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**Title:** Hermann: A Novel

**Author:** E. Werner

**Translator:** Helen Keer Brown

**Release Date:** February 2, 2011 [EBook #35142]

**Language:** English

**Credits:** Produced by Charles Bowen, from page scans provided by Google Books

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# HERMANN.

A Novel,

BY

**E. WERNER.**

*Author of "Success and How He Won it," "Under a Charm," "Riven Bonds," "No Surrender," etc.*

TRANSLATED BY

**HELEN KEER BROWN.**

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# HERMANN.

## CHAPTER I.

"But, Doctor, for heaven's sake tell us what this is all about."

"The whole town is talking of it already, and still we have heard no particulars!"

"Surely it is impossible, Doctor, it cannot be true!"

He, to whom all these questions and exclamations were addressed, rapped his stick with an air of impatient vexation against the pavement, and replied in a rather dry, concise tone--

"What you may think possible or impossible, gentlemen, is not for me to decide; the fact is simply this, that the sum of 20,000 thalers is missing, and that the steward, Brand, has shot himself this morning. You can decide for yourselves the connection between the two circumstances."

The assembled officers of the Prince's household surrounded, with pale, horrified faces, the principal physician of the town, from whose lips they had just received confirmation of a report, which had already agitated the little town for some hours.

"It is really true, then! And they say that the misfortune happened in Count Arnau's own room."

"In his business room! The Count had suspected the steward for some days, and therefore sent for him this morning. He called him to account, and finally charged him to his face with the robbery. Brand attempted to deny it at first, but at last confessed to it, and begged for mercy, which, of course, could not be granted to him; and as the Count turned to ring the bell, in order to have him taken into custody, he drew out a pistol and shot himself before his Excellency's eyes."

"Did you hear this from his Excellency himself?" asked one of the older members of the Count's household.

"From his own lips."

"Indeed?"

"What do you mean?" asked the Doctor, surprised at the strange tone of this "indeed?"

"O, nothing! Only I cannot understand how Brand could be a thief. Brand, the most punctual, most conscientious of all men, who would never allow the slightest irregularity in his work--"

"Appearances deceive sometimes. Just this apparent conscientiousness must have been the cloak for his villany."

The old man shook his head.

"And yet--it cannot be. I would have believed any one capable of it, sooner than Brand! Has it been proved already then, that--"

The Doctor made a movement of impatience.

"My dear Weiss, I am no judge in a court of law. Of course an examination will disclose all particulars; for the present the papers of the deceased have been seized, and I hear that Count Arnau has himself undertaken to look over them--but I have no time to waste. I must attend the Countess."

"Ah, yes, poor lady!" said a third, joining in the conversation. "How is she?"

The Doctor shrugged his shoulders gravely.

"Very unwell! which is, unfortunately, only what we can expect. Such an event in one's own house is enough to make any one ill, and when one is in the last stage of consumption, and ought to be carefully guarded from all agitation, it is enough to cause one's death. Adieu, gentlemen!"

So saying, he lifted his hat, and with a hurried greeting, left the steward's office, where the conversation had taken place, and hurried towards the house of the chamberlain, Count Arnau, which lay about midway between the former and the Prince's residence.

In the drawing-room of the large, splendidly appointed dwelling sat two ladies, the wife of the Count, and her mother, the widowed Präsidentin von Sternfeld, who had left her estates in the neighbourhood in order to visit her daughter, and had now been with her about a quarter of an hour. At the first glance no one would have taken the two ladies for mother and daughter, for, indeed, one could not trace the slightest resemblance between them. The Präsidentin was a woman about fifty, with a not very tall, but powerful figure, and with features, which, indeed, could never have been beautiful, but were now striking from their remarkable expression of energy and decision. There was nothing attractive, nor womanly in this sharply-cut countenance, and her whole appearance coincided with it. Carriage, speech, everything, was short, decided, and commanding, as is usual with any one accustomed to unconditional authority and command. The Countess, on the other hand, was a young, and still beautiful woman, though her form showed but too plainly the devastating traces of severe bodily suffering. The delicate, stooping figure, the gentle pale face, the low, soft voice, all formed the sharpest contrast to the mother's appearance.

The subject of the two ladies' conversation was naturally the dreadful event of the morning.

The Countess had just related it with renewed agitation; her eyes showed the traces of newly-shed tears, and her pale cheeks showed two burning, feverish spots. The Präsidentin apparently possessed stronger nerves than her daughter; the Countess's agitated relation seemed to make only a very slight impression upon her. The most painful feature in the whole affair appeared to her, that it should have happened in the Count's own house.

"Well, I hope they took care to inform you of it gradually?"

The Countess shook her head gently.

"O, mamma, that was impossible! I heard a shot in my husband's study; and of course I flew along the corridor, frightened to death, and just reached the door as Adalbert opened it for me. He hurried past me to call for help, and--"

"And took no notice of you, when it was enough to kill you on the spot!" interrupted the Präsidentin, very angrily. "What incomprehensible want of consideration!"

"Ach, Adalbert was so upset himself, so beside himself, indeed, more than I have ever seen him! He seemed quite unnerved, and I understand that only too well. To think that he should have been the one, though against his will, to drive the unhappy man to that terrible step."

"Your husband only did his duty," said the mother, decidedly, "and the man suffered the punishment he deserved. He has at least been spared public disgrace, since he unfortunately cannot be called to account in any way."

"But he leaves behind a family, a wife, and a child only a few months old--a little girl, I believe."

"That is sad; but better for them that the husband and father should be dead, than know him to be in prison. Don't make such a trouble of it, Ottilie, this is not the first time that an untrue servant has anticipated justice in this way. And if he possessed any character at all, scarcely anything else would have been open to him after the unavoidable discovery."

The Countess sighed; she apparently had not philosophy enough to throw aside the dreadful event which had happened almost before her eyes, so easily as her mother, who now asked--"Where is Adalbert?"

"I have not seen him since. He is himself undertaking the seizure and examination of the steward's papers; I expect he is still occupied with them."

"And Hermann? Why does not he come as usual to see me?"

Before the Countess could answer, the folding doors opened which communicated with the next room, and a boy, about eight years old, appeared. The little Count Arnau was a strong, but

rather unattractive child, who bore little or no resemblance to his mother, though a very striking one to his grandmother.

It was the same cast of face, the same high, broad forehead, the same clear, sharp glance, and round the small mouth were already forming the first lines of that energy and decision which made the grandmother's countenance so repellent and so striking. Was the boy always as pale as this? or had he, too, been influenced by the terrible event of this morning, the news of which had spread through the whole house? In any case, he did not run merrily to his grandmother, but went slowly towards her--almost shyly, and without speaking, put his arm round her neck.

"Why, Hermann," asked she severely, "you were in the ante-room, and did not come in? What does that mean? How long have you been accustomed to listening behind the curtains?"

The grave, but not severely-meant reproof, had a strange effect upon the boy. He shrank back at the last words, and a sudden flush dyed his formerly pale cheek; at the same time his eyes rested upon his grandmother with such an expression of anxious pain, that she involuntarily softened her tone, and asked, "But what is the matter, child? Have you become shy and timid all at once?"

"The poor child is still frightened," said the Countess, intercedingly. "I suddenly found him at my side in the study, so that he, too, like myself, must have witnessed the terrible scene. Wasn't it so, Hermann--you heard the report in papa's room, and hurried after me?"

The boy did not answer; he hid his face on the grandmother's shoulder, and she felt how his whole body trembled in her arms. But the Präsidentin was not the woman to suffer any display of feeling in her grandson, she lifted up his head in rather ungentle fashion.

"I should not have expected this from Hermann. If his poor, suffering mamma, is made worse by this fright, that is only natural; but if a boy, who is ever to become a *man*, trembles like this for hours after, it is a sign of weakness and effeminacy which ought to be struggled against as early as possible."

These sharp, severely-spoken words, evidently wounded the boy deeply. There was no fear or pain, but decided defiance in the hasty movement with which he turned away from his grandmother. With flashing eyes, and deeply offended mien, he opened his mouth for some passionate retort, when his glance fell upon his mother, and a strange change passed over the child's face. His little lips pressed themselves firmly together, as if they would force back any words that might rise to them; the defiance disappeared from his features, which suddenly showed an expression of decision, astonishing for a boy of his age, and which brought out more clearly than before the likeness to the Präsidentin; then he hung his head, and let the reproof pass without remark.

The Präsidentin shook her head, and was about to express her surprise at this unaccountable behaviour, when the Doctor was announced. The Countess, who did not wish her mother to find out how terribly she was really affected by the event of the morning, rose apparently without effort, and went into the ante-room; the Doctor's visit did not last long, after an absence of scarcely two minutes she returned to the drawing-room.

The Präsidentin still sat in the same place as before; but her head was bent low as she listened to what little Hermann was telling her. He knelt beside her on the sofa, his arms thrown round her neck.

Both grandmother and child started as the Countess entered; the former hastily laid her hand on the child's mouth, and, raising her head, turned slowly towards her daughter.

"*Um Gotteswillen*, mamma, what is the matter?" cried she, looking dreadfully frightened.

The Präsidentin's face was pale as death, justifying only too much the anxious question; she tried to answer, but her trembling lips refused to do so; a mute, deprecatory wave of the hand was her only reply.

The Countess raised her hand towards the bell. "You are not well, I will call my maid, she shall--"

"Stop! I want no one," cried the Präsidentin, almost roughly. The energetic woman had already mastered her weakness, though the colour still did not return to her paleface, and her lips trembled as they added more quietly--"It is nothing! A sudden giddiness, it will be gone directly."

But Countess Ottilie had never seen her mother's iron constitution yield to any bodily weakness, therefore this sudden attack alarmed her so much the more.

"Would you not like to lie down in your room for a time?" asked she, anxiously. "The long drive has over-tired you. Go away just now, Hermann, you see grandmamma is not well."

But the grandmother drew the boy convulsively towards her. "Hermann shall go with me. I should like to have him. Do not trouble, Ottilie, I repeat, the giddiness has quite gone; you need

rest and quiet quite as much as I do, and therefore I will take Hermann with me, he may disturb you with his chatter."

This proposal was made in such a decided tone, that the Countess, who had never been accustomed to contradict her mother in anything, made no objection; she silently complied, though still with visible anxiety.

And the poor woman was to experience still more that was strange and puzzling in the course of this day, which had begun so terribly. The Präsidentin excused herself from appearing at dinner, she was still not quite well, but refused most decidedly to see a doctor, and requested instead, that her son-in-law would come and see her for a few minutes, so soon as dinner was over.

The Count, apparently thoroughly out of humour, not only through the dreadful event of the morning, but also from the numerous unpleasant business duties incumbent upon him, seemed inclined to be irritable and impatient, and complied with the request with visible unwillingness; so much the more was the Countess astonished that he remained so long with her mother. The interview lasted more than an hour, and she heard nothing of what had passed, for, during the whole time, not only the door of the room, but that of the ante-room remained fast shut. The only apparent result of the conversation, as far as the Gräfin was concerned, was, that her mother informed her, she intended to return as early as the next day, and would like to take her grandson, who, indeed had been with her ever since she had retired to her room. She stated that the boy's naturally lively disposition disturbed and annoyed the mother in her present state, and that it would be best for him to remain away some time, so that she should be left perfectly undisturbed to recover from her recent agitation. The Count seconded the grandmother's proposal most decidedly, but Ottilie was anxious and disturbed, and strove against the decision. She did not like losing her only son, whom she loved so tenderly, and called it cruel kindness to take away the only comfort of the long, weary days of illness--but in vain--mother and husband, usually most indulgent to the gentle patient, for once withstood her wishes with incomprehensible hardness, and the Countess, too weak and too little accustomed to independent resistance, was obliged to comply.

The next morning the travelling carriage stood early before the door.

Ottilie was greatly agitated as she bade farewell to her son, and, bathed in tears, threw her arms round him again and again, but the boy's peculiar nature was proof even against his mother's distress. True, his little mouth quivered, and his breast heaved with a suppressed sob, but no tears came into his eyes, and he submitted mutely to the caresses lavished upon him, till at last the Count became impatient, and drew him away from his wife's arms. But as he did so, Hermann suddenly drew back, with unconcealed dread, indeed, almost horror, from the father's caress, and the Count was only too well aware of it. A deep flush rose to his brow, he seized the boy's hands, pressing them fast in his, and drew him thus towards him, with apparent gentleness, but in reality with no little force. This time Hermann made no resistance, and no cry of pain escaped his lips, though the pressure of his father's hands must have hurt him, but he clenched his little teeth, and his face wore such an aspect of dark defiance, that his father suddenly loosened his hold and pushed him away. But the glance which met the boy's eyes was so fearfully threatening, that the Präsidentin involuntarily threw her arm protectingly round the child.

"Adalbert!"

He turned round quickly, and a momentary glance passed between them, unobserved by any one else. The Countess still lay sobbing on the sofa, and when the servant entered the Count had recovered his usual equanimity, and offered his mother-in-law his arm.

"Calm yourself, Ottilie! We are only giving up Hermann to his grandmother, who will look after him well."

There was something like oppression in the tone of these harmless words, and his glance sought the Präsidentin's, who returned it unswervingly.

"Do not be the least anxious, Adalbert," replied she shortly, "whatever I undertake I can answer for."

Some minutes later the travellers were seated in the carriage; the Count, who had accompanied them to the door, bowed farewell, and retired from the carriage door, above which the Countess's tearful face appeared at the window, waving her handkerchief. As the carriage rolled away, the Präsidentin gave a sigh of relief, and drew the boy convulsively towards her, as if she had just rescued him from some great danger. He hid his head on her shoulder, and, for the first time, burst into tears, and sobbed bitterly.

The guilt and suicide of the steward, Brand, had brought the whole town, usually a quiet, sleepy place, where anything of importance seldom happened, into a state of great agitation. The event excited so much the more stir, as the opinion which the old servant had expressed to the doctor, on hearing of the disaster, was one which represented the town in general. All thought any other person capable of the deed, sooner than Brand, who had been everywhere considered a most capable and clever man of business, as well as a pattern of conscientiousness, and

faithfulness in duty.

Indeed, it was just these qualities, or rather the strictness with which he enforced his own punctuality and carefulness from others, and the blame he bestowed (especially upon his inferiors), for the slightest irregularity in business, which had made him many enemies, but no one had ever dared to withhold the highest respect towards him, and now, all at once, this man was declared to be a cheat, an impostor!

There could be no doubt about it, his own confession and suicide had declared his guilt, but what had become of the enormous sum embezzled? That was, and continued to be, an unexplained question. There lay, indeed, a certain obscurity over the whole matter, which was not smoothed away, and, perhaps, never could be, since he, who alone could account for it, was now beyond the reach of earthly justice.

The examination brought nothing further to light, beyond the already existing facts. The steward had given out the above-mentioned money from the Prince's revenue to Count Arnau, the chamberlain and confidant of his Highness; and hitherto he had been most punctual in payment of the instalments, but the last time he had put it off for eight days, for some apparently plausible excuse. At first the Count appeared quite satisfied, though his suspicions were aroused when he heard by chance that Brand had obtained some days' leave on account of "family affairs," and was on the point of setting off. He sent for him privately, demanded an explanation, threatened him with immediate examination into the Prince's affairs, and forced confession from the guilty steward, who instantly committed suicide, when the forbearance which he pleaded for was denied to him.

Count Arnau had taken up the matter energetically at once. He took upon himself the seizure of the dead man's accounts and papers, and subjected them to a careful, personal examination, though the office which he held did not require him to do so; but they were not strict about such matters in the little town, especially when the interest of the Prince's house was at stake, and thought a man of the Count's position and influence was quite justified in interfering in such matters, added to which, they considered it only natural that the Count, whose pardonable indulgence had delayed the discovery some days, and thereby probably caused the loss of the money, should now redouble his efforts to make it good. But all his zeal remained without result, neither he, nor the police officers of the town (though it must be confessed that the latter were by no means gifted with extraordinary intelligence), succeeded in finding any trace of the missing sum, or even the smallest allusion to the disposal of it in the official and private papers of the deceased. He must have first secured it, and then hoped to avoid the inevitable discovery by instant flight, asking, in the first place, merely for permission for a few days' absence, to cover the first few days' disappearance, and the boxes stood ready for his departure, when his deserved fate overtook him. Count Arnau confirmed on oath the declaration he had already made, and with this the matter was at an end. No further examination followed. The unfortunate man was buried as quietly as possible, and his widow, with her child, left the town, where their name would henceforth be branded with shame. The income which her husband's office had kept up was, of course, no longer forthcoming, and the little property he possessed was seized, though it did not cover more than the smallest part of the embezzled sum. So ended the drama, at least, so far as the town here was concerned.

## CHAPTER II.

"I do wish, Eugen, you would make up your mind. What is the good of all this doubting and fluctuating?"

The young man to whom these words were addressed, lifted his head slowly and said in a tone of unconcealed bitterness--

"I wish you knew what such a conflict was, then you would understand how difficult decision is!"

"I don't think I should. If my whole future lay on one side, and a youthful love affair, already half cooled down, on the other, there would be no conflict at all in my case, but simply necessity, which I should bow to, at any price."

"And if it cost the breaking of a heart?"

"*Mein Gott!* don't look at the matter in such a terribly tragical way. Broken hearts, dying in sacrifice to unhappy love, may be very effective and touching in novels, but don't exist in actual

life, and such a simple girl as your *fiancée*, is not likely to fall a victim to this romantic martyrdom. Of course the loss of her *bräutigam*<sup>[1]</sup> will cost her some tears, but she will get over it, and a year and a day after will marry some respectable Bürger and Councillor of B., who will suit her much better, and make her much happier than you would ever be able to do."

"I wish you would be quiet, Hermann!" cried Eugen violently. "You don't know Gertrud, and for that reason you are always unjust to her."

"That may be. I have, as you know, a decided antipathy to everything narrow and *bürgerlich*,<sup>[2]</sup> and when it stands in the way of a man's career, and drags him down into the lowest sphere of life, I simply hate it!"

Eugen had no reply ready for these decided words. He sprang up, went to the window, and pressing his brow against the glass, looked out on the park, which lay before him in the dewy freshness of a June morning. The sun shone warmly into the ancient pavilion, with its half obliterated frescoes on walls and roof, on the gilded, richly carved furniture, with its faded figured damask of the last century; and lighted up brightly the figures of the two young men seated there. The one who leaned against the window had a tall, slender figure, and a face, which, without being regularly beautiful, was yet singularly attractive at first sight. There was a mighty charm in these features, a world of passion and dreaminess in the dark eyes, and cloudy brows, and the inward conflict which was now shown plainly enough in his countenance, gave a still deeper interest to this artistic head, with its wealth of dark hair.

His companion possessed little or none of these fascinating attractions. He was smaller, but more powerfully built, with irregular features, which would have made him decidedly plain, but for the high, finely moulded brow, which gave a remarkable and peculiar character to the whole countenance. His keen grey eyes, almost too keen for a man of four-and-twenty, looked out calmly and clearly from beneath it, and seemed in keeping with the sharply defined lines round the mouth, a feature full of energy and decision, but cold and bitter in expression, robbing the countenance of all youthfulness, and making it at some moments almost repulsive. The young man spoke calmly, leaning back at his ease in the arm chair, and contemplating his agitated friend with almost indifference, but in spite of his calmness and indifferent mien, there was an air of unconscious nobility in his bearing, a decided superiority, which was wanting in Eugen, who, leaning gracefully against the window, dreamily contemplating the clouds, was certainly interesting, but perhaps a little theatrical in appearance.

A momentary pause in the conversation had occurred, suddenly broken by Hermann with the question--

"What is your feeling with regard to Antonie?"

A deep sigh, and a movement of impatience was the only answer.

"You love her?"

"I worship her!"

"And this worship gives her only too much satisfaction. But now, do you imagine that my proud cousin would be the one to suffer a rival in the shape of an unknown, insignificant little Bürgermädchen? Take care, if she should find it out sooner or later; I assure you, it would dash all your hopes to the ground at once."

Eugen looked moodily into space.

"Hopes! How could I dare to have any? Am not I *bürgerlich*, with no great name, no fortune--do you really imagine that she would be ready to sacrifice her name and rank for me, that Countess Arnau could ever become the wife of an unknown painter?"

A sarcastic smile quivered round Hermann's lips--

"Well, if you cannot tell, I am not the one to give you any certainty about the matter. But," added he, mockingly, "it seems to me you are pretty sure of your ground, and that there is not much danger of having 'No' for an answer. Just on that account you must decide for yourself. How shall it be? What have you decided?"

Eugen threw himself back into his chair with a despairing exclamation.

"Do not torment me with such questions, Hermann! You see my difficulties! It would be kinder to show me some way out of this labyrinth."

"The way is plain enough before you! Be a man, and rouse yourself to action energetically. Break quickly and decidedly the chain which has held you down so far, you owe it to Antonie, to your own future, if you do not intend your love for her to be an insult. And then, when you are free, come with me to Italy. The tour is really necessary for the completion of your art studies; if your finances don't admit of it, mine are at your disposal. Come, make haste and decide."

The decided, almost commanding manner of the friend, did not seem to admit of any

contradiction, and did not fail to impress the young painter, who wrung his hands in deep inward conflict with himself.

"I know you are right, only too right. I feel it in every word you say, but, Gertrud! Gertrud! Call me weak, call me what you will, but I cannot bear to know that she is unhappy, unhappy through me."

With a movement of the greatest impatience, Hermann pushed back his chair and sprang up.

"Well, then, if you cannot, I shall act for you. Ah, here comes Antonie, just at the right time."

"What are you going to do?" cried Eugen, alarmed.

"Cut the knot which ties you to despair! Good morning, *liebe Toni*."

Eugen longed to protest and entreat against his friend's intentions, which he dimly portended, but it was already too late. A dress rustled before the door of the pavilion, and a young lady crossed the threshold.

Countess Antonie Arnau was certainly a being whose appearance could well justify the passion of a young artist. A slender refined figure, and a face of truly poetic beauty. A pair of dark eyes, full of dreamy fire, looked out from a somewhat pale face, surrounded by dark hair, artistically arranged, and falling thickly on her white embroidered morning dress. Her movements and bearing were full of grace, but nevertheless, there was a something in her air which betrayed that the young Countess was quite as well aware of her beauty as of her position in the world.

She shook hands with her cousin confidentially, while she answered Eugen's greeting with a smile, and then said playfully--

"I thought I was the first in the park today, but I see the gentlemen are already before me, and are holding a most important conference here."

Hermann shrugged his shoulders.

"Important, yes, but entirely without result! I have been trying in vain for an hour to convince Eugen of the necessity of his companionship on my tour to Italy."

"What, Herr Reinert," and the beautiful woman glanced surprised and reproachfully at the young artist. "You hesitate? I thought it was a settled matter, and fully expected to see you again in Rome with Hermann."

Eugen was silent, and sent across a half pleading, half threatening glance to Hermann, who appeared not to see it, for he replied calmly--

"You were mistaken, Antonie; Eugen has altered his plans. He declines to go, and prefers returning to his native town, to lead his *fiancée*--"

"Hermann!" cried Eugen, who had hitherto vainly endeavoured to put in a word.

"To lead his *fiancée*, a Bürgermädchen there, to the hymeneal altar," concluded Hermann, not the least disturbed.

But these words had a formidable effect upon Antonie. For the first moment she was deadly pale, and her hand unconsciously grasped the arm of the chair to support herself, then a sudden flush suffused her countenance, and a flash shot from her dark eyes--a glance which disfigured the beautiful face, a glance which seemed ready to annihilate Eugen, who stood resistless before her. Then, gathering together all her strength, she turned away from both to the window, thus shielding at least her countenance from Hermann's sharply observant eyes.

The latter evidently felt that a third was superfluous in the explanation, which must inevitably follow, Antonie already knew enough. He took up his hat from the table--

"Excuse me a few moments. I have forgotten to give an order in the Castle. I will be back directly."

The excuse was hardly necessary; neither Antonie nor Eugen appeared to hear it, and the young Count Arnau, who detested "scenes," and saw a most stormy one impending, hurried away from the pavilion, closing the door behind him.

The two occupants of the room stood at first silently before one another. Antonie was still striving for self-command, and Eugen could find no words with which to defend himself.

He fought between anger against Hermann, and shame at the painfully humiliating situation in which he found himself, in which, indeed, his friend had placed him. The Countess was the first to speak.

"I regret, Herr Reinert, that I have only this moment become aware of your engagement through my cousin, or I should have congratulated you long since."

The icy glance and freezing tone roused Eugen from his insensibility, and he made an attempt to hurry towards her, "*Um Gotteswillen*, Antonie, not that tone!"

With a look of the proudest contempt she drew back.

"Sir, you seem to forget that you are addressing Countess Arnau."

Neither words nor expression could have been chosen, which could convey more scorn, Eugen turned pale, his self confidence returned and gave him back new courage, deeply offended, he retired a step--"Pardon, *gnädigste Gräfin!*<sup>[3]</sup> I believe it is the first time that you have found it necessary to remind me of the gulf between us, and I give you my word that it shall be the last."

He bowed and strode towards the door, Antonie looked after him waveringly. She felt she had gone too far, and that she at least ought not to have spoken thus, and quick in repentance as in anger, she called him back.

"Reinert!"

He half turned.

"What are your commands, *gnädigste Gräfin?*"

But the passionate woman's pride and self command had come to an end alike, she had never possessed more than a small share of either. Accustomed to give way to every outbreak of feeling, she sank down on the sofa and burst into a violent fit of weeping.

Eugen heard this, and stopped; he looked back, saw the beautiful tear-wet countenance turned towards him, and the next minute he was by her side.

"You are crying, Gräfin? May I speak to you? Antonie, will you condemn me unheard?"

This time no hard refusal followed his confidential tone. She looked up at him, fighting between love and anger, but Eugen saw that he might now dare to justify himself, and did not hesitate to do so.

"Yes, it is true I am bound, and this bond has become the curse of my life. When I returned to my native town some years ago, I saw once more a young girl, who had been a playfellow of mine. She was an orphan, scarcely beyond childhood, I thought I loved her, and her guardian urged me to declaration--so she became my *fiancée*. It was a step too hastily taken, but I wore the chain, and would have worn it patiently to the end. Then I came here and saw you, Antonie, and from that moment began the long fearful conflict between duty and passion. I must tear myself away from you, indeed, from every remembrance of you, if I would not succumb to this. Let my talent, let my whole future perish in that narrow confined sphere, let me know despair in an empty, joyless marriage--what is art to me, what, indeed, life itself, if I must renounce you!"

He had spoken with ever rising agitation, and Antonie had ceased weeping, anger had given place to compassion, and, as he concluded, every reproach had perished in the fear of losing the beloved one.

Countess Arnau was not the woman to recognise the claims of an outsider, where she alone would possess all.

"Renounce?" asked she softly, with dropped eyelids. But a world of encouragement lay in the tone, "and why?"

"You ask me? May I dare, then, to woo you? I am poor, you know it. I have nothing but my art. You stand so high, your position in life is so brilliant--"

His glance, resting with burning passion upon the beautiful woman's face, contradicted these words of renunciation. She looked up and smiled.

"And I am free, Eugen, quite free! You had forgotten that!"

"Antonie!"

He rushed passionately to her feet.

"Give me the hope, give me the certainty, that I may one day win you, and I will break my chain, cost what it may. Tell me, that you will be mine, in spite of your name, in spite of your family, and I will burst all bonds asunder, and win happiness, if need be, by force!"

Antonie bent down to her kneeling lover, love plainly to be seen in her eyes--she was, indeed, wonderfully beautiful at this moment.

"I fear no bonds. I know by experience how empty splendour and riches can make life, in a marriage where there is no love. Free yourself, cultivate your genius, and then, when your first work has won you an artist's fame,--then come and fetch the prize of victory!"

### CHAPTER III.

The freshness of the morning was over, and the heat of a midday sun in June brooded over the village, which lay about half-an-hour's distance from the Schloss, where Count Arnau and Eugen Reinert were at present guests. The stage coach, which had passed through an hour ago, had put down travellers, an old gentleman and a young girl. The narrow, close, room of the inn seemed oppressive to both alike; the old man sat in the little garden behind the house, whilst his companion had sauntered to the front, and was now thoughtfully contemplating the scene around her.

The village lay almost as still as death, the people were nearly all at work in the fields. No one was to be seen, save a group of children, playing in the broad village street, untroubled by the hot sunshine.

Suddenly the distant rumble of a carriage was heard, and a moment after an elegant conveyance came in sight. The groom sat behind, and a gentleman himself managed the spirited black horses;--there was no doubt that he saw the children, but he seemed to imagine that they must also see him, and would move out of the way in time, for he drove straight through the village at the sharpest pace, though in such a broad street, it would have been quite easy to have turned out of the way. The little group of children flew right and left as he approached; only one, a little fellow, perhaps two years old, sat still, quite unconscious of his danger, and when the frightened children at last roused him by their cries, the carriage was already almost upon him. He now, at last, attempted to get up, but stunned, and unaccustomed to run, he stumbled at the first step, and fell down right in front of the horses. The driver of the carriage, only perceiving the child at that instant, drew them up with all his strength, but they were in full trot, and very spirited animals, so that he did not succeed in stopping them at once, and the boy seemed lost. Then the young girl suddenly flew towards the child, and, quick as lightning, tore him away almost from under the hoofs of the horses, took him in her arms and sprang aside. An instant later would have been fatal to him! A moment after the driver had succeeded in pulling up the fiery animals, but their hoofs stamped the place where the child lay a few seconds since, and he, quiet enough from fright in the moment of danger, now that he found himself safe, burst into a loud scream.

Count Arnau gave the reins to his groom, sprang from the carriage, and approached the two.

"Is any one hurt?" asked he, hastily.

"I am not, but the child--"

Without answering a word, Hermann took the little one from her arms, felt and examined him rather roughly, but very thoroughly, on all sides, and soon convinced himself that he was not the least injured.

"It is nothing," said he calmly. "He was only frightened; come, cry-baby, you are all right enough!"

So saying, he carelessly put down the child, who, intimidated by the rough tone, was now silent and looked up at him anxiously with great eyes, still full of tears. The Count then turned politely to the young girl who had saved him.

"You showed great courage, *mein Fräulein*. It was impossible to stop the horses so quickly, and the little fellow would have been lost but for you."

His eyes looked over the girl quickly and sharply during this speech. She was still very youthful looking, as she stood there before him, certainly not more than seventeen years of age, with a slender, refined figure. Her dress was extremely simple. During the hasty movement which she made to save the child, her round straw hat had slipped off, and hung loosely on her neck, so that the full, warm, midday sun lit up her face, and the shining golden hair which surrounded it, the latter simply parted in front, and wound round the back of her head in heavy coils. Perhaps the blinding illumination of the sun made her look particularly charming at this moment, else her face was not actually beautiful, at least, not yet, though the lines of future beauty might already be traced in her features. At present they were still unformed and childish; the only characteristic which gave the face a particular charm were the great, deep, blue eyes, with their unusual, almost mysterious expression. There lay an earnestness beyond her years in these eyes, something more even than that, a shade, such as a life of care, suffering, and oppression, which cannot be fled from, will imprint upon a human countenance. Certainly the

young face showed no trace of this, except in the one feature, the childish brow showed no furrow, the mouth no hard lines, but only in the eyes this shade lay deeply, as she lifted them, now, full of gravity and reproach.

"A human life does not seem worth much in your eyes, or surely you would have given more thought to his danger."

Count Arnau looked greatly astonished at this reprimand, and measured the youthful admonitress with a long, surprised glance.

"The child is all right!" said he, in an off-hand tone, "he cried for pleasure, I suppose."

"But a moment later, and he would have been run over."

Hermann shrugged his shoulders. "Would have been!--Yes, if we always troubled ourselves about what might have happened, the day would not be long enough for every one's complaints. Fortunately all is well in this case, your courageous interference saved me from a disagreeable responsibility. I greatly regret having frightened you."

"I was not frightened."

Her words sounded cold and repellant, the way in which the Count treated the whole matter appeared to hurt the young girl. She knelt down by the boy, and busied herself in rubbing off the sand with which his little face and hands were covered, fortunately the only trace which the accident had left.

Hermann remained where he was, watching her. Hitherto, he had always stoutly maintained, that, with the exception of his grandmother, who, in consequence of her energetic, masculine character, he hardly reckoned as belonging to the feminine race, every woman either went into hysterics or fainted at the sight of danger, and was greatly astonished to find a second exception here. "I was not frightened," she had declared, and, indeed, she had not been. Her face had retained its usual colour, her hands did not tremble, as she went gently and deftly to work, the young girl showed just as much calmness now as she had just before shown presence of mind.

The door of the neighbouring house now opened, and a woman, poorly and untidily dressed, with rough hair, and a dull, expressionless face, came hurriedly out to take the boy from a stranger's arms, the Count felt in his pocket.

"The child was almost run over by my carriage, take more care of it in future. Here is something for the fright he got."

The dull features of the woman, which had hitherto hardly shown any concern, lighted up at sight of the shining thalers which he held out to her in his haughty, indifferent way. She curtsied low, and thanked the Gnädigen Herrn Grafen<sup>[4]</sup> for his kindness. The young girl had half risen, her large eyes travelling slowly from the mother to the child, and then back to the money, which the former held in her hand. She stood up suddenly, turned her back upon the group, and without saying a word, went towards the inn.

With quick steps Hermann overtook her.

"You see the fright was soon atoned for. The woman will bless the chance which has thrown her day's wages for three weeks into her hands."

The words sounded half mocking, and half like a sort of excuse. The girl pressed her lips together.

"I did not think it possible that a mother could possess so little self-respect as to let anxiety for her child's safety be bought off in that way."

Hermann smiled sarcastically.

"Self respect! In a village woman? Pardon me, Fräulein, you must come from a town, and cannot know our country folks."

"One can make acquaintance with poverty in the town too, especially when no very great depth separates one from it, Herr Graf."

Hermann bit his lips.

"I meant," said he sharply, "that the education, which separates you from those people, is quite as wide a cleft. Have you really such sympathy for these dull-witted, degraded people?"

"I sympathise with any one who is oppressed and miserable."

"Really?"

Meanwhile they had reached the inn, the young girl bowed slightly, and laid her hand upon the latch, but Hermann anticipated her. He opened the door for her, and followed her into the

inn.

She stopped and looked at him repellantly and with surprise, it was easy to see she did not wish to continue the conversation. But in spite of this the Count went on.

"Really?" repeated he, and added in rather an irritated tone, "it seems to me that you imply that I am one of the oppressors. I hope you don't credit me with having seen the child, and purposely driven on."

"No, but you must have seen all the children. Why did you not turn out of the way for them?"

"For the village children!" cried the young Count, with such unconcealed astonishment that one could see the thought had never entered his head. "I ought to drive out of the way of my uncle's labouring people?"

The proposal seemed to him evidently unheard of, and the young stranger was on the point of answering, but suddenly stopped and leaned forward, listening attentively. A half stifled cry of delight escaped her lips; she involuntarily raised her arms, and was on the point of hurrying away, when she suddenly remembered Hermann's presence. A deep flush suffused her countenance, she let her arms fall and remained where she was, as if rooted to the ground. The Count had followed the direction of her eyes, and now saw the cause of this sudden change. Eugen Reinert, who, after a hasty question in the passage, strode hastily into the room without observing his friend.

"Gertrud! *Um Gotteswillen*, you here!"

She flew towards him, holding out both hands, with a beaming smile, which transformed and glorified her youthful face, but she appeared at the same time, by a whispered word to draw his attention to the fact that they were not alone. Eugen looked up and almost started.

"Oh, Hermann, is it you?"

A minute's oppressive pause followed. Gertrud looked surprised and questioningly at Eugen, who, pale and visibly disturbed, held fast her hand without speaking a word.

Count Hermann leaned silently against the table with folded arms, and contemplated the pair steadfastly; the hard hostile look his features sometimes wore, almost alarmingly visible at this moment.

"Pardon me, Gertrud," began Eugen at last, "I expected to find you alone. You know--?"

"No," interrupted she quickly. "I met with this gentleman by chance."

It seemed to cost Eugen a tremendous effort to make known his *fiancée* to Count Arnau, but he took her hand and led her towards him.

"My--my *braut*,<sup>[5]</sup> Hermann! Gertrud, my nearest and best friend, Graf Arnau."

Gertrud was on the point of returning Hermann's cold and very measured bow, in the same manner, but at the mention of his name, she gave a sudden start. Her face, so beaming a moment since, became deathly pale, and her widely opened eyes fixed themselves upon the young Count with an expression which startled Eugen, although he could not in the least account for it.

"What is the matter, Gertrud? What is it?"

"Nothing! nothing!"

She strove visibly to command herself, and succeeded in doing so somewhat, but the strange look did not leave her eyes, and she involuntarily retreated gradually, drawing Eugen with her almost by force.

Hermann turned away quickly.

"I will not disturb your first meeting with your *braut*," said he, laying a sharp, sarcastic accent upon the word. "I am going to drive back to the Castle. *Au revoir!*"

With a hurried bow he left the room and gained the outer door.

So that was Gertrud Walter, Eugen's betrothed, the "little *Bürgermädchen*," who had appeared so distasteful to his haughty friend, because she "stood in the way of a man's career, and would draw him down to her own narrow sphere." Yes, to be sure, he had pictured her differently, but what a strange contradiction between her childish appearance and the very unchildish answers which she knew how to give. Neither met with the Count's approval; on the contrary, he was vexed that he had allowed himself to be the least impressed by this girl. And then--why did she hate him? Hermann was a closer observer than his passionate friend, he knew very well that it was not fright nor fear, but actual hate, a glowing, energetic hate, which he had seen in her eyes at the mention of his name, such as he had never before seen in any woman's countenance. For what reason did she hate him?

"Bah, I know how it is, Eugen must have betrayed to her in his letters, that it is I who always urge him against this match, and Mademoiselle Walter sees in me the hostile element which threatens her happiness, and therefore honours me with her hate. A pity she wastes her energies on such a small matter!"

The Count's lips curled scornfully, and he mounted to the box in very bad humour, took the reins from the groom, and drove away at a sharp pace. There was a dark, defiant look in his face, as he drove the horses almost recklessly before him; but when, at the end of the village, he met two old women by the wayside, who were on the point of turning out of the way for the Count's equipage in a great hurry, they observed, to their great astonishment, that the Count drove aside and flew past, at some little distance from them.

## CHAPTER IV.

Evening had come, but the sultriness of the day still remained, in the west a great thunder cloud hung threateningly, and the harvest people hurried homewards. Without any suspicion of the coming storm, since the wood hid the lowering clouds as yet, Gertrud Walter walked slowly along the footpath which led to the Schloss. She looked still graver and more thoughtful than in the morning, for Eugen's whole being seemed so strangely altered and disturbed. He had not been able to hide his visible disquiet and agitation, had seemed unwilling to answer her questions, and had hurried away, after barely a quarter of an hour's conversation with her, under the pretext that his presence was necessary at the Schloss. Gertrud was certainly embarrassed at this behaviour, but had not the slightest suspicion of anything seriously wrong, she had perfect faith in her *fiancé's* explanation, that an unpleasant circumstance had occurred, which had greatly annoyed him, and she waited impatiently for the night's meeting, in which he had promised to explain all. She wished to have some share in his unhappiness, wished to advise, comfort, help, so much as she could--she little imagined what explanation awaited her.

It was the hour agreed upon; she had come to meet him, and now stood waiting, having already accomplished her half of the way. She did not dare to go further, for the Schloss could already be seen through an opening in the wood, where, as Eugen said, some commission kept him, with the completion of which he was now occupied. The young girl sat down upon the trunk of a tree, and let her folded hands fall into her lap. At this moment she looked childish enough, and in spite of the shade of care, her face bore the aspect of full confidence, as she gazed out into the distance. But this expression suddenly changed; she had been looking towards the Schloss, which one could see to the left through the tall fir trees, and with the sight of it some dark remembrance seemed to come back to her. A shade passed over the youthful features, and her lips pressed themselves together, her clasped hands loosened, she passed her hand several times hastily over her forehead, as if she would smooth away some tormenting thought, and then looked anxiously towards the spot where she expected Eugen to appear.

Steps were now really heard in the distance. Gertrud sprang up, but it was the voices of two persons she heard. The young girl stood undecided whether to hurry forwards or wait, then a clear sharp voice reached her, and she no longer hesitated. But she turned pale; meet Eugen in this company? No, indeed. The next minute she was safely hidden behind a bush, which effectually shielded her from notice.

"I have been trying to get a minute alone with you all the afternoon," said Eugen's voice, "but you seemed to avoid it purposely, and Antonie would not let me leave her side for an instant. You must really listen now, Hermann, I need your advice, your assistance."

"What for?"

Meanwhile both the young men had reached the entrance of the wood, and the Count stopped close by the bush where Gertrud was hidden.

"What for?" repeated he.

Eugen looked at him, somewhat surprised at the cool tone.

"You ask me? Why, you know, Gertrud is here, and surely can imagine my painful, dreadful situation."

"Tell me first of all, how does your future bride happen to be here?"

"Through the most unlucky chance in the world! Her guardian is on the way to visit some

relations in A, and is taking her with him. They had to pass this village, and Gertrud, who knew I was here, persuaded her uncle to stay a day, to give me, as she imagined, a pleasant surprise! I thought I should have sunk into the earth when I heard she was here to-day!"

"Indeed?" The peculiar coldness of the Count's tone formed a sharp contrast to Eugen's passionate voice.

"A very painful chance, certainly! And what do you intend to do?"

The young man passed his hand over his brow--

"I don't know!" said he, in a constrained voice. "I was obliged to make an excuse for appearing so disturbed to-day, and got away as quickly as I could, so as to escape questions; but she expects me to-night, and will persecute me with questions and entreaties. Do advise me, Hermann, what am I to do?"

The Count sat down upon the trunk of a tree, with his back to the before-named bush; he did not for a moment alter his cold, repellent manner.

"Something which will be anything but easy, but nevertheless *must* happen--tell her the truth."

"Impossible! I cannot!"

"Eugen!"

"I cannot!" repeated Eugen passionately. "To any one else I could, but demean myself in her eyes by such a confession, I cannot!"

"You seem to fear those eyes very much. But if you dare not confess it, what then?"

Eugen cast down his eyes.

"I thought," said he, hesitating after a pause, "I thought I would not tell her anything at present. She is going away again this evening, and next week I shall leave for Italy with you. From then I thought of gradually loosening the tie--"

"Gradually loosening the tie--well, I'm waiting to hear the next."

The young painter seemed to be becoming more and more uncomfortable under his friend's steadfast glance.

"I do not wish to wound Gertrud by allowing her to know of my relations with Antonie," said he hastily. "She may think that reasons of another kind, losses or unfortunate circumstances, oblige me to break off the connection. I have already hinted at something of the sort. It will be easier to explain by letter, and from a distance--you can understand that I wish to spare her as much as possible."

"Spare her? Then why will you torment the girl for weeks, perhaps months, with uncertainty as to her future, and anxiety about you? You intend to *spare* her by giving her the poison by drops, and, after you have attracted to yourself all the womanly anxiety and tenderness she is capable of, you will give her the boundless humiliation of hearing that her *fiancé*, whom she imagines in the depths of need and despair, is the chosen spouse of the rich Countess Arnau, is about to make one of the most brilliant matches in the country. Rather an odd way of sparing her!"

Eugen looked at him in great astonishment.

"Why, Hermann, what has taken you today? You have quite altered your views!"

"My views have nothing to do with it, the question is, whether you were in earnest in what you said."

The young man was silent.

"You really mean it, then?" continued the Count, adding energetically. "Well, I must say I should not have expected it of you!"

"I cannot understand," began Eugen, irritated at his friend's scornful tone, "how you can judge my intentions so severely. Was it not you who urged me against this match from the first, and continually drove me to break it off, and almost forced me to make a declaration to Antonie? I, at least, have suffered in the conflict, but you are one of those ice-natures who stride on, indifferent to the joy or sorrow of others, not troubling whether hearts are broken or not. You know you have openly confessed to these unscrupulous principles, how is it, then, that you have changed all at once, and argue just the opposite, and condemn me because I follow your example?"

Hermann was silent a moment--did his conscience convict him? There was truth enough in what he said, and this was proved, since, for once, Count Arnau was in want of an answer, but in a moment he replied with perfect calmness--

"You are mistaken! I *was* averse to this match, and am still, because I see no good for your future in it. That you must break off this match I still think, but our opinions differ as to the way in which it is to be done. I *am* regardless, unscrupulous, when an important end to be gained is at stake, there you are right, and I suppose in this case, I should actually have broken the girl's heart; but to invent excuses in order to hide what she must discover eventually, pretend I was the victim of a cruel fate, and thus knit a tissue of falsehoods of all kinds about the matter--that Eugen, I would not do, for to tell you the truth, I think such a proceeding pretty cowardly."

"Hermann!" burst out Eugen.

"Don't be absurdly sensitive," said the Count, authoritatively, "it is out of place here. I have told you my opinion frankly, now do what you like. By-the-by, I think the storm is coming on, I must go back to the Castle. I suppose you are on the way to the village, adieu!"

Eugen did not answer, he turned away and walked off angrily without any word of greeting. Hermann shrugged his shoulders, he knew his friend's temper, and also knew it would not last long. Such scenes were not of unfrequent occurrence between them. Reinert, after such a one, usually played the part of an injured person, but ended generally by leaning to his friend's superior wisdom.

Meanwhile the sky had grown darker and darker, the wind rose and whistled in the tops of the trees. Graf Arnau glanced at the clouds, and turned towards the Schloss. Just then the wind, with a sudden gust, blew aside the neighbouring bushes, and something glimmered amongst them like a woman's dress. Struck with a sudden presentiment, Hermann stopped and peered sharply through the bushes, nothing could be made out distinctly, but he strode a few steps forward, and the next moment stood before Gertrud Walter.

The girl had sunk on her knees, her head against the root of a great tree, her face hidden in both hands. By no sound had she betrayed herself, but she had broken down at the sudden news, which had come upon her unexpectedly like a flash of lightning. Hermann only needed to stand there an instant, in order to understand and feel how fearfully humiliating his presence would be to her at this moment. For an instant he looked down at her silently, then turned and walked away as quietly and quickly as he had come.

But after walking a few steps, he stopped and looked back. She lay as still and motionless as a statue--perhaps she had fainted--perhaps--the Count had not decided within himself what common humanity and compassion demanded in this case, before he again stood at her side.

"Fräulein!"

No answer, nor the slightest movement.

Hermann bent down and lifted her up. She received his help silently, and whilst she mechanically raised her head, her eyes gazed unconsciously at his face.

"You are not well! May I offer you my assistance as far as the village?"

He ought not to have spoken, for with the tone of his voice came back at once strength and consciousness, and with it hostility against him. There it was once more, that terrified shrinking, which she had shown in the morning, the same strange hostile look returned to her eyes, it seemed, as if in the one feeling of detestation against him, even the remembrance of the last quarter of an hour was forgotten.

"I need no help--I am well--quite well--"

She walked a few steps, but tottered, and was obliged to lean against a tree to keep herself from falling. The wind shook the branches and sent a shower of leaves down upon her; the first flash of lightning quivered through the air, and a distant growl of thunder followed it. Hermann, who had again turned away, once more returned to the young girl, and said, with a decision, through which some bitterness sounded--

"I am sorry to be troublesome to you by my presence, but you are *not* well, *mein Fräulein*. You are alone, and a stranger here, and the village is half an hour's distance from this spot. You will therefore accept my assistance, and the assurance that I will not be troublesome to you a moment longer than is actually necessary."

Quietly, as if a refusal were unheard of, he took her arm, like that of a child, to lead her, but this had a truly alarming effect upon Gertrud. As if stung by a snake, she could not have started more fearfully, nor shrunk back with greater horror. With almost a cry she tore her hand out of his, and Hermann seemed suddenly to behold a changed being before him. Nothing more of the "child" was to be seen; her figure, as she stood before him, drawn up to her full height, had something commanding and powerful about it. So mysterious was this commanding glance, that any one else would have quailed before it, as with a tone and expression which perfectly electrified the Count, she cried, threateningly--

"Do not touch me, Count Arnau. I will not accept of your assistance!"

She turned away, took the road to the village and disappeared behind the bushes. Hermann stood motionless, looking after her, but the next minute anger had overcome his silent astonishment.

Never had the young Count been treated so, never so insulted, and here--when, for the first time in his life he had approached any one with warm sympathy, had for the first time diverged from his indifferent character! How could this girl dare to behave so to him? And wherefore?

He laughed aloud bitterly.

"H'm, well now, I can understand that Eugen would not care to demean himself in her eyes! He is not the man to have much influence upon a nature which can act in this way, just after it has experienced such humiliation. She would have withered him with that look!"

The thunder, becoming ever louder, and the frequent flashes of lightning, put an end to the Count's observations, and warned him to make the best of his way back to the Castle, which he had scarcely reached before heavy drops began to fall.

An hour later--the storm was over, but the rain still fell in torrents. In the Castle the last preparations were being completed for the great ball, which was to take place that night. Eugen came back from the village, pale, excited, and wet through, and at once hastened to Hermann's room. They had some conversation, and the servants, hurrying backwards and forwards, heard their voices raised loudly in dispute, and also noticed that Herr Reinert came out of the Count's room with a remarkably grave and displeased air, so that they imagined some scene, not of the pleasantest nature, had taken place between them.

The two avoided each other as much as possible the whole evening, but their quarrel went no farther, at least, outwardly. The carriages of the guests now rolled in from all sides, and so soon as night descended the whole row of windows in the Castle streamed with light.

The centre point and crown of the brilliant company, was, of course, the beautiful Countess Arnau. She appeared this evening more charming and bewitching than ever before, and Eugen hardly left her side for an instant. To-day, for the first time, he ventured publicly to offer her his homage, which Antonie accepted in such a manner as left scarcely room for a doubt as to the impending relations between them.

All eyes followed the pair, everywhere one heard whispered observations and questions, as to whether it were possible that the proud, much courted Countess Arnau could really seriously think of marrying a young, unknown painter, who, *quelle horreur!* instead of offering her the coronet of a Count, could only give her a *bürgerlich* name. What unpardonable extravagance! What a scandal for the family!

An old baroness, who was possessed of more curiosity, and more indignation at such improprieties, than all the others, determined to find out the truth at any price, and therefore to turn to the surest source of information, namely, Count Hermann.

It was some time before she found him. The Count did not care for dancing much at any time, and did not, as usual, take part in it to-night. The clang of a post horn sounded below on the country road, mixing itself strangely with the noisy dance music.

"My dear Count, what in the world are you doing here in this secluded room, at the open window? All the guests have missed you already!"

Hermann turned round, with a face on which vexation at the interruption was written plainly enough.

"It is oppressive in the ball-room," replied he, very coldly and repellantly. "I found it necessary to get a few minutes' fresh air."

"You are right, it is terribly warm there, and the air after the storm is so refreshing! But you are missing too much here--your cousin waltzes so charmingly with your friend, the young artist--*à propos*, my dear Count, is it true then--this report, that the Gräfin returns the passion of this Herr Reinert, which he takes no pains to conceal? Does she actually intend to honour him with her hand?"

Hermann shut down the window hastily.

"I regret, my *gnädigste Baronin*, that I cannot give you any information upon the subject. I am as little instructed by my cousin as to her intentions as you can be. And, by the way, I think it is becoming too cool for you here, allow me to conduct you back to the *saal*."

So saying, he offered his arm with cool politeness, and led her back to the ball-room. The waltz was not yet finished as they entered; Gräfin Antonie floated past them in the full light of the wax tapers, moving in time to the lively music, with Eugen as her partner--and in the distance died away the last note of the post horn!

## CHAPTER V.

Seven years had passed by, altering many things, and burying away and blotting out others, and, as often happens in life, so also here the reality had been very, very different from the hopes and expectations of mankind.

Of the artistic fame of Eugen Reinert one heard little or nothing. Certainly his first great work, the portrait of Countess Arnau, which was exhibited publicly, created much stir, and justified the highest hopes for the future. But with this picture, which certainly bore the stamp of originality, and created a name for him in the artistic world, he appeared to have exhausted his best powers. He still painted portraits, though exclusively of those who belonged to aristocratic circles, the *entrée* of which he had obtained through his wife, and in these his work was always considered as full of genius, but real art critics did not think much of them, and they were little noticed by the public.

Eugen's principal fault, want of energy and perseverance, became more and more perceptible as time went on. He fluctuated continually between different studies of all sorts, tried everything and finished nothing, sketched out the most ambitious plans, but carried none into execution, and wasted his great talent upon the distinguished, but often uninteresting faces of counts and "excellencies," and the albums of aristocratic ladies. Since good fortune had thrown the gifts into his lap, without trouble on his part, which he had once hoped to obtain through his art, his pleasure in it, and even his capabilities, seemed to be exhausted. What reason had he for working still? The riches, which his wife brought him, and the connections he was able to make through these, as well as the splendidly appointed house supported through them, secured all the enjoyments of life to him, as well as an undisputed position in society, and when, in the course of a few years, the title of "Von" was added to his name, "on account of his services to art," the highest degree of earthly fame seemed to have been attained.

Meanwhile the once so promising talent had all but perished, and quietly enough, on the other hand, great gifts were developing where they had been least expected, namely, in Count Hermann, who, on account of his reserved and silent nature, was little known, and still less liked. His genius seemed to have taken a sudden leap forward, astonishing every one. After his return from a long tour, which he had undertaken as a completion of his education, he entered into the service of the State, and went with his Prince's ambassador to Vienna. Scarcely two years elapsed before the young *attaché* had become the right hand of the ambassador, who was not particularly capable or gifted, he asked his advice and support in any difficult matters, and finally Count Hermann became his representative, and undertook all the business which gave the title to his Excellence. By chance, the way in which this business was conducted was revealed to the Prince; he began to notice the young Count attentively, and presently called upon him to fill a post in the capital, important for a man of his age, and it was not long before Hermann had become as influential and noticeable here. His quick foresight, which saw through every matter so plainly, the never failing energy with which he undertook everything, and the almost incredible activity he manifested, secured for him success after success. He mounted from step to step, and now, at the age of thirty-two, already held one of the highest offices in the country, in the exercise of power, and stood upon the threshold of the post of Minister, which would undoubtedly be open to him at the next change of politics. Of course the ancient title which he bore, together with his riches, and the personal favour of the Prince, had contributed to this extraordinarily rapid career; but in reality they only served to smooth the way, and remove the hindrances, with which a *bürgerlicher* would first have had to contend with. Hundreds of the same rank and income would have remained at the foot of, or halfway up the ladder, to the topmost rung of which he had now climbed--truly his success was only owing to himself.

On the widowed *Präsidentin* von Sternfeld's estate, preparations had been made for the reception of different guests. The eldest son, Baron von Sternfeld, had already been there for a week with his wife and two little daughters, Count Arnau had also arrived this morning from the capital, and Herr and Frau von Reinert were expected next day.

In the garden house of the old family mansion, by the open glass doors, which led on to the broad stone terrace, Count Hermann sat with his grandmother. The appearance of the old lady, now more than seventy, still showed the intellectual and physical strength which had always made her the centre point of the family, over which she practised her old authority. The powerful form appeared to bow unwillingly to age; her hair was snow-white, her face full of lines and wrinkles, but it was a face which age could not change much. It had not been able to dim the sharp, clear eye, nor soften the authoritative expression of energy, and if she was somewhat bowed by the weight of years, her head was still carried as erect as ever.

Count Arnau, too, was little altered by the lapse of time; it seemed to leave no trace on these

decided, cold features. His glance was, perhaps, still keener, the peculiar lines round his mouth still firmer, and his bearing, in spite of its simplicity, showed more self-assurance; but more conspicuous than ever was now the likeness to the grandmother, whose face, seemed to repeat his, feature by feature, as his character resembled hers.

A long conversation had ensued about the affairs of the capital, and Hermann's post there, together with his views for the future, and thus the talk had gradually ended in a political discussion; now the Count, commencing a new topic, asked--

"So Antonie and Eugen are to arrive to-morrow?"

"Yes--according to your openly expressed wish. I am sacrificing my feelings a great deal, Hermann! You know I shall never pardon Antonie this *mésalliance*, and if I have prevailed upon myself to invite her, and Herr Reinert, it is *only* on your account."

"Thank you, dear grandmother; I know what it costs you; but the recognition of the marriage on your side had become with time necessary. And by the way, as the outer form of nobility is no longer wanting, you need fear no hindrance in introducing Herr and Frau von Reinert as relations, in society."

The Präsidentin shrugged her shoulders. "Making him a 'Von' was a necessity, since Antonie had once taken that mad step. She is, and will always be, Gräfin Arnau, in spite of all, and as such cannot be simply *bürgerlich* Frau Reinert, if she comes back here. But a consideration, which was due to the world to cover the scandal to the family, has no influence upon my judgment. To me Herr Reinert remains, as he always was, *bürgerlich*."

Hermann gazed moodily into the distance, and his brow clouded somewhat.

"I hoped Eugen would gain an artist's name for himself, which would make this 'nobility' superfluous; unfortunately it has come to nothing."

"What?" The Präsidentin's voice involuntarily became sharper. "Do you mean to say that the fame of an artist can make up for the inherited coronet of a count?"

"Make up for it--no! but it can atone for the want of it in a certain sense, especially with such a romantic nature as Toni's."

The Präsidentin's face showed how little this answer pleased her.

"You always had a weakness for this Reinert," said she, shaking her head deprecatingly.

"He was once very dear to me!"

"Was?"

"Yes. But several things have happened to cause a coldness between us. I had the greatest hopes for his talents and future, but nothing has come of them."

The Präsidentin drew herself up in her arm chair and fixed her eyes upon Hermann.

"I confess to you openly, Hermann, that formerly I was much concerned about this friendship. You were true to the aristocratic traditions of your family in all else; but you always and everywhere made an exception in favour of this Reinert. Toni would not have dared under my eyes to misuse her liberty in this manner. Unfortunately I was absent, but you were near. You ought to have acted in my place, and guarded the honour of the family. Instead of that you favoured the match openly, brought them together in Rome, and even took their part against me. I really had serious fears for your principles at that time."

The Count smiled, his old sarcastic smile, without a trace of cheerfulness.

"Your fears were groundless; you ought to have known me better, grandmother. I am constituted differently, and what I thought suitable in Eugen and Toni's case, I should not have pardoned in myself,--I should not make a *mésalliance*, you can be sure of that."

"I know it," said the Präsidentin, with calm assurance. "Fortunately you have not a trace of absurd romance about you."

"No!--and besides that--you know I have much reason for keeping my name clear!"

His voice sank at the last words, and his brow clouded heavily, whilst his eyes sought the ground. The Präsidentin, too, became graver, but at the same time there was something like impatience in her manner.

"The old conflict still? Haven't you been able to put away from you that remembrance yet?"

"I envy you for being able to do so. I forget it certainly for a few hours sometimes, but for days and weeks--never!"

The Präsidentin shook her head.

"You torment yourself with self-created fears! We alone know the secret, and can guard it securely enough. The world can and will never know more than a breath of it."

The Count raised his head slowly, his brow dark as night.

"The world! But *I* know that I am dishonoured! I know the disgrace, the curse which rests upon my name, and upon my riches, and that is the dark spot of my life which I can never, never, blot out. Whatever I may accomplish, whatever I may attain to, this dark memory continually forces itself between. I cannot forget it!"

The grandmother laid her hand authoritatively upon his arm--

"Let that rest, Hermann! I hardly know you, whenever this unhappy circumstance is touched upon. You, so strong, so energetic in everything else, are in this as weak as a child. As a boy, you showed more courage, you kept silence towards your mother, who would have been killed if she had heard it, and only revealed it, where you knew it would be safely guarded. And you were silent years afterwards, as perhaps no other child would have been, and that made my guardianship of you easy. Must the man, then, hesitate, and be ready to throw off the burden of responsibility he has incurred by no fault of his own?"

Hermann did not answer, but looked moodily into the distance.

"If only we could find a trace of the wife and child! Your enquiries were fruitless, but I renewed them with redoubled zeal, every possible means of discovery are at my command now, but in vain. It really seems as if they had disappeared from the face of the earth."

"They must have left the country."

"And perhaps perished miserably, whilst I--"

He sprang up suddenly, went to the door, and pressed his forehead against the glass panes; the usually calm man was fearfully agitated. The Präsidentin was silent, she had seen him before in this mood; however great her influence over her grandson might be, this was a point on which she did not dare to argue further with him, over which her power did not extend, she knew that he must now be let alone, unless she wished to make matters worse.

A minute's silence followed, at last Hermann turned round. His features were calm and cold as usual, but a dark cloud was still on his brow.

"Pardon me, grandmother, that I have tormented you, too, with this subject."

"You are right, it is better to let it rest? What were we talking of before?"

He sat down again by her side, and she at once seized the opportunity of introducing another subject.

"I have wished to ask you a question some time, Hermann. Have you not yet thought that it will soon be necessary for you, as head of our family, and only male representative of the house of Arnau, to form an alliance with some daughter of the nobility?"

The Count leaned his head on his hands.

"Certainly I have thought of it," replied he indifferently, "especially now that I see the necessity of forming an establishment in the capital, and of moving frequently in society there."

"Have you made a choice?"

"No. You are aware that ladies have not much attraction for me, and from my standpoint I consider a marriage of convenience the best. I shall have very little time to devote to my wife, and seek in her chiefly a representative of my house."

The grandmother bowed her head assentingly.

"And what qualities do you lay claim to in choice of a wife?"

"Much, and little, just as one takes it. Above all things, she must be of ancient and noble family; wealthy, for I have found that poor ladies, who are thrown suddenly into the arms of fortune, are apt to give way to all sorts of extravagances, and not too beautiful, for I have no desire to have to watch over my wife continually--the rest is of small importance."

The young Count set forth these qualifications for his future marriage with as perfect indifference, as if he were speaking of the purchase of an estate, but his way of looking at the matter seemed to meet with the Präsidentin's full approval.

"I quite agree with you," replied she, "and I am very glad that you look at the affair so clearly. What do you want, my dear?" interrupted she at this moment, turning towards the door.

"The children wished to say good-bye to the Frau Präsidentin before going for their walk."

Count Hermann got up from his chair at the sound of this voice, and looked at the lady with an expression of boundless astonishment as she entered, leading two little girls of six and eight by the hand. It was Gertrud, once betrothed to Reinert. The Präsidentin observed his surprise.

"Ah, so! Mademoiselle Walter--the Herr Count Arnau."

She bent down to her two grandchildren and gave them her cheek to kiss.

Hermann's bow was returned with the most measured formality and coldness, and not the slightest change in Gertrud's face betrayed her recognition. She took the children's hands, and at once prepared to leave the garden house.

"Do not make the walk too long to-day, mademoiselle, it is too hot for the children."

"I will see that they do not go too far, we will not go beyond the park to-day."

A second bow, as formal as the first, and she crossed the terrace with the children, and went down towards the park. The Präsidentin turned once more to her grandson.

"I think we were saying--but why don't you sit down, Hermann?"

He still remained standing, his hand on the arm chair, and his eyes fixed upon the avenue, where the three had disappeared; mechanically following the invitation, he sat down once more.

"Well, I think we were speaking of your future wife. I imagine the choice lies open to you; Count Hermann Arnau will hardly receive a refusal, however ambitious he may be."

"Who is this Mademoiselle Walter?" asked Hermann, instead of answering, without turning his eyes from the window.

The grandmother looked at him with some astonishment, the question seemed to her to have very little place in this important conversation.

"She is the new governess for Eurt's daughters," replied the Präsidentin coldly. "She is said to be pretty well educated and useful, and the children are wonderfully fond of her considering the short time she has been with them. I have a certain antipathy against her, for I fear that she carries something like haughtiness underneath her unflinching calm politeness, which is, of course, insufferable in a person of her dependent position."

Hermann was silent, he knew by experience, that here, too, the Präsidentin's penetration had not deceived her.

"But to come back to our subject--"

The Count got up suddenly.

"Pardon me, grandmother, if I beg you to let it rest for to-day. My night journey has rather tired me out, I really feel the want of some rest. Allow me, now that I have seen you, to go to my room for a time."

So saying, he kissed the hand extended to him, and left the room. The Präsidentin leaned back in her arm chair, and once more thought over all the plans and hopes connected with her grandson's future alliance, this grandson who had always been the dearest to her, and who had fulfilled all her expectations so brilliantly. But it would have astonished her somewhat, had she seen how Count Hermann, in spite of his petition to be allowed to rest, had not yet thought of going to his room, but went off at once from another side to the park, and in spite of the midday-heat, wandered about in it on all sides.

Under the shade of a great plane tree, in the centre of a large grass plot, sat Gertrud with her two little charges, telling them a fairy tale. The eldest of the two children had nestled closely against her governess, and looked up into her face with the most breathless attention, as if she feared to lose a single word; the younger knelt on the grass, her two little arms upon Gertrud's lap, listening as breathlessly as her sister. It was a charming group; surely that was not the cold, grave *gouvernante*, who had bowed so formally, and answered so shortly. The expression of her face was now as warm and glowing as the golden sunlight itself, which played upon her countenance through the leafy screen above her, and there was something unusually gentle and lovely in her tone and attitude, as, in low tones, with head bent down to the children, she told them of elves and fairies, something which it had never been permitted for either the Präsidentin nor the Baronin von Sternfeld to see.

But Count Hermann saw it as he stood unobserved behind a clump of bushes, and watched her closely. Yes, these features had indeed fulfilled what they had promised seven years ago.

The delicate, pale, and childish form had blossomed into almost perfect beauty, and at sight of the tall, beautiful figure, the pure classic profile and rich masses of pale gold hair, Hermann could not refrain from thinking that his aunt must have been wanting in her usual sense and tact

in receiving into her house a lady before whose attractions both she and every other lady must seem plain.

But he was not allowed to remain long unobserved, for one of the children noticed him suddenly, and pointed in the direction where he stood. Gertrud rose at once, and freed herself from the children's encircling arms.

An iciness seemed to creep over her countenance, under which all the warmth and life which had streamed from it a moment before, seemed suddenly to wither; cold, grave, and perfectly immovable, she awaited the Count's approach.

He now stood opposite, and looked straight towards her. Those were the same mysterious dark blue eyes which he remembered so well, and the same shade still lay in them, but it had become only heavier and deeper. But these eyes flashed somewhat under his searching glance; was it the old (to him incomprehensible) hatred, or was it some other feeling?

Hermann, who usually saw through all matters so clearly, did not know how to interpret it; he only felt that it was hostile to him, and that the strange girl was still the same.

"I do not know, mein Fräulein," began he, "whether you will allow me to renew a former acquaintanceship. I can scarcely hope so after the way in which you returned my greeting."

"You would oblige me, Herr Graf, if you would forget this acquaintanceship."

But Hermann was not prepared for such a repulse as this, she involuntarily irritated him, and just as he had hitherto hesitated as to whether he should approach her, so now he felt inclined to continue the conversation in spite of all.

"As you wish; but before we begin to ignore one another, allow me to inform you of something which you are surely not aware of, and which might be painful for you to experience were you unprepared for it."

"I know to what you refer!"

"You know, and--?" Hermann's eyes completed the question, which his lips could not ask--"and you remain here?"

Gertrud's countenance became a shade paler, but she remained unmoveable.

"You forget, Herr Graf, that I am in a dependent position here. I have already requested the Frau Baronin to allow me some weeks' absence, but she thinks that the children need my superintendence, and refused my request. I must therefore stay."

"If you will accept of my mediation," said Hermann, quickly, "I will go at once to my aunt, and secure you the fulfilment of your wish."

"No, thank you, Herr Graf; I wish for your interference least of all."

That was speaking plainly enough. Hermann bit his lips and drew back.

"It seems to me, mein Fräulein, that you have a decided aversion to my person. You insulted me once before, just as intentionally. I regret that my approach, should give you cause for it. Be assured that in future it shall not happen again."

Gertrud's lips quivered, but she made no answer. The Count bowed hastily, and disappeared.

"Well, this is unheard of. Neither my grandmother nor Toni would have put on such airs, and neither of them would have dared to say that to me. 'I wish your interference least.' She condescends, as it were, to dismiss me in disgrace, and I--"

The calm, immovable Graf Arnau actually forgot himself so far that he stamped with his foot.

What vexed him most, though he would not confess it to himself, was, that the manner in which Gertrud had dismissed him resembled his own, on such occasions, to a hair. That was just the calm, cold, and repellant tone which he allowed himself towards some one who did not know how to keep at a distance. Certainly it was the first time it had been used towards him, and who had dared to do this? A "Mademoiselle Walter"--the governess of his little cousins!

Yes, the grandmother was right; there was an unbearable haughtiness hidden under the calm exterior of this girl, and he felt it so much the more deeply, as, in his present position and importance, he was courted and spoiled on all sides by compliance with his wishes, especially from women. Hitherto he had looked down pretty scornfully on all the efforts he had seen to please him, and now, all at once, he was met with open opposition, with open intention to displease, and even wound him.

Count Hermann had already once sought in vain for a reason for this strange hostility, and could find a clue for it now as little as then. Gertrud's whole demeanour was, and remained, mysterious to him, as well as her presence here. Why did she not rather go without permission,

and lose her appointment, than expose herself to such a humiliation as a meeting with Eugen? Was she too proud to fly before her former lover? Or did she still love him, and could not resist the temptation of seeing him once more?

The last thought seemed to surprise the Count very much, for he stopped and knitted his brow--

"Well, I shall see to-morrow! They cannot fail to meet. I will see if this unfathomable, sevenfold secret will be revealed at last!"

It was the afternoon of the next day. Herr and Frau von Reinert had arrived somewhat earlier than they were expected, and were received by Hermann, who would not allow his grandmother's midday rest to be disturbed.

Directly after the first greetings were over, Antonie had retired to her room to lay aside her travelling dress, and her husband was now with Count Arnau in a small ante-room, close to the Gartensaal.

The friends had not seen each other for five years, in fact, since Eugen's marriage, and these five years had not left so little trace upon him as upon Hermann.

He would still always pass for a handsome and interesting man; but his expression, as well as his voice, were much altered. Weariness, languor, satiation, were all written there only too plainly. The features, once glowing with life, were weak and vigourless; the eyes, formerly so enthusiastic, languid; the whole being of the man scarcely three-and-thirty, had a touch of half-bitter, half-painful, deep, inward discontent. And this was betrayed in his tone, as, after the first indifferent questions and enquiries, he said--

"In spite of your laconic letters, I have heard enough of you from a distance. You have become a celebrity, and if report be true, will shortly take a high office in State affairs!"

"Is that the report? Well, no one ever expected or took it for granted that *I* should become a celebrity!"

Eugen understood the reproach.

"But it was expected of me, you mean? Yes, I did promise you, in those days, to begin a greater work. I have made plans and sketches enough; but--our life is so disturbing, so full of changes--hitherto I have always wanted leisure and quiet to carry them out."

"And the necessary desire to work."

"Well, if you like, the desire too. The dreams of one's youth, with which one surrounds everything, come to an end at last. In reality, there is not much in art, or in happiness, or, indeed, in life altogether!"

He leaned back in his chair with an expression of the greatest weariness.

Hermann gave no answer; but Eugen felt what lay in the grave, searching glance with which he regarded him.

"You think my observation strange?"

"From your lips, yes. Any one, to whom life has brought nothing but disappointments, may speak so; you, who enjoy all its gifts, have no right to."

"And when I find that these wonderful gifts, this dream of happiness, are all illusions, is not my disappointment as great?"

Hermann got up and took a turn through the room--

"I hoped that, at least, your marriage with Antonie would be a happy one," said he, after a pause.

Eugen was silent.

"Then you are not happy?"

Reinert made an impatient movement.

"I do not know. She often torments me terribly with her varying moods, her jealousy, and then--I have to hear often enough, whom I have to thank for all, what she has sacrificed for my sake."

An expression of inexpressible scorn curled Hermann's lips.

"Ah! so it has got as far as that! She throws that in your face, and you endure it?"

"Have I a weapon against it?"

"It lay with you to make yourself independent. I imagined that just your wife's rank and riches would be a spur to urge you to rise to an equal height through your own powers."

Eugen heaved a sigh of resignation.

"Confound it, Hermann, you take it for granted that I have an iron nature like yours, which never needs rest nor refreshment, which pushes forward unceasingly and takes everything by storm. I have a different constitution."

"I know that!" said Hermann, with calm bitterness, "and believe me, Eugen, I have repented often enough, that I had any part in causing your life to take the direction it has. You ought to be free from the cares and limitations of ordinary life, ought to find the road to your future an open one, and it was with that view that I favoured your marriage. You are right, it was a fatal error to judge you by myself. You are one of those natures which need continual spurring forward; when the necessity for work was removed, the food for your talent was gone; had I left you to yourself, and you had had to work to live, it had been better!"

"You speak," said Eugen, pettishly, "as if I had done nothing since I saw you last, and yet my portraits are valued and admired--"

"Because you are the husband of Gräfin Antonie. Since that great picture of Antonie, in which you seem to have exhausted your genius, no work of yours has risen above mediocrity."

Eugen bit his lips.

"I must say you are very--sincere."

"And you have forgotten how to hear the truth. I cannot refrain from telling it you frankly."

Reinert drew himself up angrily, his vanity would not bear a reproach, the justice of which he nevertheless felt; he was on the point of answering hastily, but Hermann turned away suddenly from him, and looked with strained attention towards the door, which opened at this instant. A triumphant smile quivered round his lips, he had not led Eugen into this ante-room for nothing. He well knew who must pass through it, to fetch the children to their lessons, the former being generally with their mother at this hour--this first meeting must and should be watched.

Eugen, too, had turned his head, but he all at once sprang up and became deathly pale, stretching out his arms as if against a spectre, and with a cry of fright, exclaimed--

"Gertrud!"

It was, indeed, Gertrud who stood upon the threshold. She knew what awaited her to-day, but she was unprepared for a meeting at this moment, and here. She, too, turned pale, and made a movement as if to fly, but her eyes met Hermann's, which rested upon her face as if he would read her inmost soul. The girl's foot seemed suddenly rooted to the spot; she drew herself up, and returned the glance proudly and coldly. And there was something in her look which was nobler than defiance, and mightier than hate; he saw how a deep red flush rose into her countenance, whilst she met his steadfast glance, but her eyes did not sink. They stood thus for some seconds, then the Count suddenly turned away, Gertrud closed the door behind her, and with firm steps passed by the two gentlemen, disappearing into the neighbouring apartment.

Hermann clenched his hand angrily.

"Unbending! I knew it! This girl cannot be humiliated; did she not almost compel my eyes to quail before her?"

Eugen, who had stood during the whole scene as if rooted to the spot, now seemed to come to his senses.

"Hermann, what does this mean? Was that my--was that Gertrud Walter? Did you know--*Um Gotteswillen*, speak--speak!"

The Count leaned against the window with folded arms, his face at this moment showed that repellant expression peculiar to him in moments of deep irritation, but there lay an almost alarming brusqueness in his tone as he answered--

"Mademoiselle Walter is at present here as governess in my uncle Sternfeld's house, and has come with them. I can understand that the meeting must be painful to you both, but you see that she possesses sufficient tact to ignore you completely, and as for you, it will be easy to avoid her, as she devotes, herself exclusively to the children, and appears seldom or never in society."

Eugen hardly seemed to hear the last, words, his eyes still remained as if magnetically fixed upon the door which had closed upon her.

"Gertrud here!" repeated he still, "and I must see here, must see her again *thus!* O, she is no longer the child I left behind! How beautiful, how wonderfully beautiful she has become!"

With a hasty movement Count Hermann drew himself up from his careless position.

"I think it is time to join Antonie, she must have finished her toilette by this time, and if so, I will take you at once to my grandmother. Come!"

"No, no," cried Eugen, violently, "not now! After this meeting, and in this fearful agitation, I cannot endure the stiff formality of such an introduction. I cannot now!"

"My dear Eugen," the Count's voice was once more perfectly calm, but there was a cutting sarcasm in the sound of it, "this stiff formality concerns the recognition of your marriage from your wife's side, and you will show this family the consideration which is due from you. Have the goodness to control your emotions, and follow me. My grandmother, the Präsidentin von Sternfeld, is not accustomed to wait."

And with the commanding authority, which he had once practised over the young artist, he now took Herr von Reinert's arm, and drew his unwilling companion away with him.

## CHAPTER VI.

The fourteen days which had been fixed for the stay of the guests were drawing to a close. They had been entirely devoted to all the pleasures and amusements of country life. The Präsidentin, who, on account of her advanced age, usually made a duty of rest and retirement, could not this time entirely withdraw from all the visits and invitations which chiefly concerned her grandson. Count Arnau had, indeed, become a celebrity, and visitors came from the whole neighbourhood round to see and admire the "lion;" the report, too, that he intended, at no very distant period, to make the choice of a fitting partner for his exalted station, made him still more the centre-point of attention on all sides, in reality, because each was anxious to form a match, brilliant in every respect, for some daughter, sister, or relation. The Count took all in his cool, reserved, and sarcastic manner, without being in the slightest degree impressed.

The duties which he owed to society he undertook with that resignation accorded to a painful but unavoidable necessity, for in this unceasing round of visits and amusements he found the safest weapon against the fermenting discontent, which, in spite of the so-called reconciliation, still reigned in the bosom of the family. Certainly the Präsidentin, in spite of her aristocratic prejudices, was perfectly well-bred, and never failed in the politeness and consideration which she owed towards the guests she had herself invited, but she, nevertheless, managed to make her granddaughter and Herr von Reinert feel that they were only tolerated, and that they owed only this toleration itself to Hermann's influence. Naturally, this knowledge did not contribute to the comfort of the visit. Antonie was sensitive and petulant upon every opportunity, Eugen continually bitter and irritable, and often it was only Hermann's interference or mediation which hindered the threatening breach.

This visit and meeting of relations would, indeed, have been, probably, most unpleasant, had not the frequent presence of strangers laid a wholesome restraint upon all.

It was the last day but one of the guests' stay, towards evening.

The Präsidentin had asked for the children to be sent to her, and Gertrud seized one of the few free hours which her appointment left open to her, to go into the park alone. During the last fortnight she had endeavoured to avoid Herr von Reinert as much as possible, or, at least, never to meet him, except when in charge of her two pupils, but to-night she felt secure; she knew that several farewell calls had to be made in the neighbourhood, and, in the enjoyment of this security, gave herself up freely to the pleasure of an often-desired walk alone.

A book in her hand, she went slowly to her favourite place under the great plane tree.

The park seemed at this time perfectly deserted. The evening sun lay golden upon the bushes and grass plots; in the distance glimmered the white plumage of the swans, sailing lazily up and down on the pond; no sound broke the deep stillness.

Gertrud sat down, leaning her head on her hand. So they had come to an end at last, these much-feared fourteen days of intercourse, and, on the whole, had passed away better than she had hoped. No one had in any possible manner made any hindrance to her manifest desire for retirement. The Präsidentin had a somewhat out-spoken antipathy against "Mademoiselle Walter," and Antonie, though she had not the slightest suspicion of any former relations with her husband, by no means loved the presence of this *gouvernante*, who had the impertinence to be so beautiful, that even she, aristocratic lady as she was, felt herself put in the shade so soon as Gertrud even appeared. After the stormy surprise of the first moment, Eugen seemed to have

come back to his senses, perhaps he also feared his wife's jealousy; in any case, he seemed to understand better how to control himself than in the first sudden meeting, and when they saw one another, which happened usually only at table, and in the presence of others, his demeanour was as distant as hers could be.

And Count Arnau? He had kept his word, and given Gertrud no cause to offend him again. There was an iron consistency in the way with which he seemed to ignore her completely after their last conversation; not a word, not a recognition did she now receive from him, not the slightest, most unimportant attention, accorded even to persons in such a dependent position. The governess appeared no longer to exist for him, and when he was obliged to acknowledge her presence by a cold, forced bow, he did so with manifest reluctance. Certainly this was what she from the first had hoped and striven for, now she had obtained her desire, and all the rest of her difficulties were coming to an end. The day after to-morrow Baron Sternfeld, with his wife and children, would return to his estate; the rest would return to the capital, the party would be broken up--it was to be hoped never to meet again, as far as some were concerned.

Gertrud gave a deep sigh of relief at this thought, or rather endeavoured to do so, but a heavy weight still seemed to be upon her heart, and she clasped her folded hands closer together in wild pain. The young girl had grown much paler these few weeks, and the shade did not lie as of old in her eyes, it was effaced, forced into the background by another expression. There was an anxious unrest, a tormenting pain to be read there now, and the firmly-pressed lips seemed to hold back some secret, which she hardly dared to speak of, even to herself. She took her book and tried to read, but she could not. She opened it in the middle, at the end, in vain. Her eyes wandered over the words without taking in the sense; her thoughts were too strong to be banished.

With a passionate movement, which betrayed the hidden conflict within, she at last threw it down, and hid her face in both hands.

"Gertrud!"

She sprang up with a look of terror.

"Herr von Reinert! You here!"

It was, indeed, Eugen, who stood at some little distance from her. He, too, was pale and agitated, and his voice trembled as with cast down eyes, he asked, in a low tone--

"May I--may I approach?"

"No!" was the firm, grave answer.

In spite of the refusal he dared to advance a step.

"Gertrud, do not be so unforgiving! I know you hate me, that I have made you unhappy--"

With an expression of indescribable pride Gertrud lifted her head, her eyes met his, large, and full of disdain, and not the slightest trace of agitation trembled now in her voice, but there was a touch of compassionate scorn as she replied, quietly--

"You are mistaken, Herr von Reinert; I do not hate you, and have *not* been made unhappy through you."

"Well, then, *I* am unhappy!" said Eugen, bluntly. "Since the moment when I left you, I have never known happiness. I could not forget the past, and now that I must meet you again, I am driven to despair!"

With his old passion he threw himself down where she had just been sitting, and pressed his hand against his brow. Gertrud stood before him; who, that was witness of the mute, but powerful conflict, which, but a few minutes since, had agitated the girl's whole being, would have understood the calm collectedness with which she now looked down upon her former lover.

"Eugen!"

He sprang up, but she gravely motioned him back.

"Do not misunderstand me. I address you now as the playfellow of my childish days, whom I have never called anything else. If what torments you is the thought of my presumed unhappiness--my loneliness, be calm, *such* a reproach I can bear from you. If I have suffered from our separation, it was only through my pride, which rose at the humiliation of being forsaken, my *heart* had no part in it, for I, Eugen--I have never loved you!"

"Gertrud!"

"Never!" repeated she, firmly. "You released me for the good of us both! perhaps, else, I should have had to confess to you that I could never be your wife."

"Impossible!" cried Eugen, springing up. "If you did not love me, why--"

"Why did I accept your offer, do you mean?" Her eyes sank to the ground, and a gentle shade passed over her face, whilst, with a low voice, the peculiarly painful tone of which pierced to his heart, she continued--"I was scarcely more than a child, I had learnt nothing beyond my mother's sick room, but care, sorrow, and many other things more difficult to bear. The first ray of sunshine which falls upon such a childhood is seldom denied entrance. You came back then from the capital in all the brilliance of your rising talent, admired by all in our little town. You told me of your love, and I--did, what every girl of sixteen does, whose heart is still free. I dreamed myself into the idea that I loved you, whilst I really only cherished an affection for my old playfellow. That this feeling was not *love*, I began to find out, when we separated, now--now I know it!"

The last words came almost inaudibly from her lips, but there was indescribable pain in them. Eugen had hitherto controlled himself with manifest difficulty, and now he broke out with painful bitterness--

"No, Gertrud, that is not true! It cannot be, you deceive yourself and me. You tell me this, and desire me to be calm, and you do not know how it makes me still more miserable, if I can no longer believe in your love to me. If you knew how unhappy I am in these golden fetters, in this marriage with a wife who sees in me only a plaything for her varying moods, whom she idolises at one moment, and at another reminds, in the most humiliating way, of his unimportance; if you knew how deeply I repent the unhappy course, which I once--"

"Let us put an end to this conversation, Eugen," interrupted she gravely, "it goes beyond the limits which are drawn between us. You have heard the truth from me. I cannot alter anything that I have said, now farewell!"

She would have extended her hand, but he took no notice, but continued in rising agitation--

"Too late, I see what I once possessed in you, what I gave up in foolish madness, and what I have exchanged for it. The fruits of that foolish passion have been reaped long ago, and now that Fate had again led us together--now the old love flames up mightily, and tears me again to your feet--"

In the deepest indignation Gertrud retreated a step.

"You forget yourself, Herr von Reinert, and deeply insult both me and your wife through such words. Leave me, instantly, I will not hear a word more!"

But even these energetic, commanding words, which would not usually have failed in effect, were powerless against a passion which tore Eugen away from the bonds of sense and reason. He fell on his knees, and repeated his former words, in that glowing, raving language with which he had once wooed the girl of sixteen, and which, a year later, Antonie had heard from his lips. This time Gertrud did not reply. With a look of unconcealed scorn she turned silently away, and would have gone, but this seemed to make him beside himself. He sprang up, seized her arm, and tried to keep her back by force.

With a cry of indignation, Gertrud endeavoured to free herself, but there was no longer need. At the moment Eugen dared to touch her, he tottered, thrown back by a powerful arm--

Count Arnau stood between them.

Gertrud, too, had shrunk back at Hermann's sudden appearance, as if it were directed against her also. Before Reinert's wild passion she had kept her presence of mind. Now it suddenly seemed to leave her, and it almost looked as if she feared the protector more than the offender. The Count noted her timidity, and an expression of deep bitterness showed itself round his lips, nevertheless he placed himself protectingly before her, crossed his arms, and calmly awaited the next.

Eugen, meanwhile, had risen, and now came up to him, pale with anger--

"What does that mean, Hermann? Why do you follow me secretly to pry, unasked, into my affairs? What right have you to do it?"

The Count remained very calm in face of this threatening violence, but there was an icy scorn in the glance, with which he measured him from head to foot.

"Can you really dare to ask why I must interfere here?"

"You have insulted me!" cried Eugen, passionately, "insulted me deeply, and either you make me an apology, or give me satisfaction with a weapon in your hand!"

Without honouring him with an answer, Hermann turned to Gertrud--

"Mein Fräulein, you see that Herr von Reinert is not sufficiently master of himself to pay the necessary consideration to the presence of a lady. May I beg you to leave us?"

She stood before him, pale, with downcast eyes. Where had the proud unapproachable demeanour of the maiden come from? Her eyes, which but lately had met his so firmly, so ready for conflict, sank now shyly to the ground. She bowed in mute assent, and walked away.

The Count looked after her long and earnestly, then he passed his hand over his brow, and turned away.

"We are alone, what do you wish to say to me?"

"That I am at last tired out of being dictated to by you, of being treated like a schoolboy, and insulted. What has passed between Gertrud and me concerns no third."

"Really?" The Count's voice was still calm, but passion lurked underneath it. "You may be mistaken."

"It is all the same to me what you think. You have attacked me, thrown me to the ground. I demand satisfaction for this insult; do you hear, Hermann, I demand it from you!"

The Count shrugged his shoulders.

"A duel between us? That would indeed be more than ridiculous."

"Ah, you refuse?"

"Yes! It would be a poor return to my grandmother's hospitality, to shoot each other dead on her estate, added to which, Antonie is too near a relation, and I must openly confess to you, Eugen, my life and work are too valuable to me, for me to risk it for the sake of one of your mad moods. I certainly refuse."

Eugen clenched his fist in boundless rage.

"Hermann, you are--"

"No insults!" said the Count, authoritatively, raising his hand. "I should have thought you have often enough had opportunity to test my courage. To-day's scene is the open breach of a friendship which has long existed only in name. In the future our paths must lie apart--let that be sufficient."

If Hermann really wished to avoid irritating Eugen still further, he ought not to have spoken in this proud, scornful tone. It robbed him of the last particle of sense remaining to him, and drove him finally to the use of force. He came close up to the Count, and with a voice half choked with passion, he said between his teeth--

"I ask you for the last time, will you give me satisfaction?"

"No!"

"Well, then, I will compel you to!"

He raised his hand, and the next minute a blow struck the Count.

The effect was terrible. Every drop of blood left Hermann's face, his fist clenched convulsively, and for a moment it seemed as if he would rush upon the offender and fell him to the earth, but the usual self-command conquered; he took a deep breath, and let his arms fall.

"Good, you shall have your way! To-morrow morning early, then!"

There lay something in the iron energy with which this man controlled himself, which shamed Eugen's violence, and was not without its effect upon him. He stood, perhaps himself frightened at what he had done, as if something like repentance were working within him, for he made a movement, as if to hold the Count back, but it was too late, Hermann had already turned away, and left the place.

On the point of turning into the great avenue, which led towards the house, he stood suddenly before Gertrud, who seemed to have gone but a few steps. A single glance at her face showed him at once, that in spite of her apparent absence, she had been a witness of a conversation, the subject of which she must have expected, meanwhile he said nothing about it, but coming up asked simply--

"I must beg of you to accept of my companionship to the house, else you might be in danger of meeting Herr von Reinert once more."

As before, she made no reply, but silently assented to his proposal. They went slowly along the avenue; here, under the shade of the great oaks and beeches it was already twilight; high up above, the last golden rays gilded the branches, and here and there a bird still warbled low and dreamily his evening song.

The two walked side by side as distantly, as if, indeed, chance had brought them into a position mutually painful. Count Arnau preserved a consistent silence, Gertrud did not raise her eyes from the ground, and yet now and then his eyes searched her countenance as if with a gloomy question, and her bosom heaved more and more stormily in some hidden conflict, which at last gained the victory over her reserve.

"Herr Graf!"

He stopped at once.

"Mein Fräulein?"

She was still silent an instant, the words would not come to her lips, and it evidently cost her a powerful effort, as she at last asked--

"You have consented to a duel with Herr von Reinert?"

Hermann shrugged his shoulders.

"You can bear me witness that I have done all that was possible to avoid it, but Eugen knew how to compel me to it. There are forms, the hurtfulness and foolishness of which one sees, and yet one has to bow to them. After what has passed between us, my honour gives me no other choice than to defend it with a weapon in the hand. I must bow to necessity."

"On my account? No, that shall not, must not be!"

Her voice became firmer as she went on, but something like a smile crossed the Count's features.

"Will *you* prevent it?"

"Yes!" replied she energetically. "I shall appeal to the Präsidentin, and Frau von Reinert, that both by their influence may--"

"You will not do that!" interrupted Hermann, gravely and sternly. "You will not misuse the knowledge which a chance possessed you of. This is a matter which concerns us men alone, and must be settled by us alone. I, for my part, will not suffer the interference of a woman here, whoever she may be, and neither my grandmother's reasoning, nor the tears and swoons of my cousin will alter my decision in the least."

For the first time during the whole conversation she lifted her eyes to his with such a look of inexpressible, entreating anxiety, that the Count, who had but just before so proudly declared his inflexibility, turned suddenly away, as if he feared to succumb to a temptation. He continued speaking, but his voice was much milder, though it had lost nothing of its peculiar firmness.

"I know that I impose a hard task upon you to be silent, and, perhaps, to tremble, where a word could hinder the bloody decision. I know, too, that few women are equal to such a task, but I give *you* credit for it. My honour now demands, that the duel shall take place undisturbed, therefore I require your promise to preserve an unbroken silence towards every one until to-morrow at noon. Give me your word upon it!"

He held out his hand to her; whether she actually laid hers in his, or whether he took it, Gertrud knew not, but the little hand trembled so violently that he let it fall the next moment.

"Do not tremble so," said he with bitterness, "I have the first shot, and am sure of my weapon, however deeply Eugen may have angered me, I shall not forget that I once called him friend. He shall not pay for his folly with his life, even if I cannot hope for such generosity from him."

Gertrud had let his bitterness pass without remark, but at his last words she lifted her head in sudden terror. Something in her countenance must have touched the Count magnetically, for his eyes suddenly lighted up, he seized both her hands, and asked in a low tone, but with quite a different expression from before, "Gertrud, why do you hate me?"

The girl started violently, and a suspicious flush bathed her cheeks and brow. She tried to free herself, but he would not let her go.

"From the first you have shown the most unconcealed hatred towards me, and yet, Gertrud, matters must be clear between us now. What have I done to you? Why do you hate me?"

No one would have thought it possible that this cold, hard voice could melt into such soft, heart-felt tones, and Gertrud's whole being seemed to tremble under them. It is impossible to describe the emotions which played in stormy strife upon the young girl's countenance, anxiety, pain, despair, and yet behind all these, an unspeakable joy, which found vent in the single exclamation, half jubilant, and yet half like a deep cry of pain, "O, my God!"

She clasped her hands before her face, Hermann looking steadfastly at her. "I see that a secret lies here, which you will not speak out. But I must take certainty with me to-morrow, Gertrud, tell me only this one thing, for which of us two do you tremble?"

A moment's heavy pause, then she slowly let her hands fall. Her face was deadly pale, but calmly, though almost inaudibly, she answered, "I tremble for every life which is threatened."

The Count drew back a step, the light in his eyes was suddenly extinguished, and his face was once more hard and cold. "You are right, *mein Fräulein*," said he icily. "Since you are the

innocent cause of our duel, the death of either of us must be equally unpleasant to you. I understand that perfectly. Adieu!"

He went to the end of the avenue, his foot hesitated an instant, he imagined he heard a cry, but when he looked back she still stood immovably in the same place. With all his aristocratic pride, Count Arnau threw back his head, and strode through the deepening twilight towards the house.

## CHAPTER VII.

The morning broke clear and sunny. At breakfast Count Arnau and Herr von Reinert were missing, they had gone for a ride very early with several other gentlemen, which had only been settled late the evening before. No one thought of attributing any importance to this circumstance, but, on the other hand, Baronin von Sternfeld was greatly displeased that Mademoiselle Walter had also excused herself, on the plea of feeling very unwell. The good lady found this sudden indisposition of the *gouvernante* very inconvenient, for she was necessitated thereby to look after the children personally the whole day, the *bonne* and lady's maid being fully occupied with preparations for the next day's journey.

In her room, the windows of which looked out towards the fields, Gertrud paced restlessly up and down.

There was a limit even to *her* self-command; she had not felt able to appear at breakfast to-day, and to hear the talk over the "early ride," the meaning of which she alone knew. Yes, it was, indeed, a fearful task, to be silent and tremble in the full consciousness of what the next hour might bring, to remain here inactive, whilst over yonder the bloody decision was made; it was almost beyond her strength. She had kept the promise wrung from her, no word had passed her lips, but what this silence cost her, that she alone knew.

One could see that no sleep had closed the girl's eyes, which rested upon the window with an expression of the most painful suspense. Cheerful and golden the sunshine lay upon the fields around, over the woods, still enveloped in a blue mist. The corn waved gently in the morning breeze, and high up in the clear heavens the swallows shot backwards and forwards in rapid flight. But the road which led to the woods remained empty, not a single rider would appear.

Gertrud's pride and self-command seemed over. What, during the whole time, she *would* not confess to herself, what even yesterday evening she had tried to deny, she had been forced to recognise in the fearful anxiety of the previous night. "He shall not atone for his folly with his life, though I cannot hope for the same generosity from him!"

The words would not be put out of her memory. Eugen would not show any generosity; she knew that he was revengeful, like all weak people, and seized the opportunity gladly to revenge himself upon the man whose intellectual superiority had so often oppressed and embittered him, and *he*, too, was sure of his weapon, and seldom failed in his mark.

She fell down on her knees, and in speechless anxiety raised her folded hands. She knew now for whom this prayer was offered, and had known yesterday, when that grave, hard voice had asked so gently, "Gertrud, why do you hate me?" Though she had gathered together all her strength for the last despairing resistance, though she had possessed cruel courage to refuse him the one single word which he begged for, it was in vain now. Now she would like to have called him back, now, when it was too late. How icily cold his farewell had sounded--perhaps it was the last. Then suddenly a sound of hoofs was heard in the distance. Gertrud hurried to the window, as she had so often done before in vain, when she had heard any sound, but this time it was no disappointment. Her eyes had recognised the rider, though he was still far off on the edge of the wood; followed by his groom, Count Arnau rode towards the house.

The rebound was too great; the sudden appearance of him whom she had feared lost, decided all. In the cry of boundless delight, which unconsciously burst from her lips, in the expression of her face, lay the secret revealed. She flew to the door, reflection and reason for the moment gone; she must and would meet him!

A heavy, dull blow, then a cracking sound followed--she stopped suddenly, and looked back alarmed. One of her travelling boxes, which she had brought out yesterday, and partly packed, had been thrust out of its place by her sudden rush to the door. A simple, easily explained circumstance, but the girl's feverishly reddened cheek had become suddenly white. Slowly she again closed the door, and hesitatingly, step by step, approached the corner by the window.

There was a strange expression in her face, a shrinking, as if before something supernatural, and with a timidity, as if she were really about to meet with some spirit, she bent down to examine the injury.

It was a small, unimportant little box, an old fashioned, insignificant piece of goods, which had belonged to her father, and which only a feeling of filial respect hindered the daughter from parting with. This legacy, almost the only one, which the orphan possessed, had hitherto accompanied her on every journey, and now it all at once fell over and broke, just at the moment when she was on the point of--Gertrud did not dare to complete the thought, but hastily pushed aside the books which had fallen out, and lifted the lid.

The back of the box had burst in two, and out of the crack, squeezed in between the wood and the leather lining, gleamed a piece of white paper. Gertrud mechanically pulled it out, and was about to lay it aside, when her eyes suddenly fell upon a word, an autograph--she passed her hand hastily across her eyes--surely it must be some vision, that she always and everywhere should come upon the name that just now filled all her thoughts, but at the second glance she saw that her eyes had not deceived her. "Hermann Count Arnau" stood there in faded ink, but in clear, plain handwriting--stood there on the old fashioned paper, which had been long years in its hiding place, where it must have fallen from a hole in the inner pocket, through a hasty opening of the box. Gertrud's head seemed to swim, incapable of comprehending the facts connected with it--still half stunned from her previous agitation she unfolded the paper.

It contained only a few lines, apparently very hurriedly put together, but in a business like form. The effect, however, upon the girl was like a lightning flash. She sprang up; her face, a moment since so pale, bathed in a deep flush, her eyes shining in passionate triumph, she pressed the new found paper with both hands against her breast, as if some one would tear it away, and her bosom heaved deeply--deeply, as if the weight of a whole life had been removed from it.

But it was only for a moment, in the next she started at some remembrance, which laid an icy hand on her heart, the fateful paper sank from her trembling hands, she stared at it despairingly, and then raised her eyes with a bitter cry to Heaven. On this paper had once hung the honour and happiness of a whole family--then a mischievous chance had allowed it to disappear.

Twice ten years had passed--two people had perished through its loss, and now chance had given back what was lost.

"O, God, why, just in my hand? And why now, just now?"

No answer came to this despairing question, and no sound from Gertrud's lips; mutely she fought out the conflict, the hardest in her life. How terrible it was, the convulsively wrung hands bore witness, but the lips were silent against the pain. She believed that in the past night she had known the fullest measure of tormenting anxiety, and yet, the despair of that hour compared with this moment! Now, with her own hand she must strike the threatening blow, it would be a deadly one, she knew, and this time more was at stake than life alone.

Only few, in face of such a choice, would have possessed the courage for conflict; they would have succumbed to swoons or tears, only listening to the voice of the heart, and turning away from the fateful decision. For her own unhappiness Gertrud was not one of the weak ones. A lonely, sad youth, containing bitter experiences enough for a whole life, had steeled her to endurance, but also given her that hardness, which happy people know nothing of. The iron law of duty, hitherto the single principle of her life, here, too, silenced every other voice, and, silently, and warningly came back the remembrances of the past, still sleeping unforgotten in her inmost soul. Every bitter hour in which her childhood had been so rich, every tear which she had shed, every humiliation she had endured, the mother's dying bed, the picture of her never known, but yet passionately loved father--all, all passed vividly before her, and as these remembrances poured upon her, the girl's features grew hard and cold, till at last, with dark decision she arose. The conflict was at an end; she laid her right hand as if with an oath, upon the fateful paper.

"The warning came at the right time! I was on the point of treason to myself and to my whole past. My poor sacrificed parents, the daughter will know how to guard your rights--even though she should perish in the act!"

Meanwhile, the other inhabitants of the house sat, as usual, after breakfast, in the garden house. Baron Sternfeld read aloud to his mother from the newspaper, but the political news, which she followed with such attention, seemed to weary the Baronin as well as Frau von Reinert; the former divided her attention between her embroidery and her two little daughters, who were playing outside on the terrace, and the latter yawned again and again behind her handkerchief.

The seven years had left their trace clearly enough upon Antonie. She was no longer that charming, poetical being, who knew so well how to inspire the young artist, that he forgot all else in his passion for her. Her beauty was of that delicate, but passing kind, which only lasts so long as the bloom and freshness of youth remains, and then vanishes, leaving scarcely a trace of its former reign. There were no firm, noble lines, no characteristic expression, no *soul*, in fact, to make up for these fleeting charms. The former enthusiastic fire in the dark eyes was

extinguished, lost in that expression of weariness and languor, as plainly to be read in her features as in her husband's. The Gräfin Arnau, at twenty, had been wonderfully beautiful, Frau von Reinert, now thirty, was already faded, and all the magic arts of her toilette could not make up for what was lost.

Hermann's entrance put an end both to the Baron's reading and the weariness of the ladies. After a short morning greeting, including all, he went up to the Präsidentin's chair, and with a few words, excused his absence at breakfast.

"Where is Eugen?" asked Baron Sternfeld, surprised.

"Eugen has had a slight accident during our ride, and hurt his arm a little, he remained behind at the gamekeeper's, and I have given orders for the carriage to be sent to him. It is not at all a dangerous affair. Dr. Börner, who was one of our party, assured us so, and he put on a bandage at once."

No one thought of doubting this explanation, given in the calmest tone. The Baronin made an exclamation of concern, but Antonie cried hastily--

"That wild riding! I have prophesied over and over again to Eugen that he would have an accident some day, but he never listens to my warnings!"

There was not the slightest trace of anxiety or tenderness in this tone, only an unmistakable vexation. The Präsidentin's face certainly did not show any great concern or sympathy, but, nevertheless, she said gravely--

"Will you not at least go to your husband?"

"What need is there, grandmother? You hear that it is not in the least dangerous, and Eugen will be back in an hour in any case."

So saying, she leaned back in her chair with the most perfect indifference. The Präsidentin was silent, but her face betrayed what she thought of this answer--so this was the end of that unspeakable, glowing passion, which had once torn away the Gräfin Arnau from all the bounds of reason and sense! Hermann well understood his grandmother's look and shrug of the shoulders; was it not he who had favoured the match? It is always painful to have to confess to an error, and today the Count seemed little in the humour for it. As he came in, his eyes had flown restlessly and searchingly through the room, and the cloud which already lay on his brow had become darker. Now his unrest seemed to increase every moment; he became monosyllabic, and absent, and hardly took any part in the conversation.

"Is there no one to take charge of the children to-day?" asked he suddenly, looking towards the little girls, who were chasing each other up and down the terrace, and becoming rather noisy.

"No!" sighed the Baronin. "Mademoiselle Walter gave me the pleasure of excusing herself this morning on the plea of illness, just now, when we want to be off!"

"Ah, so!"

The Count's lips pressed themselves together in fierce anger, whilst the Baronin continued to complain of the great inconvenience of her *gouvernante's* illness just now, which might possibly even put off their journey.

"That is hardly to be feared, I think!" put in Antonie sarcastically. "I should imagine Mademoiselle Walter's evening walk yesterday has given her a cold, which cannot be of much importance."

"What evening walk?" asked the Baronin, becoming attentive.

"Well, she came back from the park pretty late yesterday evening, and a short time before a gentleman had left her. I could not recognize him, as it was already too dark, but from his appearance and walk I should not imagine that he was either a workman or a servant. Dear me, why not? All the gentlemen of the neighbourhood are unanimous in admiration of mademoiselle's beauty. It would be certainly no wonder if she listened to one of these inspired adorers, and consented to a little rendezvous--"

The Präsidentin knitted her brow; in spite of her antipathy to Gertrud, she was strictly just, and would suffer no calumnies in her presence.

"You ought first to prove that, Antonie," she interrupted in a grave, reproving tone, "as far as I can judge the girl, this accusation is the last that could be made against her, and hitherto Bertha has not found the slightest cause for complaint in her."

"I should also advise you to wait for an explanation of the matter, *liebe Toni*," continued Hermann coldly.

He still stood by his grandmother's chair, upon which he leaned with folded arms, and looked stedfastly at his cousin, with a peculiar expression. There was something half compassionate, half

scornful in his look, and his lips already curled with the old, much feared sarcasm, which he poured unsparingly upon all around him, when irritated by some untoward circumstance.

"It was only a supposition," said Antonie, throwing back her head pettishly at the reproof. "But I had intended some time ago to give Bertha a hint with regard to Mademoiselle Walter; what I have found out lately about her is decidedly not to her credit."

Hermann smiled with unconcealed irony.

"Something you have found out *lately*? Really!"

Antonie looked questioningly at him.

"What do you mean? I don't understand you."

"Oh, I only meant, that what is not in the young lady's favour, namely, her outward appearance, you must have found out at the first moment."

Antonie flushed deeply at this malice of Hermann's, which, unfortunately, was only too true, and she did not make any denial.

She knew her cousin well enough to know that in a dispute she always got the worst of it, and that when he looked, as he did at this moment, not the slightest consideration need be expected from him. She contented herself, therefore, with darting an angry look at him, and completely ignoring the speech, turned to the Baronin, who now exclaimed suspiciously--

"But what is this you have found out about her?"

Antonie took a rose from the vase before her, and began to pluck it to pieces.

"Well, my information does not concern her so much as her family. I suppose you do not know that 'mademoiselle' has no right to the name of 'Walter.' It is her mother's family name, which the latter re-assumed, or rather was obliged to do so, because her husband's name called forth very unpleasant remembrances."

The sarcastic calmness with which Hermann had listened hitherto, suddenly disappeared and gave place to a deathly paleness. He bent forward in the deepest attention, and followed the conversation in visible suspense.

"A false name!" cried Baron Sternfeld, also coming nearer, "why, that is evident deception! How do you know it, Antonie? And why have you not mentioned it before?"

"Because I only found it out myself yesterday. My maid visited W---- some years since, and got to know something of Mademoiselle Gertrud, whose mother was still living at that time. Therese was not a little astonished to find in this Madame Walter the wife of Brand, formerly steward to the Prince in N----."

Here the Präsidentin suddenly laid her hand on her grandson's arm, and the warning was needed. He had started violently at the name, as if struck by a shot, now he slowly turned towards his grandmother, she exchanged a deep glance with him, whilst he seized her hand convulsively. But the warning was in time, he succeeded in keeping command over his features.

The others were all too much occupied with Antonie's disclosure to notice the Count.

"Brand--Brand!" said the Baron, thoughtfully, "I seem to have heard the name before somewhere. Who was he, did you say, and what do you know of him?"

"Not much to his credit. He embezzled money entrusted to him, belonging to the Prince, and finally, when he found his crime discovered, had the atrocity to shoot himself in Uncle Arnau's business room, before his eyes. I was but a child then, but I know the affair was much talked about, and made a great stir. Hermann must remember it well enough, for the shock almost cost his poor mother her life."

Count Arnau appeared not to have heard the indirect question, at least he gave no answer. His hand lay icy cold in the Präsidentin's, she must have felt by this how it stood with him, for she suddenly looked up anxiously, his face still remained immovable.

The Baronin was in the greatest indignation. "Abominable! The daughter of a thief, of a cheat in my house! And she has dared to be silent towards me, to be taken into my house under a false name!"

Antonie smiled maliciously. "Good gracious, Bertha, do you think it likely she would do otherwise? It would have been simply impossible for her to obtain a respectable situation if she had openly confessed her antecedents."

"No matter, *I* cannot suffer such a deception, cannot entrust the education of my children to the hands of a person who comes of *such* a family. I shall speak to her to-day and demand an explanation of her."

"You will not do that, Bertha," interrupted the Präsidentin, in her sharpest tone. "How do you even know whether the girl knows her father's history? I doubt it, and even if she did, the children are not responsible for the sins of their parents, in which they have had no part. If you wish to dismiss the young lady, do it at least as considerately as possible; in any case, I beg that you will take no steps in the affair without once more considering the matter with me."

The old lady had risen and stood so imposingly before her daughter-in-law, that neither she nor her husband ventured a remonstrance, indeed, they were accustomed to bow to the mother's authority unconditionally, though her sudden taking of the *gouvernante's* part had somewhat surprised them.

The Präsidentin turned to her grandson. "Have the goodness, Hermann, to lead me to my room, I feel somewhat tired. I should advise you, Antonie, to get into the carriage and drive down to your husband. If his hurt is so indifferent to you, propriety nevertheless demands, that you (at least, in the eyes of others) trouble yourself somewhat about it. The carriage is just driving up, I see."

This advice, given in the tone of a decided command, was evidently as unpalatable to Frau von Reinert as the former to the Baronin, but she, too, did not gainsay it. In the worst of tempers, she rang for her maid to fetch hat and shawl, whilst the Präsidentin left the saloon, supported on Hermann's arm.

## CHAPTER VIII.

"That Toni should mention that unfortunate name! It makes you beside yourself, Hermann, what has become of your self-command, your strength of will?"

Grandmother and grandson were alone together, the portières were drawn up, the doors closed; they were secure from listeners. The Count had not yet spoken a single word, with crossed arms he walked up and down incessantly, without answering, without even hearing. The Präsidentin shook her head.

"I cannot understand what there is so dreadful in this discovery. You have searched long enough for the dead man's wife and child; you declared it would give you back your rest if you were able to do anything for them. You ought now to bless the chance which gives us at last the opportunity of--"

The Count suddenly stopped.

"*Bless* it? Let me alone, grandmother, you do not, cannot know what has perished for me in this discovery!"

She went up to him and laid her hand on his shoulder.

"Hermann, you are beside yourself, and not in a state to look at this matter calmly and sensibly, leave it in my hands. It is, of course, an understood thing, that after this discovery, the girl cannot remain any longer in the family. Bertha intends dismissing her. In any case, I will see that it is done in the most considerate manner possible, and, later on, we will try to find some guardian to assure her future. Do it as handsomely as you are able, return to her the whole income which her mother lost. Perhaps we may succeed in finding a suitable husband for her, a clergyman, or some one of that sort, and then we might manage unsuspectingly--"

The Count suddenly freed himself with a violent movement.

"Make no plans, grandmother," said he bitterly, "it is atonement to injury that we have to do with. I had thought of another way of expiating it, but I know that she will never, never take it from my hand."

"From *your* hand? I should think not. We must go to work with greater care than that. Whatever you have to do with it, she must not suspect in the least from whom it comes, or she might ask, *why* we did it."

"And supposing she already knows?"

"Hermann!"

"She knows it, must know it! Now I understand the glowing, unforgiving hate which she has

shown towards me from the first moment, this aversion to my presence, this altogether mysterious demeanour. How strange that no suspicion of the truth ever entered my head; but it was the name which led me astray. Oh, she knows all, I tell you, she betrays it in every word, in every gesture. But one thing I have never been able to tear from her, a secret, which she knows how to keep, and yet I *must* have certainty at any price!" In great agitation he recommenced his pacing up and down the room. The Präsidentin stood still, speechless. Whether she was terrified at the idea that he was right in his conjecture, or at this outbreak of passion in the man who was usually so calm and collected, was undecided, for the next moment a slight sound was heard at the door.

"What is it? Who is there?" cried Hermann. He pushed back the bolt. Without stood a servant, looking much embarrassed.

"I beg your pardon for disturbing you, Herr Count; I did not know that the door was locked. I wished to say--"

"Well, what--what?"

"Mademoiselle Walter is in the ante-room, and wishes to speak to the Herr Count."

"Mademoiselle Walter?"

"With me?"

The Präsidentin collected herself. First she was evidently on the point of sending a refusal, but Hermann anticipated her.

"I--will see her at once!"

The servant disappeared.

"Hermann, you ought not to speak to her now! You will betray yourself whilst you are in such agitation! And what can she want?"

The Count had all at once regained his self-command, but an expression of unspeakable bitterness appeared in his face.

"Calm yourself, grandmother! I know why she comes, it has nothing whatever to do with this affair. It must be deathly anxiety, indeed, which compels her to cross *my* threshold."

The Präsidentin had no time to demand an explanation of what was a mystery to her, for the servant had opened the door to show Gertrud in. The Count was right; it cost her a fearful effort to cross his threshold, and now it was at last done, she remained standing speechless, her eyes fixed on the ground, like one conscious of guilt. Her features were calm, but there was something almost terrible in the fixed look and deathly pallor, almost as if life had left them.

Hermann advanced to meet her.

"You wish to speak with me, mein Fräulein?"

"Yes."

The word fell softly, almost inaudibly from her lips.

"Alone?"

"Yes."

"Pardon, grandmother,--may I beg you to follow me?"

He drew back the *portière* of the neighbouring room, and followed her in there. The Präsidentin remained behind, she went to the door and once more drew the bolt, then trod noiselessly to the closed *portière*, and quietly drew the folds somewhat aside--Hermann was capable of anything in this mood, he must not remain unobserved.

No word had as yet been spoken between the two. The Count stood, to all appearance calm, his hand supported by the table, and silently waited, but with the same bitter expression, for Gertrud to speak. She tried to do so, but was it really the deathly anxiety of which he had spoken? Her voice failed her, she could not.

Hermann's lips trembled, he saw well that he must speak first.

"I can guess what brings you here. You saw me come back unhurt, and tremble now for the life of my opponent. Calm yourself! Though our *rencontre* was not altogether without effect, it was not dangerous. Herr von Reinert has a slight wound in his arm, which caused his usually sure aim to miss me. He has at present remained behind at the gamekeeper's, the doctor is with him, and not the slightest danger is to be feared."

At his first words Gertrud had raised her eyes with a look almost of terror, but she now cast

them down again.

"I thank you, Herr Graf, for the news, but you are mistaken--it is not that which brings me here."

Not that! Then it was not anxiety which had blanched her cheeks so terribly, which had given her this fixed, lifeless look--the Count's eyes lighted up suddenly as they had done yesterday evening; the bitter expression disappeared; he hastily came a step nearer.

"No! What was it then, Gertrud?"

She shrank back with a start; slowly he let fall his outstretched hand. The girl struggled for breath.

"I came--to inform you of something. It concerns you--both of us. I am compelled to leave this house to-day; my letter to the Baronin contains an excuse--but I owe the truth to you."

She had brought out the words in an almost choked voice, and at the same time strove visibly to avoid meeting his eyes. Graf Arnau drew himself up decidedly; he knew what was coming now.

"I go as your enemy; but I will not do so secretly behind your back. You asked me yesterday if a secret lay between us--you shall know it now."

"I know it already!"

"How?"

"An hour ago I learnt your real name, and with it the reason for your hatred to me."

She looked up at him as before, but now with the greatest horror.

"That is impossible, you cannot! You cannot know anything--anything, except that it was the name of a deceiver, who took his own life, when he found his crime discovered. That is what you have been told, is it not? Or--did you know *more*?"

Hermann made no answer, his eyes sought the ground darkly.

"Answer me, Count Arnau! If any one on earth has a right to ask, I have. What do you know?"

"All!"

In his blunt, broken tone, lay the whole dashed down power of his nature in one word; the girl stood for a moment as if struck by lightning.

"You knew it, and were silent!"

"It was my *father*, Gertrud!"

She suddenly drew herself up with almost fierce energy.

"You are right, Count Arnau, it was your father--and it was mine! I shall not forget that."

A heavy, oppressive pause followed. At last Hermann raised his head again.

"We have reached a point now where nothing more can be kept silent or spared. Will you tell me *who* has revealed the secret?"

Since the confession of the Count a strange change had passed over Gertrud. The anxiety, the conflict which had hitherto been betrayed in her manner, had given place to an unnatural calm; her glance, which had avoided his so timidly, looked at him full and threateningly, and her voice sounded firm and clear as she replied--

"My mother initiated me into the matter so soon as I was old enough to understand it. She had no proofs to make good her rights, nothing but the invincible conviction of her heart. My father did not dare to make public the suspicion he had held for some time against his powerful and influential superior; he mentioned it only to his wife on the morning of the fateful day, and therefore she only was capable of guessing at the truth. She knew that her husband was no cheat, that he was only the sacrifice of a crime; of an already planned, treacherous a assassination--"

"No, Gertrud, no, he was not that!" burst in Hermann. "A crime of the moment, a deed of despair, but no plan. I know it--I was witness of it!"

"Ah--you were a witness!"

The Count's eyes took a rapid survey of the room; it had only one entrance, and that, he knew, was well guarded; nevertheless his voice sank to a whisper as if he did not dare to trust the secret even to dead walls.

"That morning I was in my father's business room; I seldom went into it, this time it was childish disobedience which took me there. The day before my father had taken away a book which he thought unsuitable for me; but my childish fancy was so much excited by the adventurous story that I was determined to know the end of it. The book lay in his business room; I knew this, and seized the first opportunity to get possession of it. Scarcely had this happened before voices were heard in the corridor; conscious that I had done wrong, I flew with my book into a deep corner of the bay window, thinking that I should not be there more than a few minutes, for my father was accustomed to drive out at this hour. But this time he came in with your father. On account of the sun the drawn curtain concealed me completely, and thus I was a witness of a conversation, of which, at that time, I understood almost nothing, but which, nevertheless, on account of its fearful termination, was impressed upon my mind with terrible clearness. What I heard at first was unimportant; the talk was confined entirely to business matters. My father must already have made some demand of Herr Brand which he now repeated, but which, however, was most decidedly refused by him. Brand represented that he had already paid to the Count the sum due to him, and, without special authority from the Prince, could not give out any of the money entrusted to his charge, for which he was of course responsible. My father must have seen that he was lost, must have known no other way of escape, for he chose the most dangerous plan of all, and made his inferior his confidant. He confessed to him that he had already employed the sum received for the payment of personal debts, but that the expenses of the Prince's household now needed reimbursement, and that immediately, if all was not to be discovered. He strove to persuade the steward to give him sufficient for this from the balance remaining, promising that all should be returned in a few weeks. The Count swore to take all upon himself, he entreated, he promised, he at last threatened, but promises as well as threats were lost upon the man's unflinching faithfulness to duty. He answered, steadfastly, 'No.' I say once more, in spite of all this, my father was not capable of such a diabolically thought-out plan--the pistol, which lay loaded upon the table, was, it is my firm conviction, designed for himself, he had intended, like many another ruined man, to end his life by suicide had your father somewhat moderated his answer to him, but his stern sincerity and conscientiousness hastened the crime. He declared without mercy that any one cognisant of guilt, was, in his opinion, a sharer of it, and that he should feel himself obliged to make public what he had just heard in order to prevent further harm, and thus drove the already despairing man to madness. He knew that should *this* happen his honour, the honour of his family, was inevitably lost. I saw my father's hand suddenly grasp the pistol, saw a flash--and Brand fell dead before him."

Hermann stopped and passed his hand over his brow, which was wet with cold drops, it was manifestly a fearful torture to relate this, but Gertrud made no effort to spare him; the "iron sense of duty in the father" seemed to have descended to the daughter, she listened immovably.

After an instant the Count breathed deeply, and then continued--

"Terror must have stunned me, I could not utter a sound. I saw my father open the door and cry for help, saw my mother rush in--what happened later you know. It was found possible to throw the guilt upon the dead--"

"Oh, yes, it was found possible!" interrupted she bitterly. "The only voice which upheld the truth, the cry of the widow, was at once silenced as the shameful accusation of a highly respected man, And Count Arnau swore as witness--"

"Gertrud."

Such terrible hidden torment found vent for itself in the exclamation, that Gertrud did not finish the sentence.

"You must pardon me, Herr Graf, if I am overpowered with bitterness at the remembrance of this, we have suffered too long and too deeply under it. Our little all, which our father had saved so carefully, was, of course, seized, and my mother being quite without help, was compelled to ask assistance of well-to-do relatives in W----. We found there protection from actual hunger, but only under a hard condition. Our relatives were honest, strict *bürger* people, and would not suffer a name amongst them which stood in the papers as that of a thief and a cheat. My mother was forced to re-assume her family name, she did it in order to save her child, then but a few months old, from absolute want. But our misfortune was not kept secret by those around us--we have been despised so long as I can remember."

It seemed, indeed, as if with these remembrances, all the hatred and suffering of the past years was once more awakened, every word became a passionate reproach. Hermann had listened in dark silence, now he said with a sort of bitter resignation--

"I think it is a question which of us has suffered most under the crime. Your youth may have been bitter--mine was terrible. My mother died a few months after the dreadful deed, the year after my father followed. No one was able to understand how it was that he treated his only son and heir with an open hatred, though he at the same time obstinately refused to be separated from him for a single hour. No one knew that he guarded in him a witness of his guilt, and trembled hourly at the thought that his dreadful secret hung upon the silence of a mere child. Perhaps you can imagine what a lot that child's was! Had not my grandmother at times stood protectingly between us, I know not what terrible misfortune might have occurred. She it was who at that time interfered with all her influence and wealth to avert threatening ruin, which

would have inevitably been followed by a discovery of the truth, and who later, after the death of my father, and during her ten years of guardianship, gradually managed to bring our affairs into order again, so that I may now call myself a rich man. Need I tell you, Gertrud, what a curse these riches have been to me? I could not give back the embezzled sum without arresting suspicion, but I hoped in some indirect way to make it up to those left behind. Since my majority I have never ceased to try and find trace of you, have taken all possible steps--in vain. I looked for Brand's widow and child, and never imagined how near to me the latter was. Gertrud! Fate has led us together strangely--did it really happen, in order that we might combat life and death together?"

At the last words his voice once more sank to those soft, deep tones, which she had already once heard from his lips, and the girl's whole being trembled before it, as it had done then, but she knew the danger now, and fled from it.

"Not this tone, Count Arnau,--I beg you--let us keep to the subject."

He silently bowed in assent.

"At the time my father paid out the sum, he received a receipt from his chief, Count Arnau. Did you know of it?"

"No. But my father himself undertook the seizure of the steward's papers. He will have destroyed it."

"It was not destroyed. A chance allowed it to lie hidden for years. It is in my hands!"

In speechless consternation Hermann drew back, the same moment the *portière* was torn open, and the Präsidentin stood before them.

"You must be mistaken, mademoiselle! It is impossible, it cannot be!"

Gertrud had turned round surprised, but not frightened, and met the old lady's threatening glance firmly--

"I am not mistaken. I repeat, the receipt is found, and has been in my possession an hour."

Meanwhile Hermann had collected himself, and now once more roused all his energy.

"You have the paper with you? May I see it?"

She shrank back at the proposal, and involuntarily laid both hands protectingly on her bosom. He smiled bitterly.

"Do you fear a renewed theft? I give you my word of honour that the paper shall be returned to you uninjured."

Slowly Gertrud drew it out and gave it to him; he opened it, the Präsidentin's eyes hung in breathless suspense on his features.

No one spoke for some seconds, but the Count leaned more and more heavily on the table, his cheeks pale as death; with averted face he at last, without speaking a word, gave back the paper, threw himself into a chair, and covered his eyes with his hand.

The Präsidentin knew enough.

"Mademoiselle--" it was in vain that she endeavoured to make her voice firm, it trembled audibly--"Mademoiselle, you can, and will not, make any use of this document; it accuses the dead."

Gertrud drew herself up scornfully; so soon as a third interfered, all her courage returned.

"You think not, Frau Präsidentin? But the dead Count died as a highly respected, honourable man, and my father lies dishonoured and disgraced in the grave. Do you imagine that his daughter would refrain from avenging him?"

"Do not build too many hopes on this paper; our tribunals cannot proceed against the dead, and as for the living--we are ready for any sacrifice, for any reparation within the bounds of possibility--" She stopped suddenly, even this energetic woman's eyes sank almost timidly before Gertrud's. "Take care, mademoiselle!" cried she, breaking out into anger, "take care not to drive us to do our utmost. The family of Count Arnau is still powerful and influential enough, and they will risk all, if it concerns their honour. Do not dare to let that paper out of your hands, else ruin might come upon yourself."

An expression of unspeakable scorn curled Gertrud's lips.

"I will wait and see if this mighty influential family succeed for the second time in defying justice. I will see if the law of the land will dare to refuse it to me when I come before them with this proof. Spare your words, Frau Präsidentin. What I had to fear was overcome before I came to

you, now nothing more can intimidate me."

She had spoken with cold, firm decision. If her features had seemed fixed before, now they seemed turned to stone; the only expression in them was a fearful determination. The Präsidentin saw that nothing more was to be gained here. She placed herself before the door, covering it with her body.

"Now then, Hermann, you must guard your own and our honour! It must be!"

Her eyes, even more than her words, challenged the Count to get possession of the fateful paper by force.

Hermann had risen, he too seemed to have made a last decision, but with a wave of the hand, he dismissed his grandmother's proposal, and went up to Gertrud, who stood before him, still firm, and fearless.

"Gertrud!"

She shrank slightly, but did not alter her decided expression.

"I have no right to expect or ask forbearance from you. Do what your conscience tells you. You can raise no accusation against Count Arnau, my father--he is dead; but on the ground of this document you can publicly demand that the money which was withdrawn from you be returned, and thus cleanse your father's name from the stain which rests upon it, transferring it to mine instead."

In face of *his* words Gertrud looked somewhat inclined to waver, she hung her head.

"I--know it."

"You know it! Well, then, you also know that it will be my ruin. I have tried in strained activity to forget the curse which I have inherited. I have accomplished much, and hoped everything from my career; that is, of course, at an end, so soon as public shame reaches me. Neither my office nor my connection with the Prince's household can stand before that; I must resign it, henceforth to hide a dishonoured name in darkness and inactivity. For a nature like mine, this means ruin, Gertrud; power and the right to use it lie in your hands. Retaliate as you will, if you *can* ruin me, then do it."

A deep sigh heaved the tormented girl's breast, she would have rushed away, but the ban of his eyes and voice held her enchained. He stood before her, without entreaty, but also without reproach, only his eyes burned in passionate unrest, they searched her's deeply--deeply as if he must and would read the depths of her soul.

"Gertrud! It concerns your father's honour, and my destruction--do it!"

The girl's arm sank hopelessly, with a heart-rending expression she looked up, as if begging for mercy, her eyes met his, a moment passed, an eternity for both, then Gertrud suddenly seized the paper convulsively with both hands--it fell in fragments at her feet.

The Präsidentin stood speechless; she had not understood the last scene between the two, nor Hermann's incomprehensible behaviour, only now that she saw him draw the girl passionately towards him, the truth began to dawn upon her. The proud old woman tottered and supported herself by a chair, this was too much in one hour.

Meanwhile Gertrud lay half insensible in Hermann's arms, and he bent over her with an expression of tenderness, which the grandmother had never before seen in his firm, cold features.

The passionately longed-for certainty was his at last, now he knew, too, for whom she had trembled yesterday.

But the energetic girl did not succumb many minutes to this fearful agitation, she raised herself and tried to escape from his arms.

"You are saved, Count Arnau--Farewell!"

He stood as if struck by lightning.

"Gertrud, for heaven's sake, what does this mean?"

"I leave this house at once. Do not hold me back, I must go."

"And do you really imagine," cried Hermann, "that I will let you go? Oh, your incomprehensibility does not alarm me any longer. You have given a right over you by this sacrifice which I shall know how to use."

Gertrud looked earnestly at him for a moment.

"No," said she at last, "with this sacrifice I have torn every tie between us for ever. What has happened does not exist for the world, and the daughter of the thief, Brand, can never be the wife of Count Arnau."

He took both her hands gently--

"Gertrud, not this bitterness. Can you not credit me with the power of protecting my wife before idle tongues?"

"Your wife, perhaps, but not yourself. My real name cannot remain unconcealed, so soon as I emerge from dependence and obscurity, and I have lived in aristocratic families long enough to know what is thought on such points. They would hardly pardon you your *bürgerliche* wife, and you would suffer under the continual persecution, until you would at last be compelled to retire to the hated obscurity of private life--on my account."

The Präsidentin, who had stood hitherto like one in despair, now breathed freely again at these words, which she saw were not without effect upon her grandson. He must, indeed, have himself recognized the undisputable truth of her argument, but he still strove against it.

"Gertrud, at this moment, under the influence of this agitation, we cannot make any weighty decision for our future. Promise me later--"

"No," interrupted she firmly, "the word of separation must be spoken now. Count Arnau, you know the relations of our country and Court better than any one else--answer me! Can your influence, your career still continue the same, if you break your connection with the nobility and with the Prince's household?"

The Count looked down, unprepared for an answer.

"I knew it! And now hear my last word. I shall not have made the sacrifice in vain, and, therefore, under the circumstances, I can never be your wife. Do not try to dissuade me, or to find me, it would be in vain. By this sacrifice I save your future, and that, with such a nature as yours, will be such as to dispense with a wife's love. Farewell!"

An unspeakable bitterness rang in her last words, but she left him no time to reply, and erect and stately, walked towards the door; here, however, the Präsidentin met her. Deeply moved, she silently held out both hands.

For an instant Gertrud took them, then disappeared in the neighbouring room.

The Präsidentin went up to her grandson and laid her hand on his shoulder.

"You may thank the girl's high principles, Hermann, for saving you from a folly which you would have had to repent all your life. She saves you, and us all!"

The Count did not answer, his eyes were fixed on the door where Gertrud had disappeared.

The Präsidentin bent down, and carefully picked up every fragment of the torn paper, then lit a candle, and held the pieces over the flame. As the last sank into dust and ashes the old lady breathed freely--

"Thank heaven! The evil is at an end!"

## CHAPTER IX.

Six months had passed, the winter had come in all its severity, and the approach of Christmas was heralded by a heavy fall of snow. The mid-day bells chimed from the village church tower, a sound welcome everywhere, and joyfully greeted in the pastor's house as the crowd of merry children came hurrying from the garden, (where they had been engaged in a hot snow-ball contest), with greatly increased appetites. Five fresh little faces, rosy with the cold, ranged themselves round the dinner table, and began to attack with great interest and zeal the dishes set before them.

The pastor, a man already past middle age, with a kind, gentle face, seemed to-day unusually grave and reflective. He divided his attention between the children and their governess, who sat opposite to him, the two youngest children on either side. There was a loving care, as well as a quiet firmness in the way which she quieted and kept in order the little company, and the

children seemed to be tenderly attached to her. Fräulein Walter was hardly able to rescue herself from all the histories and relations which one little chattering mouth poured out after the other. At last the dinner was at an end, and the little wild troop, after receiving permission, stormed out again to occupy the hour of play still left to them, with a more peaceful occupation, namely, the building of a snow man.

Gertrud had taken up her key basket, and was on the point of leaving the room, when the pastor detained her with the request that she would follow him into his study for a few minutes, as he had something important to speak to her about.

She willingly put down her basket and complied with his request. This important matter was not difficult to guess at; Christmas was near, and five little tables had to be planned for. But the introduction to this harmless subject seemed to cost the Herr Pastor some difficulty, he cleared his throat several times in an embarrassed manner, and at last began with visible hesitation--

"First, Fräulein Walter, accept my heartfelt thanks for all that you have been to me and my children."

Gertrud looked surprised, the introduction sounded almost solemn.

"I only did my duty," replied she, quietly.

"Oh, no, you have done much, much more!"

The man's former embarrassment now gave place to warm heartiness.

"You merely undertook the duty of instructing the children, and you have been the most loving guardian to them, the most faithful support to my orphaned household. Only since you came have I once more known that I possess a home, a happy domestic circle."

Gertrud was perfectly calm and unsuspecting.

"I have done what I could. But of course a stranger cannot ever fill the mother's place."

"Ah, that was just what I wanted to speak to you about," interrupted the pastor, hastily. "In spite of all your goodness, I cannot deny to myself that my children need a mother, and my house the superintendence of a lady, whilst I--" He suddenly stopped, for Gertrud had shrunk back with an involuntary movement of fright. "Do you wish me to be silent?"

She had become pale, but she shook her head gently.

"Please go on."

He got up and seized her hand.

"Since the five months that you have been here I have often been on the point of speaking to you, and have as often stopped myself. There was something in you which--let me be sincere--that oppressed me, and kept me at a distance. However kind and obliging I saw you in the house, and everything thriving under your hands, I could not, nevertheless, banish the thought that you were intended for quite a different sphere of life. But I must speak out at last. You are young, beautiful, and richly gifted in every respect, I am already an elderly man, and have nothing to offer you but a simple house, modest circumstances, and the participation in the care of five children. Can the love of these children, the gratitude of a man, who honours and admires you with all his heart, atone for the sacrifice you will make by your consent--if so--then you will make me very happy."

Gertrud had listened silently with downcast eyes, her face had become very pale, but her voice was calm.

"Your offer honours me, Herr Pastor, but you do me wrong if you think that a simple life and duties are irksome to me. For the first time in your house I have once more known what it is to be surrounded with loving kindness; I--"

She raised her hand, and, as if struck by a sudden pain, laid it--not in that of the pastor, but upon her breast!

"Is anything the matter?" asked he anxiously.

She forced herself to smile.

"Oh, no, it is nothing. I only wished to ask you for a short time for consideration. You shall have my answer in a few hours."

The pastor seemed hardly to have expected his offer to have met with so favourable a reception. A short time for consideration is usually only a form of propriety, ending with an answer in the affirmative. With glad thankfulness he seized both her hands.

"As you will, *liebes* Fräulein, as long as you like. I do not wish to attribute your consent to a hasty decision. Consult your own heart undisturbed, and then tell me candidly what you have

decided."

An hour had passed, Gertrud sat in her high storied room, lost in deep reflection. As before, she involuntarily pressed her hand on her heart. There was something there which still obstinately refused to bow to the outward calmness of her nature. It had sprung up in burning, trembling pain, when she had stood on the point of giving her consent, and had it not seemed to tear her back with warning fear as if from a precipice, and stopped the "Yes," which already trembled on her lips with a loud "No, no"? And yet this weakness must be overcome! If not quite forgotten, she had at least imagined that it was overcome, and had not guessed that she should have to probe herself with anxious, painful self-enquiries. Hermann had made no attempt to try and find her, or even send her a last word of farewell. He had fully recognised the earnestness of her decision, the truth of her words, and bowed firmly and strongly to the unavoidable, but--it tore the girl's heart that he could be so firm and strong. Then he had his future to make up for what was lost--for which he had surrendered her--and she?

She had made up her mind to accept the pastor's hand. What could she, the solitary, homeless one, do better, than to take the home and hearth offered to her, the love of an honourable man, and the perhaps heavy, but still blessed cares connected with his children. Truly, he had been right, there was an element in Gertrud's nature which strove against this future in the isolation of the little village, and monotonous round of household duties, so far from the busy world with its many centres of interest--but Gertrud was tired of ever moving aimlessly and with no settled future, from one place of dependence to another; she longed for some sure, calm haven, though she knew that it would be the grave of all that she called life.

The snow storm had begun once more, Gertrud opened the windows and looked out, without regarding the cold--was it not the last free hour of her life--the next would bind it for ever. Over there on the distant country road, the sound of a post horn came through the falling snow. Noiselessly and thickly fell the soft flakes from the grey winter sky upon the hard earth. Everything around, the fields and valleys, the boughs of the trees, and the roofs of the houses bore the cold, shapeless garment of snow, and still and solitary lay the village, like death, covered with a white robe.

But this calm was suddenly broken by an unusual event, the post horn did not die away as usual in the distance, it came nearer and nearer, loud and merry, and was presently joined by the rattle of wheels. Drawn by four steaming horses, a post chaise worked itself with difficulty through the snow, till it stopped before the pastor's door. A gentleman, wrapped in furs, sprang out, and with a cry, half consternation, half joy, Gertrud flew from the window.

"Hermann!"

Meanwhile this unexpected event, the arrival of a guest in an extra post chaise with four horses, had alarmed the whole household below. The flock of children rushed into the hall, the pastor's study-door was hurriedly opened, voices were heard on all sides, till finally, a firm voice, making itself heard above all the tumult, said--

"Do not trouble yourself, Herr Pastor. Fräulein Walter will excuse me if I present myself without being formally announced. I have important news for her."

Steps were heard on the stairs, the door flew open, and Count Arnau stood upon the threshold.

Gertrud could not utter a word of greeting; trembling in every limb, she still stood on the same spot. He closed the door and approached her.

"So you have flown from me to this distant, isolated village? Gertrud, did you really think I should *not* find you?"

His eyes rested gravely and reproachfully on her face.

She made an attempt to regain her self-command.

"Herr Graf, I do not know, indeed, what your sudden appearance means after--"

"After my long silence? What, Gertrud, did not you know me better? You thought I was weak and cowardly enough to accept your generous sacrifice unconditionally?"

She dropped her eyes; a "No" to this answer would have been--a lie. He came close to her and took her hand.

"I knew *you* well enough to know that your declaration was made in all earnestness, and that every attempt to dissuade you would meet with a renewed refusal, and it is contrary to my nature to indulge in useless complaints and assurances. I preferred to be silent till I could act."

"Act?"

She looked at him questioningly, doubtfully.

"Yes. Your farewell words were true, no one knew that better than myself. In our little capital,

where every scandal sleeps unforgotten, to wake again through love of talk, to the ruin of some family--in our own principality, where every important post depends upon favour at Court, and in the midst of a nobility whose prejudices are not yet touched by the faintest breath of advancing opinion, my career would, indeed, have been shattered if Gertrud Brand had become my wife. A union between us under *these* circumstances would have been impossible."

"And now--?"

"These circumstances had to be altered. I am free."

"Hermann! What have you done?"

His countenance lighted up with that expression which hitherto only she had seen, and under which the hard features seemed so strangely mild. In spite of her consternation there was an unspeakable amount of confession in her words, which he had hitherto not been able to tear from her; it was the first time she had called him by his name.

"I have bidden farewell to the past. Do not be frightened, I have all the future before me. I am not one of those natures who are able to vegetate from one year's end to another in the retirement of an estate, allowing the world to go its own way as it will, and neither are you suited for such a narrow sphere of life. Before the beginning of the year I was asked to enter into the service of the State in another country, but I then refused, because my connection and prospects gave me certain hopes of the first place in our principality. Directly after you left the offer was renewed. There are certainly some steps to mount in order to gain such a position as that I have renounced, and it may cost me more effort than hitherto, but I *will* rise, be sure of that."

He said all simply and calmly; but Gertrud nevertheless felt deeply what a sacrifice the ambitious man had made; her bosom heaved in joyful pride, she knew now what she was to him.

"All is settled now," continued he, after a moment's pause. "I shall enter upon my new office in B---- next month--but I shall not go there without my wife. Gertrud, will you come with me?"

His arms closed passionately round the no longer resisting girl; she leaned her head upon his shoulder.

"Do you think, Hermann, then, that there we--"

"We are strangers in B----. There no one knows of the crime and the unhappy remembrances connected with it, and if, in the future, anything should be heard--in the bustle and life of that great capital there will be no lasting place for dim, distant reports of a past generation. Besides this, I shall have no connection with the Court there; and if it does not choose to receive my *bürgerliche* wife, it will be easy for me to avoid it, and we shall find sufficient to make up for that in other circles. *I* will answer for the Gräfin Arnau's fitting reception and position in these."

A deep flush bathed Gertrud's cheeks at the last words; that name--once so hated, she heard it now for the first time as her future one.

"And your grandmother?" asked she softly.

The Count's brow darkened.

"I had a hard battle with her, for she alone guessed the reason for my determination. She must thank her own hardness and obstinacy if a stranger's hand closes her eyes. We parted without reconciliation."

"O, Hermann, you are giving up all for my sake!"

He gently raised her head, and looked into her eyes.

"And you gave up what was most sacred to you, the only treasure you possessed, to save me. Sacrifice for sacrifice! Gertrud, I am no longer the cold egotist who knows nothing but ambition. You know what had made me hard and bitter, what poisoned my youth, and took away, when I was but a child, my love, my trust in men; give it back to me!"

The full, passionate look of love in her eyes answered him--

"I have one request, Hermann, it is my first. Let the past be buried between us, let us never allude to it, even by a word. We will forget it--for ever."

"For ever!"

Without, the snow still fell noiselessly, and laid itself thick and cold on the hard earth; but here two hearts beat warm against one another, ready to meet the future bravely. The old curse, which had so long darkened the lives of both, and appeared as if it must separate them for ever, had been banished by their own hands.

Not avenged, but expiated was the crime, and both now felt what the old Präsidentin had said, as the last fragment of the fateful paper sank in dust and ashes; "God be thanked! The evil is at

an end!"

FOOTNOTES:

[Footnote 1](#): Bridegroom.

[Footnote 2](#): Belonging to the lower rank, common.

[Footnote 3](#): Most gracious--a term used in addressing ladies in Germany.

[Footnote 4](#): Gracious Count.

[Footnote 5](#): Betrothed, bride. A German lady is always called a bride as soon as she is betrothed.

**THE END.**

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Printed by REMINGTON & Co., 5, Arundel Street, Strand, W.C.

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