.

Dr. Volkmar left them to make a call upon a patient, and Willibald remained alone with his fiancée. They had not seen each other for so long, and now the future lay dark and threatening before them. But the next few days belonged to them, and they were happy in this thought, in spite of everything.

CHAPTER XLVII.

Engaged in their subdued chatting, they did not notice that the house door was opened, and some one came with slow, rather hesitating steps along the hall, until the rustle of a woman's dress upon the gravel path made them listen, and suddenly both sprang to their feet.

"My mother!" cried Willibald, in joyful surprise; but at the same time he put his arm around Marietta as if he wished to protect her from a renewed attack, for Frau von Eschenhagen's face seemed hard and gloomy, and her bearing did not look like reconciliation.

Without noticing the young girl, she turned to her son:

"I learned through Adelaide that you were here," she began in a rather harsh tone, "and I only wanted to ask how everything is at Burgsdorf. Have you looked for a steward during your absence? One does not know how long the war will last?"

The joyous expression on the face of the young lord vanished. He had really hoped for a different greeting at this unexpected appearance of his mother.

"I have arranged everything to the best of my ability," he replied. "The greater part of my people have been called to enlist; even the inspector has to leave in a few days, and a substitute cannot be had now. Work must therefore be reduced to the necessities, and old Martens will overlook everything."

"Martens is a goose," said Regine, in her old, terse way. "If he takes the reins, everything at Burgsdorf will go topsy-turvy. Nothing else is left for me to do but to go there myself and look after things right."

"How? You would?" cried Willibald. But his mother cut him short.

"Do you think I would let your possessions go to nothing while you are in the war? It will be securely cared for in my hands--you know that. I have held the reins there long enough and will do it again--until you return."

She still spoke in the hard, cold tones, as if she wished to exclude every warmer feeling. But now Willy stepped up to her, with his arm still around his bride-elect.

"You will take care of my worldly possessions, mamma," he said, reproachfully; "you will take them under your protection. But for the best and dearest thing that belongs to me you have no word nor look. Have you really only come to tell me that you will go to Burgsdorf?"

Fran von Eschenhagen's harsh reticence could not hold fast at this question. Her lips trembled.

"I came to see my only son once more before he goes to war--perhaps to death," she said, with painful bitterness. "I had to hear from others that he had come to say farewell to his bride. He did not come to his mother, and that--that I could not bear."

"We should have come," cried the young lord; "we should have made one more attempt to win your heart before leaving. See, mother, here is my bride-elect--my Marietta. She is waiting for a friendly word from you."

Regine threw a long look upon the young couple, and again her face quivered painfully as she saw how Marietta pressed shyly, but confidently, to the man in whose protection she knew herself so secure. Maternal jealousy stood a last, hard struggle; but finally she allowed herself to be conquered. She stretched out her hand to the young girl.

"I offended you once, Marietta," she said, in a half-stifled voice, "and did you a possible wrong that time; but for that you have taken from me my boy, who, until then, had not loved anybody but his mother, and who now loves nobody but you. I believe we are quits."

"Oh, Willy loves his mother as dearly as ever," Marietta said heartily. "I best know how he has suffered under the separation."

"So? Well, we will have to agree with each other for his sake," said Regine, with an attempt at playfulness, which did not quite succeed. "We shall be in a great deal of anxiety about him soon, when we know him in the battlefield; care, anxiety, will be plentiful then. What do you think, my child? I believe we could bear it easier if we worry about him together."

She opened her arms, and the next second Marietta lay sobbing upon her breast. Tears glittered also in the eyes of the mother when she bent down to kiss her future daughter-in-law; but then she said in the old, commanding tone: "Do not cry; hold up your head, Marietta, for a soldier's fiancée must be brave--remember that."

"A soldier's wife," corrected Willibald, who stood by with beaming eyes. "We have just now decided to be married before I leave."

"Well, then, Marietta really belongs to Burgsdorf," declared Regine, who was hardly surprised, and seemed to find this decision quite in order. "No arguments, child. The young Frau von Eschenhagen has nothing to do further at Waldhofen, except as she comes for a visit to her grandfather. Or are you perhaps afraid of your grim mother-in-law? But I believe you have in him"--she pointed to her son--"a sufficient protection, even if he is not at home. He would be capable of declaring war upon his own mother if she did not bear his little wife upon her hands."

"And she will do that, I know it. When my mother opens her heart, she does it perfectly."

"Yes, now you can flatter," Frau von Eschenhagen said, with a rebuking glance. "So you go with me to your future home, Marietta. You need not worry about the duties; I will attend to that. When I go away again it will be different; but I see already that Willy will hold you like a princess all your life long. It is right with me, just so he returns to us safe and sound."

She reached out her hands now to her son, and those two had perhaps never been in a closer or more loving embrace than to-day.

When the three entered the house, a quarter of an hour later, they met the Chief Forester, who actually started back at the sight of his sister-in-law. Regine marked his surprise with the liveliest satisfaction.

"Well, Moritz, am I still the most unreasonable, obstinate person?" she asked, offering her hand. But Schonan, who had not recovered from his jilting, kept his behind him, and muttered something incomprehensible. Then he turned to the young couple:

"So? And now you are to be married in hot haste. I met Dr. Volkmar just now and he told me about it; so I came to offer myself as best man. But perhaps that will not be acceptable, since the Frau Mamma is at her post."

"Oh, you are just as cordially welcome, uncle," cried Willibald.

"Well, yes, I can just be used as a secondary person in a marriage," grumbled the Chief Forester, with a reproachful glance at Regine. "And so there will be a marriage before the war? One must say, Willy, you have marched with seven-league boots from your practical Burgsdorf into romance, and I should never have looked for it in you. However, my Toni is just as intent upon romance. She and Waldorf would have liked best to marry like this in steaming haste before marching orders came, but I have vetoed that, for circumstances are different with us, and I do not care to already sit at home, lonely as an owl."

He glanced again with the very grimmest expression at Frau von Eschenhagen, but she approached him now, and said, cordially: "Do not bear malice, Moritz. So far we have always made up again. Let us forget this quarrel also. You see, at least, that I can say 'Yes' for once, when the whole happiness of my boy depends upon it."

The Chief Forester hesitated a moment longer, then grasped the offered hand and pressed it cordially. "I see it," he acknowledged, "and perhaps you will now forget altogether that blamed 'No,' Regine, about another point."

CHAPTER XLVIII.

The Steward of Rodeck stood in the study of Prince Adelsberg's palace, in the Residenz. He had been called there to receive various orders and plans before the departure of his young lord.

Egon, who already wore the uniform of his regiment, had given him verbal instructions, and now dismissed the old man.

"Keep the old forest nook in good order for me as heretofore," he concluded. "It is just possible that I may go to Rodeck for a few hours before I leave, but I hardly believe so, for the order to march may come any day. How do I please you in my uniform?"

He arose and drew himself up to his full height. The slender, youthful form looked well in the uniform of a lieutenant, and Stadinger measured him with admiring eyes.

"Real splendid!" he assured the Prince. "It is a pity that Your Highness is not a soldier by profession."

"Do you think so? Well, I am one now, body and soul. Service in the field will come rather hard to me, and I will have to get used to it first. But it does not hurt when one is under strict discipline."

"No, Your Highness, it will not hurt you at all," remarked Stadinger, with his terrible truthfulness. "When Your Highness travels about for years in the Orient with a great sea serpent and a whole herd of elephants, or when you run away from the most gracious Court at Ostend because you do not want to marry at all--nothing comes of that but only----"

"But only stupidity," completed the Prince, wisely. "Stadinger, I shall severely miss one thing in the campaign--your boundless tiresomeness. You want to give me a last curtain lecture--I see it in your face--but will spare you the trouble. Remember me rather to Lena when you get home. Is she back at Rodeck now?"

"Yes, Your Highness, *now* she is there," said the old man, with heavy emphasis.

"Of course, because I march to France. But be content; I shall return a genuine model of sense and virtue, and then--then I shall marry, too."

"Really?" Stadinger cried in joyful surprise. "How glad the most gracious Court will be."

"That depends," teased Egon. "I may terrorize the most gracious Court with my engagement, and perhaps inflict cramps upon my most gracious Aunt Sophie with it. Don't look so stupid at this, Stadinger. You don't understand it, but I will permit you to crack your head over it during the campaign. But now go, and if we should not see each other again--keep your master in pleasant remembrance."

Stadinger's face took on the grimmest of wrinkles to hide the upwelling tears, but he could not succeed.

"How can Your Highness talk like that?" he muttered. "Shall I, an old man, remain perhaps alone in this world, and not see you any more--so handsome so young and happy! I could not live at that."

"And I have vexed you so much, old Waldgeist," said the young Prince, giving him his hand; "but you are right--we must think of victory and not death. But, when both come together, then death is easy."

The old man bent over his master's hand, and a tear fell upon it.

"I wish I could go, too," he said, under his breath.

"I believe it," laughed Egon; "and you would not look bad as a soldier, in spite of your snow-white hair. But we younger ones have to march now, and you old ones remain at home. Farewell, Stadinger----" He shook his hand cordially. "I really believe you are crying. You ought to be ashamed of yourself. Away with tears and sad anticipations. You will yet read me another lecture."

"May God grant it!" sighed Peter Stadinger, from the depths of his heart. With wet eyes he looked once more into the youthful face, so full of life, smiling at him, so happy and sure of victory. Then he left sadly, with bowed head, realizing how much his young master had grown into his heart.

The Prince cast a glance at the clock. He was to go to his superior, but saw that he had almost an hour yet, so he reached for the newspapers and plunged into the newest dispatches and reports.

A rapid footstep sounded in the ante-room. Egon looked up in surprise. Servants were not in the habit of making such a noise, and callers were always announced. But this caller did not need any announcing, as all the servants knew. All doors were open to him in the house of Prince Adelsberg.

"Hartmut, is it you?"

Egon sprang to his feet in joyful surprise, and cast himself on the breast of the newcomer.

"You back in Germany, and I have no idea of it! You wicked monster, to leave me for fully two months without news of you! Have you come to say good-by to me?"

Hartmut had neither returned the greeting nor the stormy embrace. Silently and gloomily he suffered both, and when he spoke at last, even his tone betrayed nothing of the joy of this *Wiedersehen*.

"I came straight from the depot. I hardly dared hope to find you still here, and yet everything depends upon it for me."

"But why did you not announce your return to me? I wrote you immediately after the declaration of war. You were still in Sicily then, were you not?"

"No; I left there as soon as war seemed unavoidable, and did not receive your letter. I have been in Germany a week."

"And you come to me only now?" said Egon, reproachfully.

Rojanow did not notice this reproach. His eyes rested upon his friend's uniform with almost a jealous expression.

"You are already on duty, I see," he said, hastily. "I also intend to enter the German army."

Egon evidently expected something entirely different. He retreated a step in boundless surprise.

"In the German army? You--a Roumanian?"

"Yes, and therefore I have come to you. Will you make it possible for me?"

"I?" asked the Prince, whose surprise grew greater and greater. "I am nothing more than a young officer. If you are really in earnest in this strange resolve, you must go to one of the standing posts of command."

"I have already done that at various places. I have tried it even in your neighboring state, but they will not accept the stranger. They demand all sorts of papers and references, which I do not possess, and torture me with endless questions. Everywhere suspicion and mistrust affront me. Nobody will understand my resolve."

"To speak the truth, Hartmut, I don't understand it, either," said Egon, solemnly. "You have always showed such a deep antipathy to Germany--you are the son of a country whose higher circles know only French education and customs--which stands in sympathy exclusively with

France. The mistrust of strangers is easily understood. But why do you not turn directly to the Duke, and personally accomplish your desires? You know how prepossessed he is with the poet of 'Arivana.' It will cost you only an audience, which will be granted you at any time, and an order from him will remove every difficulty and admit every exception."

Rojanow's glance fell, and his clouded brow grew darker as he replied: "I know that, but I cannot ask anything from that side. The Duke would put the same questions as all the rest, and I could not withhold the answer from him, and the truth--I cannot tell it to him."

"Not even to me?" asked the Prince, stepping up to him and laying his hand on Hartmut's shoulder. "Why do you insist so persistently upon entering our army? What do you look for under our colors?"

Hartmut passed his hand across his brow, as if to wipe something away from there. Then he replied, heavily and huskily:

"Salvation--or death."

"You return as you went--a puzzle," said Egon, shaking his head. "You have hitherto refused every explanation. Can I not now learn your secret?"

"Obtain me an entrance into your army, and I will tell you everything," Rojanow cried in feverish excitement. "No matter under what conditions, only see that it is granted me. But do not speak to the Duke nor to a general, but turn to one of the lower commanders. Your name, your relationship with the reigning house makes your word powerful. They will not answer Prince Adelsberg with a 'No' when he himself speaks for a volunteer."

"But the same question will be put to him as to you--you, a Roumanian."

"No, no," cried Hartmut, passionately. "If I must confess it to you--I am a German."

The effect of this disclosure was not as great as Hartmut might have feared. The Prince looked at him for a moment, amazed.

"I have thought so at times, for the one who could compose an Arivana in the German language did not get this language by education, but had grown up with it. But you bear the name Rojanow----"

"The name of my mother, who belonged to a Roumanian--Bojar's family. My name is--Hartmut von Falkenried."

His own name sounded strange in his ears, for he had not pronounced it for years; but Egon grew attentive at the name.

"Falkenried? That was the name of the Prussian Colonel who came on that secret mission from Berlin. Are you any connection of his?"

"He is my father."

The young Prince looked compassionately upon his friend, for he saw how terribly hard this confession came to him. He felt that a family drama was hidden here, and, too delicate to investigate further, he only asked: "And you do not want to proclaim yourself the son of your father, not a Falkenried? Every Prussian regiment would be open to you then."

"No, they would be closed to me forever. I fled from the cadets' school ten years ago."

"Hartmut!" Absolute terror was in the exclamation.

"Do you also, like my father, consider me worthy of death for it? You, of course, have grown up in freedom and have no conception of the iron rule which reigns in these institutions; of the tyranny with which one is bent under the yoke of blind obedience. I could not stand it. I was forced to freedom and light. I begged--entreated my father--but in vain. He held me fast in the chain--when I broke it, and fled with my mother."

He uttered this, all with wild, desperate defiance; but his eyes rested anxiously upon the face of his listener. His father, with his severe ideas of honor, had sentenced him; but his friend, who idolized him, who in passionate enthusiasm admired his genius and all that he did--he *must* understand the necessity of his step. But this friend was silent, and in this silence lay the sentence.

CHAPTER XLIX.

"You too, Egon?"

In the tone of the questioner who waited several minutes in vain for an answer, there lay deep bitterness. "And you too, Egon, who have so often told me that nothing should hamper the flight of the poet; that he must break the fetters which would hold him to the ground. I did that--and you would have done the same."

The Prince drew himself up with the firmness of decision.

"No, Hartmut; you are mistaken there. Perhaps I should have fled from a strict school, but from the colors--never!"

Here it was again--the harsh words which he had already heard once before--"fled from the colors." It forced the blood to his brow again.

"Why did you not become an officer?" continued Egon. "You could have become one early at your home; you could have taken your leave then at an age when life only commences. Then you would have been free--honorably."

Hartmut was silent. His father had told him the same, but he had not wanted to wait and submit himself to rules. A barrier had stood in his way, and he simply threw it down unconcernedly. But he threw down duty and honor with it.

"You do not know all that stormed upon me at that time," he replied, heavily. "My mother--I do not wish to accuse her--but she has been my doom. My father had separated from her in early life. I thought her dead, when suddenly she entered my life and snatched me to her with her burning mother love--with her promise of freedom and happiness. She alone is responsible for that unfortunate breaking of my word----"

"What word?" interrupted Egon, excitedly. "Had you sworn to the standard?"

"No, but I had given my father my word to return when he allowed me the last conversation with my mother----"

"Instead of which you fled with her?"

"Yes."

The answer was almost inaudible and was followed by a long pause. The Prince spoke never a word; but in his open, sunny face deep, bitter pain was depicted--the bitterest of his life, for at this moment he lost his so passionately loved friend.

At last Hartmut resumed, but he did not raise his eyes. "You understand now why I want to force an entrance into the army at any price. Now that war has broken out, the man can atone for the boy's sin. Therefore I left Sicily immediately after the first threatening news, and flew as in a storm to Germany. I hoped to be able to hasten to arms. I had no idea of all the difficulties and hindrances which would be put in my way. But you can put them aside, if you intercede for me."

"No, I cannot do that," said Egon, coldly. "After what I have heard just now, this is impossible."

Hartmut turned deathly white and stepped up close to Egon with a vehement gesture.

"You cannot? That means--you will not?"

The Prince was silent.

"Egon!" Wild, stormy entreaty was in the tone. "You know I have never made a request of you--this is the first and last one. But now I beg--entreat you for this friendly service. It is the relief from the doom which has hung over me since that hour. The reconciliation with my father--the reconciliation with myself--you must help me!"

"I cannot," repeated the Prince. "The rejection to which you have been subjected may hurt you deeply--I believe it--but it is only just. You have broken with your fatherland--with your duties--and that cannot be mended so easily without anything further, when one has become of a different opinion. You fled from the service of our standard--you, the son of an officer! Now the army is closed to you, and you must bear it."

"And you tell me that so calmly--so coldly!" cried Hartmut, beside himself. "Do you not see that it is a question of life or death to me? I saw my father again that day at Rodeck, when he hastened to the deathbed of Wallmoden. He crushed me with his contempt--with the awful words he threw into my face. It was that which drove me away from Germany, which chased me ceaselessly from place to place. His words went with me and made life a hell to me. I have greeted the war cry as a deliverance. I want to fight for the fatherland which I once cast from me,

and now the door which is open to every one is closed to me alone. Egon, you turn from me! Oh--there is only one way left for me!"

With a sudden, passionate motion he turned to the table, where the Prince's pistols were lying; but the Prince sprang at him and tore him back.

"Hartmut, are you out of your senses?"

"Perhaps I shall be so. All of you torture me beyond endurance."

Boundless despair lay in those words.

Egon, too, had turned pale, and his voice trembled as he said: "Before it goes so far--I will try to find an opening in a regiment for you."

"At last! I thank you."

"However, I cannot promise you anything, for the Duke has to be put altogether aside now. Besides, he leaves to-morrow for the battlefield. Should he learn later on that you serve in his corps, we shall then be in the midst of the storm of war, and one does not ask 'How' and 'Why' in the face of a completed fact. But it may take days before the decision arrives. Will you be my guest?"

Formerly the Prince would have accepted that as only natural and would have been exasperated if his friend had refused; now he made the inquiry, and Hartmut felt what lay in the cold question.

"No, I shall not remain in town," he replied. "I shall go to the Forester at Rodeck, and I beg that you will send your answer there. I can return here in a few hours."

"As you wish. Then you will not go to the castle?"

Hartmut gazed at him with a long, sad look.

"No; to the Forester's. Farewell, Egon."

"Farewell."

They parted without a pressure of the hand, without a further word, and when the door closed behind him, Hartmut knew that he had lost the friend who had idolized him. Judged here, too--and cast out! He had to atone terribly for the old guilt.

CHAPTER L.

Over the Wald hung a dark, cloudy sky, which, from time to time, sent down showers of rain. Gray mists clung around the heights, and storms raged through the crowns of the trees. It was a regular autumn day in the middle of summer.

The mistress of Ostwalden was alone at her castle. She had received news from her brother that he had already left, and that the meeting planned between them could not take place. Therefore Adelaide had postponed her departure to be present at the marriage of Willibald and Marietta, which was quietly celebrated in the presence of the nearest relatives.

The young couple had left for Berlin, where Willibald was to join his regiment immediately. His young wife wished to remain near him the few days before the order came to march. From there she was to go to Burgsdorf, whither her mother-in-law had preceded her.

The morning hours had not yet passed when Prince Adelsberg drove up to the castle of Ostwalden. He had asked for leave of absence to-day to "arrange some important matters"; but the important matters did not carry him to Rodeck, but to Ostwalden. He came to say farewell to Adelaide, whom he had not seen since that first visit.

As his carriage entered the castle yard, they met the priest of the neighboring village with the holy sacrament, and attendant chorister. Apparently the last rites had been administered to one seriously ill. The Prince inquired to whom the sad visit had been paid, and learned that it was to one of the inspectors of the estate, and that the mistress of the castle was at present with the dying man; but the guest should be announced to her instantly.

Egon restlessly paced up and down the reception room, into which he had been shown. He had come here to obtain an assurance, without which he did not feel able to march into a campaign of life or death; and the uncertainty with which such a campaign was ever taken, must serve as apology for thus approaching a young widow still in deep mourning. It need not yet be a proposal. He wanted to take with him only a hope the promise of which had risen so brightly at their last meeting, when Adelaide had shown such warm interest in his sorrow about his absent friend. He did not dream that he had made a fatal mistake. Still, in spite of this, a deep shadow rested upon the face of the Prince, usually so cheerful. It was not the leave-taking which gave him pain, for he went to the battlefield with glowing enthusiasm and the happy faith of youth, which dreams only of victory, and rejects all dark prospects. Besides, he dreamed of another happiness in the future, which he wished to secure now.

The door opened to admit Frau von Wallmoden.

"I beg your pardon for detaining you so long, Your Highness," she said, after the first greetings. "It was probably told you that I was beside a deathbed?"

"I learned so upon my arrival," replied Egon, who had hastened to meet her. "Is the case really so serious?"

"Alas, yes! poor Tanner! He used to be tutor in a family in the neighborhood, but had to give up his position on account of a serious illness. At the request of the Chief Forester, I gave him employment in cataloguing my husband's library, which had been sent to Ostwalden, and it was hoped that he would quite recover in the easy office and the invigorating forest air. He was so grateful for it, and told me only yesterday how happy his mother was that he should be excused from military service, on account of not being yet quite well. But suddenly this morning he had a hemorrhage, and the physician tells me that he can live but an hour longer. It is awful to see a young life bleed to death like that!"

"And yet this will happen to thousands in the next few weeks," said Egon, gravely. "Have you been with the poor man?"

"Yes, at his request. He knew how it was with him, and wished to lay a prayer upon my heart for his old mother, who loses in him her only support. I have calmed his mind on that subject, but it was all I could do for him----"

One could see how deeply the scene at the deathbed had impressed the young widow, and Egon, too, felt deep compassion at the narrative.

"I come to say farewell," he said, after a short pause. "We march the day after to-morrow, and I could not deny myself a visit to you once more. I am happy to have found you here, as I understand you intend leaving soon."

"Yes, for Berlin. Lonely Ostwalden is so far remote, and in this time of feverish expectation one wishes to be as near the centre of communications and connections as possible. I am anxious about my brother, who has joined the standard."

Again a pause ensued, and the Prince was about to break it with expression of what lay so near his heart, when Frau von Wallmoden anticipated him with a question, asked with apparent indifference, but in a voice which trembled slightly:

"You were in much anxiety about the non-arrival of news of your friend at your last visit, Your Highness. Have you heard from him yet?"

Egon's eyes fell, and the shadow which had been dispelled during the conversation returned, heavily and gloomily, to his face.

"Yes," he replied, coldly. "Rojanow is back in Germany."

"Since the declaration of war?"

"Yes, he came----"

"To join the army! Oh, I knew it!"

The Prince looked at her amazed.

"You knew it, Your Excellency? I thought you had known Hartmut as a Roumanian only, and through me."

A deep blush suffused the cheeks of the young Frau von Wallmoden. She felt the exclamation had been a betrayal, but she quickly regained composure. "I became acquainted with Herr Rojanow last fall, when he was your guest at Rodeck," she answered, composedly; "but I have known his father for long years, and he---- I suppose your Highness knows all that has happened?"

"Yes, I know it now," said Egon, with heavy emphasis.

"Colonel Falkenried was a near friend of my father's and visited our house frequently, although I had never heard of his son. I had considered the Colonel childless until that awful hour at Rodeck, the day my husband died. Then I learned the truth, and was a witness of a meeting between father and son."

The Prince breathed a sigh of relief at this explanation, which dispelled the disastrous thought just dawning upon him.

"I understand your concern, then," he replied. "Colonel Falkenried is, indeed, to be pitied."

"He only?" asked Adelaide, struck by the harsh tone of the last words. "And your friend?"

"I have no friend--I have lost him!" cried Egon, with passionate pain. "What he confessed to me two days ago opened an abyss between us, and what I know now parts us forever."

"You judge the misdemeanor of a seventeen-year-old lad very severely. He must have been only a boy then."

A deep reproach lay in the words of the young widow; but the Prince shook his head vehemently.

"I do not speak of that flight and that breaking of his word, although they weigh heavily with the son of an officer. But what I heard yesterday--I see you do not yet know the worst, gracious lady, and how should you? Spare me this report."

Adelaide had turned pale, and her eyes, full of fear, hung fixed upon the speaker.

CHAPTER LI.

"I beg of Your Highness," Adelaide commenced again, "to tell me the truth--the whole truth. You said that Herr Rojanow had returned to join the army. I had thought he would--had expected it--for it is the only thing by which he can atone for his old guilt. Has he joined the standard already?"

"Happily it has not gone so far, and that has spared me a heavy responsibility," said Egon, with supreme bitterness. "He reported to several regiments, but was refused everywhere."

"Refused! But why?"

"Because he did not dare to confess himself a German, and because a very just suspicion was raised toward the strange Roumanian. One has to be cautious at the present time that no--spies may force their way into the ranks of our armies."

"For God's sake, what do you mean?" cried Adelaide, who began now to comprehend the situation.

Egon sprang up in great excitement and drew nearer.

"If you wish, then, to know it, gracious lady--listen. Hartmut came to me and requested me to use my influence to make the entrance into one of our regiments possible to him. I refused at first, but he forced me to consent by a threat which was hardly meant seriously. I kept my word and asked one of our higher officers, whose brother was secretary to our embassy at Paris and who had just returned from there with him. This gentleman was present at our interview. He heard the name, Rojanow--inquired further into the matter and gave me disclosures; I cannot repeat them. I have loved Hartmut as I have nothing else upon this earth--have almost idolized him. I let myself be carried away by the force of his genius, and now I learn that the friend who was everything to me is a monster; that he and his mother did service as spies at Paris. Perhaps he wished to do the same in our army!"

He covered his eyes with his hand, and there was something awful in the agony of the young man whose idol had been so ruthlessly shattered.

Adelaide had risen, and the hand with which she leaned upon the back of the chair trembled.

"And what have you--has he--answered to that?"

"Do you mean Rojanow? I have not seen him since and shall not see him again. I shall spare myself and him that much. He is now at the forestry at Rodeck and awaits my answer there. I

have notified him in three lines of what I learned, without adding a remark or a word. He has probably received the letter and will understand it sufficiently."

"Good God! that will drive him to his death," Adelaide burst forth. "How could you do it! How could you judge the unfortunate one without hearing him!"

"The unfortunate one!" repeated the Prince cuttingly. "Do you really consider him that?"

"Yes, for I do not hear these awful accusations for the first time. His father cast them in his face at that meeting."

"Well, if even his own father accuses him----"

"The deeply offended, deeply embittered man! He cannot have an unbiased judgment, but you--the friend of Hartmut--you, who stood so near him--you ought to have stepped in and defended him."

Egon looked with questioning surprise upon the excited lady.

"You appear to wish to do so now, Your Excellency," he said slowly. "I cannot do it, for there is too much in Hartmut's life which confirms the suspicion. It explains everything to me that has hitherto seemed mysterious. These are quite decided facts upon which the accusation is based----"

"Against the mother! She has ever been the doom--the ruin--of her son; but he did not know the shameful work to which she had fallen; he lived at her side ignorant of it. I saw how he broke down when his father uttered the awful words--how he struggled against it as in a death struggle. That was truth--that was the despair of a man who is being punished more deeply than he has transgressed. That flight--that breaking of his word--robs him now of the faith of those who stand nearest to him. But if his father and his friend both so judge him--*I believe in him!* It is not true! He is not guilty!"

She had drawn herself fully erect in her stormy excitement. Her cheeks glowed; her eyes sparkled, and her tone and words contained that convincing passion which only love knows when defending the loved one.

Egon stood there transfixed and looked at her. There it was--the awakening, of which he had often dreamed, Fire and life glowed there now--a blooming world arose from the ice; but it was another who had called it forth.

"I do not dare to decide as to whether you are right, gracious lady," said the Prince in a toneless voice, after a brief silence. "I only know one thing. Whether Hartmut be guilty or not, he is enviable in this hour."

Adelaide shrank back; she understood the hint and lowered her head mutely before the reproachful glance.

"I came to say farewell," continued Egon. "I intended to add a question--a prayer--to this leave-taking, but that is over now. I have only to bid you farewell."

Adelaide raised her eyes, in which hot tears glistened, and offered her hand.

"Farewell, and may God take you in His care and keeping during the campaign!"

But Prince Adelsberg shook his head silently.

"What shall I do with life?" he finally cried in overwhelming sorrow. "I should like best--no, do not look at me so entreatingly! I know now that I made a fatal mistake, and I will not torture you with a confession; but, Adelaide, I would gladly die could I buy with death the look and tone you had just now for another. Farewell!"

Once more he pressed her hand to his lips, then hastened away.

CHAPTER LII.

The storm had increased in violence during the afternoon. It roamed in the forest, dashed among the open heights and chased the clouds over the sky with increasing wrath. It raged with full force around that forest height which had once witnessed such a significant encounter

between two people, but the man who leaned there now alone and lonely at the trunk of a tree did not seem to feel it, for he stood immovable in the midst of it.

Hartmut's face was deathly pale; a stony, unnatural calm rested upon it, and the sparkle of the eyes had died out, while the hair fell heavy and damp over his brow. The storm had torn his hat from his head; he had noticed it as little as the rain which drenched him.

He had found himself at this place after hours of roaming through the forest--here, where a remembrance drew him unconsciously. It was the right place for his purpose.

The news which had been looked for so feverishly had finally come; no letter; nothing but a few lines without any preface, and with only the signature, "Egon--Prince Adelsberg." But in these lines there lay annihilation for him who received them. Cast out forever--judged by his friend without a hearing! Doom had awfully fulfilled itself in the son of Zalika.

The crashing of a huge limb which broke under the pressure of the storm and fell whizzing to the ground, aroused Hartmut from his despairing revery. He had not even started at the crash, but slowly turned his glance to the heavy mass which fell close to him. A foot nearer and it would have struck him--would perhaps have made an end of all the shame and torture in one moment; but death was not made so easy for him. That blessing came to him only who loved life--he who wished to throw it away must do so with his own hand.

Hartmut took the gun from his shoulder and put the butt to the ground; then he laid his hand upon his breast to find the right place. Once more he glanced up to the veiled skies with their scudding masses of clouds, and down to the little dark forest lake in the deceiving meadow, over which the fog clustered as at that time at home. The beckoning, charming will-o'-the-wisp had appeared to him there; he had followed the flame of the depths, and now it drew him down hopelessly; there was no further rising into the heights where other, brighter lights shone. A bullet in the heart and everything would be at an end.

He was about to grasp the trigger when he heard his name called in a tone of deadly anxiety. A slender figure in a dark cloak sprang toward him from the edge of the forest, and the weapon fell from his hand, for he gazed into the face of Adelaide, who stood trembling before him.

Moments passed without a word from either. It was Hartmut who recovered first.

"You here, gracious lady?" he asked with enforced calmness. "Are you out in the forest in this weather?"

"I should like to put the same question to you."

"I have been hunting, but the weather is unpropitious, and I was about to discharge my gun----"

He did not finish, for the sad, reproachful glance upon him told that the lie was in vain. He broke off and looked gloomily before him. Adelaide, too, gave up all pretense, and in her voice all her anxiety trembled as she cried: "Herr von Falkenried, what did you intend to do?"

"What would have now been done had you not interfered," said Hartmut, harshly. "And believe me, gracious lady, it would have been better if coincidence had brought you here a few moments later."

"It was no coincidence. I was at the forestry at Rodeck, and heard that you had been gone for hours. An awful presentiment drove me to look for you here. I was almost sure I should find you here."

"You looked for me? Me, Ada?" His voice shook at the question. "How did you know that I was at the forestry?"

"Through Prince Adelsberg, who called to see me this morning. You received a letter from him?"

"No, only a communication," returned Hartmut with quivering lips. "No single word was directed to me personally in the short lines; they brought only a communication in a business tone which the Prince thought necessary. I fully understood it."

Adelaide was silent; she had known it would drive him to suicide. Slowly she walked with him under the protection of the trees, for it was hardly possible to keep erect out in the open space in this raging storm, but Hartmut did not seem to feel it.

"You know the contents of the communication--I see that you do," he commenced again, "and it is not new to you, either. You overheard what happened that night at Rodeck, but believe me, Ada, what I felt at that moment when you stood before me in that ghostly glow which shone through that night, and it grew clear to me that I had been ground into the dust before you--what I felt might have satisfied even my father's vengeance, might have atoned for all my sin."

"You do him wrong," replied the young widow solemnly. "You saw him only in the stern, iron inflexibility with which he cast you from him. I saw him differently after you had gone. He broke

down there in wild anguish; he then let me look into the heart of a despairing father who loved his son above everything. Have you not made an attempt since then to convince him?"

"No; he would believe me as little as Egon does. He who has once broken his word, has lost forever their faith, even if he would regain it with his life. Perhaps my death upon the battlefield would have enlightened them, but when I fall now by my own hand they will see in it only the deed of a despairing man--a guilty one--and will despise me even in my grave."

"Not everybody will do that," said Adelaide lowly. "I believe in you, Hartmut, in spite of everything."

He looked at her, and through the gloomy hopelessness of his soul there flamed something of the old fire.

"You, Ada? And you tell me that upon this spot where you cast me off? You did not know anything about me then----"

"And for that reason I shuddered before the man to whom nothing was sacred--who recognized no law but his will and his passions; but that winter night, when I saw you at your father's feet, showed me that you fell more through doom than guilt. Since then I have known that you can and must cast that unfortunate inheritance from your mother far from you. Rouse yourself, Hartmut. The road which I then showed you is still open; whether it leads to life or death--it leads upward."

He shook his head gloomily.

"No, that is past. You have no conception of what my father has done to me with his terrible words. What my life has been since then I--but let me be silent about it; nobody can grasp it; but I thank you for your faith in me, Ada. Death is made easier to me through that faith."

The young widow made a quick motion toward the weapon which lay at his feet.

"For God's sake, no! You dare not do that!"

"What am I to do with life?" Hartmut burst forth with terrible vehemence. "My mother has branded me as with a red-hot iron, and this closes to me every way to atonement--to salvation. I am cast out from the ranks of my people, where even the poorest peasant can fight; a privilege which is denied only to the dishonorable criminal, is denied also to me, for I am nothing else in Egon's eyes. He fears that I might become a traitor--a spy to my own brothers!"

He covered his face with both hands, and the last words died in a sob; then he felt a hand touch his arm gently.

"The brand is extinguished with the name Rojanow. Throw that from you, Hartmut; I bring you what you tried in vain to obtain--entrance into the army!"

Hartmut started and gazed at her in unbelief.

"Impossible! How could you----"

"Take these papers," interrupted Adelaide, drawing forth a package. "They are made out in the name of Joseph Tanner 29 years old, slender, with dark complexion, black hair and eyes--you see everything will suit--with these nobody will refuse you an entrance as a volunteer."

She gave him the papers, around which his right hand closed spasmodically as upon the most precious jewel.

"And these papers?" he asked, still doubting.

"Belong to a dead man. They were given me for another purpose, but the deceased has no further use for them and will pardon me if with them I save a living man."

Hartmut stormily opened the package. The wind almost tore the sheets from his hand and he was scarcely able to decipher the contents as the young widow continued:

"Joseph Tanner had a small office at Ostwalden, when seized with a hemorrhage this morning. He had but a few hours to live and gave me his last words and mementos for his mother. The poor woman shall receive everything--every letter, every scrap which can be a solace to her, but I have taken the official papers--for you. We do not rob anybody in doing this, for they are valueless to the mother to whom they now belong. Perhaps a strict judge would call that deceit, but I gladly shoulder the blame, and God will pardon it, and so will the fatherland."

Hartmut closed the case and hid it in his breast, which heaved under a deep, deep breath. Then he drew himself up and pushed the rain-soaked locks from the high brow, so like his father's--his only inheritance from the Falkenrieds, but which gave him an unmistakable resemblance to them.

"You are right, Ada," he said. "I cannot thank you in words for what you have done for me. Words have no power, but--I shall strive to deserve it."

"I know that. Farewell and--*auf wiedersehen!*"

"No, do not wish that," said Hartmut gloomily. "Death in battle can exonerate me to myself, but not to my father or Egon, for they would never hear of it; and if I remained among the living the old stain would return; but when I fall, tell them who rests under the foreign name. Perhaps then they will believe you and remove the curse from my grave."

"Do you want to fall?" asked Adelaide with plaintive reproach, "even if I tell you that you sadden me inexpressibly?"

"Sadden you, Ada!" he cried passionately. "Do you no longer shudder at my love--at the fate which drew us together? Oh, I might have possessed the highest happiness, for you are--free; but it comes near to me now for only a fleeting moment, and vanishes again into unattainable heights, like the form of the legend who bears your name in my drama. Nevertheless, it has approached me, and I may be permitted for once only to clasp it to me in farewell."

He drew her to him and pressed a kiss upon the brow of his love, who leaned against him sobbing.

"Hartmut, promise me that you will not seek death."

"No; but it will know how to find me. Farewell, my own Ada."

He tore himself away hastily. Adelaide remained alone. The storm roared above her head; the giant crowns of the trees moaned and swayed; the storm sang its wild song on and on, but suddenly over in the west there flamed a dark-red rent through the clouds. It was only for a brief moment--only one solitary ray of the sinking sun, but it shiningly illumined the forest height and the departing one, who turned once more and sent back a last greeting. Then the clouds massed together again, and the ray was extinguished.

CHAPTER LIII.

The reddish, flickering glow of a wood fire lighted up the interior of a small, isolated house which had formerly served as a dwelling to a station-keeper, but was now pressed into service for the sentinels of the outpost. The room did not bear an expression of cosiness with its bare, smoked walls, low ceiling and small, barricaded windows, but the tremendous logs which flared and burned in the uncouth stone fireplace offered a very welcome warmth, for it was bitterly cold out of doors, and the whole country was buried in the snow of a severe winter.

The regiment here was hardly better off than their comrades before Paris, although they belonged to the Southern army corps.

At present two young officers were entering, and the one who still held the door open called laughingly to the one preceding: "Please bend down, Herr Comrade, or you might take our door frame along, for our villa is in rather a dilapidated condition, as you see."

The warning was not without need, for the giant figure of the guest--a Prussian Lieutenant of the Reserve--was not at all in proportion to the door. Nevertheless, he succeeded in entering safely and looked around at the four walls, while his companion, who wore the uniform of a South German regiment, continued: "Permit me to offer you a seat in our 'salon,' which is not so bad considering the circumstances. We have already had it worse during the campaign. So you are looking for Stahlberg? He is with my comrade out at the post, but will probably return directly. You will have to be patient for a quarter of an hour."

"With pleasure," assured the Prussian. "I see from that that Eugene's injury is really as slight as he reported. I looked for him in the hospital, and heard that he was making a visit to the outposts, but as we shall probably march on by to-morrow, I did not wish to let this opportunity pass by unimproved, and therefore came to see him now."

"His wound was indeed only slight--a shot in the arm, which is already far advanced toward healing, but will, nevertheless, disable him for service for a short time. You are a friend of Stahlberg?"

"Yes, and connected besides through the marriage of his sister. I see that you do not remember me, Your Highness. Let me give you my name--Willibald von Eschenhagen. We met last year----"

"At Furstenstein," interrupted Egon von Adelsberg quickly. "Certainly, now I remember you perfectly. It is remarkable how the uniform changes one; I really did not know you at first."

He glanced with a half-admiring look at the once awkward country squire who had appeared so ridiculous to him, but who now possessed a stately, military appearance.

It was not the uniform alone, though, which had changed Willibald so completely. What love had begun the campaign had finished by tearing him from the accustomed surroundings and circumstances. The young Baron had not only, as his Uncle Schonan expressed it, "become a man," but had developed into a true, genuine man.

"Our meeting at that time was a brief one," continued the Prince, "but nevertheless you will permit me to offer my congratulations? You are betrothed----"

"I believe you are under a mistake, Your Highness," interrupted Willibald with some embarrassment. "Although I had been introduced to you at Furstenstein as the future son-in-law of the house, but----"

"That has been changed," finished Egon, smiling. "I knew it, for the comrade of whom I spoke just now is Lieutenant Waldorf, the happy fiancé of Baroness Schonan. My words were meant for Fraulein Marietta Volkmar."

"At present Frau von Eschenhagen."

"What! You are already married?"

"Have been for five months. We were married just before marching orders came, and my wife is now at Burgsdorf with my mother."

"Then accept my congratulations on your marriage. But really, Herr Comrade, I ought to call you to account for the unwarrantable damage you have done to art. Please tell your wife that, as far as I can learn out here in the campaign, the entire Residenz still mourns her loss in sackcloth and ashes."

"I shall not forget it, although I fear the Residenz has not much time for such mourning at present. Ah, the gentlemen are returning--I hear Eugene's voice."

Steps were heard outside and the expected ones entered. Young Stahlberg greeted his relative with an exclamation of the most joyful surprise. He had not seen Willibald during the campaign, although both served in the same army corps. He still bore his arm in a sling, but otherwise looked well and happy.

Eugene did not possess the beauty of his sister, and the feature of decided will-power which the daughter had inherited from her father was missing. The son showed a gentle, more conciliatory nature in his appearance as well as demeanor, but still he resembled his sister closely, which might have been the cause of Prince Adelsberg's intimacy with him.

His companion, a handsome young officer with sparkling, saucy eyes, now approached, and the Prince performed the introduction.

"I will not fear that the gentlemen will challenge each other when I mention the names," he said, jestingly. "They are obliged to be called--so then, Herr von Eschenhagen--Herr von Waldorf."

"God forbid! For my part I am peace personified," cried Waldorf gayly. "Herr von Eschenhagen, I am glad to meet the cousin of my fiancée, and so much more so because he is already in the bonds of holy matrimony. We also would have liked to do as you did--marry before the march--but my father-in-law put on his grimmest mien and declared, 'Gain victory first and then marry.' Well, we have done the first continually for five months, and as soon as I return home I shall speedily ask for the second."

He cordially shook the hand of his bride-elect's former fiancé, then turned to the Prince.

"We brought along something for Your Highness--something we seized outside. Orderly of Rodeck, advance to His Highness--the Lieutenant, Prince Adelsberg."

The door opened, and in spite of the gathering twilight the Prince recognized the wrinkled face and snow-white hair of him who entered. He started.

"All good spirits defend us! It is Peter Stadinger!"

It was, indeed, the live Stadinger who stood before his young master. He did not seem to be wholly a stranger to the others, for although they now saw him for the first time, they greeted his appearance with the liveliest joy.

"Above everything, let us have light to take a good look at the 'Waldgeist' of His Highness," cried Waldorf, lighting candles and holding them with comical solemnity close before the old man.

Egon laughed.

"You see, Stadinger, what a well-known and frequently spoken of person you are here. Now let me introduce you in proper form. Behold here, gentlemen, Peter Stadinger--celebrated for his unequaled churlishness and his moral lectures, which make one quake. He probably thinks I cannot exist without them, and he will doubtless give to me here also upon the battlefield the satisfaction of this friendly habit. I hope that some of it will fall upon your heads, gentlemen--and now begin, Stadinger!"

But the old man, instead of obeying, grasped the hand of his master in both of his and said in a heartrending tone: "Ach, Your Highness, how we have trembled and feared for you at Rodeck!"

"Well, that is polite!" said Eugene Stahlberg, but the Prince assumed a displeased air.

"So? And you therefore took to your legs speedily and left everything to go topsy-turvy at Rodeck. I should not have thought you would neglect your duty like that!"

Stadinger looked at him in doubting perplexity.

"But I have come according to orders. Your Highness has written me to make haste and come and take Louis from the hospital--you would attend to the travel and everything. I arrived this noon, and found the lad as well as could be expected. The doctor thinks I can take him home with me in a week, for then all danger would be over. But the kindness Your Highness has shown to Louis and all the others from Rodeck who are in the army can never be told. May God reward you a thousand times!"

Egon withdrew his hand impatiently.

"It is 'Herr Lieutenant' now, remember that. I insist upon my military title--and what does this mean, now that when I count upon your churlishness you are meek as a lamb and give us a pathetic scene! I forbid it! This Louis, gentlemen, is a grandson of this old Waldgeist--a fine, brave fellow, but he has a sister who is much handsomer. I am sorry to say this senseless grandfather sends her away regularly when I go to Rodeck. Why did Lena not come along? You should have thought of bringing her."

This proved effective against the meekness and affection, which were as unusual as embarrassing.

Stadinger drew himself up rigidly and replied with his usual terseness: "I believed Your Highness had no time here in the war to think about such foolishness."

"Aha, now it is coming!" said the Prince under his breath to Waldorf, who stood beside him, but aloud he continued: "That is where you are very much mistaken. A fellow gets uncivilized in the war, and when I return home again----"

"Then Your Highness has promised to get married at last," reminded the old man in the most emphatic tone, which called forth general laughter among the young officers. Egon joined it, but his laugh sounded forced, just as did his reply:

"Yes, yes; I have promised, but I have reconsidered the matter in the meantime. I may keep my word in ten years or perhaps in twenty, but no sooner."

Stadinger, who in spite of the command would not have used the title of Lieutenant under any consideration, because that would be a humiliation to the ducal family in his eyes, flew into a high state of indignation and gave free vent to it.

"If I do not almost believe it! If Your Highness has really for once a sensible thought, it does not hold good for twenty-four hours--and your sacred father a married man, too! Man has to marry, anyhow, and all foolishness stops of its own accord after marriage."

"Now that he is in the run of it, gentlemen, let him moralize to you," cried Egon, and the young officers, to whom this was great fun, teased the poor Stadinger until he lost all respect and exhibited himself in the full halo of his admonitory nature.

Half an hour later Willibald and Eugene Stahlberg approached the Prince to take leave.

"You march on by to-morrow?" he asked.

"At daybreak. We march toward R----, where Major-General von Falkenried is stationed with his brigade, though it will take several days to reach there, for the whole country between here and the fortress is occupied by the enemy, and we have to clear our way."

"But tell the General, Willy, that I shall follow in at least a week," said Eugene. "It is bad enough that I have to remain behind so long on account of a shot wound not worth mentioning. Next week I shall report myself well, whatever the doctor may say, and after that I shall join my regiment without delay--I hope before the capture of R----"

"You must, indeed, make haste then," said Egon, "for resistance does not last long usually

where General Falkenried stands; we have seen that often enough. He is always in front with his men always the first to storm a place, and has already won inconceivable things. It seems as if no impossibility exists for him."

"But he has the good luck to be always put in the front," grumbled Lieutenant Waldorf. "Now again he is to take R----, while we lie here, God knows how long. And he will take possession of it--there is no doubt of that--perhaps he has taken it already. News reaches us only by roundabout ways so long as the enemy stands between us."

He arose to escort the two gentlemen out, while the Prince remained behind.

Standing before the fire with folded arms, he gazed into it, and his face bore an expression not in accordance with the gayety which he had but now been showing. Seriously, yet gloomily, he looked into the dancing flames, and the shadow would not leave his usually sunny eyes.

He seemed to have forgotten the presence of Stadinger, but as the latter made himself heard by clearing his throat, he started.

"Ah, you are still here? Remember me to Louis and tell him I will come to see him again to-morrow. We don't have to say farewell yet, as you remain here for the present. You did not think we had such gay times here? Yes, one makes life easy as possible when one has to be ready every day to lose it."

The old man stood before his master and looked sharply into his eyes, then he spoke half aloud:

"Yes, the gentlemen were gay and Your Highness the gayest of all but you are not happy in spite of it."

"I? What do you mean? Why should I not be happy?"

"I don't know that, but still I see it," insisted Stadinger. "When Your Highness used to come from Furstenstein, or were up to all sorts of things with Herr Rojanow, you looked different and laughed different, and just now when you looked into the fire it seemed to me as if Your Highness had something very heavy upon your heart."

"Get away with all your observations!" cried Egon, to whom his old Waldgeist was again becoming uncomfortable. "Do you suppose we are always jolly? I should say that when one has the bloody battlefield always before the mind, earnest thoughts come near."

Nothing could be said to that, and Stadinger remained silent, but he could not be deceived. He knew quite well that something was wrong with his young master, and that something was hidden behind this ostensibly exhibited gayety.

CHAPTER LIV.

Lieutenant Waldorf re-entered the room, but left the door open. "Come right in here," he called to the man hesitating outside. "Here is an orderly from the Seventh Regiment with a report. Well, don't you hear, orderly? Come in!"

The repetition of the order sounded very impatient. The soldier who stood upon the threshold hesitated there, and had even made a start back, as if he wished to return to the darkness outside. He now obeyed, but kept close to the door, so that his face remained in the dusk.

"Do you come from the outposts at the Capellenberg?" asked Waldorf.

"At your command, Herr Lieutenant."

Egon, who had turned indifferently, started at the sound of that voice. He made a hasty step forward, then stopped as if suddenly recollecting himself, but his eyes were fixed with an almost terrified expression upon the speaker.

As far as could be discerned in the semi-darkness he was a tall young fellow in the coarse cloak of the common soldier, with helmet upon his closely-cut hair. He stood there, rigidly immovable, and delivered his report correctly, but his voice had a peculiarly choked, hollow sound.

"From Captain Salfeld," he reported. "We have seized a suspicious character, dressed as a peasant, but probably from the French reserve, who tried to steal into the fortress. What writings he had with him----"

"Do come nearer," commanded Waldorf, impatiently. "We cannot half understand you."

The soldier obeyed, drawing near to the officers. The light now fell full and sharp upon his features, but his face bore an ashy paleness; the teeth were tightly closed, and the eyes were fastened to the floor.

Egon's hand clutched the hilt of his sabre convulsively, and only by an effort he suppressed the stormy exclamation which was forced to his lips, while Stadinger, with wide-open eyes, glared at the man, who now continued: "The writings which he had with him were not of much account, but contained hints which he was probably to fill out verbally. The Captain thinks that if he were strictly examined, more could be learned, and asks now whether he shall send the prisoner here or to headquarters."

The report was neither surprising nor unusual. It often happened that suspicious people were seized. The enemy's reserve tried obstinately to obtain connection with the fortress; perhaps they kept it up in spite of all the watchfulness of the besiegers: but Prince Adelsberg seemed to have to struggle for breath before he could give the answer.

"I beg the Captain to send the prisoner here. We shall be relieved in two hours and then we march straight to headquarters. I shall attend to the fellow."

"I hope he can be made to speak when he is seriously pressed," remarked Waldorf. "He would not be the first whose heart had fallen when his position became clear to him. Well, we shall see."

The soldier stood there awaiting his dismissal; not a muscle quivered in his face, but neither did he raise his eyes from the floor. Egon had now collected himself, and, retaining the assumed ignorance, he asked in the curt tone of the superior:

"Do you belong to the Seventh Regiment?"

"At your command, Herr Lieutenant."

"Your name?"

"Joseph Tanner."

"Drawn?"

"No, volunteer."

"Since when?"

"Since the 30th of July."

"You have been in the whole campaign?"

"Yes, Herr Lieutenant."

"Very well; now take the message to your Captain."

The soldier saluted, turned upon his heel and left.

Waldorf, who had been a little surprised at the examination, but had not attached any importance to it, looked after him, shrugging his shoulders.

"Those out at the Capellenberg have the worst time of it. No rest by day or night; taxed to the utmost, and with all that they are often ordered to help the pioneer corps. The poor fellows work there in the hard, frozen ground until the sweat runs in streams from their brows, and their hands bleed. Our people surely are better off."

He left the room to appoint an orderly to guard the expected prisoner and give him the necessary instructions; but Egon tore the window open and leaned out; it seemed as if he should suffocate.

Then he heard Stadinger's voice behind him in subdued tones, which nevertheless betrayed the greatest terror.

"Your Highness."

"What is it?" Egon asked without turning.

"Has not Your Highness seen?"

"What?"

"The orderly who was here just now. That was Herr Rojanow as sure as he lives and breathes."

Egon saw that presence of mind was needed here, so he turned around and said coldly: "I believe you see ghosts."

"But, Your Highness----"

"Nonsense! there may be a little resemblance. I noticed it myself, therefore I wanted to know the name of the man. You heard that it was Joseph Tanner."

"But still it was the real live Herr Rojanow," cried the unshakable Stadinger, whose sharp eyes could not be deceived. "Only the black locks were gone and the proud, haughty manner, but it was his voice."

"Get away from me with your fancies!" Egon broke out angrily. "You know that Herr Rojanow is in Sicily, but here you want to trace him in an orderly of the Seventh Regiment. It is truly worse than ridiculous."

Stadinger held his peace. It was, indeed, ridiculous and impossible, and consequently was his young Prince so ungracious. He felt offended that a common soldier should be confounded with his friend. And really the haughty Rojanow, who understood how to command from the very bottom of his heart, and had often chased all the servants at Rodeck helter-skelter with his orders--and the orderly who had been snubbed by Lieutenant Waldorf because he did not speak loud enough--were two ever so different things. If only it had not been for the voice!

"Think, Your Highness," besought the old man, who was now wavering.

"I think that you are an old seer of spirits," said Egon more mildly. "Go into your quarters and sleep away the fatigue of your journey, or you will be finding some more resemblances. Good-night!"

Stadinger obeyed and took his leave. Fortunately he had not known Joseph Tanner, who had only been at Ostwalden a few weeks, and the encounter had put him in such a fright that the partly concealed excitement of his master passed quite unnoticed by him. But he clung to his doubts; the thing was strange--very strange.

When the Prince found himself alone he began to pace the floor in violent excitement. So! what he had refused his former friend had been enforced. Joseph Tanner! He plainly remembered the name, which had been mentioned to him at Ostwalden, and he knew now whose hand had opened for Hartmut the ranks of the army which had been closed to a Rojanow.

What will not the love of a woman attain!--a woman who desires to see her love exonerated at any price. She herself had sent him out into danger and death--to save him for life and--herself. Jealousy rose wild and hot in Egon's breast at the thought, and with it that awful suspicion, not yet overcome, raised its head again threateningly. Did Hartmut really wish to atone only in this war? Was not his presence at the outposts a danger, for which one was responsible if he kept it a secret?

Then came back to the Prince's mind the pale, gloomy face of the man to-night--the friend who had once been so dear to him, and who must have suffered agonies of torture at this encounter, far exceeding his imagination. He well knew Hartmut's unbending pride, and this pride was now bowed low in the dust in that subordinate position day after day. He had heard it; how out there on the Capellenberg they often worked so hard that in spite of the icy weather the sweat poured in streams from their brows, and their hands bled. This was what the spoiled, famed Rojanow was doing; the man at whose feet the whole town laid its homage only a year ago, and whom the house of the reigning Prince had overwhelmed with distinction; and he was doing it of his own free will, when the success of his poetical work afforded him the richest revenues. And with it all, he was the son of General Falkenried!

Egon's breast rose under a deep but relieved breath. This view of it was giving him back slowly his lost faith; all torturing doubts fled before this. The old sin of the boy Hartmut was now being atoned for, and the other more awful sin was the mother's alone--not his.

CHAPTER LV.

It was toward nine o'clock in the evening when Prince Adelsberg left his quarters to go to the Commanding General. He was not obeying an official order, but an invitation, for the General had

been close friends with his father, and had shown paternal attention to the son all during the campaign.

Egon would have given much to have been permitted to remain at home to-night, for the encounter with Hartmut had shaken him to the inmost heart, but the invitation of the superior could not be disregarded, and one could not follow one's inclinations in war-time.

An adjutant met the Prince upon the stairs, seeming to be in the greatest haste, and only dropping a hint of bad news, which Prince Adelsberg would probably hear from the General. Egon mounted the stairs shaking his head.

The General was alone, pacing the room in apparent excitement and with a face which boded no good.

"Good evening, Prince Adelsberg," he said, pausing in his walk at the entrance of the young officer. "I am sorry I cannot promise you a pleasant evening, but we have received news which will probably ruin every pleasure of being together."

"I just heard a hint about it," replied Egon; "but what has happened, Your Excellency? The dispatches of to-day noon sounded favorable."

"I have had this news but an hour. You yourself delivered the suspicious man who had been seized by our outposts to headquarters. Do you know what he had with him?"

"Yes, for Captain Salfeld sent the papers with the prisoner. I was also of the opinion that he was to complete the information verbally, as they had been carefully prepared. They had apparently counted upon the possibility of the man's falling into our hands. He would not confess anything, but I knew he would be examined closely here."

"Which has been done. The man was a coward, and when he saw the bullet threatening him he saved himself by a confession, the truth of which cannot be doubted. You remember that in one of the papers it was mentioned that one could in an extreme case follow the heroic example of the commander of R----?"

"Yes, that is incomprehensible, as the fortress is on the eve of surrender. General Falkenried sent word that he hopes to move in by to-morrow."

"And I fear he will make his word good," cried the General. Egon looked at him in amazement.

"You *fear*, Excellency?"

"Yes, for there is a scoundrelly scheme--a betrayal without example. They mean to surrender the fortress, and when their garrison has withdrawn to a safe distance, and our army has moved in, they intend to blow the citadel to atoms."

"For God's sake!" shrieked the Prince in horror. "Cannot General Falkenried be notified?"

"That is the question. I fear that it will not be possible. I have sent out warnings upon two different routes, but our direct connection with R---- is cut off; the enemy has the mountain passes in possession; the messengers will have to make a wide circuit and cannot arrive there in time."

Egon was silent in deepest consternation. The passes were, indeed, occupied by the hostile forces. Eschenhagen's regiment had been sent to clear the way, but that might take several days.

"We have considered all possibilities," continued the General, "but there is no way out of it--nothing but a slight hope that the surrender has been delayed in some way; but Falkenried is not the man to allow himself to be kept waiting. He will hasten the finale and then he is lost with perhaps thousands with him."

He resumed his walk through the room. One could see how the fate of his endangered comrades went to the heart of this iron man.

The Prince, too, stood helpless, but suddenly a thought flashed upon him. He drew himself up.

"Your Excellency."

"Well?"

"If it should be possible to send a dispatch over the passes, a good horseman might possibly get to R---- by to-morrow morning. Of course, he would have to ride for life and death----"

"And through the midst of the enemy--nonsense! You are a soldier and must tell yourself that it is impossible. The foolhardy rider would not get half a mile--he would be shot down."

"But if a man could be found who would be willing to make the attempt in spite of everything? I know such a man, Your Excellency."

The General frowned angrily.

"Does that mean that you wish to offer yourself for this useless sacrifice? I would have to prohibit that, Prince Adelsberg. I know how to value the courage of my officers, but I shall not give them permission for such impossible enterprises."

"I do not speak of myself," said Egon earnestly. "The man of whom I am thinking belongs to the Seventh Regiment, and is at present upon sentinel duty on the Capellenberg. It was he who reported the prisoner."

The General had grown thoughtful, but he shook his head incredulously.

"I say it is impossible; but what is this man's name?"

"Joseph Tanner."

"Private?"

"Yes, he entered voluntarily."

"You know him, then?"

"Yes, Your Excellency; he is perhaps the best rider in the whole army; dauntless to foolhardiness, and capable to act in such a case with the circumspection of an officer. If the thing can possibly be done, he will do it."

"And you believe--such a thing cannot be commanded--it is, indeed, an act of despair--you believe that the man would take this message of his own free will?"

"I stand for it."

"Then, indeed, I cannot nor dare not say no where so much is at stake. I will order Tanner up immediately."

"May I not take the order to him?" Egon quickly interrupted.

The General stopped and looked at him searchingly.

"You wish to do it yourself--why?"

"To save time; the road which Tanner has to take leads by the Capellenberg; an hour would pass before he could get to headquarters and back."

Nothing could be said against that, but the General seemed to feel that something important was hidden beneath this. An ordinary private would hardly undertake such peril, which drove him almost into death's embrace, but the old warrior did not inquire further. He only asked:

"Do you stand for the man?"

"Yes," returned the Prince, firmly and calmly.

"Very well; then you can inform him yourself. But one thing more--he must have statements for the outposts on the other side, if indeed he reaches it, for every detention may prove fatal where moments count."

He stepped to his desk and wrote a few lines upon a paper, which he handed to the Prince.

"Here is the necessary passport, and here the dispatch to Falkenried. Will you bring me immediate news whether or not Tanner consents to go?"

"Instantly, Your Excellency."

Egon received the papers, took his leave, and hastened to his quarters, where he ordered his horse saddled at once. Five minutes later saw him on his way.

CHAPTER LVI.

The Capellenberg, of Chapel Mountain, which had probably borne originally another name, but was so called by the Germans because it bore a chapel, was only a small height, partly

covered with forests. It was the last outrunner of the mountains at this side, and formed here the border of the German troops. A company of the Seventh Regiment was stationed in the farms which lay scattered over its side. Their position was rightly considered very hard and most dangerous.

The chapel lay desolate and lonely, half buried in the deep snow. Priests and choir had long since fled, and the little edifice bore traces of destruction everywhere, for hot battles had been fought around this height. Walls and roof still stood intact, but a part of the ceiling had fallen, and the wind whistled through the shattered windows. Behind it rose the forest, clad in ice and snow, and all this lay in the uncertain light of the half-moon which was now visible in the heavily clouded sky, shedding her ghostly light upon the surroundings, only to again quickly disappear.

It was an icy winter night, as at that time at Rodeck, and, as then, the horizon was lit up by a dark reddish glow; but no aurora beamed here in gorgeous beauty; the glow which flared here in the north bore witness of battles fought all around; it had its origin in burning villages and farms; the awful signs of the flame of war, which were reflected in the skies.

A lonely sentinel stood here with gun on shoulder--Hartmut von Falkenried.

His eyes hung on the flaming horizon, the dark masses of cloud shone there blood-red, and from time to time a shower of fiery sparks burst from the seething smoke which rested over the earth.

Glow and flame there; ice and night here! The cold, which had been intense already during the day, now grew to the breath of ice, in which all life seemed to become stark, and which chilled the lonely sentinel to the very marrow.

Although he was not the only one who had to do this hard duty, his comrades had not been spoiled by years of life in the Orient and the balmy air of Sicily. Hartmut had not lived through a northern winter since his boyhood; this cold grew disastrous to him, for it seemed to change the blood in his veins into ice.

Slowly the deadly sleepiness, which is not sleep, crept upon him; it made the limbs heavy as lead, and drooped the eyelids forcibly. He who was so terribly threatened, struggled against it with all his will-power; he tried to collect himself and move about; he succeeded for a moment, but exhaustion again approached, the end of which he knew.

Was it not even to be granted him to fall by a bullet?

Hartmut's glance turned to the half-destroyed house of God, as if beseeching help; but what were church and altar to him? He had cast faith from him long ago; only night with death stared him in the face, and life would have given him so much when the atonement should have been completed--possession of his love, the fame of a poet, and perhaps even reconciliation with his father.

But it was not to be. He must stand to his post and wait for the ignominous death which was creeping upon him from the icy darkness. Duty commanded and he--obeyed.

But in the distance sounded steps and voices which came nearer and nearer. They tore Hartmut from the semi-unconsciousness which had already begun to veil his senses.

He roused himself with an effort and made his gun ready, but it was his comrades who drew near. What did it mean? The hour for relief had not yet come; but in a moment a sergeant stood before him.

"Relief--command from headquarters brought by an officer," came the order.

The change was made and a sturdy peasant, who did not seem to mind the cold much, took Hartmut's place. As Hartmut was about to join the sergeant an officer approached him from the other side.

"Let the sergeant go on. I wish to speak to you, Tanner; follow me."

Prince Adelsberg, who did not wish the sentinel to witness the conversation, entered the chapel, into which Hartmut followed him.

The pale moonlight falling through the windows revealed all the dismantled and destroyed interior. The fallen ceiling had shattered some of the pews; the altar alone stood undemolished.

Egon had walked to the middle of the room, where he stopped and turned.

"Hartmut."

"Herr Lieutenant."

"Stop that, we are alone," said the Prince. "I did not think, that we should meet like this."

"And I hoped I should be spared it," said Hartmut hoarsely, "You have come----"

"From headquarters. I heard that you had been ordered to sentinel duty on the Capellenberg. That is awful duty for such a night as this."

Hartmut was silent; he knew that without this interruption it would have been his last duty.

Egon looked at him with concern. In spite of the uncertain light he saw how rigid and exhausted was the man who leaned against one of the pillars as if he needed support.

"I came to bring you an order, but it is left to your own free will to accept it or not. The matter is considered almost impossible, and it would be, perhaps, to any one else. You have courage for it, I know, but the question is, have you the strength after all these exertions?"

"Fifteen minutes' rest and warmth will give me the strength. But what does it concern?"

"A ride for life or death. You are to take a message through the midst of the enemy--to R----"

"To the fortress?" cried Hartmut with a start. "There stands----"

"General Falkenried with his brigade; he is lost if the message does not reach him. We lay his safety in the hands of his son."

Again Hartmut started. Gone were frost and exhaustion. With feverish excitement he grasped the Prince's arm.

"I am to save my father? I? What has happened? What must I do?"

"Listen. The prisoner whom you reported to me to-day has given us a terrible disclosure; it concerns a betrayal. The fortress is to be blown up as soon as their troops are in safety and ours have taken possession. The General sent warnings instantly, but they will not reach them in time, as they have to take a circuitous route. Your father thinks of taking possession to-morrow. He must be warned before that, and there is only one possibility. The messenger must go over the mountain passes, which are held by the enemy. If successful, the news will reach there to-morrow before noon, but the way----"

"I know it," interrupted Hartmut. "Our regiment took it only fourteen days ago coming here. The passes were free then."

"So much the better! Of course you must take off your uniform, which would betray you."

"I shall change only cloak and helmet. If I am held up at all, my fate is sealed--so it is only important that I be not recognized in flying past. If only a good capable horse can be found!"

"It is at hand. I brought my Arab--my Saladin--with me. You know him and have often ridden him. He flies like a bird, and must do his master achievement this night."

The conversation had been conducted with flying haste, and now the Prince drew out the papers which he had received at headquarters.

"Here is the order of the Commanding General, which puts everything at your disposal when you reach our outposts--and here the dispatch. Give yourself half an hour's rest, for your strength might not hold out, and you will break down on the way."

"Do you think that I need rest and recreation now," cried Hartmut, flashing up. "I shall surely not break down now; it will have to be under the fire of the enemy if I do. I thank you, Egon, for this hour, in which you at last--at last--speak to me free from that base suspicion."

"And in which I send you out into death," said the Prince softly. "We will not shun the truth. It will be a miracle if you get through safely."

"A miracle."

Hartmut's glance wandered to the altar, upon which rested the pale light of the moon. He had forgotten long ago how to pray, yet at this moment he sent up a silent, fervent prayer to the heavens--to the power which could do miracles.

"Only until I have saved my father and his men--only so long guide and keep me!"

In the next second he drew himself up. It was as if Egon had poured glowing life power into the veins of the man who so shortly since was threatened with death through cold and exhaustion.

"And now let us say good-by," whispered Egon. "Farewell, Hartmut."

He opened wide his arms and Hartmut fell upon his breast.

All that had stood between them was buried in this embrace. The old glowing love burst forth powerfully again for the last time, for both felt that they would not meet again--that this was a final farewell.

Scarce fifteen minutes later a horseman dashed away; the slender Arab flying so that his hoof seemed not to touch the ground. In furious gallop he flew along over the snow through ice-covered forests, over frozen brooks on and on into the mountain passes!

CHAPTER LVII.

The next day brought clear, frosty weather, but the sun shone brightly and the cold had somewhat abated.

In Prince Adelsberg's quarters were Eugene Stahlberg and Waldorf, the latter being off duty today on account of a fall upon the ice, resulting in an injury to his hand, which prevented him from marching with his company as Egon had done.

The gentlemen were awaiting their princely comrade, who was expected soon, and entertained themselves in the meantime by teasing Peter Stadinger, who had, as in duty bound, appeared at his young master's this morning, and who also awaited him now.

The young officers knew nothing as yet of the news which had been obtained at headquarters yesterday, and were in the best of spirits--taking all possible pains to call forth in Stadinger the far-famed churlishness. But it was not successful today. The old man remained laconic and reticent. He would only repeat his question: When would His Highness return? and if it would be a serious skirmish to which His Highness had marched? until finally Waldorf lost all patience.

"Stadinger, I believe you would like best to pack up your Prince and take him back with you to your Rodeck, which is safe from bombs," he asserted. "You must get over this anxiety in the war--remember that."

"And, besides, the Prince has only marched out to reconnoitre," added Eugene. "He is just taking a little walk with his people from the Capellenberg into the neighboring dales and ravines, to ascertain how it really looks there. They will probably exchange a few compliments with the French gentlemen, and then retreat politely; the more impolite attacks will follow in a few days."

"But is there shooting with it all?" asked Stadinger, with such anxious mien that the two officers laughed aloud.

"Yes, shots are being exchanged, too," confirmed Waldorf. "You seem to have great fear of them, yet you are at a safe distance."

"I?" The old man drew himself up, deeply offended.

"I wish I could be in the midst of it also."

"Perhaps to protect your much loved Highness. The Prince would decline that. You would hold on to his coat tails and cry continually, 'Take care, Your Highness, there comes a ball.' That would look fine!"

"Herr Lieutenant," said the old man, so seriously that the gay tease was silenced, "you should not do that to an old hunter who has often climbed after the chamois, and has fired his gun when he had scarcely a foot's breadth of ground to stand on; I feel so depressed and anxious to-day. I wish the day would end."

"Well, it was not meant so seriously," said Eugene, soothingly. "We believe you, Stadinger; you do not look like a man who is afraid. But you must not speak to us about your depressing presentiments. One does not think of them after one has stood so many times in the shower of bullets. When we are happily at home again, I will come to my sister at Ostwalden, and we will then be good neighbors with Rodeck. The Prince loves his old forest nook so well. And now abandon your anxiety, for there he comes already."

Rapid steps were heard on the stairs outside; the old man sighed with relief. But it was only Egon's attendant who appeared in the open door.

"Well, has His Highness arrived?" asked Waldorf; but Stadinger did not allow the man time to answer. He had cast one glance at his face--only a single one--then suddenly grasped his hand with a convulsive clutch.

"What is it? Where--where is my master?"

The man shook his head sadly and pointed silently to the window, to which both officers hastened with fear and dread. But Stadinger lost no time. He dashed out down the stairs, into the little garden which lay before the house, and with a loud, bitter cry sank upon his knees at the side of a stretcher, upon which there lay a slender, youthful figure.

"Quietly," said the physician who had accompanied the sad group. "Control yourself--the Prince is seriously wounded."

"I see it," gasped the faithful old servant; "but not fatally--oh, say not fatally. Only tell me that, Herr Doctor!"

He looked up to the surgeon with such despairing entreaty that the latter had not courage to tell him the truth, but turned to the two officers who now hastened near and overwhelmed him with low, anxious questioning.

"A ball in the breast," he explained, in the same tone. "The Prince begged to be brought to his quarters, and we have used all possible care in the moving; but it will bring the end more quickly than I thought."

"Fatal?" asked Waldorf.

"Beyond a doubt."

The surgeon gave the bearers who prepared to take their charge into the house, a sign to desist.

"Stop, the Prince seems to have something to say to his old servant, and there are no moments to lose."

Stadinger saw and heard nothing of what happened at his side. He looked only upon his master.

Egon seemed to be unconscious. The light hair had become disheveled, the eyes were closed, and beneath the cloak with which he had been covered, and which had partly fallen open, the blood-stained uniform could be seen.

"Your Highness," besought Stadinger, softly, according to the doctor's warning, but with heartbreaking accents, "only look at me! Speak to me! It is I--Stadinger."

The well-known voice found its way to the ear of the desperately wounded man. Slowly his eyes opened, and a slight smile flitted over his features as he recognized the old man who knelt at his side.

"My old Waldgeist," he whispered, "did you have to come--to see this?"

"But you will not die, Your Highness," murmured Stadinger, his whole body a-tremble, but never removing his eyes from his dying master; "no--do not die--surely not!"

"Do you think that it is hard?" said Egon, calmly. "Yesterday--you saw quite correctly--my heart felt heavy; but now it is light. Give my love to Rodeck--and to my forests and--to her, too, the mistress of Ostwalden."

"Whom? Frau Wallmoden?" asked Stadinger, almost terrified at this turn.

"Yes--take her my last greeting--tell her to think of me sometimes."

The words came painfully--brokenly--from the lips which seemed to almost refuse their duty; but they left no doubt as to the meaning of the last greeting.

Eugene had started when he heard the name of his sister, and now bent low over the dying man, who saw the brother of Adelaide--recognized the features which resembled hers so much--and again a smile passed over his face. Then he leaned his fair head quietly and calmly on the breast of his old Waldgeist, and the beautiful blue eyes closed forever.

It had been a short, painless struggle--almost a falling asleep. Stadinger had not moved--had not uttered a sound, for he knew it would hurt his young master, whom he had borne in his arms as a child, and who now drew his last breath in those arms. But, when all was over, the composure of the old man gave way. He threw himself despairingly upon the body and wept like a child.

CHAPTER LVIII.

Over on the other side of the mountain passes also the winter sun shone clear and bright upon the new achievements which the victorious German troops had acquired.

The negotiations with the commander of R---- had been brought to an end, and the fortress had surrendered. The captive garrison moved out, while a portion of the victors had already marched in.

General Falkenried stood in the main square of the lower town with his staff, about to move also into the fortress. The helmets and arms of the troops who were on their way into the citadel glittered in the sunshine. Falkenried issued various orders, then took his stand at the head of his staff and gave the signal to march.

But now there came a horseman in furious haste over the main road; the noble animal he rode was covered with sweat and foam, and his sides bled from the cruel spurs which had hurried him on and on when his strength threatened to desert him. The face also of the rider was disfigured by the blood trickling from beneath the cloth that had been wound around the forehead.

He came flying, as if driven by a tornado, and everything fled from before him until he reached the open square, dashed through the midst of the officers straight up to the General. A few steps from the end of the journey the strength of the noble horse failed, he broke down completely; but at the same moment the rider sprang from the saddle and hastened toward the commander.

"From the Commanding General."

Falkenried started at the first word. He had not recognized the blood-covered face; he only saw that the man who dashed up as if for life or death must bring an important message. But at the sound of that voice, an idea of the truth flashed upon him.

Hartmut swayed and laid his hand for a moment on his brow; it seemed as if he were about to break down, too, like his horse. But he recovered with an effort.

"The General sends word to be cautious--betrayal is planned--the fortress will be blown up as soon as its garrison has moved off. Here is the dispatch."

He tore a paper from his breast and gave it to Falkenried. The officers had become violently excited at the awful news, and pressed around their chief as if expecting to hear from him confirmation of the incredible report. But they had a strange sight before them.

The General, whose iron composure they all knew--who never lost control of himself--had turned deathly pale, and stared at the speaker as if a spirit had risen before him from the ground, while he held the paper unopened in his hand.

"Herr General--the dispatch!"

One of the adjutants who understood the proceedings as little as the others, gently reminded him; but it was enough to bring Falkenried back to consciousness. He tore the dispatch open and glanced it over, and was now again the soldier who knew nothing but his duty.

With full, firm voice he gave his orders. The officers galloped right and left; signals and commands resounded in all directions, and in a few moments the last detachment of soldiers came to a standstill. Upon the fortress sounded the signal of alarm. Neither friend nor foe knew what it meant. Did it not appear as if the so recently conquered place was to be vacated at once? But the orders were executed with the usual alacrity and dispatch; the movements were completed with perfect composure, in spite of the haste, and the troops turned back into the town.

Falkenried was still in the open square, giving orders, receiving reports, watching and guiding everything with his eyes. But still he found a moment's time to turn to his son, to whom he had not as yet given any sign of recognition.

"You are bleeding--let it be bandaged."

Hartmut shook his head hastily.

"Later--I must first see the retreat--the rescue."

The awful excitement sustained him; he did not falter again, but followed with feverish attention every movement of the troops.

Falkenried looked at him and then asked:

"Which way did you come?"

"Over the mountain passes."

"Over the passes! The enemy stands there."

"Yes, there they stand."

"And you came over that way?"

"I had to, otherwise the news would not have reached here in time. I started only last night."

"But that is an heroic deed without an equal! Man, how could you accomplish it?" exclaimed one of the higher officers, who had just brought a report and heard the last words.

Hartmut was silent; only he slowly raised his eyes to his father. He no longer feared the eyes he had feared so long, and what he read in them now told him that here, too, he was free from that awful suspicion.

But even the greatest will power has its limits, and this was reached with the man who had rendered almost superhuman assistance. The face of his father was the last thing he saw--then it disappeared as behind a bloody veil; something hot and wet flowed over his forehead--all became night around him, and he sank to the ground.

And now resounded a crash, under the appalling force of which the whole town trembled and quaked. The citadel, whose outlines had just stood out sharp and clear against the blue sky, was suddenly transformed into a crater, vomiting forth fire and destruction. In those walls a hell seemed to open; showers of rocks and stones rose high in the air, only to come down with thunderous clatter, and immediately there leaped and flickered over all the huge pile of débris a giant pillar of fire and smoke which rose up to the heavens--a terrible sign of flame!

The warning had arrived at the last possible moment. But, in spite of it, there was a sacrifice of life, for whoever had been still in the neighborhood of the citadel had been crushed or severely injured. Still the loss was small in comparison with the incalculable disaster which would surely have taken place had not the warning been brought.

The General, with his officers and nearly all his troops, had been saved. Falkenried had made all the arrangements required by the dreadful catastrophe with his usual promptitude and circumspection. He was everywhere, and his activity and example succeeded in giving back to the men who had been betrayed in the height of victory their equilibrium. Only when the commander had done his duty did the father seek his natural rights.

Hartmut still lay unconscious in one of the neighboring houses, into which he had been carried when he sank to the ground. He neither saw nor heard the father, who stood at his bedside with one of the physicians.

Falkenried silently gazed down upon the pale face and closed eyes, then turned to the physician.

"You do not consider the wound fatal?"

The doctor sadly shrugged his shoulders.

"Not the wound in itself, but the great overexertion of that life and death ride--the heavy loss of blood, the bitter cold of the night. I fear, Herr General, you must be prepared for the worst."

"I am prepared for it," said Falkenried, solemnly. Then he knelt down and kissed the son whom perhaps he had found only to lose again; and hot, burning tears fell upon the deathly white face.

But it was not granted the father to remain with his child for any length of time; he was forced to leave after a few moments, requesting the doctor once more to give his greatest care and skill to the patient.

At the open square were collected the General's staff and other officers, awaiting their chief. They knew he was at present with the wounded man who had brought the warning, and whom nobody knew.

It had become known that he had come over the mountain passes, through the midst of the foe--that he had ventured upon a ride the like of which nobody in the army could imitate--and when the General at last appeared, everybody gathered around him, questioningly.

Falkenried was deeply serious, but the rigid, gloomy look which his face was accustomed to bear had disappeared and given place to an expression which the attendant officers saw now for the first time. In his eyes tears still glistened, but his voice sounded firm and clear as he answered:

"Yes, gentlemen, he is desperately injured, and perhaps it was his last ride that brought rescue to us. But he has done his duty as a man and a soldier, and if you want to know his name--he is my son, Hartmut von Falkenried!"

CHAPTER LIX.

The old mansion of Burgsdorf lay peaceful and cosy in the brightest sunlight. It had but recently received back its lord, who had been absent nearly a year, and who returned now after the war was over, to his home and his young wife.

The large estate, with its extensive work, had not suffered through his long absence, for it had been under safe guidance. The master's mother had stepped into her old place, and held the reins with her usual firm hand, until the return of her son; but now she laid those reins solemnly into his hands again and insisted, in spite of all prayers and entreaties, upon leaving Burgsdorf and returning to her city home.

At present Frau von Eschenhagen was standing upon the terrace, the broad stone steps of which led into the garden, talking with Willibald, who stood beside her.

Her glance rested with undeniable satisfaction upon the powerful, manly form of her son, who appeared even more stately now because of the acquired military bearing. Perhaps she felt that something different and better had been made of the young country squire than she could have done with her education. But she would not have confessed it at any price.

"And so you wish to build," she was saying; "I thought about as much. The plain old house in which your father and I lived so many years is, of course, not good enough for your little princess. She must be surrounded by every available splendor. Well, I don't mind; you have the money for it, and can allow yourself that pleasure. I am glad to say I have not the responsibility of it any longer."

"Do not act so grim, mamma," laughed Willibald. "If any one should hear you, they would think you the worst of mothers-in-law, whereas if I did not know it from Marietta's letters, I see it daily now, how you spoil her and carry her upon your hands."

"Oh, well, one likes to play with pretty dolls sometimes, even in old age," replied Regine, dryly; "and your wife is such a delicate little doll, who is only good for play. Do not imagine that she will ever get to be a competent farm manager. I saw that from the first moment, and have not allowed her to do it at all."

"And you were right in that," joined in the young lord. "Work and management are my part. My Marietta shall not be worried with it. But, believe me, mamma, one can live and work quite differently when such a sweet little *singvogel* sings courage and love of work into one's heart."

"Boy, I believe you are crazy still," said Frau von Eschenhagen, with her old grim manner. "Has it ever been known that a *sensible* man--a husband and estate owner--speaks so of his wife--'sweet little *singvogel*'! Perhaps you get that from your bosom friend, Hartmut, who is considered by you all as such a great poet. You always did imitate him as a boy."

"No, mamma, it is really my own. I have composed poetry but once in my life, on the night when I saw Marietta in Hartmut's 'Arivana.' The poem fell into my hands the other day, when I was putting my desk in order, and I gave it to Hartmut, begging him to change it a little, for, strange to say, the rhymes would not fit, and I had not done very well with the meter. Do you know what he said? 'My dear Willy, your poem is very beautiful as far as sentiment is concerned, but I advise you to abandon poetry. Such verse is not to be tolerated, and your wife will seek a divorce if you sing to her in this style.' That is how my 'bosom friend' judges my poetical talent."

"It serves you right, too. What does an estate owner have to do with poetry?" said Regine, caustically.

The door of the dining room was opened and a small head, running over with dark curls, peeped out.

"Is it permitted to disturb the assembly in their important business discourse?"

"Come along, you small elf," said Frau von Eschenhagen. But the permission was superfluous, for the young wife had already flown into her husband's open arms. He bent over her affectionately and whispered something in her ear.

"Are you commencing again?" scolded the mother. "It is really unbearable in your presence nowadays."

Marietta only turned her head, without freeing herself from the embrace which held her so closely, and said, roguishly: "We are celebrating our honeymoon after the long separation, and you must know from your own experience how people act then, *nicht wahr*, mamma?"

Regine shrugged her shoulders. Her honeymoon with the late Eschenhagen had been of a different kind.

"You received a letter from your grandfather, Marietta," she said, changing the subject; "was it good news?"

"The very best. Grandpapa is quite well and anticipating much pleasure in his visit to Burgsdorf next month. But he writes that everything is very quiet around Waldhofen since Rodeck has lost its master. Everything is closed and desolate since the death of the young Prince. Ostwalden is lonely, and Furstenstein will be deserted, too, after Toni's marriage, which occurs in two weeks. Poor Uncle Schonan will be all alone then."

The last words were spoken with a certain emphasis as the young wife threw a peculiar glance at her mother-in-law.

That upright lady did not pay any attention to it, but only remarked: "Yes, it is a strange notion of Hartmut and Adelaide to live here in the pine forest in a small, rented villa during the first weeks of their married life, while the large castle of Ostwalden and all of the Stahlberg country seats are at their disposal."

"They probably wished to remain with their father a little longer," said Willibald.

"Well, Falkenried could have taken a vacation in this case and gone with them. Thank God that the man has really come back to life, since that terrible bitterness has fallen from him, and he has his son again. I knew well how very hard the flight of the boy struck him. He secretly idolized him, while showing him only severity and requiring in turn nothing but obedience. Of course, what Hartmut accomplished with that night's ride, by which he saved his father with his troops, erases even more than a senseless boy's escapade, for which the mother was really to blame."

"But we are cheated out of all the wedding festivities in the family," pouted Marietta. "Willy and I had to be married quietly because the war broke out, and now, after the war has happily ceased, Hartmut and Adelaide do just like it."

"My child, when one has gone through such things as Hartmut has, all pleasure in festivities is lost," said Frau Eschenhagen, gravely. "And, besides, he has not fully recuperated yet. You saw how pale he was at the wedding. Adelaide's first marriage was, indeed, celebrated with more pomp. Her father insisted upon it, in spite of his low state of health, and the bride was really a queenly, if cold, apparition in her satin train and her laces and diamonds. But, truly, she looked different when she drew near the altar with her Hartmut, in the simple white silk dress and the dainty veil. I never in my life saw her so lovely. Poor Herbert! He never possessed the love of his wife."

"But how could one love such an old Excellency in his diplomatic frock coat? I could not have done it, either," said Marietta, pertly.

But she had touched a weak point; her mother-in-law held the remembrance of her brother in high esteem.

"The necessity would never have come to you," she remarked, with pique. "A man like Herbert von Wallmoden would hardly have wooed you--you little saucy----"

But she got no further, for the saucy little sprite already hung around her neck coaxingly.

"Please don't get angry, mamma. How can I help it that my most undiplomatic Willy is dearer to me than all the Excellencies in the whole world, and he is that to you, too; eh, mamma?"

"You little flatterer!" Regine tried in vain to keep up her severe mien. "You know very well that nobody can get angry with you. A regime will now probably commence here at Burgsdorf which has had no precedent. Willy is ashamed before me now, but after I am gone, he will surrender to you upon grace or displeasure."

"Mamma, do you still cling to that idea?" asked Willibald, reproachfully. "Will you go now, when everything is love and peace between us?"

"Just because of that I shall go, so that it may remain. Do not oppose it, my son. I have to be first where I live and work. You want to be that now; therefore it is best we are not together; and your little princess must not get angry about it. We have heretofore had great anxiety about you, and people do not quarrel when they have to tremble anew each day for husband and son. But that is over now, and I am still too much of the old kind to fit myself to your youth. Do whatever you like, but things must go as I like in my house, and therefore I go."

She turned and went into the house, while the young lord looked after her with a half-suppressed sigh.

CHAPTER LX.

"She is right, perhaps," Willibald said, half aloud, as his mother vanished; "but she will be unhappy alone, and without the long-accustomed activity. I know that she will not be able to bear the enforced rest. You ought to have begged her to remain, too, Marietta."

The young wife laid her curly head upon her husband's shoulder and looked at him roguishly.

"Oh, no; I shall do something better. I shall see to it that mamma does not get unhappy when she leaves us."

"You? How will you do that?"

"Quite easily. I shall marry mamma off."

"But, Marietta, what are you thinking of?"

"Oh, you wise Willy; have you really not noticed anything?" laughed Marietta, and it was the old, silvery laugh with which she had bewitched him at Waldhofen. "And you do not know why Uncle Schonan was in such a grim temper when we saw him in Berlin three days ago? And why he did not want to come to Burgsdorf at all, although we begged him so much? Mamma did not ask him, because she feared a renewed proposal. He understood it, and consequently he was so angry. I have known all about it ever so long; even at the time when mamma came to us at Waldhofen, and he told her so fiercely that she would only use him as a secondary person at a wedding. I saw then that he would like to be one of the principals. Willy, you are making a superb face now! You look exactly as you did at the beginning of our acquaintance."

The young lord did not, indeed, look very intellectual in his boundless surprise. He had never considered the possibility of his mother marrying again, and to her brother-in-law, besides! But it broke upon him that this was an excellent solution of the difficulty.

"Marietta, you are surpassingly clever!" he cried, looking with the greatest admiration at his wife, who accepted the homage with much satisfaction.

"I am even more clever than you think," she said, triumphantly, "for I have put the matter to rights. I got behind Uncle Schonan and gave him to understand that if he would storm once more now, the fortress would probably surrender. He grumbled mightily and said that he had had enough of it and did not want to be made a fool of again; but at last he reconsidered the matter. He arrived fifteen minutes ago. I did not dare tell mamma anything about it, and--here he is!"

She nodded to the Chief Forester, who emerged upon the terrace and heard the last words.

"Yes, here I am; but take care, little woman, if you have 'led me behind the light,' for"--to Willibald--"I have come solely at her request. She has probably given you the details about how it stands with us--that is, with me, for your Frau Mamma is probably again unreasonable, obstinate and self-willed as she usually is--but I will marry her yet!"

"All right, uncle, if she will only have you," laughed Willibald, who could not help thinking this description of his mother from a wooer very peculiar.

"Yes, that is the question," said Schonan, doubtfully; "but your wife thinks----"

"That we dare not lose another minute!" interrupted Marietta. "Mamma is in her room, and has no conception of the attack. Willy and I will remain in the background, and join in the battle if the worst should happen. Forward, march, uncle; forward, Willy!"

And Frau Marietta von Eschenhagen, with her little, delicate hands pushed the stately Chief Forester and her huge husband forward, without more ado. They patiently submitted, although Schonan muttered:

"Strange how they all understand how to order one about--little ones as well as big ones. It must be born in them."

Regine von Eschenhagen stood at the window of her room, looking out upon her beloved Burgsdorf, which she intended to leave in a few days.

Much as she was convinced of the wisdom of this decision, it was yet not easy to execute it.

The strong, restlessly active woman, who had stood thirty years at the head of a large work, felt a shudder at the rest and inactivity which awaited her. She had been made acquainted with the city life during her first separation from her son, and had been very unhappy in it.

The door opened and the Chief Forester entered.

"Moritz, you here!" Regine started with surprise. "This is sensible of you to come."

"Yes, I am always sensible," remarked Herr von Schonan, very pointedly. "Although you did not have the grace to invite me, I came to get your consent to attend Toni's wedding. Of course, you will come to Furstenstein with your children?"

"Yes, certainly we will come; but we were all much surprised at this haste. Did you not intend to buy an estate first? And that is not usually accomplished so quickly."

"No, but they want to get married. Our victors have become very assuming since their heroic deeds. Waldorf simply declared upon his return, 'Papa, you said when I left, First win in war and then marry; now we have won and now I want to marry. I'll not wait any longer. The estate has time to wait, but not the wedding, for that is the most important.' So, since Toni is also convinced of this importance, nothing was left for me to do but to name the wedding day."

Frau von Eschenhagen laughed.

"Yes, young people are quick to marry, and they have so much time to wait."

"But it is not so with older folks," said Schonan, who had only been looking for this opportunity and speedily made use of it. "Have you considered the question at last, Regine?"

"What question?"

"Our marrying. I hope you are now in the 'humor' for it?"

Regine turned away, somewhat offended.

"You like to be abrupt, Moritz. How did you get into the notion so suddenly?"

"What! you call that sudden?" the Chief Forester cried, indignantly. "I made my first proposal to you five years ago; the second one last year, and now I come for the third time, and yet you have not had sufficient time to consider. Yes or no? If you send me away this time, I shall not come back--depend upon that--and the whole courtship can go where it wants to."

Regine did not answer, but it was not indecision which made her hesitate. Even this strange, original nature had a spice of deep romance in her heart--love for the man who was once to be her husband, Hartmut von Falkenried. When he had married another, she too had pledged her hand, for she was not the kind to mourn her life away uselessly; but the same bitter pain which had stung the young girl when she approached the altar, awoke now again in the aging woman and closed her lips; but it lasted only a few moments, then she threw the dream from her with decision, and stretched out her hand to von Schonan.

"Well, then, yes, Moritz. I will be a good and true wife to you."

"Thank God!" cried Schonan, with a deep sigh of relief, for he had taken the hesitation as a preliminary to a third refusal. "You should have said that five years ago, Regine, but better late than never. At last we have gotten so far."

And with that the persistent wooer enclosed the finally won life companion in a hearty embrace.

CHAPTER LXI.

It was a hot summer day. Even in the forest one felt something of the intense heat which flickered upon meadows and fields. Upon the forest path a little group walked beneath the tall firs. It was General Falkenried, with his son and daughter, who were accompanying him a part of the way to Burgsdorf, where he intended making a visit.

Falkenried had indeed become another person.

The war which had been fatal to so many, and made others old before their time, in spite of

the victories and triumphs won, appeared to have been a source of rejuvenation to him. Although the white hair and deep furrows in the face remained, witnesses not to be erased of a painful time, yet the face had life in it again; the eyes had regained their old fire, and one saw now at the first glance that the man was not so old, but stood yet in the fulness and power of life.

Hartmut had not yet entirely recovered, as his appearance proved. The campaign had not made him younger. He looked older and graver, and the still pale face, with the broad red scar upon the forehead, spoke of a time of heavy suffering.

The wound in itself had not been serious, but had become so through the severe loss of blood, and the overexertion of the ride in the night of the severe cold, so that at first all hope had been abandoned, and it required months of careful nursing to give Hartmut back to life.

But the old Hartmut, the son of Zalika, with his wild blood and unbridled desire for freedom, had also died in this time of suffering. It seemed as if with the name Rojanow, which he had cast forever from him, the unfortunate inheritance from the mother had also been lost. The heavy, dark curls were just beginning to grow again, and the high, powerful forehead appeared more striking in its resemblance to his father.

But the young wife at his side bloomed in the fullest beauty of youth and happiness. Whoever had seen her in her cold hauteur--her icy, unapproachable manner, would hardly have recognized her in this bright, slender woman, in her light summer costume, with fresh forest flowers in her hand.

The smile and tone with which she spoke to her husband and father had never been known to Frau von Wallmoden; they had been learned only by Adelaide von Falkenried.

"Not any farther, now," said the General, pausing in their walk. "You have to take the return walk, and Hartmut must still be careful. The physicians request that he be very prudent."

"Father, if you only knew how depressing it feels to be considered an invalid still, when I already feel full of life and power! I am really well."

"Do not place in jeopardy again what has been so hardly won," continued the father. "You have not yet learned patience, but fortunately I know you are under Ada's supervision, and she is strict on this subject."

"Yes, had it not been for Ada, there probably would not have been anything to take care of," said Hartmut, with a look of deepest affection upon his wife. "I believe I was in rather a hopeless condition when she came to me."

"The physicians, at least, gave me no hope when I sent off the dispatch which called Ada to your side. You called for her in your first conscious moment, to my boundless surprise, for I did not dream that you ever knew each other."

"Was it not right to you, Papa?" asked the young wife, looking smilingly up to the father, who drew her to his breast and pressed a kiss upon her brow.

"You know best what you are to Hartmut and me, my child. I thanked God that I could leave him under your nursing when I had to march on. And you were right, too, when you persuaded him to remain here, although the doctors wished to send him away. He has to learn to feel at home first in the fatherland--must learn to understand and love again that from which he has so long been estranged."

"*Has* to learn it?" said Ada reproachfully. "What he read to you and me to-day I should think would show that he has learned it already, and that this new work bears another language from the wild, glowing Arivana."

"Yes, Hartmut, your new work is of great merit," said Falkenried, giving his hand to his son. "I believe the fatherland will be proud of my boy, even in times of peace."

Hartmut's eyes sparkled as he returned the pressure of the hand. He knew what praise from his father's lips was worth.

"And now, good-by." The General kissed his daughter-in-law again, "I will drive from Burgsdorf directly to town, but we shall see each other in a few days again. Farewell, children!"

When he had disappeared behind the trees, Hartmut and Adelaide turned on their homeward way, which led them by the Burgsdorf pond. Involuntarily they paused beside it, and gazed upon the calm sheet of water which lay so shiningly in the sun with its wreath of rushes and water lilies.

"I have played boys' games here so often with Willy," said Hartmut softly, "and here my future was decided on that fatal night. I realize only now what I did to my father in that unfortunate hour."

"But you have atoned for it fully," returned Ada, leaning her head on her husband's shoulder. "It has been wiped out before the world, too, which overwhelmed you and father on all sides with

admiration and appreciation when it was known who had done that heroic deed."

Hartmut shook his head gravely.

"It was a deed of despair, not heroism. I did not believe that it would succeed--nobody believed it; but even if I had fallen I should have regained my lost honor by that ride through the enemy. Egon knew that, and for that reason he put the rescue into my hands. When we said farewell that icy winter night in the shattered walls of the little chapel, we both felt that it was a final farewell, but we thought, too, that I should be the victim, for I went into almost certain death. Fate decreed differently. I was borne as by spirit hands through the dangers to the accomplishment of my aim, and almost at the same hour Egon fell. You need not hide your tears from me, Ada; I am not jealous of the dead, for I loved him just as--he loved you."

"Eugene brought me his last greeting," said the young wife, in whose eyes shone the tears she had wished to conceal from her husband. "And Stadinger, too, wrote me to fulfill his dying master's last request. I fear the old man will not live much longer; his letter sounded as if he were utterly crushed."

"Poor Egon!" In Hartmut's voice sounded the deep pain he felt for his friend. "He was so full of sunny happiness and joy; he was created for it and to give it. Perhaps you would have been happier at his side, Ada, than with your wild, passionate Hartmut, who will trouble you often enough with the dark side of his nature."

Ada smiled up at him with the tears still in her eyes. "But I love this wild, stormy Hartmut, and do not desire any greater happiness than to be his wife."

The forest lake lay in dreamy noonday stillness; grave and dark stood the old firs over it; the rushes at its border whispered low, and thousands of bright sparkles danced upon its surface.

Above it curved the blue sky into which the boy had once wished to soar like the falcon of which his race bore the name, higher and higher to the sun. It beamed, too, now up there in shining splendor the powerful, eternal sign of flame in the heavens!

[THE END.]

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