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E. Werner**

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"CLEAR THE TRACK!"

(FREIE BAHN)

A STORY OF TO-DAY

BY

E. WERNER

Author of "The Alpine Fay," "Banned and Blessed," "Danira,"

"Vineta," "At a High Price," etc. etc.

TRANSLATED BY MARY STUART SMITH

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CONTENTS.

CHAP.

1. [The Feast of Flowers at Nice](#)
2. [In Council](#)
3. ["See the Path is Clear to a Grand Career"](#)
4. [Odensburg Manor](#)
5. [A Victory Wop](#)
6. [In Which More Than One Charmer Charms](#)
7. [Cecilia Visits Radefeld](#)
8. [A Bough of Apple-Blossoms](#)
9. [The Cross on the Whitestone](#)
10. [Maia's Choice](#)
11. [A Secret Foe and Open Enemy](#)

12. [The Goal in Sight](#)
13. [Runeck leaves Odenburg](#)
14. [How an Old Bachelor makes Love](#)
15. [A Wedding Day](#)
16. [Scenes at the "Golden Lamb"](#)
17. [Election Times](#)
18. [Fortune Smiles on Victor Eckardstein](#)
19. ["Off With the Old Love, On With the New"](#)
20. [Maia Must be Saved](#)
21. [From Heights of Bliss to Depths of Woe](#)
22. [His Sin had found Him out](#)
23. [A Lover's Tryst](#)
24. [A Deed that Wipes Out Old Scores](#)
25. ["Twixt Life and Death](#)
26. [How Forces that Are Opposed May Blend](#)

CLEAR THE TRACK!

CHAPTER I.

THE FEAST OF FLOWERS AT NICE.

A spring day at the South! Sky and sea are radiant in their deep blue, flooded with light and splendor, the waves breaking gently upon the shores of the Riviera, to which spring had already come in all its glory, while, at the North, snow-storms are still raging.

Here rests golden sunshine upon the white houses and villas of the town, that embraces the shore within the radius of a vast semicircle, adorned by lofty palms, and embowered in the green of the laurel and myrtle. Among thousands of shrubs, the camellia is conspicuous from its wealth of bloom, in every stage of perfection, its colors ranging from pure white to richest crimson; and could anything excel the richness of its glistening foliage? From the adjacent hills hoary monasteries look down, and modern churches surrounded by tall cypress trees; friendly orchards stand out from pine and olive groves, and in the distance the blue Alps, with their snow-crowned summits, are half hidden in sunny mist.

Nice was celebrating one of its spring-and-flower festivals, and the whole city and its environs had turned out in gala-attire, whether stranger or native-born. Gayly-decked equipages passed by in endless procession, every window and balcony being filled with spectators, and on the sidewalks, under the palms, thronged a merry multitude, the brown and picturesque forms of fishermen and peasants being everywhere conspicuous.

The battle of flowers on the Corso was in full swing, the sweet missiles being constantly shot through the air, here hitting their mark, there missing it: blossoms, that are treasured at the North as rare and expensive, were here scattered heedlessly and lavishly. Added to this, there were everywhere waving handkerchiefs, shouts of joy, bands of music playing, and the intoxicating perfume of violets,--the whole of this enchantingly beautiful picture being enhanced by the golden sunshine of spring with which heaven and earth was filled.

Upon the terrace of one of the fashionable hotels stood a small group of gentlemen, evidently foreigners, who had chanced to meet here, for they conversed in the German language. The lively interest with which the two younger men gazed upon the entrancing scene betrayed the fact that it was new to them; while the third, a man of riper years, looked rather listlessly upon what was going on.

"I must go now," said he, with a glance at his watch. "One soon gets tired of all this hubbub and confusion, and longs after a quiet spot. You, gentlemen, it seems, want to stay a while longer?"

His companions certainly seemed to have that intention, and one of them, a handsome man, with slender figure, evidently an officer in civilian's dress, answered laughingly:

"Of course we do, Herr von Stettin. We feel no need for rest whatever. The scene has a fairy-like aspect for us Northmen, has it not, Wittenau?--Ah! there come the Wildenrods! That is what I call taste; one can hardly see the carriage for the flowers, and the lovely Cecilia looks the very impersonation of Spring."

The carriage that was just driving by was indeed remarkable through its peculiarly rich ornamentation of flowers. Everywhere appeared camellias, the coachman and outriders wore bunches of them in their hats, and even the horses were decked with them.

On the front seat were a gentleman of proud and noble bearing, and a young lady in a changeable silk dress of reddish hue, her dark hair surmounted by a dainty little white hat trimmed with roses. Upon the back seat a young man had taken his place, who exerted himself to take care of the heaps of flowers that were fairly showered upon this particular equipage. Among them were the costliest bouquets, evidently given in compliment to the beautiful girl, who sat smiling in the midst of all her floral treasures, and looking with great, beaming eyes upon the festive scene around her.

The officer, also, had taken a bunch of violets, and dexterously flung it into the carriage, but instead of the lady, her escort caught it, and carelessly added it to the pile of floral offerings heaped up on the seat beside him.

"That was not exactly meant for Herr Dernburg," said the dispenser of flowers rather irritably. "There he is again in the Wildenrod carriage. He is never to be seen but when dancing attendance upon them."

"Yes, since this Dernburg has put in his appearance, the attentions of all other men seem superfluous," chimed in Wittenau, sending a dark look after the carriage.

"Have your observations, too, carried you so far already?" said the young officer tauntingly. "Yes, millionaires; alas! are always to the fore, and I believe Herr von Wildenrod knows how to appreciate this quality in his friends, for I hear that luck sometimes deserts him over yonder at Monaco."

"You must be mistaken; there can be no talk of any such thing as that," replied Wittenau, almost indignantly. "The Baron produces the impression that he is a perfect gentleman, and associates here with our very first people."

The other laughingly shrugged his shoulders.

"That is not saying much, dear Wittenau. Just here, at Nice, the line separating the *élite* from the world of adventurers is strangely lost sight of. One never rightly knows where the one ceases and the other begins, and there is some mystery about this Wildenrod. As to whether his claim to nobility is altogether genuine----"

"Undoubtedly genuine, I can certify as to that," said Stettin, who had hitherto been a silent listener, but now came forward and joined in the conversation.

"Ah, you are acquainted with the family, are you?"

"Years ago, I used to visit at the house of the old Baron, who has died since, and there I also met his son. I cannot pretend to have any particular acquaintance with the latter, but he has a full right to the name and title that he bears."

"So much the better," said the officer, lightly. "As for the rest, it is only a traveling acquaintance, and no obligation is incurred."

"Assuredly not, if one lays aside such relations as easily as they are assumed," remarked

Stettin with a peculiar intonation. "But I must be off now--I hope to meet you soon again, gentlemen!"

"I am going with you," said Wittenau, who seemed suddenly to have lost his appetite for sight-seeing. "The rows of carriages begin to thin out already. Nevertheless, it will be a hard matter to get through."

They took leave of their comrade, who was not thinking of departure yet, and had just supplied himself with flowers again, and together left the terrace. It was certainly no easy thing to make one's way through the densely-packed throng, and quite a while elapsed ere they left noise and stir behind them. Gradually, however, their way grew clearer, while the shouts of the multitude died away in the distance.

The talk between the two gentlemen was rather monosyllabic. The younger one, particularly, appeared to be either out of sorts or absent-minded, and suddenly remarked, quite irrelevantly:

"It seems that you know all about the Wildenrods, and yet mention it to-day for the first time. And, moreover, you have had nothing to do with them."

"No," said Herr von Stettin coolly, "and I should have preferred other associates for you. I several times intimated as much to you, but you would not understand my hints."

"I was introduced to them by a fellow-countryman, and you said nothing decided----"

"Because I know nothing decided. The associations of which I told you, a while ago, date twelve years back, and many changes have taken place since then. Your friend is right, the line of demarcation between the Bohemian and man of society gets strangely confused, and I am afraid that Wildenrod is on the wrong side of the barrier."

"You do not believe him to be wealthy, then?" asked Wittenau, with some emotion. "He lives with his sister, in high style, being apparently in the easiest circumstances, and, at all events, has command of abundant means, for the present."

Stettin significantly shrugged his shoulders.

"Inquire at the faro-bank of Monaco; he is a regular guest there, and is said, too, to have good luck in play, for the most part--so long as it lasts! One hears, too, occasionally of other things, that are yet more significant. I have not felt disposed to renew the former acquaintance, although our intercourse had been rather frequent, for what used to be the Wildenrod possessions lay in the immediate neighborhood of our family property, that is now in my hands."

"What used to be?" asked the young man. "Those possessions have been sold, then? I perceive, however, that you do not like to speak on the subject."

"To strangers, most assuredly not. I shall give what information I have to you, though, because you have a real interest in the matter. Remember, however, that what I say is strictly confidential!"

"My word upon it, that nothing you tell me shall go any farther."

"Well, then," said Stettin gravely, "it is a brief, melancholy, but, alas! not an unusual story. Although the estate had long been heavily encumbered with debt, the establishment was maintained upon a most expensive scale. The old Baron had contracted a second marriage, in later life, long after his son was a grown man. He could not thwart his young wife in a single wish, and her wants were many, very many. The son, who was in the diplomatic service, was also accustomed to high living; various other losses ensued, and finally came the catastrophe. The Baron suddenly died of a stroke of apoplexy--at least so it was said."

"Did he lay violent hands on himself?" asked Wittenau in a whisper.

"Probably. It has not been ascertained for certain, but it is supposed that he was not willing to survive the misery and disgrace of his ruin. Disgrace was certainly averted, for the family still holds the most honorable position. The Wildenrods rank with the highest nobility in the land, and the name was to be shielded at any price. The castle and lands adjacent became a royal domain, so that the creditors could be pacified at least, and, by the general public, the sale was deemed a voluntary one. The widow with her little daughter would have been given over to utter poverty if, by the king's grace, she had not been allowed a home in the castle and had an annuity settled upon her. As for the rest, she died soon afterwards."

"And the son? The young Baron?"

"Of course he resigned his position, had to do so, under the circumstances, for he could not be *attaché* of affairs without some fortune of his own. It must have been a severe blow upon the proud, ambitious man, who had, most likely, been kept in utter ignorance of the state of his father's affairs, and, now, all of a sudden, found himself stopped short in his career. To be sure, many another honorable calling stood open to him; friends would doubtless have secured some situation for him, but this would have necessitated descent from the sphere in which he had

hitherto played a chief part; necessitated sober, unremitting toil in an obscure station, and those were things that Oscar Von Wildenrod could not brook. He rejected all offers of employment, left the country, and was no more heard of in his native place. Now, after the lapse of twelve years, I meet him here at Nice with his young sister, who, meanwhile, has come to woman's estate, but we prefer, it seems, on both sides, to treat each other as strangers."

While this narration was being made, 'Wittenau became very thoughtful, but made no comment whatever. Noticing this, his friend laid his hand upon his arm, and said gently:

"You should not have given young Dernburg such angry glances, for it has been his appearance upon the scene, I fancy, that has saved you from committing a folly--a great folly."

A glowing blush suffused the young man's face at this intimation, and he was evidently much embarrassed.

"Herr von Stettin, I----"

"Now, do not understand me as reproaching you on account of looking too deeply into a pair of fine eyes," interposed Stettin. "That is so natural at your age; but in this case, it might have been fatal. Ask yourself, whether a girl thus brought up, who has grown up amid such influences and surroundings, would make a good farmer's wife, or be happy in a country neighborhood. As for the rest, you would hardly have found acceptance as Cecilia Wildenrod's suitor, because her brother will give the decisive voice, and he wants a millionaire for a brother-in-law."

"And Dernburg is heir to several millions, people say," remarked Wittenau with undisguised bitterness. "So, he will be the one upon whom this honor is to be bestowed."

"It is not mere say so, it is fact. The great Dernburg iron and steel works are the most important in all Germany, and admirably conducted. Their present chief is such a man as one rarely meets. I speak from personal knowledge, having accidentally made his acquaintance a few years ago. But see, there are the Wildenrods coming back again."

There, indeed, was the Baron's equipage, which had left the Corso a little while ago, and was now on its way back to their hotel. The fiery horses, which had with difficulty been curbed in, so as to keep step with a procession, were now going at full speed, and rushed past the two gentlemen, who had stepped aside, and looked upon the cloud of dust that had been raised.

"I am sorry about that Oscar Wildenrod," said Stettin earnestly. "He does not belong to the ordinary herd of mankind, and might perhaps have accomplished great things, if fate had not so suddenly and rudely snatched him away from the sphere for which he had been born and reared. Do not look so downcast, dear Wittenau! You will get over this dream of your youth, and after you get home to your fields and meadows, will thank your stars that it was nothing but a dream."

The carriage, meanwhile, had gone on its way, and now stopped before one of those grand hotels, whose exterior sufficiently showed that it was only at the disposal of rich and distinguished guests.

The suite of rooms occupied by Baron von Wildenrod and his sister was one of the best, and, of course, most expensive in the house, and lacked none of the conveniences and luxuries to which pampered guests lay claim. The rooms were splendidly furnished, but there was about them that air of the public-house that takes away, in large measure, any sense of genuine comfort.

The gentlemen were already in the parlor. Cecilia had retired in order to lay aside her hat and gloves, while her brother, chatting pleasantly, conducted their visitor to the veranda, whence was to be seen a fine view of the sea and a portion of Nice.

Young Dernburg appeared to be twenty-four or five years old, his looks making an impression that was insignificant rather than disagreeable. His diminutive figure, with its somewhat stooping carriage and pale complexion, with that peculiar tell-tale flush upon the cheeks, betrayed the fact that he had sought the sunny shores of the Riviera, not for the sake of pleasure, but out of regard for health. His face had its attractive features, but its lineaments were much too weak for a man, and this weakness culminated in the dreamy, somewhat veiled, look of his brown eyes. The self-consciousness of the rich heir seemed to be entirely lacking in this young man, his manners being unassuming, almost shy, and had not the name he bore everywhere procured him consideration, he would have been apt to be overlooked by the generality of the world.

The Baron's personality was in every respect the reverse. Oscar von Wildenrod was no longer young, being already not far from fifty years old.

There was something imposing in his lofty stature, and his clean-cut, regular features could but be regarded as handsome still, in spite of the sharp lines engraven upon them, and the deep furrow between the brows, that lent a rather sinister aspect to his countenance. Only a cool, considerate calm seemed perceptible in his dark eyes, and yet they flashed occasionally, with a fierceness that betokened the existence of a passionate, unbridled nature. As for the rest, there was something thoroughly distinguished in the Baron's whole appearance, his manners united

the complaisance of a man of the world combined quite naturally with the pride inalienable from the scion of an ancient stock of nobility, which was manifested, however, in a manner by no means offensive.

"You are not seriously thinking of taking your leave of Nice?" asked he, in the course of conversation. "It would be much too early, for you would just be in time for that season of storms and rain, which they honor with the name of spring, in that dear Germany of ours. You have spent the whole winter in Cairo, have been just six weeks at Nice, and should not expose yourself now to the asperities of that harsh Northern climate, if you would not imperil the health that is restored to you, but can hardly be established as yet."

"The question is not one of to-day or to-morrow," said Dernburg, "but I cannot defer too long my return home. I have been more than a year in the South, feel perfectly well again, and my father urgently requests that I return to Odensburg as soon as possible, provided that the doctors give me their permission."

"That Odensburg must be a grand creation," remarked the Baron. "According to all that I hear from you and others, your father must almost occupy the position of a small potentate; only his authority is more unlimited than that of a prince."

"Certainly, but he has also the whole care and responsibility of his station. You have no idea what it is to be at the head of such an undertaking. It requires a constitution of iron, such as my father possesses; the burden that he carries on his shoulders is that of a very Atlas."

"Never mind, it is power, and power is always a delight!" said Wildenrod, with flashing eyes.

The young man smiled rather sadly.

"To you, and very likely to my father, too--I am differently constituted. I should prefer a quiet life, in a modest home, located in such a terrestrial paradise as this delicious climate supplies; but it is not worth while to talk; as an only son, it must one day devolve on me to superintend the work at Odensburg."

"You are ungrateful, Dernburg! A good fairy endowed you, when in your cradle, with a destiny such as thousands aspire to, with eager longing--and I verily believe you sigh over it."

"Because I feel that I am not qualified for it. When I behold what my father accomplishes, and reflect that one day the task will devolve upon me, of filling his place, there comes over me a sense of discouragement and timidity that I cannot control."

Wildenrod's eyes were fastened, with a peculiar expression upon the diminutive figure and pale features of the young heir.

"One day!" he repeated. "Who cares now about the distant future. Your father is still living and working in the plenitude of his powers, and in the worst case he will leave you capable officers, who have been trained in his school. So you will actually stay no longer at Nice? I am sorry for that; we shall miss you a great deal."

"We?" asked Dernburg softly. "Do you speak in your sister's name also?"

"Certainly, Cecilia will be very sorry to lose her trustiest knight. To be sure, there will be plenty to try and console her--do you know, yesterday I had a regular quarrel upon my hands with Marville, because I offered you the seat in our carriage, upon which he had surely calculated?"

This last remark was apparently made carelessly, without any design, but it had its effect. The young man's brow became clouded, and with unmistakable irritation, he replied:

"Vicomte de Marville constantly claims a place by the Baroness, and I plainly perceive that he would like to supplant me in her favor altogether."

"If you voluntarily resign your vantage-ground--very likely. So far, Cecilia has continually manifested a preference for her German compatriot, and yet there is no doubt but that the amiable Frenchman pleases her, and the absent is always at a disadvantage, especially where young ladies are concerned."

He spoke in a jesting tone, as though no weight were to be attached to his words, since he did not look upon the matter at all in a serious light. This only made Dernburg more solicitous to come to an understanding. He made no reply, he was evidently struggling with himself, and finally began, unsteadily and with hesitation:

"Herr von Wildenrod, I have had something on my heart--for a long while already--but I have not ventured until now----"

The Baron had turned and looked at him wonderingly. There lurked in his dark eyes a half-mocking, half-compassionate expression, the look seeming to say: "You have millions to offer and yet hesitate?" but aloud he replied: "Speak out, pray; we are no strangers, and I hope that I have a claim to your confidence."

"It is, perhaps, no longer a secret to you that I love your sister," said Dernburg almost timidly. "But allow me to say to you, that I should account myself the happiest of men, if I could hope to win Cecilia--that I would do everything to make her happy--may I hope?"

Wildenrod did not indeed affect any surprise at this confession, he only smiled, but it was a smile that was full of promise.

"First of all, you must address your question to Cecilia herself. Young ladies are rather self-willed on such points, and my sister peculiarly so. Perhaps I am too considerate of her, and she is completely spoiled in society now, how much so you saw for yourself again to-day, during our ride on the Corso."

"Yes, I saw it," and the young man's tone showed deep depression, "and just on that account, I have never before been able to find the courage to speak of my love."

"Really? Well, then, I shall have to come to the help of your timidity. It is true that our whimsical little princess is not to be counted upon, but, to speak confidentially, I have no fear of your being rejected by her."

"Do you really think so?" exclaimed Dernburg rapturously. "And how as to yourself, Herr von Wildenrod?"

"I shall gladly welcome you as a brother-in-law, and see my sister's happiness entrusted to you without a qualm of anxiety. My sole desire is to see this child happy and beloved, for you must know that my relation to her has always been that of a father rather than a brother."

He extended his hand, which was grasped by the young suitor, and warmly pressed.

"I thank you. You make me very, very happy by this consent, by the hope that you give me, and now----"

"You would like to hear this consent spoken by other lips," said Wildenrod, laughingly finishing his sentence for him. "I'll gladly give you the opportunity to speak, but you must plead your own cause. I allow my sister entire freedom to act as pleases her best. I think, however, my blabbing has inspired you with courage, so venture boldly, dear Eric."

He gave him a friendly nod, and went. Eric Dernburg also returned again to the parlor, and his glance took in the quantities of flowers that the servant had brought up and piled upon the table. Yes, indeed, Cecilia Wildenrod was petted and spoiled as is the lot of few of her sex. Again to-day how had she been overwhelmed with flowers and tokens of homage! She had only to choose: dared he indulge the hope that her choice would fall upon one like him? He had wealth to offer, but she was rich herself, for her brother's style of living left no doubt on that head, and moreover she came of an ancient and noble family. As he thus pondered, the scale oscillated painfully. In spite of the encouragement that he had received, the young man's face showed that he feared just as much as he hoped.

Wildenrod, meanwhile, had passed through the adjoining apartment, and now entered his sister's chamber.

"Ah, is that you, Oscar? I am coming directly. I only want to stick another flower in my hair."

The Baron looked at the magnificent bunch of pale yellow roses that lay half-loosened upon the dressing-table, and asked abruptly:

"Are those the flowers that Dernburg gave you?"

"Certainly; he brought them to me, when he came for the drive on the Corso."

"Good! adorn yourself with them!"

"And I should have done so all the same without your most gracious permission," laughed the young lady, "for they are the loveliest of all."

She selected one of the roses, and held it, experimentally, against her hair: there was an uncommon, but indeed very conscious, grace in this movement: the slender girl of nineteen resembled her brother little, if at all: at first sight they seemed to have nothing in common but the dark color of their hair and eyes, otherwise hardly a feature betrayed the nearness of their relationship.

Cecilia Wildenrod had that style of appearance which seems to have an irresistible fascination for the opposite sex. Her features were more irregular than those of her brother, but their mobility and variety of expression gave them a peculiar charm that never wore out. Her dark hair, that was so abundant as not to be always brought down to the requirements of the latest fashion, and complexion, that was of the clear brunette type, made one suspect that she could not be of purely German origin; and from beneath long black eyelashes gleamed a pair of lustrous eyes, that allured one who looked deeply into them with all the fascination of a riddle to be solved. In these mysterious depths, too, glowed a spark that might well be fanned into a flame; they, too, having some of that glow of passion, which in Oscar's case was hidden under a

semblance of excessive coldness. This constituted the sole resemblance between the brother and sister, but it was a resemblance that stood for much.

Cecilia still wore the silk dress in which she had appeared on the Corso, already a few pale yellow, half-open, rosebuds adorned her bosom, and now she placed a full-blown rose among the dark waves of her hair. Nature's adorning became her wondrously, and her brother's glance rested upon her with evident satisfaction. He had closed both doors carefully behind him, nevertheless he now lowered his voice and said in a whisper:

"Eric Dernburg has something besides roses to offer you--his hand. He has just had a talk with me, and is now going to address himself to you."

The young lady likewise heard this news without any surprise.

She turned her head to one side, that she might see how the flower looked in her hair, and asked with apparent indifference:

"So soon?"

"Soon? Why, I have been expecting a declaration from him this long while, and he would have made it, too, only you seem to have given him poor encouragement."

A fold appeared between Cecilia's brows, exactly in the same spot where a deep furrow had seamed her brother's.

"If he were only not so abominably tiresome!" murmured she.

"Cecilia, you know that I am anxious for this marriage, exceedingly anxious, and I hope that you will regulate your conduct accordingly."

His tone was very positive, seeming to preclude any chance of opposition on the part of his sister, who now pushed away the rest of the roses with a gesture of impatience.

"Why had it to be this Dernburg, and no one else? Vicomte de Marville is much handsomer, much more agreeable----"

"But is not thinking of offering you his hand," interposed Wildenrod. "He, just as little as all the other triflers who swarm around you. You need not put on that injured air, Cecilia, you may rely implicitly upon my judgment: I know men, I tell you, girl. Now this union with Dernburg secures to you a brilliant destiny; he is very rich."

"Well, so are we, for that matter."

"No," said the Baron shortly and sharply.

The young lady looked at him in amazement: he stepped up to her and laid his hand upon her arm.

"We are *not* rich! I am obliged to tell you this now, that you may not ruin your future prospects, through caprice or childishness, and I confidently expect you to accept this offer."

Cecilia still looked at her brother, half shocked, half-incredulous, but she was evidently accustomed to submitting to his will in silence, and attempted no further opposition.

"As if I should dare to say 'no,' when my stern brother dictates a 'yes,'" pouted she. "But I can tell Dernburg one thing, he need not flatter himself with the idea that I am going to bury myself with him in that horrid Odensburg. To live among droves of day-laborers, at those iron works, full of dust and soot--it makes me shudder just to think of it."

"All that can be accommodated afterwards," said Wildenrod calmly. "As for the rest, you have no idea what it is to be some day master of the Odensburg works, and what a stand you will take in the world, by his side. When you do come to comprehend the situation fully, you will be grateful to me for the choice that I have made. But come, we should not keep your future husband waiting any longer."

He took her arm, and led her to the parlor, where Dernburg was awaiting them in restless suspense. The Baron pretended not to observe his uneasiness, and chatted unrestrainedly with him and his sister about their drive on the Corso, and various little incidents that had occurred, until it suddenly occurred to him to admire the sunset, that promised to be particularly beautiful this evening. He stepped out upon the veranda, as if undesignedly, let the glass doors fall to behind him, and thus gave the young couple an opportunity to be alone.

"Why, it looks just like a flower-market!" exclaimed Cecilia laughingly, as she pointed to the table that was overladen with bouquets. "Francis has, of course, piled them up with a reckless disregard of taste: I must really arrange them better. Will you not help me to do so, Herr Dernburg?"

She began to divide out the various sorts and put them in vases and bowls, and with the

remainder to decorate the hearth. Dernburg helped her, but he was not a very efficient helper, for he could not take his eyes off the slender form, flitting to and fro, in dainty garb, with that lovely rose in her dark hair.

At the first glance, he had perceived that those were his roses that she wore, and a happy smile played about his lips. He wondered if her brother had already given her a hint? She was so free from embarrassment, laughed so heartily at his absence of mind, and treated him with the same pretty insolence as usual--she could not possibly know that he meant to address her!

In Cecilia's manner, there was most assuredly nothing of the sweet shyness and embarrassment of a young girl who, for the first time, listens to the addresses of a lover. In fact, it hardly seemed that she comprehended the seriousness of the situation. She would soon be twenty years old, at which age girls in her circle often married or, rather, were given in marriage, for their families usually decided the matter for them. Individually, moreover, she had no objection to marrying. It would be very pleasant to enjoy the freedom allowed a married woman, to be wholly untrammelled as to expenditure in dress, jewels, etc., and to be no longer obliged to submit to the will of a brother, who was at times very despotic, only--how much handsomer and more agreeable was Viscount de Marville than this Dernburg, who had not even rank to recommend him. It was really outrageous, that a Baroness Wildenrod would, in future, have to bear the name of a simple citizen!

She had just taken up the last bouquet, preparatory to decorating the hearth with it, when she heard her name breathed softly but fervently.

"Cecilia!"

She turned around and met the gaze of Eric, who stood beside her, and continued in the same tone:

"You have only eyes and thoughts for the flowers--have you not a single glance for me?"

"Why, do you stand so much in need of that glance?" asked Cecilia archly.

"Oh! how very much I need it! It is to give me courage for a confession--will you hear it?"

She smiled and laid down the bunch of flowers that she held in her hand.

"Why, that sounds quite portentous. Is it something so important?"

"No less than the happiness of my life, for which I look to you!" replied Dernburg impetuously. "I love you, Cecilia, have done so from the first moment that my eyes rested upon you. You must have known this for a long while, could not help guessing it, but I always saw you so surrounded by admirers, and so rarely obtained the least excuse for the indulgence of hope, that I dared not press my suit. Now, though, that the time for my departure draws near, I cannot go, without certainty as to my fate. Will you be mine, Cecilia? I will lay everything, everything, at your feet, gratify every wish, and all my life long guard you as the most precious of treasures. Say one word, only a single one, that shall give me hope, but do not say 'no,' for that I could not stand."

He had caught both her hands, his face, commonly so pale, was now suffused with a bright flush, and his voice quivered with emotion. This was no stormy, passionate declaration, but each word expressed the truest love, the fullest tenderness, and the young girl who had so often been besieged by flattery and adulation, heard this tone for the first time, and listened, half perplexed, half fascinated.

Cecilia had not supposed the quiet, bashful lover, whom she had often treated with great disdain, capable of such a wooing, and as he now went on, more tenderly, more urgently, the 'yes' pleaded for came at last from her lips, rather hesitatingly, it is true, but without any sign of repugnance.

In a transport of rapture, Dernburg wanted to fold his betrothed to his heart, but she shrank back. It was an involuntary, half unconscious movement of shyness, almost aversion, such as perhaps would have wounded and chilled anybody else, but Eric only saw in it the sweet modesty of the young girl, and while he still softly clasped her hands, he whispered:

"Oh, Cecilia, if you did but know how I love you!"

There was no mistaking in his tone the genuine accents of devoted love, and it did not fail to make its impression upon Cecilia, who now began to realize that she had no right to be so reserved with the man to whom she had plighted her troth.

"Well, then, you deserve that I should give you a little love in return, Eric!" said she, with a charming smile, at the same time suffering him to draw her to his side and imprint a first kiss upon her lips.

Wildenrod was still standing out upon the veranda, and turned around with a smile as the young couple approached him. Beaming with pride and happiness, Dernburg led his betrothed up to him, and received the congratulations of his future brother-in-law, who first embraced his

sister, then Eric.

Then there began a lively, cheerful conversation, out upon the balcony, where the soft breezes of spring were still sporting. The dazzling splendor of daylight was already breaking up into that gorgeous blending of colors, as is only witnessed in the South, at sundown. The city and surrounding heights were glorified, as it were, by the resplendent sheen that glistened and sparkled like molten gold upon the waves of the sea, and while the distant mountains were veiled in a roseate mist, the sun itself, a fiery ball, sank lower and lower, until it finally vanished from view.

Eric had slipped his arm around the waist of his betrothed, and whispered into her ear tender and loving words. Irradiated with glory as was the lovely landscape before them, so seemed the future to him, by the side of that precious girl. Wildenrod stood apart, apparently wholly absorbed in the contemplation of that magnificent spectacle, but nevertheless, a deep sigh of relief escaped his chest, and while his eyes flashed in triumph, he murmured, almost inaudibly: "At last!"

CHAPTER II.

IN COUNCIL.

"I Am sorry, gentlemen, but I have to pronounce all your plans and proposals unsatisfactory. The question is to draw all the water-power we need from the Radefeld low-grounds, in the shortest way, and with the least possible expense. But, without exception, your designs call for such vast and expensive outlays, that it is not worth while to talk of their being carried into effect."

It was Eberhard Dernburg, the proprietor of the Odenburg Works, who thus declined the plans laid before him by his officers, in this decided manner. The gentlemen shrugged their shoulders and looked at the plans and drawings that were spread out upon the table, when, finally, one of them said:

"But, you see, Herr Dernburg, that we have to contend here with the greatest difficulties. The land lies in the most unfavorable of all ways, mountains and valleys alternating along the whole line."

"And the pipes must be secured against all casualties," remarked a second; while the third added:

"The laying of them down will certainly occasion a large expenditure, but as things are now, this cannot be altered."

These three gentlemen, the director and head-manager of the Odenburg works, the superintendent of the technical bureau, and the chief-engineer, were unanimous in their views. This conference was being held in Dernburg's office, where that gentleman usually received the reports of his subordinates, with whom his son also was found to-day. It was a large apartment, quite plainly furnished, but its walls were lined with bookcases. His desk was heaped up with letters and other papers; on the side-tables lay plans and maps of all sorts; and the great portfolios, that were visible in an open press, seemed to contain similar matter. It was evident, that this room was the central point, whence came the guidance of the whole gigantic enterprise,--a spot devoted to never-ending toil and unflagging activity.

"You do not, then, think any other solution possible?" began Dernburg again, as he drew out a paper from a portfolio near by, and spread it out before him. "Please glance at this, gentlemen! Here the course taken is to start from the higher ground, but it penetrates the Buchberg, and then, without further difficulty, is to be conveyed to the works across Radefeld itself--there is the solution sought for."

The officers looked somewhat chagrined, and eagerly bent over the drawing. Evidently none of them had thought of this plan, and yet they did not seem to consider it with any special good-will.

"The Buchberg is to be penetrated, did you say?" asked the director. "A very bold thought, that would assuredly offer great advantages, but I do not deem it feasible."

"Neither do I," chimed in the chief-engineer. "At all events, a searching examination is needed, to ascertain if it is possible. The Buchberg---"

"Is to be mastered," interposed Dernburg. "The preliminary works have already been executed. Runeck established the fact of their possibility, at the outset, when he made the outer measurements, and treats of it expressly in the explanation now lying before us."

"So the plan emanates from him, does it?" asked the superintendent of the technical bureau.

"From Egbert Runeck--he and none other."

"I thought so."

"What do you mean, Herr Winning?" asked Dernburg, quickly turning upon him.

Herr Winning made haste to protest that he had no particular meaning; that the affair only interested him because the young technician was in his own department, immediately under his superintendence: the other two said nothing but cast upon their chief, strange looks of inquiry, which he did not appear to observe.

"I have decided upon adopting Runeck's plan," said he quietly, but, at the same time, with a certain sharpness. "It fulfills all my requirements, and the estimate of expenses amounts to about half of yours. We must consult, of course, over the details, but anyhow, the work is to begin as soon as possible. We'll talk it all over another time, gentlemen."

He rose from his seat, and in so doing gave the signal to disperse, for the officers bowed and took their leave; but in the ante-chamber, however, the director paused, and asked in a whisper:

"What do you say to it?"

"I do not understand Herr Dernburg," answered the chief-engineer, with a voice likewise cautiously lowered. "Is it that he actually does not or *will* not know?"

"Of course he knows it. I myself have given him information on the subject, and the Socialist gentleman himself does not pretend to make any secret of the course he is pursuing; he recklessly admits the stand that he has taken. Should any other man here at Odenburg dare to do the same, he would obtain his dismissal on the spot, but Runeck's discharge seems as yet to be a thing of the dim future. You see his plan has been accepted without any question, while we were plainly given to understand that ours were good for nothing. That surpasses anything that has happened yet----"

"You just wait," interposed Winning calmly. "On that point our chief is not to be trifled with, we all know. At the right time he will speak authoritatively, and, if Runeck does not yield then, it is all up with him, let him be ten times over the young master's bosom-friend and deliverer from death. You may rely upon that!"

"Let us hope so," said the director. "By the way, how poorly Mr. Eric does look still, and how remarkably silent he is. Why, I do not believe he uttered ten words during the whole debate."

"Because he did not understand what we were talking about," explained the chief-engineer, shrugging his shoulders. "They have taken pains enough to drill it into him, but very evidently not much has stuck to him. He has inherited nothing from his father, whether outwardly or inwardly. I must be gone, though, I have to drive out to Radefeld--Good-morning, gentlemen!"

Father and son had been left together by themselves, and the former walked silently up and down the room, evidently quite out of sorts.

In spite of his sixty years Eberhard Dernburg was still in the full vigor of life, and nothing but his gray hair and wrinkled forehead gave any indication that he had already crossed the threshold of old age. His face, with its firm, grave features, told no such story, any more than did his glance, which was keen and clear, and his tall figure was as erect as ever. His address and speech were those of a man accustomed to command, and to receive unflinching obedience, and in his outward appearance there was something that spoke of the sternness attributed to him alike by friend and foe.

It was plainly to be seen now, that his son bore not a shadow of resemblance to the father, but a glance at the half-length portrait that hung over the desk explained this, in some sort. It represented Dernburg's deceased wife, and Eric was speakingly like her. There was the same countenance, with its delicate, meaningless features, the soft, uncertain lineaments, the dreamy, reserved look.

"There sit my deputies with all their wisdom," began Dernburg, finally, in a half-mocking, half-angry tone. "For months they have been pottering over the task, concocting all manner of designs, not one of which was worth anything; and, on the other hand, there is Egbert, without any commission at all, going quietly along, taking the necessary measurements, and studying the situation, until he matures a plan, and lays on the table before me a scheme that is simply masterly! How do you like his sketch, Eric?"

The young man cast an embarrassed look upon the drawing which he still held in his hand.

"You find it excellent, father. I--pardon me--I cannot exactly get a clear idea of its bearings."

"Why, I should think it ought to be clear enough, since you have been pondering over it since yesterday evening. If you require so much time for comprehending a simple plan, for which all the necessary explanations are given, how will you acquire the quick insight into affairs, indispensably necessary for the future owner of the Odenburg works?"

"I have been absent fully a year and a half," said Eric in apology, "and during all that time, the physicians enjoined it upon me to refrain from all exertion, particularly prohibiting any mental strain. You must make allowances, father, and give me time to fit into harness again."

"You have always had to be on your guard against over-exertion, and been restricted in work," said Dernburg with a frown. "On account of your continual sickness, you were never able to pursue any serious study, or engage in anything that required bodily activity. I fixed all my hope upon your return from the South, and now--do not look so disconsolate, Eric! I do not mean to reproach you; it is not your fault, but it is a misfortune in the station to which you are now called."

Eric suppressed a sigh; once more he was feeling this enviable station to be a sorely heavy burden. His father continued impatiently:

"What is to be done, when I shall no longer be here? I have capable subordinates, but they are all dependent upon my guidance. I am accustomed to do everything myself, I never let the reins slip out of my hands, and your hands, I am afraid, will never be strong enough to manage them alone. I have long perceived the necessity of securing you a support for the future--and just at this crisis, Egbert disappoints me by being guilty of the madness of allowing himself to be caught in the net of the socialistic democrats! It is enough to drive one mad!"

He stamped passionately with his foot. Eric looked at his father, with a certain shyness, then said gently:

"Perhaps the matter is not so bad as you have been informed. The director may have exaggerated many a thing."

"Nothing has been exaggerated. My investigations have ratified every word. His period of study in that cursed Berlin has been fatal to the young man. I ought to have taken the alarm, indeed, when he wrote me word, after the first few months of his stay there, that he no longer needed the means which I had placed at his disposal, for he could manage to support himself by giving drawing-lessons and by other work. It must have been hard enough for him, but I liked his pride and independence of spirit, and let him have his way. Now I see more clearly! Those mad ideas were already beginning to seethe in his brain, the first meshes of the net were already woven about him, in which he has since been caught, and he would accept nothing more from me, for he knew that all was at an end between us, if I learned anything about it."

"I have not spoken with him yet, and therefore cannot judge. He is out at Radefeld, I hear."

"He is coming in to-day. I am expecting him before the hour is out."

"And you are going to talk to him on the subject?"

"Of course--it is high time."

"Father, let me implore you not to be hard upon Egbert. Have you forgotten----"

"That he drew you out of the water? No, but he has forgotten that since then he has been almost treated like a son of the house. Do not meddle in this matter, Eric, you do not understand it."

The young man was silent, not daring to oppose his father, who, for the last few minutes, had resumed his pacing of the floor. Now he paused in his walk, and said grumblingly: "I have on my mind all manner of disagreeable things, and lo! here you come, with your love-affairs, and prating about marriage. It was dreadfully precipitate of you to bind yourself without first obtaining my consent."

"I believed myself certain of your approval, and so did Wildenrod, when he promised me his sister's hand. What objection have you to make to my choice, father? The daughter that I am going to present to you is so lovely and sweet. How beautiful she is that picture shows. She is, moreover, rich, from a highly-esteemed family--indeed she belongs to a line of the ancient nobility----"

"I do not attach the slightest consequence to that," brusquely interrupted his father. "No matter how suitable your choice was, it should have been first referred to me; instead of which you even allowed the engagement to be announced at Nice before my answer had arrived. It almost looks as if there was a purpose to obviate any possible opposition on my part."

"But there can be no talk of that! My relations with Cecilia had not been unobserved, it was already the theme of town-talk; and Oscar explained to me that he had to acknowledge the truth, to avoid any misinterpretation of our actions."

"Never mind, it was a piece of unwarrantable presumption. My investigations have certainly proved satisfactory."

"Ah! you have had yourself informed?"

"Of course, since a family connection is at stake. I have certainly not turned to Nice--a mere transient sojourn like that offers no reliable hold--but to the native place of the Wildenrods. Their former possessions are now part of the royal domain, and I got the information I wanted from the court-marshal's office."

"That was superfluous, father," said the young man reproachfully.

"I, however, deemed it needful for your sake," was the dry rejoinder. "There is no doubt but that the Wildenrods belong to the most ancient nobility in the land. The old Baron seems to have lived rather extravagantly, but was universally respected. His estates were sold after his death, and, for a respectable sum were transferred to the king, on condition that the widow might still be allowed a home in the castle. This certainly agrees with the information furnished you by Herr von Wildenrod, a person, by the way, with whom I cannot have the slightest affinity."

"But you do not know him yet. Oscar is an intellectual man, and in many respects a remarkable one."

"That may be, but a man who no sooner succeeds to the paternal inheritance than he makes haste to dispose of the family estates, at as high a price as possible, deserting the service of his fatherland, and roving around in the wide world, without any profession or occupation of any kind,--such a man inspires me with but little respect. This gypsy life on the part of these high-born drones, that wander homeless from place to place, everywhere seeking nothing but their own pleasure, revolts me to my inmost soul. I also regard the Baron as lacking greatly in delicate feeling, when he allows his young sister to share in such a life."

"He loves Cecilia with the greatest tenderness, and she has never had anybody in the world to depend on but him. Should he commit his only sister to the hands of strangers?"

"Perhaps it would have been better. When he deprives a young girl of home and family, he takes the ground from under her feet. However, she would find both here again. You love her, at all events, and if you are really sure that she reciprocates your love----"

"Otherwise would she have plighted her troth to me?" cried Eric. "I have already described to you, father, the extent to which she was idolized and courted, with the whole world at her feet, as it were. She had so many to choose from and chose me!"

"That is just what surprises me," said Dernburg, coolly. "You do not possess one of those shining qualities which girls of her claims and education covet. However, that may be--first of all, I want to get personally acquainted with Fräulein von Wildenrod and her brother. Let us invite them to Odensburg, and we shall see what will come of it. Meanwhile, I entreat that no greater publicity be given to the affair than it has already unfortunately attained."

So saying he left the room, and went into his library, which was immediately adjacent.

CHAPTER III.

["See the path is clear
To a grand career."](#)

Eric remained alone. He had thrown himself into a chair, and rested his head in his hand. The manner in which his engagement had been taken at home depressed and disenchanted him. He had not thought of the possibility of objections, expecting that his father would hail his selection with joyful approval, instead of which investigations had been entered into, and doubts and scruples suggested. His father actually seemed to entertain serious mistrust, and evidently claimed, even now, the decisive voice. The young man fired up at the thought of his petted, idolized betrothed, and her haughty brother, being first put on probation, as it were, here at Odensburg, ere they should ultimately be admitted into their family. Just here the door was opened, and he started up from his reverie.

"Egbert!" he cried, joyfully springing to his feet, and hurrying to meet a young man, who came in with outstretched hand.

"Welcome home, Eric!"

"Yes, I have been away from it a long while, so long that I am quite a stranger in it," said Eric, returning the pressure of his hand, "and we have not seen one another for an eternity."

"I, too, have been away two years in England, only returning a short time ago. But first of all, how is your health now?"

Egbert Runeck was very little older than the young heir, but he had the appearance of being more mature by some years. His *personnel* made the impression of manly vigor in the highest degree, and his tall figure towered so over Eric's, that the latter had to look up when he spoke to him. His face, tanned by exposure to sun and wind, was anything but handsome, yet there was expression and energy in every feature. His light brown hair and full beard had a slightly reddish hue, and underneath a broad and massive brow shone a pair of dark-gray eyes, that had a peculiarly cold and earnest look. The man wore the air of one who had hitherto tasted only the toils of life, neither knowing nor seeking its pleasures. Moreover, there was something harsh and arrogant in his manner, that, toned down into mildness at this moment, was nevertheless the predominant trait of his whole mien. Such an appearance might be striking--attractive it was not.

"Oh, I am perfectly well again, thank you," said Eric, in answer to the inquiry after his health. "The journey has fatigued me some, of course; I am suffering, too, from the change of climate, but this is a mere passing annoyance."

Egbert's eyes were fastened upon his friend's face, that to-day looked rather pale and pinched, and his voice, too, softened as he replied:

"Certainly, you will have to get accustomed to the North, again."

"If it were only not so hard for me!" sighed Eric. "You do not know what held me fast in the sunny South so long and so irresistibly."

"Why, I guessed the truth easily enough, from those hints in your last letters--or is it to be a secret still?"

A bright, joyous smile flitted across Eric's features, while he gently shook his head.

"Not from you, Egbert. My father does not want it known at Odensburg for the present, but I may say to you, that, under the palms of the Riviera, on the shores of the blue Mediterranean, I have found happiness, such enchanting, fairy-like happiness as I never dreamed of before. If you could only see my Cecilia, with her ravishing beauty, her winning sweetness---Ah! there it is again, that cold, mocking laugh of yours, with which you used always to set at naught any romance, any warmth of feeling, you stern Cato you, who never have known nor ever will know love."

Runeck shrugged his shoulders.

"I have had to devote all my energies to work, from earliest youth, and the romantic seldom forms a large ingredient in such a life as that. The like of us has no time for what you call love."

This reckless remark hurt the feelings of the lover, who said excitedly:

"So, love is in your estimation only a pastime for the idle? You are the same old fellow, Egbert! To be sure, you never did believe in that mysterious, overpowering force, that irresistibly draws two people together, and binds them indissolubly together."

"No!" said Egbert, with an air of cool, almost mocking, superiority. "But do not let us dispute over it. You, with your soft heart, must give and receive love,--for you it is a necessity of life. I am not made for that sort of thing--have had other aims in view from the beginning--such as do not comport with dreamt of love. The name of your betrothed is Cecilia, then?"

"Cecilia von Wildenrod. What is the matter? Do you know the name?"

Runeck had certainly started when the name was pronounced, and the glance that he cast upon the friend of his youth was a peculiarly searching one.

"I believe I have heard it somewhere before," he replied. "The talk there was of a Baron von Wildenrod."

"My future brother-in-law, I suppose," said Eric with unconcern. "He belongs to a well-known family of the ancient nobility. But, first of all, you must see my Cecilia. I have introduced her to father and sister, at least, through her portrait."

He took a rather large likeness that lay on his father's desk, and handed it to his friend. Although the photograph was faithful, it had by no means the charm of the original, but it showed what a beauty she was, and the large, dark eyes looked full at the inspector. Egbert looked down upon it silently, without uttering a word, until meeting the expectant gaze of the girl's lover, he said:

"A very beautiful girl."

The tone in which he spoke these words was peculiarly frigid, and Eric was chilled by it, too. He knew, to be sure, that his old friend was not at all susceptible to the charms of female beauty, but, notwithstanding, he had calculated upon a warmer expression of admiration. They both stood by the desk--Runeck's glance fell accidentally upon a second photograph, that likewise lay there, and again there flitted across his features the same peculiar expression as a while ago, upon the mention of that name, a sudden shiver, that lasted but for an instant.

"And this one, here, I suppose, is the brother of your betrothed?" said he. "It may be seen by the likeness."

"That is Oscar von Wildenrod certainly, but, properly speaking, there is no likeness whatever. Cecilia does not resemble her brother in the least; their features are quite different."

"But the same eyes!" said Egbert slowly, continuing to regard the two pictures fixedly; then he suddenly pushed them from him, and turned away.

"And you have not even a congratulation for me?" asked Eric reproachfully, being mortified at this indifference.

"Pardon me, I forgot it. May you be happy, as happy as you deserve to be! But I must go to your father, who is expecting me, and requires, you know, undeviating punctuality."

He evidently wanted to cut short this interview. Eric, too, remembered now what was impending, and the subject that was to be brought into discussion.

"Father is in his library," he remarked, "and you know he will not be disturbed there. He has summoned you from Radefeld----do you know why?"

"I suspect so, at least. Has he spoken to you about it?"

"Yes, and from him I heard the first word on the subject, Egbert--for heaven's sake, be on your guard. You know my father, and are aware that he will never tolerate such a bent in his works."

"In general he tolerates no other bent than his own," rejoined Egbert coldly. "He never can nor will comprehend, that the boy, who has to thank him for education and culture, has become a man, who presumes to have his own views, and go his own way."

"This way seems to diverge very widely from ours," said Eric sadly. "But you did not give me the slightest intimation of this in your letters."

"Why should I? You had to be spared and guarded against excitement, and you would not have understood me, either, Eric. You have always shunned all the questions and conflicts of the present, while I have confronted them, and, of late years, stood in the very midst of them. If, thereby, a gulf has opened between us, I cannot help it."

"Do not say between *us*, Egbert! We are friends and must remain such, let happen what will. Think you that I have forgotten to whom I owe my life? Yes, I know you do not like to be reminded of it, but it ever abides in my memory--the plunge into the ice-cold flood, the deadly anguish, when the rushing waters overwhelmed me, and then the rescue, when your arm encircled me. I did not make it easy for you; I clutched you so convulsively, that I hardly left you room to move, and put you in extreme peril. Any other would have shaken off the dangerous burden, but you did not let me go, you held me with your mighty strength, and worked your way forward until we reached the blessed shore. That was an heroic deed for a lad of sixteen years."

"It put my powers as a swimmer to a good test, that was all," answered Runeck, declining any claim to merit. "I shook the water from my clothes and was all right again, while the shock and chill brought on you an illness that well-nigh proved fatal."

He broke off, for, just now Dernburg entered with a book in his hand, and responded to the young engineer's greeting as composedly as if there was no agitating subject to be broached between them.

"You enjoy meeting after your long separation, do you not?" asked he. "You see Eric for the first time to-day--how do you find him?"

"He looks rather delicate yet, and will have to be prudent for a while longer, it seems to me," said Runeck, with a glance at his friend's pale face.

"The doctor is of the same opinion. And to-day you do look especially feeble, Eric! Go to your room, and take a good rest."

The young man looked irresolutely from one to the other. He would gladly have stayed, to interpose some soothing word between these two, if the discussion grew too hot; but his father's direction sounded very peremptory, and now Egbert, also, said in a low tone:

"Go, I implore you."

With a sensation of bitterness Eric submitted, feeling that there was something humiliating in the compassionate indulgence, and that it extended further than to his bodily condition. He had never been treated by his father as an equal, capable of independent action, and properly, not by his friend either. Now he was sent away to take his rest, which meant, that they wanted to spare him from being witness to a scene that would almost assuredly be stormy, and he--he, indeed, allowed himself to be thus dismissed, depressingly conscious that his presence would be superfluous and useless!

The other two found themselves alone. Dernburg had seated himself, and again taken in hand the drawings of the Radefeld aqueduct, that he once more proceeded to inspect.

"I have decided upon carrying out your plan. Egbert," said he. "It is the best of all laid before me, and solves all the difficulties in an astonishing manner. I have to consider further on a single point; but, taken as a whole, the plan is excellent, and it is to be carried into effect forthwith. Will you undertake its superintendence? I offer you the appointment."

The young engineer seemed to be surprised; he had probably expected a totally different introduction; unmistakable satisfaction was depicted upon his features, at this recognition, emanating from his chief, who was usually so chary with his praise.

"Very gladly," replied he; "but this much I know, the chief-engineer has the affair already in hand. I was commissioned by him to attend to the outworks."

"But if I now decide differently, the chief-engineer has nothing to do but to submit;" declared Dernburg emphatically. "It depends only upon yourself, whether you shall undertake the execution of your own plan, and, in this regard, there is certainly another matter to be discussed and cleared up first."

So far he had spoken in a calm, business-like tone, but Egbert was sufficiently prepared; he knew what subject was now to be introduced, and yet he obviously did not shrink. The transient mildness that he had manifested awhile ago in conversation with Eric had long since vanished, and the stolid and determined in his character stood forth undisguised, as he now firmly met the dark looks of his chief.

"I have long since remarked that you had come back a changed man," resumed Dernburg; "in many respects this was to have been expected. You were three years in Berlin, and two in England, where your sphere of observation was broadened; indeed, I sent you out into the world, that you might see and judge for yourself. But now things have come to my ears, concerning which I must apply to you for more exact information. I do not like long circumlocution, so briefly and clearly: is it true that you constantly associate with the socialists in our town, that you publicly own yourself to be one of them, and that you are upon very intimate terms with that Landsfeld, their leader? Yes, or no?"

"Yes," said Egbert simply.

Dernburg did not seem to have expected so reckless a confession. He frowned still more darkly.

"Really! And do you say that so composedly to my face?"

"Am I to deny the truth?"

"And since when have you been a member of that party?"

"For four years."

"The thing started, then, in Berlin: I thought as much. And you have actually allowed yourself to be thus ensnared. To be sure you were very young and inexperienced, but still I would have expected you to be wiser."

One could see that the young man was wounded by the manner in which he was spoken to. Calmly, but with sharper intonation, he replied: "Those are *your* views, Herr Dernburg; I regret that mine differ from them."

"And it is not for me to disturb myself about them, you think," supplemented Dernburg. "There you are mistaken, though. I do concern myself about the political opinions of my employés. But I do not condescend to enter into explanations with them. Whoever does not like Odenburg can quit. I force nobody to stay; but he who does remain has to submit absolutely to its regulations. Either----or! There is no third way here."

"Then I shall be obliged to choose that 'or,'" said Egbert coldly.

"Will it be so easy for you to leave us?"

The young man looked down moodily.

"I am in your debt, Herr Dernburg, I know it----"

"That you are not! If I have given you education and culture, you have saved my Eric for me; but for you I should have lost my only son. So far as that goes, we are quits, if we propose to balance accounts on a purely business basis. If that is what you propose, speak out openly, and we are done with each other."

"You do me injustice," said Runeck, with suppressed emotion. "It is hard enough for me thus to oppose you."

"Well, who forces you to do so? Only those wild ideas, that have run away with you so. Do you think it is an easy thing for me to give you up? Be reasonable, Egbert. It is not your chief who speaks to you--he would have long since cut the matter short! But for years you have been almost a child of my house."

The half-fatherly, half-masterful tone entirely missed its aim. The young engineer, with arrogant self-assertion, raised his head, as he answered:

"I *am* possessed by those 'wild ideas,' and stick to them. There comes a time when the boy becomes of age, and I reached this state when out in the world, and I cannot go back to the irresponsibility of boyhood. Whatever you demand of the engineer, the official, shall be done to the best of my ability. The blind subjection that you demand of the man, I cannot and *will* not take upon myself. I must have free course in life."

"Which you have not with me?" asked Dernburg in an irritated tone.

"No!" said Egbert firmly. "You are a father to your subordinates so long as they submit themselves unquestioningly, but in Odensburg they recognize only one law--viz., your will. The director yields just as unconditionally as does the lowest laborer; no one has an opinion of his own at your works, or ever will have, so long as you are at the head of things."

"Those are pretty things, to be sure, that you attribute to me," said Dernburg fiercely. "You say, plainly, that I am a tyrant. You, to be sure, have always been allowed to take more liberties than all the rest put together--have done so, candidly, too. You never were passively obedient, nor was such a thing required of you, either, for we'll talk of that later. Free course! There again is one of your catch-words. With you, all is to be down, all, and then you will have free course--to destruction."

He had risen to his feet, and walked to and fro several times, like a person trying to compose himself, then he paused in front of the young man, and said with bitter scorn:

"In spite of your youth, you seem to have quite a significant part to play in your party. They make no secret of setting the greatest hopes upon you, and seeing in you one of their future leaders. Those people are not so stupid as some suppose; they know their men, and with less attractive bait would not have caught you."

"Herr Dernburg!" exclaimed Runeck, "do you believe me capable of low calculation?"

"No, but of ambition!" said the older man coldly. "You may not acknowledge to yourself what has driven you into those ranks, but I will tell you how it is: to be a clever engineer, and gradually work one's way up to be chief-engineer, is an honorable career, but much too modest a one for a man of a disposition like yours. To guide thousands by a word, a nod; to fling forth burning words in the Reichstag, such as the whole country shall hear; to be lifted upon a shield, like a conqueror, that is power, that would charm you. Do not contradict me, Egbert; with my experience I see farther than you do--in ten years let us talk together again!"

Whether the words hit home was not to be decided. Runeck stood there with lowering brow and compressed lips, but replied by not a syllable.

"Well, I suppose my Odensburg will have to do without you, meanwhile," began Dernburg again. "I am master here and suffer no rival rule, whether open or secret; tell that to your party-comrades, if they should not know it already. But what was your idea, when you came back to me with such views? You knew me! Why did you not stay in Berlin, or England, and send your challenge from there?"

Again Egbert made no answer, but this was not the defiant silence of a while ago, in which lay ten contradictions; now his eye sought the ground, and a deep blush slowly mantled his cheeks and brow. Dernburg saw this, and his countenance, just before so dark, brightened up, and there was even a slight smile upon it, as he continued in a milder tone:

"Well, we shall suppose that it was attachment for me and my family. Eric and Maia are as devoted to you as if they were your own brother and sister. Yes, ere you are completely lost to us, you are to know what you resign, and what a future you slight for the sake of your mad schemes."

Runeck gave him a questioning glance; he evidently did not guess whither the words tended.

"You mean----"

"I mean Eric's health, which still costs me constant solicitude. Even if danger to his life has

been averted for the present, he has not come back from the south cured. He will always need to be spared exertion, and can never perform the duties of an able-bodied man; moreover, he is of a soft, dependent nature, accessible to influences of all sorts. I cannot conceal from myself the fact that he is not qualified to fill the position that one day will be his, and I want, after my eyes are closed, to be assured of the perpetuity of the enterprise that I have established, and this assurance I can only have if it is left in powerful hands. Nominally, Eric will be my successor; virtually, it must be some one else--and for this I had calculated upon you, Egbert."

Egbert started, and there was stamped upon his features a surprise that was almost painful.

"On me! I am to----"

"Some day guide the reins at Odenburg, when they shall drop from my hands," said Dernburg, finishing his sentence for him. "Of all that I have reared in my school, only one is of the right stuff for it, and now he will scatter to the winds all my plans for the future. My Maia is still half a child, and I cannot foresee whether her future husband will be fitted for such a position, ardently as I desire it. I am not of the number of those fools who buy for their daughters the title of some count or baron; I care only for the man, no matter what station he occupies, and from what stock he springs, provided that he has secured the affections of my child."

He said all this slowly and with full emphasis.

That was a dazzling promise, which, although unspoken, yet loomed up plainly enough before the young man, and which he comprehended only too well. His lips quivered, impulsively he drew one step nearer, and said with suppressed emotion:

"Herr Dernburg--send me away!"

Now a smile relaxed Dernburg's features, and he laid his hand upon the shoulder of the agitated young man.

"No, my boy, I'll do no such thing. We must both make one more trial at getting along together. First of all, take charge of the Radefeld aqueduct. I'll see that you are left perfectly untrammelled. If we call in all available forces, we can finish by the autumn. Will you take hold?"

Egbert was evidently battling with himself. A few seconds elapsed ere he answered; then he said in a low tone:

"Herr Dernburg, it is a risk--for both of us!"

"Possibly, but I'll adventure it with you, and I think that there is no such haste about your making the people happy, that you cannot ponder the matter for a few months longer. Meanwhile, we declare a truce. And now, go to Eric! I know he is dreadfully anxious as to the result of our conversation, and Maia, too, will be rejoiced to see you again, for you are always out at Radefeld these days. But to-day you are not going to drive out until evening, and must dine with us. Done!"

He held out his hand, and Egbert silently laid his own within it. It was plain to see what an effect the goodness of the usually stern, unyielding man had had upon him, and, more yet, perhaps, the recognition of what he was worth to the man who thus spoke to him. Dernburg had adopted the right remedy, the only one that was of avail here. He required no promise and no sacrifice, both of which would have been rejected, but he showed implicit confidence in his unruly favorite, and in so doing disarmed him.

CHAPTER IV.

ODENBURG MANOR.

The Dernburg iron and steel works had a worldwide reputation, and could compare, indeed, with the greatest undertakings of this sort in the old as well as in the new world.

Odenburg was situated in a wooded valley between mountains, the chief wealth of which consisted in its inexhaustible mines, and, a generation before, the father of the present proprietor had established here a plain foundry and iron factory, that kept growing as the years went by. But it had only assumed its present truly vast proportions under his son, who really created the present works, that were upon an astonishingly vast scale. He had gradually bought in all the mines and forges of the region round about, absorbing also all the labor at command, and giving

to his undertakings an expansion that controlled the industrial life of the whole province.

It required, indeed, an unusual amount of energy to devise such an enterprise, and then carry it on to success, but Dernburg was equal to the occasion. He had a whole array of engineers, technicians, and administrative officials; but the director, like the humblest workman, knew that all the reins joined in the master's hand, who decided everything important for himself. This master had the character of being stern and unbending, but likewise just, and if he was conscious of the whole power of his position, he had an equally high idea of its duties.

The accommodations that he provided for his workmen were on a scale commensurate with the other departments of his works, and were everywhere pronounced to be the most excellent conceivable. They were only possible for a man who had millions at his disposal, and was not stingy with his wealth, when the welfare of his subordinates was in question.

But in return for this, Dernburg demanded complete subjection to his will, and planted himself like a rock against the advent of modern ideas, such as that every individual has the right to follow his own convictions. At Odensburg, strikes, rebellion, and conflicts, such as are so common in other industrial establishments, were things unknown. It was well understood that nothing was to be gotten out of the chief by force, and, with their situations, the people well knew they lost certain provision, in the future, for themselves and their families,—thus all those incitements to insubordination, that were not lacking here either, failed to get foothold, and even if they were listened to here and there, came to nothing so far as actions were concerned.

And yet this man, who was the very embodiment of strength, had an only son for whose life he had perpetually to tremble. From his very infancy Eric had been puny and delicate, and that fall into the water, caused by his own imprudence, brought on him a dangerous illness, that lasted for months. He recovered, it is true, but could never again be called a well man, and two years before so significant a symptom as hemorrhage from the lungs had appeared, which necessitated his speedy removal from the harsh climate of home, and a long sojourn in the South.

The peculiar relation in which the youth who had saved Eric's life stood to the Dernburg family, had always been a matter of surprise in the village, and to many of envy as well. Egbert Runeck, the son of a workman employed in the foundry, had passed his early boyhood amid the plainest surroundings, and continued to move in the same sphere as his parents, until nearly grown. If, nevertheless, he learned more than any of his companions of the same age, he had, in the first place, to thank the excellent schools, which Dernburg had established for the children of his employes, and upon which he lavished uncommon care. The rarely endowed boy, with his unflagging diligence, had already, in earlier days, attracted the chief's attention, but after he had saved the life of his only son his future was decided. He shared Eric's lessons, was treated almost as a member of the family, and was finally sent to Berlin for the completion of his education.

The Manor-house lay quite apart from the works, on an eminence that commanded the whole valley. It was an imposing edifice, built in good style, with a broad terrace, long rows of windows, and a great covered piazza in front, the roof of which was supported upon columns. Dotted here and there, ever the broad expanse of lawn and park, were monarchs of the forest that had been spared in clearing, the long line of wooded hills in the rear, with their grand old trees, forming an extremely effective background for the picture. It was a fair and stately abode, that might well have merited the name of castle, but Dernburg did not like it at all when they applied that designation to it, and so it was called in the end as in the beginning, "Odensburg Manor."

The family were accustomed to spend the greatest part of the year here, although Dernburg possessed several other estates that were more beautifully situated, and he also had a residence in Berlin. But he never went to the capital, unless his duty as a member of the diet called him there; for the most part, too, he only paid short and flying visits to his other estates. Odensburg needed the master's hand and eye, and was it not the creation of his own brain? Upon this ground he was unlimited ruler; here his will alone held sway; here much could be won or lost; and therefore it had been and continued to be his favorite abode.

There was as little to be found fault with in the family-life of the Dernburgs as in their outward surroundings. He and his gentle, shrinking wife, had been a model married couple, she being in perfect subjection to her domineering husband. Now his only sister, the widowed Frau von Ringstedt took the part of lady of the house. She had lived with her brother for a good many years, and tried to make up to his children for the loss of their mother, who had died young.

It was towards the end of April, but the weather was still cold and uncomfortable. In the South, for two months already Spring had gladdened the earth with her wealth of bloom, but here, at the North, buds and leaves even now hardly dared to burst their sheaths, and a gray, cloud-covered sky spanned the somber, dark green foliage of the fir-trees.

Guests were expected at the Manor to-day. The curtains to the guest-chambers of the upper story were put far back, and the little parlor belonging to that suite of rooms had a festal air. Everywhere bloomed flowers, dispensing their sweet odors around; sweet, bright-hued children of Spring, that to be sure, even now had to be grown in hot-houses, decorated in lavish profusion the room evidently destined for a lady.

Two ladies were in it at this very moment, also. One, the younger, was amusing herself with

teasing a little, soft, white Spitz dog, that she incessantly egged on to bark and jump, while the other lady surveyed the parlor with a critical eye, here straightening a chair, there pushing a curtain back, and once more arranging the pretty writing-materials on the desk.

"Must you always have that pug about you, Maia?" said she discontentedly. "He puts everything out of order, and just now came very near dragging off the table the vase of flowers as well as the cloth."

"I did lock him up, but he got out and ran after me," cried Maia. "Down, Puck. You must be good. Miss Friedberg says positively you must."

She laughingly called him, and, at the same time, cut at the little beast, with her pocket handkerchief, that, of course tried to catch hold of the handkerchief with loud barking. Miss Friedberg shuddered nervously and heaved a sigh.

"And do you call these the manners of a grown-up young lady! I felt obliged recently to complain to Herr Dernburg, and tell him that nothing was to be done with you. You will not be anything but the veriest child, and, if possible, exceed Puck himself in playing all manner of monkey-tricks. Tell me, if you ever intend to be earnest and rational?"

"Not for a long while, I hope," declared Maia. "Everything is so horribly earnest and rational at Odensburg already. Papa, aunt, you, Miss Leona, and lately Eric has been intolerable, too, sighing and longing after his lady-love from morning to night. And am I, too, to be made rational? But we do not like that, do we, Puck? We, at least, want to be merry." And so saying, she seized Puck by the fore-paws, and made him dance on his hind-legs, although he gave unmistakable signs of displeasure.

Maia Dernburg, who objected so emphatically to being rational, was evidently in the first bloom of young girlhood, not being a day over seventeen years of age. She was one of those creatures, at sight of whom the heart bounds, and who gladden the beholder as does bright sunshine. Her lovely face, that bore only a very remote likeness to her brother, beamed in the rosy freshness of youth and health, and her beautiful brown eyes had nothing mysterious about them like Eric's. They shone clear and bright, dimmed by no shadow in the world. Her fair hair, that glistened like gold, when the sun's rays struck it, only confined by a ribbon, fell in rich curls over her shoulders, while a few tiny ringlets, that would not submit to be bound, enhanced greatly the beauty of her brow. Her features were still half child-like, and the delicate, pretty figure had apparently not yet attained its full height; but this very thing gave to the young girl an unspeakable charm.

Miss Leona Friedberg, the governess of the young daughter of the house, who still filled an office that was by no means a sinecure, although, properly speaking, Maia's education was finished, was about five-and-thirty years old, and, although no longer young, had an attractive appearance: a slight, delicate form, with dark hair and eyes and a somewhat languid expression upon the pale but pleasant features. She responded to the rash remark of her pupil with a shrug of the shoulders, and then cast a searching look through the room.

"There, now we are ready! But you have been too extravagant with your flowers; Maia, the perfume is almost intoxicating."

"Oh! a promised bride must have flowers showered upon her! Cecilia is to find her future home beautiful, and flowers are the only things, with which we can welcome her. Papa will not hear of a grand reception taking place."

"Of course, since the betrothal is to be publicly announced first from here."

"And then there is to be a betrothal-party and a grand, grand wedding!" shouted Maia. "Oh! I am so curious to see Eric's betrothed. She must be beautiful, very beautiful. Eric is continually raving over her to me; but he does behave so comically as a love-sick swain. He never has a bright day now, because he is always dreaming of his Cecilia. Sometimes papa gets seriously vexed over it, and yesterday he said to me: 'You will behave more sensibly, my little Maia, when you are engaged, will you not?' Of course I shall: I'll be a model of good sense, I will!"

And to prove this incontestably, she took Puck in her arms, and whirled about the room with him, like a spinning-top.

"Oh yes! that is very likely!" cried Miss Leona, indignantly. "Maia, once more, I beseech you not to behave like a wild tom-boy, when your new connections come. What are the Baroness Wildenrod and her brother to think of your bringing-up, if they see a young lady almost seventeen years old behaving in that wild, hoydenish manner."

Maia, meanwhile, had finished her round dance and let loose her Puck, and now seated herself in a ceremonious manner, before her governess.

"I shall behave so as to satisfy the most fastidious, for I know the points thoroughly. Miss Wilson she tutored me: that English governess, you know, with the sallow face, turned-up nose, and no end of learning--do not look so provoked, Miss Leona, I am not talking about you!--Miss Wilson was really very tiresome, but I learned to curtsy as they do at court from her anyhow,

look, so!" She made a low and solemn reverence. "You see I shall make an impression upon my future sister-in-law with my fine manners, and then I shall fall upon her neck and kiss her so and so;" and with this she overwhelmed the unsuspecting lady with impetuous caresses.

"But, Maia, you will choke me to death," cried the horrified lady, freeing herself with some difficulty. "Why, dear me, it is striking twelve already! We must go down. I shall only cast one more glance into the chamber, to see if all there is in order."

She left the parlor, and Maia fluttered down the steps like a butterfly, Puck bounding after her, as a matter of course. The dwelling-rooms of the family were in the lower story; there the large reception hall was likewise decorated, in honor of the expected guests with tall laurel, and orange-trees and the whole flora, of the hot-houses. There stood a young man, who seemed to be waiting for somebody, who, upon seeing the young lady of the house, made a very low and reverential bow. Maia bestowed upon him a casual nod.

"Good-day, Herr Hagenbach. Is the doctor here too?"

"He is, and at your service, Miss Dernburg," answered the person interrogated, with a second bow just as low. "My uncle is with your father, laying before him the week's report of the infirmary, and I-I am waiting here for him--with your most gracious permission."

"Oh, yes, you have my permission," said Maia, highly amused at this overstrained reverence, while Puck eyed, with somewhat critical glances, the stranger whose plaid pantaloons seemed to excite his displeasure.

Herr Hagenbach was a very young man, with exceedingly light hair, and exceedingly pale blue eyes, and a timid, awkward gait. The meeting evidently threw him into great embarrassment, for he reddened and stammered considerably. Nevertheless, he seemed to feel the necessity of showing himself versed in the usages of society, for several times he made the effort to speak in vain, and finally succeeded in getting out the words:

"May--may I venture to ask after your health, Miss Dernburg?"

"I thank you, my health is perfectly good," answered Maia, the corners of whose mouth began to twitch.

"I am exceedingly glad to hear it," asseverated the young man. He had really purposed to say something else, something intellectual, important, but nothing, alas! occurred to him, and so he continued:

"I cannot tell you how delighted I am to hear it, and I hope Madam von Ringstedt is well, too."

Maia, with difficulty suppressed a laugh, while she answered his question in the affirmative. Herr Hagenbach, who was still on his vain chase after the witty remark, meanwhile persisting convulsively in inquiring after the health of every member of the family, then asked for the third time: "And young Herr Dernburg----"

"Has gone to the railroad station," wound up Maia, who could no longer restrain her merriment. "You may be easy as to the condition of my brother, however, and of my father, as well--the whole family thank you for your extraordinary kindness in asking after our health."

Herr Hagenbach's embarrassment increased perceptibly. In his confusion he bowed down before Puck, who was still devoting his attention to the plaid pantaloons, and tried to stroke him, while he remarked: "What a dear little doggie!"

The dear little doggie, however, showed himself very unappreciative of this caress, and darted, with a loud bark, at the legs of the young man who jumped back, but Puck sprang after and stuck his teeth into the gay trousers. The person attacked, who did not dare to drive away the young lady's dog, took refuge behind the tub of flowers, at his heels his pursuer, who now aimed his attack at his legs, while Maia, instead of calling off the dog, was highly amused at the scene.

Fortunately help now came from a different direction. Out of the door leading to Dernburg's apartments, stepped an elderly gentleman, who, without further ceremony, seized the still yelping Spitz by the nape of his woolly neck, and lifted him up, while he said fretfully,

"Why did you not defend yourself, Dagobert? Were you going to let him tear your pantaloons off you? Puck is such an artful little rascal!"

Dagobert, all out of breath, stood under a laurel-tree, looking greatly relieved--and now Maia also came forward.

"Let go the evil-doer, do, Dr. Hagenbach. There would really have been no risk to your nephew's life. In the whole course of the one year of Puck's life he has never torn a single man to pieces."

"It is enough to make a dead-set at pantaloons, especially when they are such magnificent ones as the pair that has just been imperiled," answered Doctor Hagenbach pleasantly, as he set

down the tiny, struggling creature. "A good-day to you, Miss Maia! No need to ask after your health, I perceive."

"No, indeed, it has certainly been sufficiently asked after, for one day," protested the young lady, with a saucy look at Dagobert. She took her little dog upon her arm and caused it to make a comical bow.

"Beg pardon, Puck, and promise that you will not do it again. Good-morning, gentlemen, I must go to papa as fast as ever I can." And with a careless salutation she flew off to her father's rooms.

Dr. Hagenbach, the surgeon for the works and Dernburg family-physician, was a man of forty-five or forty-six years, whose hair already began to be tinged with gray here and there, and whose figure tended to rather too much fullness, was, on the whole a fine-looking man, the perfect counterpart of the nephew to whom he now turned.

"You have played the part of a veritable hero, to be sure!" mocked he. "That ungovernable little thing only wanted to play, and you to run away!"

"I did not want to treat the young lady's pet roughly," explained Dagobert, solicitously examining his pantaloons, that fortunately had not been damaged. The uncle silently shrugged his shoulders.

"We shall hardly be able to make the visit to-day to Miss Friedberg," said he then. "As I just learned, they are expecting the party from Nice in about an hour, and the whole house is upset, preparing to receive them. But since we are here, I'll make the attempt, anyhow, to speak with the lady; you meanwhile can be recovering composure, both as to the outward and inner man."

He mounted the stairs, and at the top met the governess, who had just come out of the parlor. Almost daily she saw the doctor, who, for long years, had stood upon a very friendly footing with the Dernburg family, nevertheless, there was a perceptible reserve in her manner as she returned his greeting. Hagenbach seemed not to remark this, he asked lightly after her health, listening in the same way to her answer, and then said:

"I had an especial reason for calling upon you, Miss Friedberg. The time is badly chosen, it is true, for apparently you, too, are engrossed by the coming reception of the expected guests, but my request can be made in a few minutes, so permit me to lay it before you, just as we stand."

"You have a request to make of me?" asked Leona, with cool surprise. "Actually?"

"You think I can do nothing but give orders and write prescriptions, I suppose. Yes, Miss Friedberg, it is the physician's right, he must preserve his authority under all circumstances, especially when he has to do with so-called *nervous* patients."

He emphasized the word, in a way that evidently provoked his hearer, for she replied tartly:

"Why, I believe your authority remains undisputed, security is given for that by your very considerate manner of ensuring obedience."

"Even as-I know patients upon whom all love's labors are lost," replied Hagenbach composedly. "But-now to the errand that brought me here. You know my nephew, who has been three weeks at Odenburg?"

"Yes, indeed, your brother's son. The young man has no longer any parents?"

"No, he is a double orphan, and I am his guardian, having, indeed, to charge myself entirely with his future, for his parents were so unmindful of their duty as not to leave him a single penny. They thought very likely that I, as a confirmed old bachelor, might need an heir."

Leona's countenance plainly betrayed that she thought this mode of expressing himself very indelicate; the doctor saw this, too, but disturbed himself not in the least about it, but continued in the same tone:

"Dagobert has gone through the gymnasium, and also passed the examination for admission to college, with much groaning, to be sure, for he is not a specially clear-headed fellow. Now he looks wretchedly from sitting so steadily at his books and drudging. Only think, the fellow is nervous, too, or at least fancies himself to be so, therefore I have undertaken to cure him. I'll teach him to forget that he has nerves."

"Then I only hope the young man will survive the cure," said the lady sharply. "You love heroic measures, doctor?"

"When they are in place, certainly. As for the rest I shall not put an end to my nephew, as you seem to fear. He is to spend the summer over here and take a good rest ere he enters the high school. If the fellow has nothing at all to do, he will fall into folly of various kinds, so he may as well learn a little about languages, modern languages I mean. They have drilled him sufficiently in Latin and Greek, but he seems to know very little French and English, and so I wanted to inquire if you would give him a little help in this, you speak both fluently, I hear."

"If Mr. Dernburg has no objection----"

"Mr. Dernburg is agreed. I have just spoken with him on the subject--the only question is, whether you are willing. I know, indeed, that I am not much in your favor----"

"Pray do not go on, doctor," coolly interposed the lady. "I am very glad that you give me an opportunity to prove my gratitude for the medical advice that you have given me several times."

"Yes, in your 'nervous' attacks. Very well, the matter's settled. Dagobert, boy, where are you hiding? Come up!" He shouted these last words down the steps in a very peremptory tone.

Leona fairly shrank and said disapprovingly: "You treat the young man exactly as if he were a schoolboy."

"Am I to put on more than usual ceremony with the youth? He would evidently like to take the part of a man in society--and at the same time he blushes and stammers as soon as he addresses a stranger. Well, there you are, Dagobert! This lady is going to have the goodness to take you as a pupil. Return your thanks!"

Again Dagobert made an uncommonly low and reverential bow--he seemed to have made a regular study of it--again blushed and began:

"I am very grateful to the lady--I am perfectly delighted--I cannot begin to say, how glad I am---" There he stuck fast, but Leona came to the help of his embarrassment, and turned to him kindly:

"I am not going to be a strict teacher, and I think we shall get on nicely together, Herr Hagenbach."

"Call him simply 'Dagobert,'" interrupted the doctor in his reckless way. "He has such an odd name though."

"Have you any objection to make to his name. I think it very pretty."

"I am not at all of that way of thinking," declared Hagenbach, without observing the deeply injured mien of his nephew. "By rights, he should have been named Peter, for that is my name, and I am his godfather. But that was not poetical enough for my sister-in-law, and so she fell upon Dagobert. Dagobert Hagenbach--there is a jaw-breaker for you!"

A smile, unmistakably derisive, played about Leona's lips, as she replied: "In that case your sister-in-law was undoubtedly right. The name Peter has not only poetry opposed to it."

"What objection have you to make to it?" cried the doctor irritably, while he straightened himself up, ready for combat. "Peter is a good name, a famous name, a Bible name. I should think the Apostle Peter would have been a fine enough man."

"But, you have only the quarrelsomeness of the Apostle--nothing else," remarked Leona cheerfully. "So, Herr Hagenbach, I shall look for you to-morrow afternoon, when we shall settle upon the time and plan of instruction. It will give me pleasure to push you forward as much as possible."

The shy Dagobert seemed very agreeably touched by this friendliness, and had just begun again to assure her that he was extremely glad, etc., when his uncle interposed, in a highly ungracious mood:

"We have detained the lady long enough. Come, Dagobert, else we'll be caught, and figure as unbidden guests at the family reunion."

So saying, he and his nephew took their leave. As they went downstairs the latter adventured the remark: "Fräulein Friedberg is a very amiable lady."

"But nervous and eccentric," growled Hagenbach. "Cannot bear the name Peter. Why not, I wonder? Had your lamented parents baptized you Peter, you would have been another sort of a fellow! But so, you look like a girl with the green-sickness, that was dubbed Dagobert by mistake!"

He placed a very contemptuous emphasis upon the name. Meanwhile, they had left the house, and now emerged upon the terrace, where they met Egbert Runeck. The doctor was for passing him by with a short, very formal salutation, but the young engineer stood still and said:

"I have just been to your house, doctor, to solicit your help. One of my workmen, through heedlessness, has come by a hurt. It is not dangerous, so far as I can judge, but medical aid is necessary. I have brought him to Odenburg and left him in the hospital. Let me commend him to your particular attention."

"I shall see after him immediately," replied Hagenbach. "Are you on your way to the Manor, Herr Runeck? They are just now expecting the party from Nice, and Herr Dernburg will hardly---"

"I know," interposed Runeck. "It was on that very account that I came in from Radefeld. Good-morning, doctor!" He bowed and went on his way. Hagenbach looked after him, then struck his cane hard upon the ground, and said in a low tone:

"That is going it strong!"

"Did you notice, uncle, that he wore a dress-suit under his overcoat," remarked Dagobert. "He is specially invited."

"It would really seem so!" ejaculated the doctor wrathfully. "Invited too, to this reception, which was to be strictly confined to the limits of the family circle.--Strange things happen at Odenburg!"

"And all Odenburg is talking about it too," said Dagobert, under his breath, looking cautiously around. "There is only one voice of fault-finding and regret over this incredible weakness of Herr Dernburg, for----"

"What do you know about it, saucebox?" continued the doctor. "At Odenburg nobody either finds fault with the chief or presumes to regret what he does--they simply obey him. Herr Dernburg always knows what he is about, and is not going to make any mistake in this case, either, unless his *protégé* should, perchance, disappoint him. He too is one bent on having his own way, like his lord and master, and when steel and stone meet there are sparks. But, now, make haste and get home, for I must be seeing after the Radefeld workman."

So saying, he took the path to the infirmary, and dismissed his nephew, who was evidently rejoiced to be rid of his tyrannical uncle.

CHAPTER V.

A VICTORY WON.

Runeck had gone into the house and there met Miss Friedberg, who was just coming downstairs. Here, too, his salutation was not exactly received with cordiality, and the young lady drew three steps back and cast a pleading look around, which, in response, brought a somewhat derisive smile to the lips of the young engineer, as, with the greatest possible politeness, he inquired whether Herr Dernburg was in his office.

The lady was saved an answer, for, at that instant the door opened and Dernburg himself appeared with his daughter, who immediately came forward to meet Runeck and greeted him with the most unaffected cordiality.

"Is that you at last, Egbert? We thought you would miss the reception, we are expecting the carriage every minute."

"I was detained by an accident," answered Egbert, "and moreover had to drive very slowly, since I had a wounded man with me, else I should have been here long ago."

He stepped up to Dernburg and reported the case to him; while Miss Friedberg, who had looked on with real horror at Maia's friendliness with the engineer, now whispered to her pupil:

"But, Maia, what unbecoming familiarity--you are no longer a child now! How often have I implored you to remember your years and your position. Must I really have to appeal to your father's authority?"

Maia paid no heed to this lecture, not the first one which had been delivered to her on this subject, but waited impatiently until Runeck had gotten through with his report. Dernburg had himself accurately informed as to the nature of the hurt, and seemed satisfied when he heard that it was not dangerous, and that the surgeon had already been called in; finally he let Egbert off, who now turned to the young girl.

"You hear, Miss Maia, it was not my fault that I am late, so you must not be angry with me for it."

"I am very angry with you, though, for insisting upon calling me 'Miss,' as long as we have lived in the same house!" cried Maia, seeming to be highly wrought up. "I'll not stand it, Egbert, do you hear, I will not, indeed."

She stamped her little foot and pouted charmingly, while her governess darted a shocked glance at the master of the house. It was high time for him to interpose his authority, since hers had failed so ignominiously. But Dernburg appeared not at all to share her sentiments, for he said with perfect composure:

"Well, if Maia insists upon it, you must let her have her way, Egbert! You are one of our family, you know."

Miss Friedberg did not trust her own ears--the permission of such a liberty appeared so monstrous to her, that she gathered up her forces for resistance.

"Herr Dernburg, I think----"

"What, Miss Friedberg?"

His question was only a short one, spoken quite composedly, but the governess instantly lost her desire to continue her opposition.

"I think that we had better station a servant on the terrace to let us know the moment the young gentleman's carriage comes in sight."

"You are right, pray give orders to that effect," said Dernburg: "but I think we had better go in now, for Eric may be belated likewise."

He moved towards the parlor, Maia with him, but she archly looked back over her shoulder.

"You have heard your orders, Master Engineer Runeck, and you are to obey on the spot, I tell you!"

There was such a pretty playfulness in her tone and gesture, that even the grave Egbert was thawed by it, and answered with pleasant raillery.

Maia was as full of glee as a child over this victory, that put so effectually to flight the shy reserve of this friend of her youth, and Dernburg smiled at it. There was an expression of tenderness rarely seen upon his stern features, as he looked upon the bright and lovely creature at his side. It was plain to see that Maia was his favorite, and that she was closer to his heart than her brother.

The patience of the expectant group was not put to too severe a test, for they had hardly waited a quarter of an hour, before the announcement was made that the carriage was in sight, and the grand folding-doors of the entrance hall were flung wide open. There stood Dernburg with his sister, a dignified old lady rather stiff in her bearing, Maia at their side, all joy and expectation, while Egbert and the governess stayed back in the house.

Now the carriage approached, a half-covered landau drawn by a magnificent pair of bays, and halted in front of the terrace. The servant opened the carriage-door. Eric was the first to jump out and help his betrothed to alight, while behind them the tall form of the Baron became visible.

Dernburg had taken one step forward and stood erect on the threshold of his house. His demeanor betrayed all the pride of the commoner about to receive the youthful representative of a long line of noble ancestry, all the self-satisfaction of a man who has climbed aloft through the exertion of his individual force. It was he, who did an honor to the Baroness Wildenrod, when he received her into the bosom of his family.

Cecilia bowed lightly, with the grace peculiar to her, when Eric presented her to his father. She had thrown back her veil and now lifted her eyes to that stern countenance, which, however, had no terrors for her. She knew too well the witchery of her own presence, and here too it failed not of its effect. Youth and beauty make easy conquest of even cold and critical age. To be sure Dernburg's glance for a few seconds, scrutinized her features keenly and questioningly, but then he stooped down and kissed her brow.

"Welcome to my house, my dear," said he, earnestly, but kindly.

Eric secretly drew a breath of relief. With those words his father's opposition was given up. Cecilia had been received and recognized by him as a daughter: here, too, she had conquered by her mere appearance! He recognized this with joyful pride.

Frau von Ringstedt followed her brother's example and welcomed the young Baroness with simple cordiality. Wildenrod, meanwhile, exchanged greetings with the master of the house, while Maia was wholly taken up with admiration of her beautiful sister that was to be. She forgot entirely the courtesy, that she had practiced so dutifully, and, instead, impetuously threw her arms around her neck, with the exclamation:

"Oh, Cecilia, I never imagined that you were so beautiful!"

Cecilia smiled, accustomed as she was to compliments and flattery of all sorts, nevertheless, this artless, childish confession delighted her, and with a gush of real tenderness she kissed "that sweet little Maia," of whom she had heard Eric talk so much.

"You have showered so many kind attentions upon my sister, dear young lady," suddenly said a deep but sonorous voice, "that I indulge the hope that I too may obtain a friendly greeting."

Maia turned around and looked into a pair of deep, dark eyes, that rested upon her countenance, with an expression that affected her strangely, almost painfully, and yet she felt that there was admiration written there. Yet she shrank from that gaze with a slight shudder, something like a bodeful feeling of dread taking hold upon her, and her voice had not its usual joyous, saucy sound, when she replied, half interrogatively:

"Herr von Wildenrod?"

"Yes, it is Oscar von Wildenrod, who begs to be allowed to shake hands with the young lady of the house."

There was some reproof implied in these words. It was very true that Maia had not yet offered her hand to this man, who was soon to be a connection of the family, but now she extended it with hesitation, and a timidity that was something entirely new to her. Wildenrod stooped down and pressed his lips to it. This was but a common piece of courtesy, and yet the young girl trembled at the contact, while her eyes were spell-bound at the same time, by that gaze which seemed to exercise a mysterious charm upon her.

Dernburg now offered his arm to the young Baroness, to escort her in, the Baron stepped up to Frau von Ringstedt, while Maia, with a quick movement, took her brother's arm. Eric was in the happiest of moods, and pressed gratefully and tenderly the hand of the sister, who had received his betrothed with so much affection.

"Does Cecilia please you, then?" he asked. "Have I told you too much about her?"

"Oh, no, she is far, far prettier than her picture. She is just my idea of the princess in a fairy tale."

"And what do you think of my future brother-in-law? A chivalrous looking fellow, is he not, although he is far from being young?"

"I do not know," said Maia, slowly and reflectively. "He has such singular eyes--so deep and dark--almost evil-looking."

"Little simpleton, I verily believe you are afraid of him," laughed Eric. "That does not look like our high-spirited little Maia, and Oscar will not be much edified by this first impression of his character. But you must get better acquainted with him first; he is excellent company, and a really brilliant conversationalist."

Maia did not answer forthwith. Afraid? Why, yes, what she had felt was very like fear, but she was already very much ashamed of this childish feeling, and darted an extremely ungracious look at the Baron, who was walking just in front of her with her aunt. All her audacity came back to her, and tossing her head she called out, laughingly:

"Oh, I shall have to learn what the sensation of fear is, like the hero in the fairy tale."

* * * * *

The weather, that had looked threatening in the forenoon, had now become much worse. The mountains were veiled in thick fog, from time to time showers of rain fell, and the wind howled in the trees of the park.

It was so much the more comfortable in the large parlor of the Manor-house, a vast room with lofty ceiling, richly draped and upholstered in dark crimson, with carved oak furniture, and a huge fireplace faced with black marble. The colors might have been regarded as rather dark, but through the wide glass doors that opened upon the terrace, broad light streamed in. Only a few, but choice, pictures adorned the walls, and some family portraits. In the fireplace burned a bright fire and the whole room gave the impression of solid wealth and perfect comfort.

They had just risen from table and the younger members of the family seated themselves by the fireside and engaged in lively chat: Frau von Ringstedt sat upon a sofa in the corner with Miss Friedberg, and the master of the house was absorbed in serious conversation with Oscar von Wildenrod. They were talking of the Odenburg works, in which the Baron showed not only an uncommon interest, but his questions and remarks also demonstrated, that he was by no means so little versed in such matters as Dernburg had imagined, and he had just said:

"I had no idea, that you were so familiar with all these things, Herr von Wildenrod. Such work as ours generally has no charm outside of the profession. But you seem to be well acquainted with all its bearings."

"I have read a great deal about it," lightly answered Wildenrod. "One who, like myself, has no regular profession undertakes little private studies, and I have always had a fancy for mining and the manufactory of iron. My knowledge, to be sure, represents only the superficial observations of an amateur. Perhaps you will allow me to perfect them here, in some degree?"

"It will give me pleasure to act as your guide myself, in this pursuit," said Dernburg warmly. "In your ride, you only touched upon a small section of the works, but from the terrace, here, one has quite a comprehensive view of the whole."

He opened one of the glass doors and stepped out with his guest. The mist had not yet disappeared, but the works that stretched along as far as to the foot of the mountain-chain, and the teeming life astir there that pressed up to the very Manor itself, lost nothing of its grandeur on that account, which might have struck a stranger as well-nigh overpowering. It did seem to have made this impression upon the Baron too, for his eyes turned slowly from one end of the valley to the other, while he remarked:

"A mighty creation is this Odenburg! Why, you have caused to spring up here a regular city, in the solitude of mountains and forests. Those huge buildings there that tower aloft in the center, are----"

"Those are the cylinders and foundries: yonder, farther on, are the forges."

"And those grounds to the right, that look almost like a colony of villas?"

"Those are the residences of our officers; the workmen's homes lie on the other side. To be sure I have only been able to accommodate the very smallest number in Odenburg, the most of them living about in the adjoining villages."

"I know, Eric showed me as we rode along. How many workmen, exactly, do you employ, Herr Dernburg?"

"Nine thousand here in the works: the mines up in the mountains have their own force of laborers, and their own officers."

Wildenrod looked at the man, who, with such perfect composure and evidently through no impulse of vanity, unfolded before him the description of a power and wealth that would have made any other man dizzy. Each one of those mines and furnaces, that he mentioned so casually, represented a fortune: of his other estates, that ranked among the richest in the province, he spoke not at all. And moreover, there was not the slightest trace of boasting in his words, he simply gave information asked for, nothing further. The Baron leaned against the stone parapet and looked out again, then he said slowly:

"I had already heard a great deal of your Odenburg from Eric and others, but to form a conception of the magnificence of the scale upon which the enterprise is planned one must see it with his own eyes. It must be an intoxicating feeling to know one's self to be the absolute ruler of such a world, and to be able to put ten thousand men in motion by a single word."

"It took me thirty years to reach that point," answered Dernburg coolly. "He who has had to battle for every victory won, and mount upward step by step, is not the one to be intoxicated by success. There is many a heavy burden to bear, too, which you, Herr von Wildenrod would hardly take upon yourself. The management of the property inherited from your father was a load that you shook off."

There was a certain asperity in these last words, that was understood, too, but Wildenrod evinced no sensitiveness, he quietly answered:

"You mean to reproach me for the course I took Herr Dernburg----"

"Not so; what right would I have to do such a thing? Every man's life cannot be shaped after the same model. The one seeks his happiness in work, the other----"

"In idling, do you think?"

"In the enjoyments of life, I wanted to say."

"Nevertheless I expressed your thought, and alas! I must own that you are right. But I never was attracted by activity on any but a large scale, and my inheritance was no vast estate adequate to bring this impulse into play. I could not bear to bury myself in barren monotony of every-day country life, in the wearisome round of a management that any good overseer could conduct as well as myself. I was not made for that sort of thing."

"Why, then, did you not stay in the diplomatic service?" remarked Dernburg. "Certainly there was a field commensurate with the widest ambition."

It was an expression of unspeakable bitterness that curled Wildenrod's lips at this question, to be sure only for a second, when he quietly replied:

"Personal considerations were to blame. I had had disagreements with the chief of the bureau, believed myself slighted and overlooked, hence rashly broke my supposed chains, in a fit of sensitiveness. I was still young at that time, and the wide world with its dreams of a golden future, attracted me irresistibly--how the prospect changes, with the lapse of time! I have long since felt that my life lacked serious purpose and will feel this yet more sensibly after Cecilia leaves me. Deep dissatisfaction results from leading such an existence."

"For which you have to bear the sole responsibility, yourself," said Dernburg gravely. "You are still in the enjoyment of a full manly vigor, you have an independent fortune--Only come to a resolve."

"Quite right, a resolve is what is needed, and yet that is precisely what I have not been able to make up my mind to. To me toil and industry ever presented themselves under the image of what was small and wearisome. Here, in sight of your Odensburg, I comprehend for the first time, what a power lies in it, and what incredible results it can achieve. That could stir me up too, engage my every power, I admit. Will you kindly afford 'the idler,' Herr Dernburg, a deeper insight into your world of work? Perhaps he may yet profit by the lesson."

There was something uncommonly winning in this request and the whole manner of the Baron, and Dernburg was very agreeably impressed by this candor. His hitherto rather cool civility gave way now to a warmer tone, as he answered:

"I shall be delighted if Odensburg gives you such lessons. I indeed have had to plow my way through all the pettiness and weariness of routine. If I had not bestirred head and arms, probably the simple forge bequeathed me by my father, would still be standing here--but then, everybody need not handle a spade with one's own hands. If everybody only does something, and fills the place allotted him in life that is the main thing after all."

CHAPTER VI.

TO WHICH MORE THAN ONE CHARMER CHARMS.

In the parlors, meanwhile, Cecilia formed the center of the group drawn up around the fireplace. She could be very amiable when she pleased, and her young sister-in-law was perfectly enchanted by her, while Eric who, to-day in general, had neither eyes nor ears for any one but his betrothed, hardly stirred from her side. Only Egbert Runeck took no part in the conversation. He looked out upon the terrace where those two gentlemen were engaged in such lively conversation, and then again his eyes rested upon the young Baroness; but in doing so his brow contracted almost threateningly.

"No, Eric, you need not try to persuade me that there ever is any spring here in your fatherland," exclaimed Cecilia laughing. "On the Riviera flowers have been blooming and diffusing sweet odors for months past; but since we have crossed the Alps, we have had nothing but storms and cold. And now, to crown all, this ride to Odensburg! Everywhere wintry wastes, nothing but the melancholy green of these everlasting fir-forests, besides mist and clouds and, for a change, sleety rain! Dear me! how I freeze in your cold, gray Germany."

She shivered, every movement she made, somehow adding charms to her naïve beauty, and then turned to the fire:

"In your Germany?" repeated Eric with tender reproach in his tone. "But, Cecilia, it is your Germany as well!"

"Of course it is, but I always have to put myself in mind, before I can realize that I am actually a child of this hateful North, where I am such a total stranger. I was hardly eight years old, when my father died, and two years later I lost my mother also. Then I was carried first to relations in Austria, and later to Lausanne, where I went to boarding-school. When I grew up, Oscar took me away, and since then we have lived mostly in the South. At Rome and Naples, the Riviera and Florence, in Switzerland, too, we have been a few times, and once in France. But Germany we have never come near!"

"Poor Cecilia! so you have never had a home!" cried Maia, compassionately.

Cecilia looked at her in great astonishment; such a life of vanity as she had led, continually changing both her society and surroundings seemed to her the only enviable one.

Home! That was quite a novel idea to her. Her eyes took a hasty survey of the parlor where they sat--yes, indeed, it wore an entirely different air from the gay and yet commonplace hotel-apartments, in which she had been living for years.

Those rich dark tapestries and curtains, that oaken furniture, every piece of which had an artistic value--the family portraits on the walls, and above all the breath of comfort that pervaded the whole! But, on the other hand, all this appeared so somber and dark, in the light of this gay,

rainy day--as grave as all the people here, with the solitary exception of Maia--and the spoilt child of the world inwardly shuddered at the thought of her bridegroom's "home."

"Do you really and truly spend the largest part of the year here at Odensburg?" asked she. "It must be very monotonous. You have such a handsome residence in Berlin, as Eric has told me, and you hardly spend two months in the winter there. I do not understand it."

"My father think he has no time to move around the world," said Maia, in a wholly unembarrassed manner--"and I have only been a few times to the Baths with my aunt and governess. I like it here at Odensburg."

"Maia has not been introduced into society yet," explained Eric. "She is to come out next winter, for the first time, for she has completed her seventeenth year. Until now little sister has always had to stay up in the nursery, even when we had a large reception at home; and as to city life, she knows nothing of it whatever."

"I went into society when I was sixteen," remarked Cecilia. "Poor Maia, to think of their keeping you waiting so long--it is incomprehensible?"

The young girl laughed merrily at being the object of such genuine commiseration.

"Oh, I do not consider that as such a great misfortune, for then I must 'behave' myself as Miss Friedberg calls it, must be so dreadfully prim and staid, and no longer dance around with Puck--why, Puck! I do believe you have gone to sleep in broad daylight! Are you not ashamed? Will you wake up, I say!"

Therewith she rushed to one corner of the parlor, where Puck, greatly discontented at so little attention being paid him to-day, lay on a footstool, having yielded himself to the sweetest of slumbers. Cecilia's lip curled.

"Maia is nothing but a child, sure enough!" said she in an aside to Eric. "Well, Oscar, has the rain driven you in?"

"Yes, indeed," answered Wildenrod who had just come in. "We have been inspecting Odensburg, for the present, only from the terrace, but, Eric, your father has promised to introduce me into his realm within the next few days."

"Certainly, and Cecilia must get acquainted with it too," chimed in Eric. "Then we'll drive out, some day, to Radefeld, too, where the Buchberg is being tunneled." "Egbert," said he, turning to that young man, who had sat by, a silent listener, "you observe that we are inviting ourselves to pay you a visit some day."

"I am only afraid that our works will not interest Herr von Wildenrod," answered Egbert. "Externally they have very little of interest to show, and, as for the rest, we have not come to the tunneling yet."

Wildenrod turned to the young engineer, who had of course been presented to him upon his arrival. He knew through Eric that this friend of his youth occupied an anomalous position, but his presence here upon occasion of this exclusively family-party surprised him none the less, and he knew too how to give expression to this surprise. Through all the politeness, with which he treated Runeck, there was ever clearly transparent in his eyes the question: "What business have you here?"

"You sketched the plan for these works, did you not, Herr Runeck?" he asked. "Eric has spoken to me about it, and I am glad to make the acquaintance of so clever an engineer."

The words sounded very obliging, but the "engineer" was emphasized and thereby the barrier raised that separated the son of the worker in iron from the family of the millionaire, however much they might see fit to ignore this at Odensburg. Egbert bowed just as obligingly, while he replied:

"I have already had the pleasure of making your acquaintance, Herr von Wildenrod."

"Mine? I do not remember that we ever met before."

"That is comprehensible, for it took place at a large party--three years ago in Berlin--at the house of Frau von Sarewski."

The Baron pricked up his ears, and fixed his keen eyes searchingly upon the young engineer, but at the same time a mocking smile played about his lips.

"And so you saw me there? Really, I would not have expected you to move in such circles."

"Nor do I, in fact. It was an exceptional case, and I was not there as a guest, either. Perhaps you may remember the circumstance if I recall the day to your mind--it was the twentieth of September."

The hand which rested on the back of Cecilia's chair trembled slightly, and at the same time

there flashed from Wildenrod's eyes a glance of suspicion, that was threatening as well, but it produced no effect upon the perfectly unmoved features of Runeck. It lasted, indeed, only a second; then the Baron said carelessly:

"You really expect too much of my memory. I have really been introduced to so many people traveling about as much as I have done these last ten years, that I no longer distinguish individuals. What circumstance do you allude to?"

He spoke with perfect composure, not the slightest change being perceptible in his features, although those dark gray eyes of his were fastened fixedly upon Runeck, with an expression of threatening determination.

"If you have forgotten it, sir, it is hardly worth while to recur to it," said Egbert coolly. "But your features and individuality impressed themselves upon me in a manner that I have never forgotten."

"Very flattering to me!" Wildenrod bowed haughtily to the young engineer, and then turned his back upon him. He proceeded to the other end of the parlor, where Maia was tugging at the white coat of her pet, that had by no means taken in good part being suddenly disturbed in its siesta.

The game was at an end, though, when the Baron came up, and Fräulein Maia drew herself up, in a way that said plainly she was ready for battle, for she felt the urgent necessity for having an act of oblivion cast over her former childish timidity. No opportunity for this had been given at dinner because Frau von Ringstedt had absorbed the entire attention of the new family connection who was seated beside her: but now he was to see that nobody was in the least afraid of him; now she was fully determined to let him see that she could hold her own.

Alas! Oscar Wildenrod paid no attention whatever to this warlike mood, he began, in all innocence, to tease, first the little dog, and then its mistress, and, without any embarrassment whatever, took a place at her side.

Then he began to chat of all imaginable things, in a half playful, but uncommonly fascinating manner, that was quite new to the young girl. He quietly took it for granted that the connection which was so soon to exist between their families justified him in approaching her with the freedom of a relation, and he gently and naturally asserted this claim, and finally set himself seriously to work to gain Puck's friendship, and was fully successful in the effort.

All this was not without its influence upon Maia, who gradually gave up standing on the defensive, and became more sociable. She, too, began to talk now and tell about all sorts of things. The conversation was in full swing, when Wildenrod suddenly asked, quite irrelevantly:

"So, you are no longer afraid of me?"

"I?" The young lady was disposed to contradict what was said indignantly, and yet could not hinder the hot blood from mounting to her cheeks.

"Yes, you, Fräulein Dernburg! I plainly saw it when we exchanged our first greeting--or will you deny what I say?"

The blush upon Maia's face grew still deeper. He had only seen too clearly, but she was annoyed at this inconvenient sharp-sightedness on his part, and thought it very inconsiderate in him thus to take her to task.

"You are only making sport of me, Herr von Wildenrod!" said she indignantly.

He smiled, and it was remarkable what an improvement it wrought in his face. That dark fold between his eyes seemed to smooth down, all the sharp, stern lineaments softened, and his voice, too, sounded strangely soft, as he replied:

"Do I really look as if I would make sport of you? Can you really believe it?"

Maia looked up at him. No, those eyes were not mocking, at least not now, but again they exerted the same spell over her as they had done awhile ago, and she was helpless to resist it--and there again was that inexplicably oppressive sensation. No answer occurred to the young girl, and she only gently shook her head.

"No?" asked Wildenrod. "Well then, prove to me that the guest who has arrived to-day does not inspire you with fear by gratifying me in a request--will you?"

"I must first know what your request is," said Maia, taken captive, and with a vain attempt at resuming her old petulant tone. Wildenrod stooped down to her, and his voice sank into a low whisper.

"Everybody here calls you Maia, everybody in this circle has the right to address you simply by your name, which is the prettiest one in the world. Even that Herr Runeck has been granted that privilege--only I am left out in the cold. I am not so bold as to claim the same right as Cecilia, who uses the sisterly 'thee' when addressing you, but--may I, too, call you Maia?"

He had taken her hand, as though accidentally. His request was neither so very presumptuous nor so unusual, the elderly man might certainly be allowed this freedom in addressing a girl of seventeen, of whose brother he was soon to be the brother-in-law--nevertheless, Maia delayed her answer, delayed so long, that he asked reproachfully:

"Do you refuse me?"

"Oh, no, certainly not, you are Cecilia's brother, Herr von Wildenrod."

"Yes, indeed, and Cecilia's brother has another name, which he would also like to hear called by you, Maia,--my name is Oscar."

No answer followed, but the little hand quivered within his grasp and tried to free itself, but in vain, he held it fast.

"You will not?"

"I--I cannot!" There was an almost agonized repulse in these words. Oscar smiled again.

With a gentle pressure he released her hand. Maia! How strangely he pronounced the name, it was a sound that penetrated the young girl with a feeling never experienced before, at once sweet and torturing, but she breathed deeply, as though relieved, when Eric approached and said playfully:

"I do believe, Oscar, you are slyly paying court to our little Maia."

"For the present I am only paving my way to the intimacy of future relationship," was the cheerful reply. "Maia has just given me leave to give up addressing her formally as Miss Dernburg. You have no objection, I hope."

"Not the least," said Eric, laughing. "You will play the part of uncle to our little girl, with great dignity, I fancy. Only see to it that you treat her with all due deference!"

A singular expression flitted across Oscar's features at this harmless conception, but he made no response to it. Maia had not heard this last remark, for she had hurried to her father, who had joined the two older ladies. With an almost impetuous movement, she cuddled up to him, as though she sought shelter in his arms, shelter from some unknown peril, that still lay far away in the dim distance, and which, nevertheless, cast a shadow athwart the glowing present.

Cecilia still sat by the fireside, and Runeck, too, had not left his place--the "stony guest," as Cecilia had awhile ago styled him in a whisper to her betrothed. Egbert's silence had indeed been striking, at least to Eric and Maia, Baron Wildenrod thought it natural enough under the circumstances. The young man evidently felt out of place in the circle, to which he did not belong of right, and the favor evinced him by this invitation evidently oppressed more than it gratified him. Cecilia fully shared her brother's sentiments on this point, and, like him, up to this time, she had only taken very casual notice of the young engineer. And yet it had not escaped her that he was observing herself; she took this, of course, for admiration, and therefore, in the most gracious manner, now opened a conversation with him.

"You were already acquainted with my brother, it seems, Herr Runeck? That is a remarkable coincidence."

"Hardly, in a large city," was the quiet reply. "As for the rest it was only a very brief interview that we had, of which, as you have heard, Herr von Wildenrod thought no more."

"I remember myself, he was in Berlin three years ago. He came from there to Lausanne, to take me away from school, but, I believe, Oscar is not particularly fond of the Capital. You were there quite a long while, were you not?"

"Several years. I studied at Berlin."

"Ah, indeed! Well, I shall make acquaintance with it, too, next winter, at Eric's side. Society must be brilliant there, especially in the height of the season."

"Alas! I can give you no information on that point," said Egbert coolly. "I was in Berlin, to study and to work."

"But that does not consume all of one's time?"

"Oh, yes, noble lady, every bit of one's time."

This answer sounded very positive, almost uncouth: it thoroughly displeased Cecilia, but yet more he displeased her who had given utterance to it, and whom she took this opportunity of observing closely for the first time. This friend of Eric's youth was--coldly considered--anything but attractive in personal appearance. It is true, that his tall, commanding figure made a certain impression, but it was not at all suited to the parlor. Add to this, those homely, irregular features, where everything was stamped with such sharpness and hardness, and the stiff, disobliging manner, that did not soften even now, when one was exerting herself to draw him into

conversation. Why, that answer sounded almost as if this Runeck would like to teach a lesson to her, Baroness Wildenrod! She remarked, to her astonishment, that here was nothing of timidity and conscious inferiority, and now, too, she awoke to the fact that it was not admiration which spoke in those cold, gray eyes, but rather enmity. But what would have chilled, and perhaps dismayed, any one else, was just the thing that attracted Cecilia Wildenrod, and so, instead of letting the conversation drop, she took it up again.

She propped her pretty foot against the fender and leaned far back in the arm-chair, her attitude being a negligent, but infinitely graceful one. The late afternoon hour and the dark rain-clouds out of doors had already produced twilight in this part of the parlor, and the fire, sometimes flaring up and again dying down, cast its light upon the slender form that sat there, draped in a light silk gown, covered with lace, falling upon the roses that she wore on her bosom, and upon the beautiful head that was pillowed upon a rich crimson cushion.

"Dear me! how shall I accommodate myself to this Odenburg?" said she pettishly. "Every third word here is work! They seem, in general, not to have another idea. I, frivolous worldling that I am, feel quite intimidated by it and know I shall inevitably fall into disgrace with my father-in-law-to-be, who is himself a first-class genius of work."

She spoke with an arrogance that challenged reply. It was the tone that had been deemed piquant and fascinating in the sphere of society in which she had been accustomed to move. But it made no impression here: Runeck seemed to be utterly insensible to it.

"Certainly, Herr Dernburg is a model to us all in this respect," answered he. "I certainly do not anticipate seeing you contented at Odenburg, Baroness Wildenrod. But surely, Eric must have given you a fair picture of it, ere you made up your mind to come here."

"I believe that Eric's taste is the same as mine," remarked Cecilia. "He likewise loves the joyous, sunny South, and raves of a villa on the shores of the blue Mediterranean, beneath palm-trees and laurel-bushes."

"Eric was sick and suffered under the severe climate of his native land, which, nevertheless, he loves: the South has restored him to health. As for the rest, he is rich enough to purchase a place anywhere in Italy that he chooses, and to pass there his time for recreation, although his regular home must continue to be at Odenburg."

"Do you think that so absolutely necessary?" Slight derision was perceptible in the tone of her question.

"Most assuredly, for he is the only son, and one day must take charge of the works. That is a duty which he cannot shirk and of which he as well as his future wife must render an account."

"Must?" repeated Cecilia. "That seems to be your favorite word, Herr Runeck. You use it at every opportunity. I cannot bear that uncomfortable word, and I do not believe I shall ever be reconciled to it, either."

Egbert seemed to find no special satisfaction in this sort of dialogue, his reply having a touch of impatience about it, that was entirely too suggestive of faultfinding.

"We shall do better not to dispute over it. We belong to two entirely different worlds, and so, naturally, do not understand one another."

Cecilia smiled at having finally moved this man from his imperturbable equilibrium, which she interpreted to almost as an insult. She had not been accustomed anyone denying her the toll of admiration, or speaking of "must," to her. The fire again blazed up brightly, and while Runeck stood aside in the shade, the reflection fell full upon the beautiful girl, who still reclined in her chair, in the same attitude as a while ago. There was something ensnaring in the flickering play of the flames, in the abrupt transition from light to shade; something that was akin to the appearance of the girl herself, who now looked up at the young engineer with moisture dimming the luster of her dark and glowing eyes.

"Why, there may be a bridge that can unite these two worlds," said she playfully. "Perhaps we may come to understand each other--or, think you that it is not worth the trouble?"

"No."

This "no" had a perfectly frigid sound. Cecilia suddenly straightened herself up and darted a look of withering anger upon Egbert.

"You are very--candid, Herr Runeck."

"You misunderstand me, Baroness Wildenrod," said he calmly. "I meant, of course, that it was not worth your while to descend to so inferior a world--nothing more."

Baroness Wildenrod bit her lip. He had parried her thrust in masterly style, and yet she knew what he had meant, she understood the bitter taunt, hidden behind his words. What sort of a man was this, that dared thus to confront the betrothed of his best friend, the future daughter of the

house, in which he had received so many favors? Previously she had hardly had a glance to bestow upon this engineer in his subordinate station, now a burning sense of hostility seized her--he was to suffer for having provoked her!

She arose with a brisk movement and turned to Eric and her brother, who were talking together. Egbert remained where he was, but his eyes followed the brother and sister, while he murmured under his breath:

"Poor Eric, you have fallen into bad hands!"

Night had come and the family had already separated. They wanted their guests--who had made rather a fatiguing journey that day--to retire early to rest, but this they had not yet done.

In the boudoir, attached to the suite of company-rooms, were Oscar and Cecilia Wildenrod to be found. They were alone. The perfume of the flowers with which Maia had given so graceful a welcome to her future sister-in-law, still filled the room, but neither of this pair paid any heed to it. Cecilia stood in the center of the room, but the smile that she had worn and the amiability which she had manifested all day had both vanished now. She looked excited, provoked, and her voice had the intonation of suppressed passion.

"And so you are not content with me, Oscar? I should think that I had done everything possible to be done this day, and still you have fault to find with me."

"You were too incautious in your expressions," criticised Oscar; "much too incautious. You hardly took the trouble to conceal your disapproval of Odensburg. Take heed, Eric's father, is very sensitive on that point, anything like that he does not pardon."

"Am I, for whole weeks here to act a farce, and pretend to be enthusiastic over this abominable place, that is far more unbearable even than I had supposed? One is cut off here and thrust out of the world, as it were, buried between mountains and dark forests. Then the immediate proximity of those works with their noise and their crowd of coarse laborers, but above all these people here! Little Maia is the only one endurable. My future father-in-law, though, seems to have a very domineering nature, and tyrannizes over his whole household. I shudder before his stern countenance. What a look he gave me upon my arrival, as though he wanted to look me through and through. And that tiresome Frau von Ringstedt with her prim state, and that just as stupid pale-looking governess--but, above all, that so-called friend of Eric's youth, who said things to me--" she suddenly broke off, and with a pettish movement threw her fan upon the table. Wildenrod had quietly listened to all this harangue, without making any attempt to soothe her, at those last words, however, he grew attentive.

"What things?" he asked quickly and sharply. "What did he say to you?"

"Oh, not so much in words, but I knew perfectly well what was implied, although not expressed. If we had not just met for the first time, I should believe that he hated both you and me. There was something so inimical in his cold, steel-gray eyes, when he talked to me and they had precisely the same expression when he mentioned, to you, your having met in Berlin."

Wildenrod gazed upon his sister in surprise, he had never before perceived that she was gifted with such keen powers of observation.

"You seem to have been studying him very closely," he remarked. "As for the rest, you have judged quite correctly. This Runeck is extremely disagreeable, perhaps even dangerous. We'll be even with him though."

"Once for all, I cannot stand such surroundings!" cried Cecilia with renewed heat. "You have always told me that Eric would live with me in the great world, we have never had any other idea, but here there seems to be no talk of any such thing. They regard it as a matter of course that we should take up our residence at Odensburg, and have ruthlessly made the announcement to me already. Upon my marriage, am I to renounce everything that lends life its charm for me, and under the oversight of my high-and-mighty father-in-law, learn housekeeping and all the other domestic virtues that he seems to rate so high, and for my reward to be allowed a daily promenade through his works? For there seems to be no talk here of any other pleasure."

"The question is not one of pleasure but necessity," said Oscar in a low sharp tone: "I thought I had made that sufficiently clear to you when we accepted the invitation. Already, on the day of your engagement, you forced me to give you a hint of the truth, that I would have preferred to conceal from you, and since then you have learned all without reserve. Our fortune has been all lost, how and when does not concern you, but what you have to deal with is the fact. I have hitherto managed to maintain ourselves in handsome style, through what sacrifices I alone know; but there comes a time when even the last resources fail, and to that point we have now arrived. If you cast away, through your own folly, the brilliant future that I have opened up to you by tying this knot, know that you will no longer have any pretension to what you call life: then you must descend to an existence of poverty and privation--must I once more recall this to your mind?"

This harsh exhortation had its effect: poverty and privation were two things from which Baroness Wildenrod shrank, although she had only a misty idea of what they were. Already the bare idea that she might be forced to give up the brilliant life that she had hitherto led horrified

her, and broke down her resistance. She bowed her head and was silent, while her brother continued:

"I have hitherto treated you, for the most part, as they do spoiled children, not deeming it needful to show you the serious phase of life; but now I require--do you hear, Cecilia, I *require*--that you submit absolutely to my will, and do as I shall direct. You are not married yet, and Dernburg is just the man to break the engagement at the last minute, if there should arise in his mind grave doubts as to its expediency. You have to cultivate his favor first of all, for Eric is altogether passive in his disposition, and will always submit to his father's will. It is all-important to be prudent! Be assured of one thing--*my* plans are not to be thwarted through your self-will--you know me!"

This was a tone of command, of menace, and Cecilia looked up at her brother with shy eyes. It was not the first time, that he had bent her under his will, but so earnestly and darkly he had never spoken to her before. She heaved an impatient sigh and threw herself into a chair; but she did not think of making any further opposition.

The pause of a second ensued, when Oscar stepped up to her, and his voice was milder as he said:

"How you do allow yourself to be carried away by your feelings! Other girls would give anything in the world to change places with you; thousands at this moment, are envying your fate, while you are disposed to throw away your good fortune, like a toy that did not please you--yours is not a calculating nature."

"But you are!" said Cecilia, in an angry and embittered tone.

"I?" Again Wildenrod's face darkened. "I am and have been many a thing that my spirit revolted against. He who has battled with the waves of life for twelve long years, like myself, knows only one watchword. Stay on top, at any price! Thank God, that you have been spared this battle, and thank me for landing you safe on shore ere you knew of the perils to which you were exposed. You are to enter a highly-respected family, your marriage will give you a right to almost countless wealth, and your future husband knows no greater happiness than to gratify your wishes--I think that is enough."

"And what will you do when I am married?" asked Cecilia, struck by his words, that she only half understood.

"Commit that to me!" A fleeting smile flashed across Oscar's features. "At all events, I do not intend to live on my rich sister's charity, for I was not made for such a fate--Now, good-night, child; you will be more prudent in future, and never let a hint drop of Odensburg not being to your mind. I hope you will need no second lecture."

He lightly touched her brow with his lips and passed into his own chamber that adjoined the boudoir. Out of doors it was already dark, and the Manor was wrapt in silence and gloom, only a candle glimmering here and there in the rooms of individuals. The wind had lulled, and profound quiet reigned in the immediate environs.

But over yonder at the works there was still astir that mighty throbbing life, that rested not fully, even during the night, and if by day it was heard only in occasional, far-away sounds, now every noise made there was distinctly heard. At times there was a great glare of light from the blazing forges, while here and there one of the huge chimneys sent up a flashing spark to the starless sky, and there where the furnaces lay, the vaporous wreaths of smoke were reddened by the glow of the fire. It was a sublime and fascinating spectacle.

Oscar Wildenrod seemed to find it so, too, for he stood long at the window and gazed out. The admiration that he had expressed in the afternoon had not been assumed. His breast heaved with the deep breath he drew, and he said in an undertone:

"To be the lord and master of such a world--to move thousands by a single word of power! How that man stood on the threshold of his own house when he received us--like a prince and ruler, and such in fact he is. Success no longer intoxicates him--me it will intoxicate."

He drew himself up, proudly, to his full height, but all of a sudden a more tender expression rested upon his features, while he continued almost inaudibly:

"What a sweet pretty child that Maia is! So pure, so untouched by any shadow--and to the hand of that child is attached the other half of this power and this wealth."

He opened the window and leaned far out; restless, ambitious thoughts were working in the soul of this man, while he looked down upon the vast establishment at his feet. The rash gambler was not satisfied with his one lucky stroke, he was making ready for a second which was to be his master-stroke. Oscar von Wildenrod was not indeed made to live upon the bounty of his sister.

Cecilia, too, had not yet gone to rest, but, nestling among the cushions of an arm-chair, still sat motionless in the same spot that her brother had left her. She had taken the roses from her bosom and was heedlessly pulling them to pieces. They had been a present from Eric; he had

welcomed her with them upon her arrival. Magnificent, pale yellow roses to remind her of their betrothal-day, when she had worn these same flowers. The withered leaves showered down upon her gown and upon the floor, but the intended bride heeded them not; she gazed into space like one lost in dreams. Evidently the visions that haunted her were of no friendly nature. Upon her forehead between those finely-arched eyebrows, there was again that fold, the significant feature which she had in common with her brother, and there, too, were his eyes that looked from her countenance--at this minute, it was easy to see that the two were of one blood.

CHAPTER VII.

CECILIA VISITS RADEFELD.

The engagement of the young heir of Odensburg to Baroness Wildenrod had now indeed been announced and had excited great surprise in neighborhood circles, that had always supposed that in this matter, too, Dernburg would act as his son's guardian, and have the first word to say as to this union, and now Eric had made his own choice, far away at the South, without asking either his advice or permission. The beauty of the bride-elect, her good old name and her evidently brilliant fortune and connections, lent to this choice, it is true, the prestige of a thoroughly suitable one. And the father's consent was taken as a thing for granted.

At present, Cecilia had no ground for complaint as to the dreaded solitude of Odensburg, for her betrothal made the usually quiet Manor the scene of a constant round of social festivities. The engaged couple had made the usual visits, and now received return-calls from all the neighbors, by far the larger number of whom were the families of the large landed proprietors of that district. There were numerous invitations, larger and smaller entertainments, of which Cecilia was ever the center of attraction. Here, too, homage was paid to her wherever she appeared, and happily Eric had not the foible of jealousy. So swam Cecilia with full sails, upon the stream of satisfaction; new acquaintances and surroundings, new triumphs that hardly allowed her, for the moment at least, to miss the life to which she was accustomed.

The appearance of Baron von Wildenrod made the most favorable impression on every one. His distinguished appearance and his gifts as a brilliant conversationalist in general, won the favor of every one that he wanted to win, and here he was treated with double honor, as the future relative of the Dernburg family. Already, during the few weeks of his sojourn here, he had attained to a prominent position in these circles, and well knew how to maintain it.

At Radefeld the works had been forwarded with all the forces available. The men, for the most part, had been accommodated in the adjacent village, and the chief engineer had also taken up his quarters there, in order to avoid the loss of time in a daily ride to and from Odensburg. He usually went there only once or twice a week to give in his report to his chief.

Radefeld, indeed, was only a little village in the woods, and a stay there was not comfortable in the least. The two confined rooms in which Egbert lodged at a peasant's house, were meanly furnished, but the young engineer was not a Sybarite. He had taken nothing with him from his ordinary residence but his books, his plans, and drawings, and as for the rest, contented himself with things as he found them.

Runeck was usually to be found early at his place of business. But to-day he had had a visitor from the city. His guest, a man of about fifty years, with sharply-cut features and dark eyes, sat in the old arm-chair, that here had to take the place of a sofa. The two seemed to have had an earnest and interesting conversation.

"As for the rest," said the stranger, "I should like to ask why you so seldom come to town now? You have not been there for weeks, and if one wants to have a talk with you, he has to institute a veritable search after you."

"I have a great deal to do," answered Egbert, who stood at the window, with a rather clouded brow. "You see for yourself how immersed I am in work."

"Work?" mocked the other. "I should think that *our* work was more important than digging and rooting here in the woods. You contrived the plan, so I learn. Will you, perhaps, earn another million for your chief to add to the other millions that he already has?"

"That is not the question, but whether I shall perform a duty that I have undertaken to perform," was the brief reply. "The execution of this plan was properly the upper-engineer's work, and I have to justify the confidence that called me to do it, in his stead."

"To chain you fast here at Radefeld, so that you will not be dangerous at Odenburg! The old man is not stupid, nobody can accuse him of that, he always knows very well what he is about, and you may depend he knows a thing or two about your proclivities already."

"Be done with your insinuations, Landsfeld," interposed Egbert impatiently, "of course Dernburg knows, from my own lips. He called me up for a talk, and I gave him my views without any reserve. I naturally expected my dismissal after that--but instead the superintendence of the Radefeld water-works was entrusted to me."

Landsfeld started and directed a searching glance at the young engineer.

"That is remarkable, to be sure, it does not look like the old man! He must either be perfectly infatuated with you, or he has some object to subserve. He is capable of anything. As for the rest, your candor was very out of place in this case, for now, of course, your movements at Odenburg will no longer be free. You have managed very awkwardly, young man!"

"Was I to deny the truth?" asked Egbert with knitted brow.

"Why not, if it could serve a good purpose?"

"Then look out for some one else who is more practiced in lying! I regard it as cowardice, to deny one's convictions and one's party, and acted accordingly."

"That is to say, you have again followed your own head, and acted in utter defiance of orders. Odenburg is your field of labor, you are to get the fellows there to affiliate with you, instead of which, here you are quietly constructing water-works at Radefeld, at the same time that you are being coddled in the so-called Manor-house, and yet you know perfectly why we sent you here!"

"And you know that I resisted from the very beginning, that finally only a direct order from headquarters forced me into line."

"Alas! I suppose you confided that to your chief, too?" The question came in the sharpest of tones.

"No," answered Runeck coldly; "he attributed my return to an entirely false motive, and I left him in his error. Never again would I have gone voluntarily to Odenburg, and I cannot stay here either, my position is an untenable one, as I foresaw."

"And nevertheless you will be obliged to remain," said Landsfeld dryly. "This Odenburg is like an impregnable fortress, that defies all attacks. The old man has made his people tame, with his schools and infirmaries and funds for the poor, they dread to lose the good berths they have, and, above all, they have an incurable fear of their tyrant--the cowards! However often we applied the lever, nothing was to be done, he has made them thoroughly suspicious of our agitators. You are a child of a workman, have grown up in their midst, and even now have intimate relations with their chief. They will listen to you, and follow you too, if it comes to that."

"And to what end?" asked Runeck moodily. "I have often enough explained to you that a strike at Odenburg would be perfectly futile. Dernburg is not a man to be coerced: I know him--he would rather close his works. He is a man after this sort, that he would rather take any loss upon himself than to yield, and he is rich enough to resist to the uttermost."

"Just for that very reason he must be brought down from his throne of infallibility! He shall see, that there are men who dare to make head against him, puffed up as he is, sitting there on his millions in luxury and idleness, while----"

"That is not true!" burst forth Egbert passionately, "and you know that what you say is a lie! Dernburg works more than you and I. Often enough have I been compelled to admire his immense strength and wonderful powers of endurance, that actually put to the blush the youngest among us. And he seeks recreation only in his family-circle. Once for all, I'll not stand having that man slandered in my presence."

"Oho, you speak in that tone, do you?" cried Landsfeld, now irritated in his turn. "You take sides with him against us? It only shows how tame living the life of a lord makes one, if he once gets a taste of it."

"Take heed, else you might learn that I am anything but tame," said Egbert, more quietly, but in a threatening tone. "I repeat it, I'll submit to nothing of the sort, for it has nothing to do with our cause. Either you will omit these personal attacks upon Dernburg or----"

"Or?"

"I'll never more cross your threshold and shall know how to protect mine from things that I *will* not hear."

Landsfeld shrugged his shoulders, as much as to say that he did not care.

"That means, in other words, that you will put me out of doors? Right friendly and brotherly, to be sure, but we will not dispute about that. It is not our way anyhow to pass many compliments.

You are coming to our next meeting, are you not?"

"Yes." This word sounded harsh and sullen.

"Well, I am going to depend upon that. An important matter is to be brought up. We expect a few comrades from Berlin, and it is likely you will be taken pretty sharply to task, on account of your inactivity up to this time."

"Until next week then!"

He nodded shortly and went out in front of the house, however, he stood still and sent back a look of hatred, while he murmured in an undertone:

"If we did not need you, absolutely need you! But it is impossible to get along without you at Odensburg. Just wait though, my young man, and we'll see if we cannot curb that haughty spirit of yours!"

Egbert, being left alone, stood in the middle of the room, with fist doubled up and deeply-furrowed brow. It was manifest that a fierce battle was being waged in his soul, but suddenly he straightened himself up and stamped with his foot, as though he would quell by main force the storms that were raging within.

"No, and again no! I have made my choice and will abide by it!"

The Radefeld estate, ordinarily a quiet, lonely valley in the midst of a forest, now again resounded with the noise of laborers who were hard at work. Everywhere there was shoveling, ditching, and blasting; trees and shrubs fell beneath the stroke of the ax; the indefatigable host having already progressed as far as the foot of the Buchberg, the tunneling of which was the enterprise afoot.

Runeck, who had come later than usual, stood upon an eminence and thence directed a tremendous blast. In obedience to his order, all the workmen had retired from the neighborhood of the mine, which now exploded with dull, muffled sounds. The cliff against which the work of destruction was aimed, was split in two, one part still standing erect, while the other fell with a crash; the earth round about trembled when the mighty boulders rolled heavily down.

The group of laborers at the foot of the eminence dispersed: Runeck, too, left his place, to examine closely what had been effected, when an old inspector stepped forward and announced:

"Herr Runeck--the master's family from Odensburg."

Egbert looked up, in expectation of seeing the wagon of Dernburg, who frequently came out to inspect the condition of the works, but suddenly gave such a violent start that the old man looked up in surprise.

Over at the entrance to the ravine Eric Dernburg and Cecilia Wildenrod had halted, on horseback, while the groom had dismounted, and had firmly by the bridle their animals, who seemed to have been made unruly by the noise of the blasting. The young engineer, meanwhile, had quickly recovered from his surprise, and went across to pay his respects to his waiting visitors. Eric cordially stretched out his hand.

"We have kept our word, Egbert, and come upon you without any warning. Will you allow us an insight into your province?"

"I shall be delighted to be of the least service," replied Runeck, while he bowed to the young lady, who now gracefully and lightly swung herself out of the saddle, and in doing so hardly touched the proffered hand of her betrothed.

"We stopped at Radefeld and through the open windows cast a glance in at your lodgings, Herr Runeck," said she. "Dear me, what surroundings! Do you really intend to spend the whole summer there?"

"Why not?" asked Egbert composedly. "We engineers are sometimes here, sometimes there, and have to accept work wherever it is offered."

"But you have your comfortable home at Odensburg, and a carriage is always at your disposal. Why do you not stay there?"

"Because then I would daily lose three hours in going and coming. I have my books and works at Radefeld, and as for the rest I am entirely independent of my surroundings."

"Yes, you are a Spartan by constitution, physically as well as intellectually," said Eric with a sigh. "I wish that I could do like you, but, alas! there is no chance of that. I have gotten too much spoiled at the South and must now do penance."

He drew himself up and shivered; evidently he suffered more from his native climate than he himself was willing to confess. He looked pale and worn, the ride through the woods seeming to have been an exertion to him rather than a pleasure.

So much the more blooming appeared the young lady by his side. For her the brisk, rather long, ride had been only an exhilaration, and she had reined her horse in impatiently enough out of respect to Eric. She had been accustomed to race at full-speed, having been tutored into this by her brother, and she did not understand how any one could be cautious and circumspect in riding like Eric. As for the rest, she was beaming with cheerfulness and high spirits, even Egbert was treated with perfect amiability, not a look, not a word, reminded of that disagreement when they first met.

The laborers reverentially greeted the young master and his promised bride, whom all eyes followed with admiration. Even here Cecilia's beauty celebrated a triumph, only Egbert Runeck seemed perfectly insensible to its charms.

He became their guide through grounds in the act of being laid out, taking pains to show his guests whatever was worth seeing, but he observed towards the Baroness Wildenrod the same cold reserve as before, and turned mostly to Eric; in him, to be sure, he did not have a particularly attentive listener. The young heir showed only a faint, half-forced sympathy in all these things, with which he should properly have felt himself identified.

"It is incredible, the quantity of work that you have all done in these few weeks," said he, finally, with genuine admiration. "That would be something for my brother-in-law, who now buries himself all day in the Odenburg works and has regularly constituted himself my father's assistant. I would never have believed that Oscar had so keen a relish for such things."

Runeck did not answer, but his lip curled contemptuously at these last words. Eric, who did not observe this, continued in the most unembarrassed way:

"One thing more, Egbert, we recently made an excursion into the mountains, and some of our party noticed that the great cross on the Whitestone had sunk. Father wishes the matter to be carefully looked into, so that no accident may happen. Is there any one among your people here, who will undertake the dangerous task?"

"Certainly," assented Runeck. "It would be very perilous, if that heavy cross should one day fall from that high cliff, since the road runs along just below. I shall go up and see about it myself in the course of the next few days."

"Upon the Whitestone?" asked Cecilia, whose attention had been awakened. "How is that? They say it is inaccessible."

"Assuredly it is for ordinary people," mocked Eric. "One's name must be Egbert Runeck to undertake such a walk on our most dangerous cliff. I believe he has been up there already three or four times."

"I am practiced in mountain-climbing," said Egbert composedly. "When a boy I used to be familiar with every cliff and mountain of my native district, and that is knowledge which is not unlearned. As for the rest, the Whitestone is not inaccessible, it only demands a steady head, clear eye and the necessary fearlessness, then the way is to be forced."

"Dear me, do not say that!" cried Eric laughing, but yet with a certain unrest. He really feared lest Cecilia might be seized with one of those madcap fancies by which she had recently so frightened him. "She was wild to go to the top of the Whitestone."

Runeck seemed to think this project something unheard of, he looked doubtfully and in surprise upon the young lady, who replied in a haughty tone:

"Why, yes! I should like just for once to stand on such a dizzy height, immediately above that abrupt precipice. It must be a thrillingly sweet sensation! Eric was horrified at the bare idea."

"Cecilia, you torture me with such jests!"

"How do you know that it is a jest? And suppose I act upon it in earnest--would you go with me?"

"I?" The young man looked as if he thought they expected him to jump down from the cliff in question. About the lips of his betrothed played a half-compassionate, half-contemptuous smile; almost imperceptibly she elevated her shoulders.

"Compose yourself, pray! I shall not demand such a proof of love--I would go alone."

"Let me implore you, Cecile, not to think of such a thing!" exclaimed Eric, now alarmed in good earnest, but Egbert interrupted him with quiet decision.

"You need not disturb yourself on that score. That is no path for the dainty feet of a lady to tread. Baroness Wildenrod will hardly make the attempt, and, if she should do so, she would give it up again in five minutes."

"Cecilia tossed her head, and her eyes flashed as she asked in a peculiar tone:

"Are you so certain of that, Herr Runeck?"

"Yes, noble lady, for I know the Whitestone."

"But you do not know me!"

"May be so."

Cecilia started, the answer seemed to surprise her, but her glance strayed to her betrothed, and she laughed scornfully.

"Do not look so miserable, Eric! All this is only bantering! I am not thinking of the Whitestone and its break-neck cliffs.--How do you manage, really, Herr Runeck, when you blow up these colossal masses of rock?"

Eric breathed more freely after the conversation had taken this new turn. He was already accustomed to being put on the rack by various whims and wild ideas suggested by his promised bride, that had no substantial basis, however, and were never to be taken seriously. Being restored to his composure now, he turned to the old inspector, who stood close by, expecting, evidently, to be noticed.

Old Mertens had served the father of the present chief, and now they had given him to perform the light and lucrative duties of an upper-inspector of the Radefeld works. Eric, who had known him from childhood, spoke kindly to him, making particular inquiries after his family, and afterwards greeted with the same kindness the other workmen within speaking distance. Any stranger seeing him stand thus among the people, with stooping gait, delicate, worn features and almost timid manner, would never in the world have suspected him of being the future lord of Odensburg. There was nothing of the master at all about him.

Perhaps Baroness Wildenrod had imbibed this same impression, for her delicately-arched eyebrows contracted as though from displeasure, and then her glance turned slowly to the young engineer, who stood in front of her. Hitherto she had only seen him in company-suit, to-day he wore a gray woolen jacket and high-top boots, such as wind and weather asked for, but he gained wonderfully by this simple garb. It matched so admirably with the bold manliness of his appearance; here on his own territory his individuality was most strikingly manifest. The first glance showed that here it was his to command, and that he was fully equal to the trust reposed in him; the diminutive form of the friend of his youth shrank into nothingness at his side.

He gave the explanation desired, fully and in detail, illustrating what he said by showing the mine already laid to that part of the cliff which still stood erect, yet in doing this, he turned his whole attention to the rocks and had hardly a look to bestow upon his fair listener, who now said smilingly:

"We saw the blasting from over yonder, and the explosion was extremely effective. You were enthroned yonder on the height like the mountain-sprite in his own person--all the others like ministering gnomes at your feet--a wave of your hand, and with the sound of muffled thunder the cliffs were split and sank in ruins--a genuine glimpse of fairyland!"

"Why, do you know anything of the tales and legends of our mountains?" asked Egbert coolly. "I really would not have supposed it."

"Only Maia is to be thanked for it. She has introduced me into the legends of her native hills, and I verily believe the little thing believes them to be solidly true. Maia sometimes is still a real child."

These last words sounded very scornful. The slender young lady who stood there, leaning against the wall of rock, in a stylish riding-habit of silver-gray, with hat and plumes to match, could not, by any means, be accused of being a child. Even here she was the lady of fashion and distinction, who was making it her pastime just to see for once how the sons of labor lived and delved. And yet she was ensnaringly beautiful, despite her pride and self-consciousness; radiant and certain of conquest she stood before the man who alone seemed to have neither eye nor ear for charms that had never elsewhere played her false. Perhaps it was this very insensibility which attracted the spoiled girl, who now continued in taunting tone:

"When I beheld that telling picture of which you formed the center, I could not help thinking of the old saying about the caper-spurge. That is the mysterious magic wand of the mountains, to which every bolt yields and every cavern opens. And then the buried treasures of the earth shine and beckon to the chosen one, who is to bring them to the light.

'He takes from night and darkness
Their treasures, hidden deep,
And he those jewels sparkling
And all that gold may keep.'

What think you--has not Maia had an apt scholar?"

She looked at him smilingly as she repeated the verse of that old song which told of the all-powerful enchanting rod, but the young engineer's manner did not soften, in spite of all her blandness. His face, embrowned by exposure to sun and wind, was a shade paler, perhaps, than usual, but his voice sounded cool and self-controlled, as he answered:

"Our time no longer has need of an enchanter's wand. It has found another sort of one for splitting rocks and opening the earth--You see it, do you not?"

"Yes, indeed. I see bald destruction, rubbish and splintered quartz--but the treasures stay buried below."

"It is empty and dead below--there are no longer any buried treasures."

The answer had a harsh and joyless sound, and the tone in which it was spoken did not soften its asperity.

"Perhaps it is only because the magical word has been lost, without which the wand remains powerless," answered Cecilia lightly, without observing, apparently, his forbidding manner. "Do you not think so, Herr Runeck?"

"I think, Baroness Wildenrod, that the world of fairies and magicians has long been left behind us. We no longer comprehend it, and no longer *want* to comprehend it."

There was something almost menacing in these apparently insignificant words. Cecilia bit her lips, and through the sunny brightness of her smile there gleamed a flash of hostility from her eyes, but then she laughed gayly.

"How grim that sounds! The poor gnomes and dwarfs have a determined enemy, I perceive. Only hear, Eric, how your friend denounces the whole legendary world."

"Yes, it is not worth while to approach Egbert with such things," said Eric, who just now came up. "He has no opinion of poetry, either, that one cannot make by line and plummets, nor needs to draw plans for--therefore he regards it as a highly superfluous thing. I have not yet forgiven him for the way in which he took the news of my engagement--actually, with formal commiseration! And when I indignantly hurled at him the reproach that he knew nothing about love, nor cared to know it either--would you believe that I got for answer a frigid 'No.'"

Cecilia fixed her large, dark eyes upon the young engineer, and again that demoniacal spark flashed in them as she said smilingly:

"And were you really in earnest, Herr Runeck?"

Some seconds elapsed ere he answered. He seemed yet paler than awhile ago, but his eye met that look fully and darkly, while he coldly replied:

"Yes, Baroness Wildenrod."

"There, you hear it for yourself," cried Eric, half-laughing, half vexed. "He is as hard as these rocks."

The young lady tapped lightly with her riding-whip against the pile of rocks that lay heaped up in front of her.

"Maybe. But rocks, too, can be brought to yield, we see. Take heed, Herr Runeck, you have mocked and defied those mysterious powers---they will have their revenge!"

The words should have sounded playful, and yet there was a perceptible breath of defiance in them. Egbert answered not a word, while Eric looked in amazement from one to the other.

"Of what were you talking?" asked he.

"We were speaking of the caper-spurge, which cleaves rocks asunder, and unlocks the hidden treasures of earth.--But I think we had better go now, if you approve."

Eric assented, and then turned to Runeck.

"There is to be more blasting, I perceive; wait, though, before you apply the match, until we get beyond the region of the ravine. Our horses were made very unmanageable by it awhile ago, the groom could hardly hold them."

Again that wicked and contemptuous smile played about Cecilia's lips, for she had been quick to note awhile ago, that Eric had nervously started at the dull sounds of the explosion and had summoned the groom to his side. Her horse, too, had become very restive, but she had held it firmly in with the bit. Meanwhile she suppressed any remark and only said, while Egbert guided her and Eric to the place where the horses stood:

"Accept our thanks for your friendly guidance and explanation. You will be glad to be rid of such disturbing guests."

Runeck bowed low and formally.

"Oh, do not speak of it, I pray. Eric is here as proprietor on his own estate, there can be no talk of disturbance."

"And yet it would seem so. You were fairly shocked, when you caught sight of us in the entrance to the ravine."

"I? Have you such sharp eyes, noble lady?"

"Oh, yes, Eric often teases me about my 'falcon-glance.'"

"In this case, however, your sight deceived you. I was only anxious, when I caught sight of you so near--horses are so easily frightened by blasting."

The riding-whip struck impatiently against the folds of her silver-gray habit. Did that rock resist everything?

Meanwhile they had reached the spot where their horses were tied. Cecilia and Eric mounted. The former nodded slightly an adieu, then applied her switch sharply to her beautiful roan, The fiery animal reared, and immediately set off at a gallop, so that the other could hardly follow him.

They were still visible for about five minutes, on the forest-road that led to Radefeld. Like some apparition flew the slender girlish figure on the back of her racing steed, with her habit fluttering and the plumes in her hat streaming behind. Once more she was seen at the bend, then the forest closed behind her.

Egbert was still standing motionless in his place, looking with fixed and burning eyes upon that road through the woods. His lips were firmly compressed, and on his features rested a singular expression, as though of stifled pain or wrath: finally, he straightened himself up and turned to go.

Then he perceived something at his feet, soft and white, as though some blossom had blown there.

The foot of the young man seemed suddenly to be rooted to the ground, then he slowly stooped and picked it up.

It was a fine lace handkerchief, delicately perfumed, that appealed to Egbert's senses in a bewitchingly flattering manner. Involuntarily his fingers clutched the airy fabric tighter and tighter.

"Herr Runeck!" said a voice behind him.

Runeck started and turned around. It was old Mertens.

"The men would like to know if they are to go on with the blasting, it is all ready."

"Certainly, I am coming directly.--Mertens, you are going to Odensburg this evening, I suppose?"

"Yes, Herr Engineer, I want to spend Sunday with my children."

"Well, then, take----"

Runeck stopped, and the old man looked at him in amazement. It was exactly as if the engineer was with difficulty, struggling for breath. And yet it lasted only a second, when he continued with a peculiarly gruff voice,

"Take this handkerchief with you, and hand it in at the Manor-house. Baroness Wildenrod has lost it."

Mertens took the handkerchief held out to him, and stuck it in his pocket, while Egbert went back to the workmen, who were only waiting for his appearance. He gave the signal, and the magic wand of the new times did its duty. The startling explosion took place, and the cliff still uninjured, that had stood there so proud and lofty, was split in twain. It trembled, tottered, and then fell in ruins at Runeck's feet dragging trees and shrubs to destruction with it.

CHAPTER VIII.

A BOUGH OF APPLE-BLOSSOMS.

"As I tell you, Miss Friedberg, the nerves are a mere habit, and one of the worst of ones at that. Since the ladies have discovered nerves, we doctors have been the most tormented people in the world. It may be a right useful invention so far as husbands are concerned, but a hardened bachelor like myself has not the least respect for it."

With these words Dr. Hagenbach closed a rather long harangue which he had been giving in Miss Friedberg's chamber. Leonie, who looked pale and worn, had called him in professionally, and in reply to his questions had only repeated again and again that she was "through and through nervous."

"I believe. Doctor, you are the only physician who denies the existence of nerves," she said. "I should think science----"

"What science calls 'nerves' has my deepest respect"--she was interrupted by Hagenbach. "But what ladies give out to be such, in their stead, does not exist. Why do you not have yourself treated by the city health-officer, who makes a profound bow to each nerve of his patients, or by one of my young colleagues here in Odensburg, who also advocates the thing, although with a certain timidity. If you give yourself into my hands, there is no favor shown, that you know."

"Yes, I do know it!" she answered with some feeling. "And now may I ask for your prescriptions."

"Which, of course, you have no mind to follow. But never mind that, I'll use strict vigilance. In the first place, then, the air in your room will not do, it is much too damp and heavy. Above all things, let us open the window."

"I beg pardon," opposed Leonie with warmth. "A keen north wind is blowing, which is more than I can stand."

"Wonderful air!" said Hagenbach, as, without paying any heed to her objection, he proceeded to the window and threw open both casements. "Were you out of doors yesterday?"

"No, we had a terrible rain-storm."

"Where were your umbrella and waterproof, I allow *them* unquestionably. Follow your pupil's example--down yonder in the park Miss Maia sails along quite merrily in the face of the storm, and that tiny thing, Puck, sails along with her, although he is almost blown away."

"Maia is young, a happy child, that knows nothing but laughter and sunshine," said Leonie with a sigh. "She knows nothing yet of sorrow and tears, of all the hard and bitter that is imposed upon us by fate."

As she spoke, her eye involuntarily sought the desk, above which a large photograph took the main place on the wall. Some sweet yet painful memory must have been linked to that picture, for it was decorated by a mourning veil of black crape, and below it was a bowl full of sweet violets, that seemed like a sacrificial offering.

That glance did not escape the doctor's sharp eyes. As though accidentally he stepped up to the desk and began to inspect the likenesses to be found there, while he dryly remarked:

"Every man has his troubles, but they are far better borne with good-humor than with wailing and mourning. Ah! there is the picture of the little lady--very like! And her brother by her side--remarkable, that he does not resemble his father in the least. Whom does that photograph represent?" He pointed to the picture draped in mourning.

This unexpected question seemed to embarrass Leonie, she blushed faintly and answered with a somewhat unsteady voice:

"A--a relation."

"Your brother, perhaps?"

"No, a cousin--quite a distant relation."

"Ah, indeed?" drawled Hagenbach.

The remote relation seemed to interest him, he examined very narrowly the features of the very pale and lank young man, with sleek hair and eyes romantically upturned, and then continued in an indifferent tone:

"That face has a familiar look to me. I must have seen it before somewhere."

"You are in error as to that." Leonie's voice quivered perceptibly. "It has been long since he was counted among the living. He has lain in his grave for years: the hot deserts of Africa."

"Heaven rest his soul!" said the doctor with provoking equanimity. "But what took him to Africa and into the desert? Did he go as an explorer perhaps?"

"No, he died a martyr to a holy cause. He had attached himself to a mission to the heathen, and succumbed to the climate."

"I can only say he might have done a cleverer thing!"

Leonie, who had just carried her handkerchief to her eyes, overcome with emotion, stopped, utterly shocked at his lack of feeling:

"Doctor!"

"Yes, I cannot help thinking so. Miss Friedberg. I deem it very superfluous, in the first place, to be going away off to Africa to convert the black heathen, while so many white heathens, are roving around here in Germany, who know nothing of Christianity, although they are baptized. If your cousin had preached the Word of God, as a well-installed pastor to his own people----"

"He was not a minister, but a teacher," the angry lady managed to put in.

"Never mind; then, emphatically, he should have taught the dear school-boys the fear of God and flogged them into it, too, if needful. Classes have little enough of that nowadays."

Leonie's face betrayed the indignation she felt at this mode of expression, but reply was spared her, however, for at this moment came a timid knock at the door, and immediately afterwards Dagobert entered, but was hardly allowed to pay his respects to the lady; his uncle calling out to him, in his threatening voice, just as soon as he laid eyes on him:

"No English lesson to-day. Miss Friedberg has just declared that she is 'nervous through and through,' and nerves and grammar do not agree."

The young man must have valued this instruction highly, for he was quite shocked at this announcement. But Leonie said most positively:

"I beg pardon, stay, dear Dagobert! Our English studies are not to suffer from my bad feelings, we shall have our accustomed lesson. I'll go for our books." So saying, she got up and went into the next room.

The doctor, with a vexed look, followed her with his eyes. "I never did have such a contrary patient! Always the embodiment of contradiction! Hark ye, Dagobert, you are tolerably well-informed--what sort of a man is the one hanging yonder?"

"Hanging? Whore?" asked the horror-stricken Dagobert, while, shuddering, he looked across at the trees in the park.

"Why, you need not be thinking directly of a rope," said his uncle. "I mean that picture over the desk, with the crazy decoration of crape and violets."

"It is a relative of Miss Friedberg, a cousin----"

"Yes, indeed, quite a remote one! She has told me that, too, but I know she must have been engaged to him. Tiresome enough he looks to have been. Do you know his name, perhaps?"

"Miss Friedberg told it to me once--Engelbert."

"So the man was named Engelbert, too!" cried the excited doctor. "The name is just as sentimental as that unbearable face. Engelbert and Leonie--they match splendidly together! How the two would have sat and cooed together like a pair of turtle-doves!"

"He is dead, poor man!" remarked Dagobert.

"Was not of much account in life," growled Hagenbach, "and does not seem to have had specially good nourishment either, before he hied him to the desert. What a wretched woe-begone face it is! I must away now, give my compliments to Miss Friedberg. Much satisfaction may you get out of your 'nervous' English hour."

So saying the doctor picked up hat and cane and left. Ill-humoredly he descended the stairs, that sentimental "man of the desert" seemed to have thoroughly spoiled his temper. Suddenly he stood still.

"I have seen that face somewhere else, I stick to that, but strange--it looked entirely different!"

With this oracular remark he shook his head with a puzzled look and left the house.

The weather out of doors did not indeed look very inviting, being one of those cold, stormy spring-days, such as occur so frequently in the mountains. It is true the landscape no longer wore the bleak, wintry aspect that it had done a few weeks before, the trees having already decked themselves in fresh green, while the first flowers were blossoming in the meadows and fields, but this blooming and growing went forward only slowly, because sunshine was lacking.

Dark masses of cloud chased each other over the face of the sky, the rustling tree-tops bent

before the wind, but this did not trouble the young girl, who, with light step, hurried forward on a narrow path through the woods.

Maia knew, to be sure, that her father did not approve of her taking such long walks unattended, but in the beginning she had confined her stroll to the park-limits, then Puck darted across the meadows and she after him, and then he went into the woods only a little distance, but it was so beautiful there under the murmuring pines, it enticed her on and on into the green solitude. What delight, to be, for once, so entirely alone, running races with the barking Puck, as if for a wager! Absorbed in this pleasure, Maia forgot entirely about the way back, until rather rudely reminded of it.

The dark clouds, which had been already threatening the whole day long, seemed finally to determine to fulfill their promise, for it began to rain, at first softly, then harder and harder, until there poured such torrents from the sky as accompany a regular thunder-storm.

Maia had taken refuge beneath a huge fir-tree, but found protection there only for the moment. It did not last long, on account of the dripping and trickling from every limb; she stood as though under the eaves of a roof, and the heavens grew ever darker. It was no quickly passing shower, so there was nothing for it but to run as fast as possible to the little lodge, only a quarter of a mile away, that offered a secure shelter. No sooner thought than done! The young girl rushed along over stick and stone, on the wet mossy soil, between dripping trees, finally, across a clearing in the forest, where wind and rain assailed her with full force, until, at last, breathless and thoroughly drenched, she found herself, with her four-footed companion, in a dry spot where they could bid defiance to the storm.

This lodge belonged to the forestry equipment at Odensburg, but was almost a half league from it, in the midst of the woods. In winter-time, when deep snow had fallen, they fed the hungry game here and also stored food for their cattle.

It was a small building constructed of boards and the trunks of trees joined together, with a water-tight roof and two low windows, now in the spring empty and unused, but a welcome place of refuge for the two fugitives.

Maia shook herself, so that the drops splashed in all directions. The rain had not hurt her waterproof at all, although it poured out of its folds, but her pretty hat, which she now took from her head, was so much the worse treated. The dainty thing, with its feathers and lace, was now nothing but a shapeless mass, and Puck did not look much better. His white coat was dripping, and its usually long silky hairs were hanging down in wet strands, giving him such a comically disconsolate look, that his young mistress laughed aloud.

"Only look, Puck! what a thing we have made of it!" said she in mock despair. "Why were we not sensible enough to stay in the park! How we do look, and how papa will scold! But you are to blame, you were the first to run off to the woods. Thank God, that at least we have a dry spot to sit in, else both of us would have been washed down to Radefeld, and Egbert would have had to fish us out."

She hurled the utterly spoiled hat upon the low bench that lined the wall on one side, seated herself and looked through the little window out upon the tempest. The rain was still coming down in torrents, and the wind howled around the lodge as though it would like to demolish it. Return home at present was not to be thought of. Mala yielded to the inevitable, drew the hood of her waterproof over her head, and watched Puck, who had stuck his nose through the small opening made by the door being left slightly ajar, and discontentedly followed with his eyes the falling drops.

Just then there appeared on the verge of the forest a person, who stood still for a moment and cast a searching glance around, but then started at a running pace over the clearing, straightway to the forest lodge. Now it was reached by the stranger, who was evidently likewise a fugitive from the storm, with a bold leap he cleared the little lake that had already been formed in front of the door, and kicked this open so violently, the inquisitive Puck was driven back by the shock. But then, with a loud bark, he rushed upon the intruder, who thus presumed to contest the sole possession of the house with himself and his mistress.

"Not so fierce, you little yelper!" cried the stranger, laughing. "Are you the lord and master in this enchanted cottage, or is it that little gray dryad cowering over yonder on that bench?"

He had stooped down to grasp the little animal, that quickly eluded him and took refuge in the corner, whence was now heard a suppressed laugh and a thin little voice saying:

"The dryad thanks you for your good opinion."

The stranger pricked up his ears; the answer showed him that it was no child of a collier or peasant, as he had at first supposed, who was crouched up there in the half-darkness of the ill-lit room. He gave a sharper look, but the low-drawn hood allowed nothing farther to be seen than a rosy little mouth, a pretty nose, and a pair of large brown eyes, that now, in their turn, were surveying the intruder with curiosity and astonishment.

He was a young man of about four-and-twenty years, with a handsome, open countenance,

brown wavy hair, and bright laughing eyes. The weather had treated him ill, for he was without any waterproof: the gray traveling suit that he wore was dripping wet, and when he pulled off his hat, and waved it in salutation, the water fell from the brim in little rivulets on the floor.

"Let me implore you," said he "to grant most graciously to a lost traveler who has been caught in the rain, opportunity for a little rest. I am really an ordinary mortal, and no water-sprite, as my outward appearance would certainly lead you to suppose. May I come closer?"

"Just stay where you are at the door!" sounded from out of the corner. "Water-sprites and the little people of the wood cannot bear one another you know, I suppose, from the fairy-tales."

"Is that so? Well, then, nothing is left for me, but to come forward with all my human attributes, such as, name, rank, family, and other earthly props. So: Count Eckardstein, lieutenant of infantry, brother of the hereditary lord of Eckardstein, to which place I am now on my way. At Radefeld I sent my carriage on ahead, in order to take that beautiful walk through the Odensburg forests, when lo! these pitiless clouds resolved to empty themselves on my devoted head. Thence come my watery habiliments, laying me open to so vile a suspicion, but it is the only fairy-like thing about me--may I regard myself as sufficiently introduced?"

"I believe so. His native place, then, may be congratulated upon seeing Count Victor again, after an absence of six years?"

The young Count started, and, despite the prohibition, impulsively drew a few steps nearer. "Do you know me?"

"Dryads are all-knowing."

"But they do not remain invisible after they have once lowered themselves to converse with mortals. Am I actually, then, not to be permitted to see what is hidden under that gray wrap?" As he uttered these last words, he made a new attempt to get a near look at the face of that mysterious being, but in vain, for, a rosy little hand that suddenly became visible, drew the hood down so low that nothing but the tip of a nose could be discerned, and again sounded that low, mocking laugh, that rippled like the twittering of larks.

"Guess, Count!"

"Impossible, how can I? I know nobody at Eckardstein or rather at Odensburg, for we are still on Odensburg land."

He paused, as if waiting for an answer, but he only heard repeated that:

"Guess!"

Count Victor perceived that he would not carry his point in this way, but the clear laugh and voice betrayed to him the fact that it must be a very young girl, who played "hide-and-seek" with him in this way. There was a gleam of haughtiness in his eye, as, with a deep bow and apparent earnestness he said:

"Indeed, I believe I do recognize now the voice and also the figure--I have the honor of standing in the presence of the Honorable Miss Corona Von Schmettwitz?"

This expedient served his purpose; quick as a wink the dryad suddenly darted forth from her dark corner, the hood flew back, and while her fair hair, released from confinement, flowed in rich light waves over the gray mantle, there appeared also Maia's shapely head and sweet innocent face, that, at this moment, indeed, was crimsoned by anger.

Corona von Schmettwitz, indeed! That forty-year-old canoness, with high shoulders and grating voice! She to look so, indeed! She to talk that way! She cast a withering look upon the Count.

He could have had no idea that the gray mantle concealed anything so lovely, for, motionless, he gazed in blank astonishment upon the young girl, whose bright appearance shone like a sunbeam in that gloomy environment. At the first instant, he evidently did not recognize her, but then a remembrance dawned upon him, and, almost shouting for joy, he exclaimed:

"Little Maia!--I beg your pardon, Fräulein Dernburg, that was but a memento of the days of our childhood!"

Maia laughed merrily. "Yes, then I wore short-clothes and long, long plaits, by which you always used to hold me fast. But now I am angry, Count, very angry--you took me for Corona von Schmettwitz."

"A stratagem of war, for which you must pardon the soldier. By no other means could I have learned the truth. Or, do you seriously believe that I could mistake you for that lady, whom even as a boy I used to stand in such dread of, that I regularly ran away, when she was seen coming to Eckardstein?--How, still angry with your brother's former playfellow? He has often enough been yours as well."

"Yes, indeed, you did often condescend to play with 'little Maia,'" pouted she, while she threw back her hair, that was not yet perfectly dry. "The name is the only thing that you have retained."

"Yes, but I did retain something else," said the young Count slowly, while his eye was riveted upon that lovely little face. "Else I should not have immediately recognized you, when the gray mantle fell. At any rate, I should have gone to Odensburg within the next few days. Eric is at home, as I hear?"

"Yes, and he is engaged to be married! I suppose you have hardly heard of that yet?"

"Yes, I got an announcement of his betrothal, and must present to him my congratulations. I have, in general, so much to ask and hear, having become almost an entire stranger at home, and now we just have time--"

"We have no time at all," cried Maia, with a glance at the still half-open door. "Only see how it has cleared, and the rain has ceased. I believe the storm is over."

Count Victor stepped to the door and examined the clouds, but with an air that betrayed great disappointment. He had complained awhile ago of the pitiless shower-bath to which he had been exposed, but now he seemed to find the clearing up of the weather a greater infliction by far.

"Yes, the rain has stopped, to be sure, but it will soon begin again," said he hopefully. "At all events, we must wait until the next shower is over."

"Just to be shut up here for good by the rain?" remarked Maia. "No, I mean to take advantage of the lull and run to Odensburg as fast as I can. Come, Puck, let's run!"

"Then I'll run with you," laughed the Count. "So, Puck is the name of the little white creature that wanted to deny me the hospitality of the lodge. Come here, yelper, and let us make acquaintance."

Puck had scrutinized the stranger in the beginning with very critical mien, and, evidently, had not yet made up his mind whether to treat him as friend or foe, but now decided favorably. When the young man invited him to approach, he trustfully came nearer, and allowed himself to be stroked.

Thus the three set out sociably together on the way back. The rain had certainly ceased, but the wind raged in full force while they crossed the clearing, and after they had gained the shelter of the forest, the swaying tree-tops performed a little after-piece that well represented a driving rain, while such a dripping and drizzling came from every branch! And the somewhat low-lying foot-path had been converted into a running brooklet, so that Maia and her escort had to make their way sideways over moss and the roots of trees. The forest-stream itself was very much swollen, and had inundated the shore on both sides of the high bridge. They had to attempt a passage, leaping from rock to rock. In doing this Puck lost his balance, slid into the water, and howled piteously because he could not swim in the vortex. Maia, who already stood upon the bank, uttered also a shriek of anguish at sight of her pet's distress, and Count Eckardstein jumped with both feet into the water, seized the floundering creature, and brought it to his mistress, who bestowed a grateful look upon the gallant rescuer. Finally, in the middle of the woods, a wild apple-tree was discovered in full bloom, which drew from the young girl a shout of rapture and gave the Count an opportunity to display his skill as an athlete. But, alas! he was left hanging to a bough from which he had broken a branch, and came to the ground again, with a gaping slit in his sleeve.

It was a course full of adventure. The two young wanderers cheerfully breasted the storm, laughed brightly when a gust of wind tore through the trees, and sprinkled them freshly and heavily with rain, ever good-humoredly they jumped and climbed over stones and stumps and prostrate trunks of trees, always the better pleased the more impassable proved the woods. There was an endless laughing and talking, questioning and answering. All the old memories of childhood and youth came trooping back as lively as ever. Gray mist was hovering closely over the fir-trees, and dark clouds chased each other across the sky, but over these two children of men arched the clear sunshine of youth and happiness. What cared they for wind and weather!

At last the Odensburg park was reached, that almost immediately adjoined the wooded mountain. Maia was just going up to the little wicket-gate, through which she had gone out of bounds a few hours ago, when it was suddenly opened and Oscar von Wildenrod excitedly confronted her.

"But, Maia, how could you go out alone in such weather--?" He suddenly broke off, and with marked surprise looked up and down her escort, of whom he had just caught sight.

Maia, who had again drawn her hood over her head and hung her ruined hat on her arm, laughed defiantly. "You thought, did you, that Puck and I would have been drowned in that water-spout. No, here we both are, safe and sound, and have even found company on the way. I believe you gentlemen are not acquainted. Count Victor von Eckardstein--Baron von Wildenrod, a connection of my brother Eric."

Wildenrod responded with a certain reserve to the friendly greeting of the stranger, who said

laughingly:

"I am glad to make your acquaintance, Baron, although you find me in this soaked condition. I am accustomed to be drier, I assure you, but really I was not prepared for an introduction to-day. I only meant to escort Fräulein Dernburg to the park-gate and then take my leave."

"Will you not stop long enough to see Papa and Eric?" asked Maia.

"No, no, Fräulein Dernburg, I should not like to appear before the Dernburg family in such attire as this. But I am coming very soon--if I may!"

As he spoke these last words, his eyes sought those of the young girl, who coquettishly said: "Are you afraid that I shall forbid it you?"

"Who knows? Water-sprites and dryads do not agree, I had to hear a while ago from your own mouth. Nevertheless, I shall venture it. Meanwhile, I beg of you to accept this token of peace from me. You know how hardly it has been obtained." With a slight bow he handed her the blossom-laden bough, that he still carried in his hand.

Wildenrod listened silently, but he gazed fixedly upon the pair. The tone of familiarity seemed to surprise him in the highest degree, and upon the Count's now taking his leave, he only bowed his head with cool civility, spoke a few words just as coolly, and then quickly followed Maia into the park, letting the wicket gate slam to behind them.

"You seem to be very well acquainted with that gentleman," he remarked, while they struck into the path leading to the house.

"Oh, certainly," answered his companion, without the least embarrassment. "Count Victor used to be a playmate of Eric's, when they were boys, and he used often enough to let me join in their sports. I was very glad to meet him again after the lapse of six years."

"Ah, indeed!" said the Baron slowly. He turned around, and with a peculiar glance scanned the form of the Count, who was just disappearing between the trees, while Maia innocently chatted on:

"If I can only slip into my own room unobserved--Papa will be angry if he sees me."

"Yes, indeed, he will scold," said Wildenrod with emphasis, "and I should like to do the same. I had gone into the park to look for you when that storm burst forth, and I heard from the gardener that you had already been for an hour somewhere in the woods. How imprudent! Did you not think how uneasy the people at home would be about you?--that I would be distressing myself?"

The reproachful tone of this question called a bright blush to the young girl's face. "Oh, that was altogether uncalled for. Here in Odenburg every workman and child knows me."

"Never mind, you should never again venture forth so far without attendance. You promise me this, do you not, Maia? And as a pledge that you will keep your word, I ask this of you."

As though in sport, he caught at the blooming branch, but Maia looked at him, half-shocked and half-indignant.

"My branch? No, why?"

"Because I ask you for it."

The request sounded like a demand, and this must have awakened Maia's pride. With a decided gesture of repulse, she drew back a step.

"No, Herr von Wildenrod. I'll not give up my blossoms."

A flash of angry surprise shot from the Baron's eyes: he had not believed the child capable of such decided opposition to *his* will, and it was precisely this that goaded him into having his way, at any price.

"Do you attach so great value to it?" he asked, with bitter scorn. "The Count seemed to do so too. Perhaps this 'pledge of peace' has some secret significance for you both?"

"A jest, nothing more! Victor is an old playmate----"

"And I am a stranger to you! Is that what you would say, Maia? I understand."

At these words, spoken with intense bitterness, the brown eyes were lifted to his in a shocked and pleading manner. "Oh, no, Herr Von Wildenrod, I did not mean that--Oh, certainly not."

"No? And yet you speak of 'Victor' and immediately grant him a renewal of the former familiar relations. I have been, and still am, nothing to you but 'Herr Von Wildenrod.' How often have I begged you to call me by my first name, just for once. I have never yet heard it from your lips."

Maia gave no reply, there she stood motionless, with glowing cheeks and downcast eyes; but

still she felt the fervent glance that rested upon her.

"Is it so hard for you to give me a name, that the future family connection has nevertheless the right to claim? Is it really so hard? Well, I will be content to forego my claim when others are present, but now, that we are alone, I must and shall hear it ... Maia!"

The delay of another second, and then it came, softly and tremblingly, from her lips: "Oscar!"

A gleam of transporting joy lighted up the man's dark features, and he made an impetuous movement, as though he would draw to his heart the young girl who stood before him, shy and trembling. But he controlled himself; only he seized and clasped firmly her quivering little hand.

"At last! And now that other, the second request."

"Herr Von Wildenrod----"

"The branch, Maia, which another gave to you, and which I, therefore, *will* not leave in your hands. Please give it to me?"

Maia resisted no longer. Powerless beneath the ban of those eyes and that voice, she held out to him the blooming bough.

"Thanks!" said Oscar softly. It was only a single word, but it had the sound of tenderness with difficulty restrained.

Now Miss Friedberg was seen at the open window of the house, which the two were now approaching, and, with clasped hands, she expressed her horror at seeing her pupil in such a plight.

"Maia, for heaven's sake tell me, have you actually been abroad in this weather? How you do look! Be quick, take off that wet mantle--you will catch your death of cold!"

"Yes, I should give her the same advice," said Oscar, smiling. "Quick, quick, go in the house!"

The girl slipped off with a passing nod. Wildenrod slowly followed her, but stood still in the garden-hall, and his brow darkened again as he looked at the blossom-laden bough in his hand. For the first time he realized that the success of his wooing might be imperiled by delay, and yet he knew that he durst not speak as yet. He did not yet stand firm enough in the favor of Dernburg, who could hardly be brought to give up his darling to a man so much older than herself, without further inducement, nor was he as yet sure even of Maia. An unwise word here, spoken prematurely, might spoil everything. And just at this crisis had to start up most provokingly this Count Eckardstein, who had lost not a minute's time in laying claim to his old footing of the familiar friend of childish days!

For a few moments Wildenrod stood lost in dark forebodings, then he drew himself up with a jerk, and in his eyes again flamed proud, triumphant self-confidence. Good--Maia was not to be won without a struggle--he was not the one to shun it. How pusillanimous, to doubt gaining the victory over that young coxcomb with his smooth face! Let him beware of crossing his path!

At the window of her own room stood Maia, who had not yet laid off her wet mantle, nor was even conscious that she still wore it. She gazed up at the cloud-beleaguered sky, with a strange dreamy look upon her face, and a slight, happy smile played about her lips.

Forgotten was the meeting in the forest-lodge, banished the form of her old playmate--she only saw one thing--those deep, dark eyes, the look that had woven such a spell upon her spirit, she only heard that subdued voice, thrilling with restrained passion. It was a sweet, disturbing dream,--a feeling, of which she did not herself know whether it portended woe or bliss.

CHAPTER IX.

THE CROSS ON THE WHITE STONE.

Spring had fully come. Through storm and cold, through frost and fog, it had victoriously fought its way through, and awakened the earth everywhere to a new and sunny life.

A solitary wanderer was vigorously climbing upward through the green woods. It was still early in the day: the forest still-rested in deep bluish gray shadow, while heavy and moist lay the

dew upon the mossy ground. Only the voices of individual birds sounded through the stillness of morning, and the tree-tops rustled and sighed as they bowed before the wind.

Egbert Runeck was on his way to the Whitestone, wanting to keep his word and examine the condition of the cross up there himself. Now he emerged from the woods, coming out upon a small elevated plateau, while just in front of him towered the mighty wall of cliff. Naked and steep it reared its crest above the dark fir-trees that fringed its base. The whole upper part was wildly cleft and riven, here only a few dwarf pines and stunted bushes were rooted in the fissures. From the summit a gigantic cross was visible to a great distance, identifying the mountain for all beholders.

That high, solitary peak played a chief part in the legends of the region round about. Already its name was linked with the world of fairies and elves that once had their mysterious being in these mountain-forests, and still survived in the superstitions of the people. The Whitestone concealed buried treasures, that, slumbering deep within its rock-bound caves, waited for release, and already many a one had paid the penalty of death for meddling with its secrets. Only the almighty *Springwürzel*^[1] opens these locked-up depths.

"He takes from night and darkness
Their treasures, hidden deep,
And he those jewels sparkling
And all that gold may keep."

How strange! Those words kept ringing in the ears of the man who stood on the edge of the mountain-meadow. It was the last stanza of an old popular ballad, that he too had been familiar with in childhood, but had long since forgotten. For him there were no longer hidden treasures, for him the depths were empty and dead, and yet that song kept ringing incessantly in his soul, but rather the voice from which he had last heard it. He hated at the bottom of his heart that beautiful syren who had ensnared by her wiles the friend of his youth, and now was to be mistress of Odensburg, but he could not rid himself of the entrancing sound of that voice, of the demoniacal charm of those eyes, and no labor, no exertion of will-power availed for his deliverance.

He crossed, over the mountain meadow, and, looking up, scrutinized the Whitestone. The weight of the winter's snows and the latest storms of spring might very well have shaken its foundations, and yet it seemed to stand firm and sure. But suddenly Egbert started, his foot seemed rooted to the spot, while his gaze clung spell-bound, to the top of the peak. Something was stirring up yonder; he saw the outlines of a bright form, that were clearly defined--his sharp eye recognized them in spite of the distance.

It had been no mere boast then, no passing whim, the madcap had really undertaken the adventure, and, undertaken it alone, as it seemed! Egbert's brow contracted, yet, for him to retrace his steps was not to be thought of--he, too, had almost certainly been already seen. He grasped his staff, then, and slowly began to climb.

The path that from here upward led to the crag certainly required a steady head and a fearless heart. It was a sort of hunter's track, that wound along close to the steep precipice, and the view of the awful depths below was always left open. At times it would vanish entirely, and then one would be forced to look out a path for himself, until the beaten track after a while again became visible.

The young engineer had lost the imperturbable coolness, with which he usually accomplished such a climb, often he stopped, his foot slipped, and he had consumed much more time than usual when he finally reached the top. There before him stood Cecilia Wildenrod, flooded by the bright light of morning, radiant in beauty and overweening pride.

"See there, Herr Runeck, we meet on the summit of the Whitestone! You have taken your time for the climb--I came faster!"

"I know the danger of the way," answered Egbert, composedly, "and therefore do not challenge it."

"Danger? I did not think of that! You thought I would not dare to follow this path, or, at best give up and go back in five minutes. What say you now?"

She gave him a challenging glance,--now, at last, a word of admiration must come from those stern lips! But there came only the cool counter-question:

"Do they know of your expedition at Odensburg, noble lady?"

"Why, no!" cried the young lady laughing. "Then they would have confined me to the house or at least set a guard over my going out and coming in. I set off this morning betimes, while they were all asleep, slipped away secretly, had the horses hitched up and drove to Crownwood. From there the road can hardly be missed, and, you see I have found it."

"Alone? That was more than incautious! If you had made a false step, if you had fallen, no help was at hand and then----"

"Dear me? Do not you begin to preach at me," interrupted she impatiently. "I shall hear enough of lectures when I get back to Odensburg."

"I have neither the purpose nor the right to preach to you, Fräulein von Wildenrod, that is for Eric to do, if any one."

"And he is the very last from whom I would take it."

"What, not from your future husband?"

"Just on that very account. I have made up my mind to rule in the establishment."

"That would not be hard to do in this case, Eric is of a gentle, yielding temper. He will never try to resist you."

"Resist?" repeated Cecilia, provoked and amused at the same time. "You seem to consider our marriage as on a war-basis--a flattering compliment to me."

"I beg pardon, if I now inspect the cross," said Egbert, interrupting the Baroness. "I came up here, solely on that account, you know. The thing is to hinder the possibility of an accident, the results of which might be fatal."

Cecilia bit her lip at this rejection of the confidential tone, which she had found good to adopt, and an angry glance was hurled at the man who dared to treat her thus.

Cecilia looked silently on as Runeck proceeded to the cross, which stood on the extreme verge of the precipice upon the side facing the valley, and tested it. He did this thoroughly and scientifically, and probably ten minutes elapsed ere he turned around again.

"Those gentlemen were mistaken," said he quietly. "The cross is standing perfectly firm and secure, and there is no fear of its falling. Perhaps you will have the goodness to report this at Odensburg. I shall not get there until day after to-morrow, and I take it for granted that you have no idea of making a secret of your adventure."

"On the contrary, I am fully purposed to boast freely of it. Do not look so astounded, Herr Runeck. You see this lace veil does not exactly belong to my tourist's equipment: I have brought it with me on purpose to prove that I really have been on the top of the Whitestone. I could have no idea that I should meet you here, and did not therefore calculate upon having your testimony to the feat." And so saying Cecilia loosened the white veil, that was flung loosely around her shoulder and waist, and advanced towards the cross.

"What are you going to do with it?" asked Egbert, looking after her in surprise.

"I have already told you,--to leave behind, a token, so that they may believe at Odensburg, that I actually performed the achievement. My veil is to wave from the cross yonder."

"For what? It is rashness, foolhardiness! Come back, please!"

His call sounded commanding, frenzied, but Cecilia paid no heed to it. Standing immediately on the verge of the precipice, she flung her veil around the cross. It was an agonizing spectacle--one single incautious movement, and she would lie crushed at the base.

"Fräulein von Wildenrod, come back! I implore you!" The voice of the young engineer was muffled and full of emotion. He seemed to suffer the agonies of a life-time in that moment.

Cecilia turned around and smiled. "Can you really beg, Herr Runeck? I am coming directly, only one more look into that chasm, which has its fascination for me." And, with her arm slung around the cross, she actually bent over the abruptly precipitous wall of rock, and looked fearlessly down.

Egbert involuntarily took one step forward, his arm quivered, as though he would drag her away by force from her dangerous position. He did not, however, but every drop of blood seemed to have left his face, when she finally left her place and came to him again.

"Do you believe now in my fearlessness?" she asked, tauntingly.

"That rash sport was really not necessary to convince me of it," said he harshly, and yet he drew a sigh of relief, when he once more saw the foolhardy girl on firm ground. "A misstep on that spot and you would have been lost!"

She recklessly shrugged her shoulders. "I never get dizzy, and just wanted for once to feel that deliciously thrilling sensation of standing up there, close over the precipice. One feels something like a demoniacal drawing to the bottom, it is as though one must rush to destruction, whether or no. Have you ever felt anything like it?"

"No," said Egbert coldly. "One must have a great deal of-time, to indulge themselves in such feelings."

"Which you deem objectionable."

"Unhealthy, to say the least. He who needs his life for work, knows how to prize it, and risks it only at the call of duty."

This reproof sounded very rude, and if it had come from the lips of any other person, Cecilia would probably have turned her back upon the "insolent creature," in silent contempt. Here she said nothing, for a minute perhaps, and at the same time scanned the sunburnt countenance of the young man, that had not by any means recovered its color as yet. Then she smiled again. "Thanks for the lesson. We just do not understand one another, Herr Runeck."

"I have told you so already--we belong to two different worlds----"

"And yet we stand so near together on the narrow space furnished by Whitestone's crest," mocked Cecilia. "As for the rest, I have enjoyed this unique pleasure long enough. I must go down now."

"Then permit me to attend you! The descent is far more dangerous than the ascent, and I could not answer to Erie for letting you go alone."

"To Eric? That indeed!" Her lips curled haughtily at the mention of her betrothed; then she cast a look up at the cross, where the loose hanging ends of the veil were fluttering in the morning breeze.

"That old weather-beaten cross has never been dressed up so before! I present it to the guardian spirits of the Whitestone; may be, out of gratitude, they will open their caverns to me and give me a sight of their buried treasures."

With a light laugh she turned to go. Silently Runeck led the way. He was right, the greater danger lay in the descent.

From time to time, at especially critical places, he exhorted her to be cautious, with a few words, or by a movement of the arm offered his assistance, which, however, was not accepted. His beautiful companion walked along over the giddy, steep path, as carelessly as over the smoothest of roads. Her light foot carried her over the rubble-stones, where Egbert's heavier tread found no good hold, and where there was climbing or leaping to do, with the help of her staff, she would swing herself from rock to rock. There was a bewitching grace in every moment of her slender white form, although, at the same time, that bold rash sport with danger that sets foresight at defiance.

They had already accomplished the greatest part of the way, already the bright green of the little mountain meadow was smiling a welcome, when Cecilia heedlessly again set her foot upon a loose rubble-stone, but this time it gave way, and rolled into the chasm; she lost her balance, tottered, stumbled--now the horrible instant of her fall, a loud shriek of dismay, then it grew dark before her eyes.

But the next second she was seized and held. Flinging his stout staff from him, Egbert had turned around as quick as lightning, and propping himself with gigantic strength against the cliff, he caught up the girl's trembling form and convulsively held her tight in his arms.

Cecilia had hardly lost her consciousness for more than a minute, almost immediately it was restored to her, and her large, dark eyes were shyly lifted up to her deliverer's face, that was bent over her. She saw that it was deadly pale, saw the expression of unspeakable agony upon his usually cold features, and felt the wild, stormy beating of the heart against which her head rested! *She* was the one who had been in peril, but upon *his* countenance was stamped the agony of death!

Thus they tarried awhile, motionless, when Runeck slowly let his arm drop. "Rest upon my shoulder," said he softly. "Right firmly--look not to the right nor left, only upon the path in front of you--I am holding you."

He picked up his staff and then put his right arm about her, so as best to give her support. Cecilia passively obeyed; that horrible danger, the nature of which she now, for the first time, realized, had broken her spirit of opposition; she still trembled in every limb and her head swam. Thus they slowly continued the descent. That light, delicate figure could hardly have been felt as a burden by so strong a man, and yet his breath came quickly and heavily, and a dark flush glowed upon his cheek.

Finally, the solid ground was reached, and they stood in the meadow. All the way down they had exchanged not a single word, but now Cecilia straightened herself up. She was still pale, but she tried to smile as she offered her hand to the man who had saved her life.

"Herr Runeck--I thank you."

There was a strange ring in those words, something that told of a genuinely warm heart and overflowing gratitude, but Egbert only touched lightly the proffered hand, and immediately let it drop again.

"I deserve no thanks, lady. I would have done the same service to any other whom I had seen in such peril. When you have recovered somewhat from your fright, I shall conduct you to Crownwood, where you said you had left your carriage and horses. Even that is tolerably far."

Cecilia looked at him in surprise, almost in dismay. Was that the same man, who had awhile ago bent over her in such tender solicitude, whose whole being had quivered in wild, feverish excitement as he had borne rather than led her down the mountain? There stood he before her, with stolid features, speaking with the same old calm composure, as though the memory of those last fifteen minutes had already been expunged from his memory. But they had been, nevertheless--a pair of dark eyes had looked into depths hitherto strongly locked up and knew not what it concealed.

"Do you take me to be so cowardly, that I tremble for hours over a danger surmounted?" asked Cecilia softly. "I am only tired from the difficulties of the walk and my feet pain me; I must rest for a quarter of an hour."

She let herself down under a tall fir-tree, the moss-covered roots of which offered a natural resting-place. She was indeed exhausted and over-fatigued, it was easy to see, but her companion had not a word of commiseration to spare her. He seemed to have but one wish, and that was to give up his office as guide as quickly as possible.

The mountain-meadow, with its sunny green, shone bright in contrast with the dark forests. Behind it loomed up the Whitestone, while in front an extensive view of the mountains was afforded. The landscape had nothing of the bright smiling beauty of the south, nor the overpowering grandeur of the Alps, but there rested upon it a peculiar charm, dreamy and melancholy as its legendary world.

Deep down lay the valleys, wrapt in bluish shadows, while the heights round about were flooded by bright sunshine, and over the valleys and hills spread an infinite expanse of green forest, out of which, only here and there, a bare wall of rock emerged, or a brook plunged wildly downward, splashing and foaming as it went. Mysteriously, as though from a far distance, came the sighing of the wind through the trees, swelling ever stronger and stronger, and then sinking again, dying away like a long-drawn sigh.

And yet other sounds were borne upon the breeze from the depths below. It was a Sunday morning and the churches of all the little villages scattered through the woods were calling to the service of God. Everywhere bells were ringing, one here sounded clear and full, another there low and sweet, mingling, as it died away, with the rustling of the trees.

Cecilia had taken off her hat and leaned against the trunk of the tree. Egbert stood a few steps apart, but his eyes hung upon her, as though riveted there by some wizard's spell. It availed nothing for him to forcibly resist; again they returned to feast themselves upon her captivating beauty, that graceful form clad in a simple white woolen gown, or that shining hair, which to-day was only lightly brushed back, and, held by a silver pin, fell loose on her neck. Her appearance was quite different from what Egbert had ever seen it before--so much lovelier--so much more dangerous!

For minutes had the silence lasted, when Cecilia looked up and asked in a low voice:

"And you are not going to scold me at all?"

"I? Why should I?"

"Why, you have good right to be angry with me, since, through my folly, your life, too, was exposed to imminent peril. I missed, by a hair's-breadth, dragging you down with me into that abyss--I am ashamed of myself."

This was uttered pleadingly, almost timidly--the tone was a strange one from that mouth. A dark flush appeared upon Egbert's brow, but his voice was as cold and distant as ever.

"You were not aware of the danger, but will not be so rash again."

"Will you not accept of my apology, but treat it as you did my thanks?" asked Cecilia reproachfully. "You have saved my life at the risk of your own--but at this moment you actually look as if you bitterly repent of it."

"I?" exclaimed Egbert vehemently.

"Yes, you! You stand there with an air that seems to say, you must defend yourself against an enemy in deadly fray. Against whom, pray? Only I am here!"

Again there was that roaring and rushing in the woods. It drew on above the hills like the waving of invisible giant-wings, and fuller and stronger sounded the church-bells from below. The whole air was instinct with sound, it seemed to soar on the sunbeams, and to swim and to shape themselves into a marvelous song, that at first sounded only in single detached chords, and then gradually changed to a melody that seemed mysterious but infinitely sweet, and both to shout and to lament.

True, those two up yonder, on that solitary, sunlit mountain-meadow, belonged to two different worlds.--it is true that a deep chasm parted them in all their thoughts and feelings. But the vain, spoiled child of fashionable society, who hitherto had only lived in a whirl of gayety, in an eternal chase after pleasure, to whom, heretofore, solitude had been synonymous with unbearable *ennui*--she now listened to that sweet, strange dream, like one lost in reverie. And the man, too, to whom hard work had never allowed time for meditation and dreams, in vain resisted the magical influence. He was wont to stand firm on the soil of reality, in the broad daylight, and to look into life with cool and penetrating vision--into a life full of toil and strife, full of hard, irreconcilable contrasts. He was made for this. What to him were the fantastic dreams of the world of the imagination? And yet now they held him fast within their toils, and through the midst of it all, with captivating sweetness, echoed a human voice:

"Against whom are you defending yourself? Only I am here."

Egbert drew his hand across his forehead, as though he would arouse himself forcibly from this dreamy state.

"I beg your pardon, Baroness Wildenrod," said he. "I was thinking of unpleasantnesses that I had had with my men at Radefeld. One like me, who has his work forever on his mind, is but poor company, as you see."

"Have I asked to be entertained by you?" asked Cecilia, with slight reproof in her accent. "Eric is right, you are as hard as your native rocks, rugged and inaccessible as the Whitestone itself. If one believes, that at last the magical word has been found, if the deep opens for one brief instant, the very next it closes, and a sealed surface of cold stone confronts the seeker."

Runeck made no reply. He had not idly dreaded this interview: he knew that he had betrayed himself in that moment of deadly peril and agony untold!

And his adversary, who had now learned to know her power, was inexorable and wanted to enjoy her triumph at any price. It had cost her trouble enough to impose her chains upon this brave, proud man--chains which all others were so glad and willing to wear; now he was conquered, and she wanted to see him, too, at her feet.

"Eric bitterly laments that he sees so little of you now," she began again. "If you come to Odensburg--and you *must* come sometimes--you confine yourself exclusively to his father's work-room and decline every invitation to join the family circle. Your engagements at Radefeld furnish you with the pretext for this mode of procedure, but I know better what keeps you away.--It is my presence and my brother's."

"Mein Fräulein----"

"Do not attempt to deny it. From the very first minute, I have been conscious of the mute hostility that you bear to us, and have often enough asked myself why--I have never found an answer to my question."

"Then ask Herr von Wildenrod, he will give you that answer."

The tone of his voice should have warned Cecilia, it sounded hollow and threatening, but she paid no heed to it.

"Something happened to make you dislike one another that time you first met, did it not? I have suspected it! But since then years have elapsed. Oscar has long forgotten the affair, as you have heard from himself. Will you alone be so implacable? And may I not know what happened then--will you not tell me, too?"

Her voice sounded yet softer and sweeter than before; her large, dark eyes were lifted imploringly to the man, who clearly felt how the net was being drawn closer and closer about him, how will and power were succumbing to the flattering sounds of that voice, as clearly he also suspected that the beautiful soulless creature there by his side was only playing a contemptible game with him and feeling nothing but the triumph of vanity. Then he rallied his forces with a last desperate resolve to burst his chains.

"Do you speak as commissioned by Herr von Wildenrod, Baroness?" he asked, with such terrible bitterness, that the young lady started and looked at him in surprise.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, that for the Baron much depends upon his learning what I really know, and his sister may well seem to him the tool well fitted for the purpose."

Cecilia rose to her feet, shocked and excited. Although these words were perfectly unintelligible to her, so much she did understand, that the matter involved here was something very different from the expected conquest. This was not the language of a man upon whose lips hovered a declaration of love. Something like hatred and contempt flashed upon her from his eyes.

"I do not understand you, Herr Runeck," said she, with rising warmth, "but I have a feeling that you insult me and my brother. Now, I *will* know, what happened that time between you two, and you are to tell it me!"

"Should that really be necessary?" asked he, cuttingly. "Herr von Wildenrod will have sufficiently instructed you. Well, then, tell him I know more of his past, than might be pleasant to him!"

Cecilia turned pale; her eyes, too, flashed threateningly, the same lurid light burning in them as in the glance of her brother when he was provoked.

"What does that mean?" cried she, trembling from excitement. "To whom do your words refer? Beware, lest Oscar call you to account!"

Her warning came too late, producing not the slightest effect upon Egbert, whose nervous system had been subjected to great strain, through the silent, torturing conflict, which he had been waging for months. He was intensely excited. Had he been the calm and collected man of earlier days, he would not have spoken, at least not at this hour and this place; he would have spared in Cecilia, the woman. But now there fermented within him only that wild desire after revenge upon her who had stolen his soul from him, who, syren-like, had chained to herself all his thoughts and feelings, and whom he believed that he hated, wanted to hate, because he despised her. If he should now inflict a deadly insult upon her, if he should open a gulf between them that no bridge could span--no word nor look cross--that would bring deliverance, break the spell, then an end would be put to it!

"Baron von Wildenrod is to call me to account, is he?" cried he, with bitter scorn. "The thing might shape itself differently. I have hitherto been silent, had to be silent, for my own conviction, however firm it might stand, would go for nothing against Eric's passion and his father's sense of justice. They will demand proofs, and I have them not at present. But I shall know how to find them, and then my forbearance ceases."

"Are you out of your senses?" interposed Cecilia, but he continued with increasing vehemence.

"Eric may possibly bleed to death from the wound that I must inflict upon him, but this is a blow that must strike him sooner or later. Better that it should happen now, when there is still room for retreat, when he is not yet chained to a woman who will risk his love and happiness as awhile ago she did her own life, making sport of them as she has hitherto done of all who came near to her. You are your brother's sister, Baroness Wildenrod, and have doubtless been taught by him how cards are shuffled. He and you already feel yourselves to be the owners of Odensburg; do not triumph too soon! You do not yet bear the name of Dernburg, and ere it comes to that, I shall stake everything upon guarding that name and Odensburg from becoming the prey of two--adventurers!"

The horrible word was out, and Cecilia shrank as though she had been struck. Pale as a ghost, incapable of speech, she stared at the man, whom she had fancied to be enthralled by her charms, and who now suddenly stood unmasked as a pitiless foe. She did not perceive the fierce pain, almost amounting to delirium, that raged in his soul and carried him away beyond all the bounds of discretion, knew not that every one of those words, that he hurled so crushingly at her, bit himself with tenfold force; she only felt the deadly insult that he had inflicted upon her. Not until he ceased to speak, did she recover from that paralyzing shock.

"Ah, that is too much--too much! You heap up one slander, one insult upon the other. I do not know at what your insinuations point, but I do know that they are all lies, shameful lies, that you will have to render an account for!"

Here was such a glowing outburst of indignation, such stormy revolt against unmerited contumely, that it removed any doubt as to the truth of her words. Egbert, too, seemed to feel this, for in his dark, threatening eyes flashed something like a gleam of hope.

With an impulsive movement, he drew one step nearer.

"You do not understand me? Actually not? You are not your brother's confidante? Answer me!"

"No--no!" gasped Cecilia, still quivering from rage, but, against her will, constrained by the torturing suspense conveyed in that question.

Egbert looked at her, his glance seemed to penetrate her inmost soul, as though he would therein read the truth, then his chest heaved with a deep, deep sigh. "No," said he, dispiritedly, "You know nothing!"

There followed a long, trying pause. The ringing of bells in the valley had gradually ceased, only a single one softly sounding from a great distance. So much the louder roared the wind, wailing as though it bore bad tidings on its mighty wings.

"Then I have to beg your pardon," began Egbert again, his voice having a singularly veiled sound. "I do not take back my accusation against the Baron. Repeat to him word for word what I said, looking him in the eye, as you do so--perhaps you will then no longer rail against me as a

liar."

In spite of the subdued tone there was such terrible positiveness in these words, that Cecilia quaked. For the first time, a dread fear, a secret anguish, took possession of her. This Runeck looked as if he were ready to maintain the truth of his words in the face of the whole world. Only suppose that he had not spoken falsely--suppose--she cast the thought far from her, but nevertheless she turned faint and dizzy.

"Leave me!" said she, with quivering lips. "Go!"

Egbert's eye rested moodily upon her countenance, then he bowed his head.

"You cannot forgive the affront I gave you. I understand that. But, believe me, this has also been a trying hour for me--the most trying of my life!"

He went, and when Cecilia looked up, he had already disappeared among the trees, and she stood alone. High up on the cross of the Whitestone her veil was waving and fluttering, about her murmured the woods, and the last church-bell died softly away in the distance.

CHAPTER X.

MAIA'S CHOICE.

On the terrace of the Odenburg manor-house Eberhardt Dernburg and Oscar von Wildenrod were walking up and down, engaged in conversation. They had become absorbed in a political discussion, that was conducted with much animation on the part of the older gentleman, while the younger, contrary to his custom, appeared to be silent and abstracted. From time to time his glance would be directed to the large grassplot where Maia was playing croquet with Count Victor von Eckardstein.

"There will be a hot contest at this session of the Reichstag, as is plainly to be foreseen," Dernburg was just saying. "It is to be called together immediately after the elections and I must just make up my mind, to sacrifice the greatest part of the winter to my duties as a member."

"Do you calculate then, positively, upon being re-elected?" asked Wildenrod.

"Of course I do!" Dernburg looked at him in surprise. "I have been representing my electoral district for the past twenty years, and the Odenburg votes alone suffice to ensure my election."

"I was just going to ask you about that. Are you perfectly sure of those votes too? Much has altered in the last three years."

"Not with me," said Dernburg quietly. "My workmen and I have known each other for tens of years. I know that insurrectionary influences have been at work--insinuations and the like. Trying with all my might I have not been able to protect Odenburg from these, and perhaps here and there these whisperings may have found individuals who would listen; but the mass of my men stand fast by me."

"Let us hope so!" A slight doubt was perceptible in the voice of the Baron, who, in spite of his short stay, showed himself perfectly *au fait* with the situation of affairs. "The socialists in the region round about have been uncommonly active, preaching, agitating, and stirring up things generally, and in many an electoral district, the candidate who was perfectly sure of an overwhelming majority, awoke to unpleasant surprises."

"But here I stand--and I believe myself fully equal to cope with those gentlemen," said Dernburg with the quiet conviction of a man who feels that he occupies a position that is unassailable. Wildenrod was about to answer, when a joyous laugh rang forth from the playground, and thither his glance was forthwith directed.

They presented an attractive picture, those two slender young people with their graceful movements, their cheeks glowing from warmth and excitement. Each thought to get the better of the other, triumphing when the opposing side failed to hit the mark, and between whiles chasing and teasing one another with unrestrained glee, like a couple of children.

Dernburg's eye had followed the direction taken by his companion's glance, and his grave features were lit up by a fleeting smile.

"Those frolicksome children! One might certainly excuse my little Maia, with her sixteen years, for allowing her spirits to run away with her a little too much, but the Lieutenant seems to forget entirely that he is no longer a boy."

"I am afraid, that Count Eckardstein will never have the earnestness that becomes a man," said Wildenrod coolly. "He has an amiable but a very superficial nature."

"There you do him injustice! Victor is a scatterbrain--alas--and has many a time caused his parents anxiety by various mad pranks--some of which Odenburg could tell of--but he always kept his heart in the right place. He is no genius, but open and honorable and intelligent enough to make a splendid officer some day."

"So much the better," remarked the Baron. "For the Count and--for Maia."

Dernburg turned around and looked at him in amazement. "What do you mean by that?"

"For Maia!"

"An explanation would hardly seem to be needed. Count Eckardstein shows his wishes and designs plainly enough, and I am convinced that it did not cost him the least struggle to fall in with his brother's scheme."

"What scheme?" A fold appeared between Dernburg's brows as he put this question.

Wildenrod slightly shrugged his shoulders.

"Well, it seems that the young Count is something of a spendthrift. You admit yourself that he has always been that, and is dependent entirely upon his brother, to whom fell the family estate. That a wild young officer should incur debts is natural enough, but in this case the measure to be tolerated must have been transgressed, at least that was the view Count Conrad took of it. It is said that violent scenes were enacted between the brothers, and really one cannot blame the elder for planning an heroic remedy for his younger brother."

These words were well calculated: each one struck home, as was manifest, although Dernburg asked with apparent composure:

"And, pray, what might that remedy be?"

"A rich marriage! It is said that the young Count has come back, by the desire or command of his brother, to resume the relations with Odenburg, that had been long since dropped, in order to gain an end that is easily guessed. Do you wonder that I am so accurately informed with regard to this matter? An accident! When we were recently invited to Eckardstein, I overheard a conversation between two gentlemen, who, indeed, had no idea that I was in the next room, else they would not have spoken so freely on private matters. They seem to regard the alliance as already an accomplished fact."

Dernburg's brow grew darker and darker during the progress of this speech, but his voice had its wonted resonance, when he replied:

"Ere such a thing could be 'fact' I would have the last word to say, for Maia is hardly anything more than a child yet--certainly much too young for any talk about her marriage.--Why, Eric, here you are, but with such a despairing look upon your face! Has Cecilia not deigned to make her appearance yet?"

Eric, who had just now joined them, did indeed look anxious and excited. "No, indeed, not yet!" answered he in a worried tone. "I have been over to the stables to inquire, but nobody knows where she can have driven to. She had the pony-carriage gotten up very early this morning while all the rest of us were asleep, and took nobody with her but Bertram. I really do not understand it."

"It will turn out to be some caprice on her part," remarked Oscar. "Cecile is simply incalculable in her whims; you will have to get used to them, dear brother-in-law."

"I think Eric would do better to cure his future wife of this want of consideration," said Dernburg with some asperity. "It would not conduce to the happiness of a marriage."

Poor Eric did not look as if he had either the will or the inclination to break his betrothed of any habit. Wildenrod, however, quickly and soothingly suggested:

"Most likely some playful jest is at the bottom of it. I'll lay a wager that Cecile intends giving us a surprise by this mysterious expedition."

The game on the grass-plot, meanwhile, had gone on its way, now seeming to break up in a quarrel, which, however, was carried on by both sides good-humoredly, and finally ended in a reconciliation and a peal of laughter. Dernburg looked over at the pair anew, but no smile played upon his features now, and he called impatiently: "I should think, Maia, it was time to stop. Come to me, my child!"

Maia obeyed. Coming promptly, still heated as she was from the game, and Victor Eckardstein followed close behind her.

"I have a request to proffer to you in my brother's name, Herr Dernburg," said he in his open, cordial manner. "Conrad celebrates his birthday on Wednesday--there will be only a very limited number of guests, there, but the Odensburg family cannot be left out. May we count upon the pleasure of your company?"

This request was made in a tone which showed that the acceptance of the invitation was taken quite for granted. The answer, however, was very cool.

"I am sorry, Count Eckardstein, but we are expecting company ourselves from town on Wednesday, and shall have to perform the duty of hosts ourselves."

"Company? who, papa?" asked Maia in surprise, and with some curiosity. "I have not heard a word of it."

"Then you hear it now. At all events we regret that we cannot accept the invitation."

This declaration was made so positively, that any further discussion was precluded. Victor was silent, but the strangely cool tone struck him as well as the formal manner in which he was addressed, as Dernburg had always been in the habit of calling him by his first name. The young man's glance was involuntarily directed towards Wildenrod, as though he suspected he had been exerting some malign influence over his friend.

Such thoughts, however, are not apt to disturb young people for any length of time. Maia, with her merry talk, soon had the ball of conversation flying again, although Eric responded only in monosyllables and was as absent-minded as possible. He allowed himself, however, to be drawn by the other two into the conservatory, where two new orchids had just come into bloom.

On the terrace, silence reigned for a few minutes, then the Baron said in a muffled voice: "I should be sorry, if my report of the young count had injured him in your eyes, but circumstanced as we now are, I felt it to be my duty to speak."

Dernburg nodded approvingly. "Certainly, I thank you for it. As for the rest, I am not accustomed to condemn anybody upon the strength of mere gossip, but I shall find means to come at the truth in regard to the matter."

"Do so," said Wildenrod, with quiet assurance. "But as to Maia's too great youth, girls in our society often marry at that age, and if a man really engages her affections----"

"Engages in the pursuit of a rich heiress, forsooth, in order to settle up his affairs," remarked Dernburg with a bitterness which showed that the report had had its effect, nevertheless. "I shall guard my child against such a fate as that."

"It will not be easy to do, for a suitor must come forward who is free and independent, besides being rich enough himself to be exalted above the suspicion of interested motives. All others will have their eye upon your millions."

These words were thrown off with a certain premeditation, but Dernburg did not observe this.

"Not all!" said he, with emphasis. "I know one who's poor and possesses nothing but his brains--they count for much, though, and guarantee him a future. The path to wealth and independence was pointed out to him, all that he had to do was to stretch forth his hand, but in order to do this he had to sacrifice principle, and he did not go that way."

Oscar started, an uncomfortable suspicion being aroused in his mind. "Of whom are you speaking?"

"Of Egbert Runeck! Are you so much surprised. I have long since perceived that Eric would never be able, alone, to superintend at Odensburg, as must, some day, be his place to do--a man of my stamp is needed for that, and such an one is Egbert, who has not been brought up in my school for naught. But in Berlin, they caught him so fast in their Socialistic toils, that I almost despair of ever getting him loose."

"Have you really tried that, in spite of knowing--?"

"In spite of knowing everything--yes, I did, because I am convinced that some day his eyes will be opened--if it is only not too late for both of us."

Wildenrod's lips were tightly compressed, as though he wanted to force back an angry rejoinder, at last he said slowly: "Herr Dernburg, for the first time, I do not understand you."

"Maybe so, but you can always trust to this, that I shall not be the one to throw a firebrand into my Odensburg, with my own hand. If Egbert continues obstinate in his present convictions, then all is over between me and him. But he will not do so. Free course in life is what he needs, he will struggle and strive upward at any price: but also build up, create and finally be ruler over that which he has created. Such natures bend not lastingly under the yoke of a party that claims

blind obedience, allowing no scope to individuality, no mighty preponderance of the single mind. I am only afraid that he will come to his senses after he has thrust his happiness far from him. I offered it to him--but he sacrificed it to his mad fancies!"

The Baron must already stand very high in his future connection's good graces, for him to speak to him thus of things that he had not even broached to his son; but Oscar did not seem to be pleasantly affected by this proof of confidence. A threatening cloud was upon his brow, and a yet more threatening fire flashed from his eyes, as he said with a voice almost stifled by passion: "You overestimate your favorite greatly. But, never mind--you seem to hint at something--" he broke off.

"What then, Herr von Wildenrod?"

"I would do better not to express it, since it involves a sheer impossibility."

"Why so?" asked Dernburg irritably.

"Because Egbert is the son of a common laborer? His parents are dead, but even if they were living----"

"I am above such prejudices."

Wildenrod was silent, he did not look at the speaker but away over at the works. There was a disagreeable look upon his face.

"You are of a different opinion on that point, I see," began Dernburg again. "In you stir the feelings of the aristocrat, to whom such a thing appears unheard of. I think differently. I let Eric choose upon his own responsibility, but I shall have to stand sponsor for my daughter's happiness. My little Maia,"--the voice of the man usually so stern had a strangely tender intonation,--"she was given to me late, but she is the sunshine of my life. How often have the merry tones of her clear young voice and the light of her bright eyes lifted me out of despondency. She is not to be the prey of the fortune-hunter. She shall be beloved and happy--and so far I know only one person into whose hands I could commit her future without solicitude, for I am convinced that he loves her. He is not calculating, he has proved that to me!"

A peculiar pallor lay upon the Baron's face. Was it anger or shame that palpitated in his soul at those last words? At all events he was spared any answer, for at this moment a servant entered with the announcement that the director was in the work-room and wanted to speak with the master.

"On Sunday? It must be about something very important!" said Dernburg, as he turned to go. "But one thing more, Herr von Wildenrod--do not let what we just talked about go any farther than ourselves. Consider it as confidential."

He went into the house, leaving Oscar alone. Now he knew that he was unobserved, and his brow resembled a threatening thunder-cloud, as he leaned with folded arms on the parapet of the terrace. Here was a danger that he had not apprehended, and with which he had never calculated upon having to cope, but in contrast with which the looming up of Count Eckardstein, that had just now appeared to him so menacing, faded away to a mere shadow. Dernburg evidently had settled it in his own mind that an attachment existed between his daughter and that Runeck, the simpleton, who had sacrificed the high prize offered him to a mere chimera,--that so-called conviction. About Wildenrod's lips now played a scornful smile of conscious superiority. He knew better to whom Maia's love was given, he felt himself equal to the conquest of this new adversary also. And there must be no more delay and no more pausing to reflect, the thing was to act! Oscar drew himself up with a determined air, it was not the first time in his life, that he had played *va banque*, and here the stake was happiness and a future that promised him everything.

At the end of the extended grounds of Odensburg, where they bordered on the wooded mountain, lay the "Rose Lake," a small sheet of water, that took its name from the water-roses, with which its surface was covered in summer. Now, indeed, none of the white blossoms had opened, only the whispering reeds and sedge-grass edged its shores; a huge beech-tree stretched its branches over it, with its foliage of fresh and tender green, and a dense thicket of blooming shrubbery fenced it in on all sides. It was a snug and quiet retreat, made, as it were, for solitary dreams.

Upon a bench beneath the beech-tree sat Maia, her hands full of flowers that she had plucked on her way, and now wanted to arrange. But this task was not accomplished, for by her sat Oscar von Wildenrod, who had accidentally sought the same spot, and managed to fascinate her so by his conversational powers, that she forgot flowers and everything else in her absorption.

He spoke of his travels at the North and South, there was hardly a land in Europe that he was not acquainted with, and he was a masterly narrator. His descriptions shaped themselves into pictures, in which landscapes, people and events came forth as though living before the listener. Maia followed him in his narrative with breathless sympathy, it all sounded so strange and unreal

to her, whose world had hitherto been confined to the family circle.

"Oh! what have you not seen and experienced!" cried she admiringly. "What an entirely different sphere you moved in before you came to us at Odensburg!"

"Another, but not a better one," said Wildenrod earnestly. "It has, indeed, something blinding and intoxicating--this living in boundless freedom, with its perpetual change and fullness of impressions, and it blinded me, too, once upon a time, but that has long since past. There comes a day when one awakens from his intoxication, when one feels how hollow and empty and vain all this is, when one finds himself alone in that concourse of men and in that longed-for freedom--quite alone."

"But you have your sister!" Maia put in reproachfully.

"How long, though! In a few months she deserts me to belong to her husband, and I have a regular horror of going back to that empty and aimless existence. You have no idea, Maia, how I envy your father. He stands firmly and surely upon the foundation of his own labor and its results; to thousands he gives bread, and the blessings, love and admiration of all compass him about, and will follow him to the grave. When I sum up the results of my life--what is the remainder?"

Perplexed, almost shocked, Maia looked up at him who had uttered these bitter words. It was the first time that Wildenrod had adopted such a tone in her presence; she knew him as the brilliant man of the world, who, even when he approached her confidentially, always maintained the character of the elderly man, who conversed half-jocularly with the half-grown girl. To-day he spoke very differently, to-day he had let her have a glimpse of his inner life, and that overcame her shyness. "I have always thought that you were happy in that life, which seems lovely as a fairy-dream, when you tell about it," said she softly.

"Happy!" repeated he gloomily. "No, Maia, I have never been so, not for a day, nor for an hour."

"Yes, but--why did you lead that life so long?"

Oscar looked into those clear child-eyes, that looked up at him with earnest questioning in their depths, and involuntarily his eyes sought the ground.

"Why? Yes, why does one live at all? To win that happiness, of which they sing to us while we are still in our cradles, and of which we think in youth that it lies out in the wide world, in the dim blue distance. Restlessly, feverishly, we pursue it, ever thinking to attain to it, while it retreats farther and farther from us, until at last it fades away like a shadow until finally we give up the restless chase--and with it hope."

In spite of his strong effort to command himself, the disquiet of a tortured spirit was but only too transparent in these words, that had the ring of perfect sincerity. None knew better than Oscar Wildenrod what was that wild chase after happiness, which he had sought all these years--by what paths, indeed, he alone knew.

That woful confession sounded strange in these surroundings, at this season of spring, when everything breathed only beauty and peace. Bright lay the sunshine upon the mirror of the little lake, over which the dragon-flies were hovering dreamily, with their gay-colored, scintillating wings. Golden rays stole through the young leaves of the beech and played in the tender May-green. Round about bloomed the lilac, filling the air with its fragrance, varied by clumps of the yellow laburnum, covered with its rich freight of pendant clusters of bloom, and the lower shrubbery was strewn over, as it were, with wild hedge-roses. There was no end to the blooms, and in the background rose a distant chain of blue mountains, gravely taking a look into this little sunny paradise.

Wildenrod's chest heaved with his deep and heavy breathing; it seemed as though he wanted to inhale the peace and purity of his environment. Then he looked upon the young being at his side, upon the innocent, rosy countenance, that was so untouched by the slightest breath of that life which he had drunk of to its very dregs. But the brown eyes that were now fixed upon him were swimming in tears, and a low, quivering voice said:

"All that you have just been saying sounds so hard, so desperate. Do you really believe no longer in any happiness?"

"Oh, yes, now I believe in it!" cried Oscar with enthusiasm. "Here at Odensburg, I have learned again to hope. It is the old story of the jewel that one goes out into the world to look for, in a thousand ways, meanwhile it rests hidden in the deep and silent woods, until the happy man draws near, who finds it--and perhaps I am such a lucky fellow!"

He had caught the young girl's hand and clasped it firmly in his own. With sudden force, Maia recognized in these words, this movement, what had hitherto been but a dim, half-understood impression resting in her soul; there sprang up within her a sweet sense of joy and yet, at the same time, again came that mysterious, uneasy sensation, which she had experienced already at their first meeting, the dread of that dark, flaming glance, which seemed to magnetize her, as it

were. Her hand trembled in that of the Baron.

"Herr von Wildenrod----"

"My name is Oscar!" interposed he beseechingly.

"Oscar--leave me!"

"No, I will not leave you!" ejaculated he passionately. "I have found the jewel, now I will catch it and keep it all my life long. Maia, years, tens of years part us, I have no longer youth to offer you, but I love you with all the fervent ardor of youth. From the instant when you advanced to meet me on the threshold of your father's house, I knew that you were my destiny, my all. And you love me too, I know it--let me hear it now from your own lips. Speak, Maia, say that you will be mine! You have no idea what power this word will exert over me--to deliver and to save."

He had thrown his arm around her, his passionate, glowing words passing over the trembling girl like the breath of a burning flame. Her head rested upon his bosom, and fixedly she looked up at him. Now she no longer shrank from meeting his eyes, she only saw the melting tenderness in them, heard only the confession of his love, and that bodeful dread was lost in triumphant rapture.

"Yes, I do love you, Oscar," said she softly. "Dearly love you."

"My Maia!"

It rang out like a shout of joy. Oscar folded her in his arms, kissing again and again the light hair and rosy lips of his beloved. An intoxication of bliss had come over him. The past, with its dark shadows, sank into oblivion, and to the man who was already approaching the autumn of life sounded joyously the message that every blossom was repeating: Spring is here!

After a while Maia gently extricated herself from his arms, her lovely face all aglow.

"But my father, Oscar, will he consent?"

Wildenrod smiled. He knew that the difference of age between himself and his betrothed would be an objection hard for Dernburg to overcome, that his consent would neither be easily nor quickly obtained, but this did not frighten him. "Your father desires only to see you beloved and happy, I know that from his own mouth," said he with overflowing tenderness. "And my Maia, my sweet, pretty child, you shall be happy and beloved!"

CHAPTER XI.

A SECRET FOE AND OPEN ENEMY.

Dernburg sat in his office at the desk. He had just had a lengthy talk with the director of his works and was looking over the papers which he had left when the door was again opened. Count Eckardstein entered, who, as a guest of the house, needed no special announcement.

"I just saw the director leave," said he. "May I disturb you for a few minutes? I only come, preparatory to bidding adieu."

"Why, you will not be at dinner, as usual?" asked Dernburg, somewhat surprised.

"I thank you, I must return to Eckardstein.--Must I really have to report to my brother that you decline his invitation? We had depended so confidently upon your presence and that of your family."

"I am sorry. You have already heard that we have invited company to dinner, ourselves, for the day named."

This refusal of the invitation sounded just as positive as chilling, and so the young Count could but feel it to be. He impulsively drew a few steps nearer, and asked in a whisper:

"Herr Dernburg--what have you against me?"

"I? Nothing! What put such an idea into your mind, Sir Count?"

"Your very address proves it to me. This morning you called me Victor and treated me with

your wanted kindness. Have I, then, become a stranger to you in the course of a few months? I am afraid that another influence has been brought to bear upon you, that I can guess."

Dernburg frowned, the hint at Wildenrod, which was only too intelligible, wounded him, but he was accustomed to go about things in a direct manner. Why seek to find out what he wanted to know by indirect methods. He looked at the handsome, open countenance of the young man, then he said slowly:

"I do not allow myself to be influenced, and it is not my way to condemn any one unheard, least of all you, Victor, whom I have known from the days of your earliest boyhood. Now that you introduce the subject yourself, it may as well be discussed between us. Will you answer me a few questions?"

"With pleasure, proceed."

"You stayed away from home a long while, and did not set foot on Eckardstein soil for years. Why was that?"

"It resulted from personal, family relations----"

"Which you would rather not talk about--I perceive."

"No, Herr Dernburg, I do not care to have concealments with you," said Victor, in a low tone. "My relation to my brother was never an especially friendly one, and since the death of our father has grown to be positively painful. Conrad is the elder, and heir of the entailed property, I am dependent upon him, and cannot maintain my rank as an officer without his assistance. He has often enough made me feel his unwillingness to do this, and in so insulting a manner, that I prefer to keep aloof from him."

One could see that it was exceedingly trying to the young Count to give this explanation, and still he was telling nothing that his hearer did not already know. The strained relations existing between the brothers was known to the whole neighborhood, but the main fault was attributed to the elder. Count Conrad, who, at the time, was still unmarried, and the senior of Victor by only a few years, was regarded as haughty and unmindful of the rights of others, and his ambition was a fact known to all. He was, therefore, anything but popular. Dernburg knew this likewise, but made not the slightest allusion to it, only asking:

"And yet you have come now?"

"This happened by my brother's express desire."

"He has concocted plans in conjunction with you--I know."

Victor started, and the blood began slowly to mount into his cheeks. Dernburg watched him sharply and inquisitively, while he continued:

"You apprehend, without doubt, what I mean. I shall be quite candid with you, but shall expect just as candid an answer. It is said that you have been summoned by Count Conrad to Eckardstein, in order to turn to account your former intimacy at Odensburg."

Victor started at this insulting speech.

"Herr Dernburg!"

"Victor, I ask you, is that so?"

The young man cast down his eyes in painful embarrassment.

"You put the question in a way----"

"That admits of no evasion. Yes or no, then?"

"You seem to take my courtship as an insult," said Victor, without lifting his eyes from the floor. "Is it such a crime, then, to seek the renewal of youthful friendship with such thoughts? Well, yes, I came here to seek a happiness that in memory took the shape of a bright little elf. What is there bad about that? At my age you would probably have done the same."

"But not at the behest of another person!" said Dernburg cuttingly. "And when I went courting I had a different fortune to offer from what you have, Herr Lieutenant."

The young Count was incensed, and with difficulty restrained himself, but his voice trembled, when he answered:

"You make poverty very bitter to me."

"Such is not my desire, for poverty is no disgrace in my eyes. You only share the fate of the younger sons in those families whose whole property is entailed upon the oldest. But they say that your brother has still more pressing reasons for exhorting you to make a so-called good

match. I am sorry, Sir Count, to hurt your feelings, but you have sought this interview yourself, not I."

"So they have informed you of that, too, and you put the most shameful interpretation upon it," said Victor bitterly. "If I have been indiscreet, my brother has already given me good cause to rue it, and I repent tenfold at this moment. Well, yes, I did not keep free of debt, could not do so with the small means that were at my command. It would have been an easy thing for Conrad to release me from my obligations, but he did not do it, even putting before me the possibility of being obliged to send in my resignation, and then----"

"Then you acceded to his proposition!" Dernburg's voice had a harsh, contemptuous intonation. "I understand that perfectly; but you, on your side, will also understand that I am not willing to give my daughter as a prize in a financial operation."

The color came and went in the young man's face, but at the last word he sprang to his feet with a half-suppressed shriek, and shook his fist in the face of the elder man, who looked at him steadily.

"To what end is this, Count Eckardstein? Will you challenge me to a duel because I undertake to tell you my view of this matter? A man of my years and station does not commit such follies."

Again Victor let his hand drop and stepped back.

"Herr Dernburg, you have been a fatherly friend to me for years, Odenburg has been a second home for me, and you are the father of Maia, whom I----"

"Whom you love," said Dernburg, with bitter irony, "you were about to say."

"Yes, I do love her!" cried Victor, drawing himself up to his full height, and his eye met clearly and openly that of the infuriated man. "This became clear to me the moment when I met again as a blooming girl the child who still lived in my memory. After what you have said nothing is left for me but to leave your house, never to enter it again; but in bidding farewell, I at least challenge your faith in the truth of my feelings for Maia--although she is lost to me."

There was intense anguish, genuine emotion manifest in these last words, which would have convinced anybody else but Dernburg. But that grave, earnest man there at the desk had never known the frivolities of youth, and hence had no idea how to make allowance for its errors. Perhaps, too, he, was convinced at this moment, but he could not pardon any one for presuming to court his darling for the sake of her wealth.

"I am not authorized to judge of your feelings, Sir Count," said he, with a coldness that forbade any further attempt at reconciliation: "and yet I understand perfectly why you should avoid Odenburg after this conversation. I am sorry that we must part thus, meanwhile as things stand, there is no help for it."

Victor answered not a word, but silently bowed and withdrew. Dernburg looked after him moodily.

"He, too!" murmured he half aloud. "The honest, open-hearted fellow, who, in earlier days, did not know the meaning of calculation! Everything goes to destruction in this wild chase after wealth, that they call good fortune!--"

At the foot of the broad staircase, that led to the upper story, stood Wildenrod and Eric, engaged in conversation. The latter had just come in from the park, and, meeting with Oscar, poured out his heart to him.

"I am afraid Cecilia is seriously unwell," said he excitedly. "She complains of severe headache and looks dreadfully pale, but has forbidden me in the most positive manner from having Hagenbach called. She protests that a few hours of undisturbed repose will restore her quicker than anything else. I saw her only a few minutes after her arrival, and have not been able to learn where she has really been, for she preserves an obstinate silence on the subject."

Oscar smiled and shrugged his shoulders. "And you, I suppose, are beside yourself over it. I told you awhile ago, that you must calculate upon the self-will of our spoilt little princess. When Cecile is in a bad humor, she stretches herself on the sofa and will have naught to do with anybody; happily she does not keep in this mood long, I can tell you that for your comfort. Your father, to be sure, is of opinion that you must break her of such whims, but you are not the man for this, my dear Eric. There is nothing, then, left for you to do, but to possess your soul in patience, and already make preliminary studies for the pattern husband, which you will undoubtedly make."

Eric looked at him in amazement. "What has come over you, Oscar? Your face fairly beams with joy. Has something very pleasant happened to you?"

"Who knows--perhaps!" said Oscar, with a flash of his dark eyes. "And therefore I want to take you in hand. You do look desperate. I have always had a great deal of influence over my sister, and shall give her to understand how unwarrantable a thing it is of her to make you taste already

the miseries of the married state--properly she has no right to do this, until after the wedding is over. You see if she does not appear at dinner in as good spirits as ever, and then you, too, I trust, will wear a different face--you poor, maltreated lover, who take so much to heart the caprices of his ladye-love."

He laughed with a superior air, and waving back a salutation, he mounted the stair. Eric looked at him, shaking his head dubiously. Such radiant gayety of mood was not at all natural to Oscar von Wildenrod, who was hardly recognizable to-day. What could have happened to him?

Up in the parlor, the Baron was met by his sister's maid, who informed him that her lady had given her strict orders not to allow her to be disturbed, under any circumstances--without exception, no one was to be admitted. Not even Herr Dernburg.

"Pshaw, such orders do not include me, you know, Nannon," said Wildenrod, cutting her speech short, without ceremony. "I want to speak to my sister. Open the door!"

Nannon courtesied, and obeyed, for she knew very well that the Baron was not one to brook contradiction. Without further ceremony, he entered his sister's chamber, which was next door.

Cecilia lay upon the sofa, with her face buried in a cushion. She did not stir, although she must have heard the opening and shutting of the door, but her brother evinced no surprise at this, and quietly drew nearer.

"Are you once more in an ill-humor, Cecile?" he asked, still in a playful tone. "You really do treat Eric in a most unwarrantable manner. He has just been pouring his laments into my ears."

Cecilia remained silent and motionless, until Wildenrod finally lost patience.

"Will you not at least have the goodness to look at me? I should like to ask you in general--" he hushed, for his sister suddenly sat bolt upright, and he looked into a face so pale and distorted, that he almost shrank back in dismay.

"I have something to say to you, Oscar," said she, softly. "To yourself alone. Nannon is in the parlor--send her away, that we may be undisturbed."

Oscar knitted his brows,--he could not yet believe that anything serious was in question; but in his joyous mood, he was more inclined than usual to indulge the whim of another. He therefore went into the parlor, sent the maid away on a message, and then turned back.

"Am I finally to learn what all that signifies?" he asked, impatiently. "Where in the world were you, Cecile, and what means this early morning trip to the mountains? Dernburg has already noticed it with much displeasure! You must know that Odenburg is not the place for such escapades."

Cecilia had gotten up, and said not a word in her own defense, but breathed out in a whisper:

"I have been on the Whitestone."

"On the Whitestone?" exclaimed Oscar. "What foolhardiness! What incredible rashness!"

"Let that be, the question is about something else," she interrupted him vehemently. "I met up there with--with that friend of Eric's youth, and he has said things to me,--Oscar, what happened between you two the first time that you met?"

"Nothing!" said the Baron, coldly. "Perhaps I did see him then; it is possible; one easily overlooks such people. At all events, I did not speak with him, and did not know that he was witness of a painful event that took place on that evening."

"What sort of an event was it?"

"Nothing for your ears, my dear, and therefore I should not like Runeck to talk with you on the subject. By the way, tell me exactly what he did say."

The question was apparently thrown off indifferently, and yet keen suspense was apparent in the dark eyes of the questioner.

"He seemed to take for granted my cognizance of the affair, and passed on to make insinuations which I did not rightly understand, but behind which looked something horrible."

"How? Did he dare to?" said Oscar, flaring up.

"Yes, he did dare to impugn your honor, and treat me as your accomplice. He spoke of knowing more about your life than would be agreeable to you; he called us adventurers--do you hear? *adventurers!* But you will have your revenge, will give him the answer that he deserves, and avenge both yourself and me!"

Wildenrod had turned pale. He stood there with darkened brow and clinched fists, but he was silent. The passionate outburst of indignation, and wrath, that Cecilia had looked and hoped for,

did not come.

"Did he actually say that to you?" he slowly inquired at last.

"Word for word! And you--you make no answer?"

Wildenrod had recovered his self-possession. He shrugged his shoulders with a mocking air of superiority. "What answer am I to make? Would you have me take such nonsense seriously?"

"He was in sober earnest, and if, as he maintained, proofs are lacking up to this time----"

"Actually?" Oscar laughed, scornfully and triumphantly, while he drew a deep, long sigh of relief.

"Well, let him search for those proofs; he will not find them!"

Cecilia supported herself on the back of the chair by which she stood. That sigh of relief had not escaped her, and her eyes were fixed upon her brother in deadly anguish.

"Have you no other answer, when your honor is assailed? Will you not call Runeck to account?"

"That is my affair! Leave it to me to get even with that man! What is it to you?"

"What is it to me, when you and I both receive a deadly insult?" cried Cecilia, beside herself. "To call us adventurers, to whom Odensburg is to fall a prey. Shall a man dare to say such a thing and go unpunished? Oscar, look me in the eye! You shrink from chastising that man. You are afraid of him! Alas! alas!"

She broke out into a wild and passionate fit of sobbing. Oscar stepped quickly up to her, and his voice fell to a low and angry whisper.

"Cecilia, use your reason! You behave like a madwoman. What has come over you, anyhow? You have been like a different person since this morning."

"Yes, since this morning!" repeated she passionately. "Since I awoke, and oh! what a bitter awakening! Do not evade me! You told me that our fortune was gone, and I was thoughtless enough not once to inquire how it came, that, in spite of this, we lived on a grand scale. When was it lost? In what way? I *will* know!"

Wildenrod looked at her darkly, that threatening tone in his sister was as new to her as her whole behavior; he must henceforth give up treating her as a child.

"Would you know when our fortune was lost?" asked he roughly. "At the time when our house broke with a crash. And our father--laid hands on himself."

"Our father!" The eyes of the young girl opened wide, and were full of horror. "He did not die from--a stroke of apoplexy?"

"That was what they told the world, the neighborhood, and you, the eight-year old child--I know better. Our estate had long been involved in debt, ruin was only a question of time, and when it actually came, father seized his pistol--and left us behind--beggars."

As unsparing as these words sounded, there was an undercurrent of dull grief in them, showing that the man still suffered at the recollection, after the lapse of twelve years.

Cecilia did not shriek, did not weep, her tears seeming suddenly to be stanchd. She only asked dispiritedly: "And then?"

"Then the honor of our name was saved by the personal interposition of the king. He bought the estate and satisfied the creditors. Your mother obtained a pension from his bounty, and alms of residence in the place where she had been mistress, and I--well I went out into the wide world, to seek my fortune."

A momentary silence followed; Cecilia had dropped into a chair, and had clasped both hands before her face. Finally Wildenrod resumed: "That hits you hard, I well believe, but at the time it hit me yet harder. I had no suspicion of how it stood with us, and now to be snatched from supposed wealth, from a brilliant station in life, from a grand career, in order to be confronted by poverty and misery--you do not know what that means. They offered me this and that office, either in the postal service or as collector of taxes in some remote province, offered *me*, whose glowing ambition had dreamed of the highest aims, beggarly positions, in which body and soul would have been destroyed in the tread-mill of a wretched existence. I was not made for that. I cast everything behind me and forsook Germany, to at least save appearances, and produce the impression that the sale of property and my resignation of office had been voluntary."

Cecilia slowly let her hands drop, and straightened herself up. "And yet you maintained your position in society? We were regarded as rich the three years that I passed with you, and were surrounded by splendor and luxury."

Wildenrod had no answer to this timid and reproachful question; he avoided meeting his sister's eye.

"Let that be, Cecilia!" said he after a while. "It was a fierce, desperate struggle to maintain that station which I did not want to give up at any price, and many a thing happened in so doing that had better not be talked about. But I had no choice. In the struggle for existence it is either sink or swim. Never mind!" He took a long breath. "Now all that trouble is over, you are Eric's betrothed bride and I--have something delightful to communicate to you."

He did not, however, get the opportunity to make his communication at present, for at the door of the parlor a gentle knock was heard, and directly afterwards Eric's voice asked:

"May I come in at last?"

"Eric," exclaimed Cecilia in dismay. "I cannot see him--not now!"

"You must talk with him," whispered Oscar softly, but dictatorially. "Is your behavior to strike him as yet more peculiar? Only for a few minutes."

"I cannot! Tell him, I am sick, or asleep, or anything you choose!"

She wanted to spring to her feet, but her brother again drew her down upon her seat, while he called out in a cheerful tone:

"Just come in, Eric! Here am I--being indulged with a half-hour's audience, by this gracious lady!"

"So I heard from Nannon!" said Eric, in a reproachful tone, as he entered, after passing through the parlor. "Is your door to remain locked to me, when it is open to Oscar? Dear me, how pale and disturbed you look! What happened on that unfortunate expedition? I implore you, speak!"

He had seized her hand and looked into her face, with deep solicitude. Her little hand trembled in his, but there followed no answer.

"You ought rather to scold her, although I have already done so sufficiently myself," said Wildenrod. "Do you know where she has been this morning? Why, on top of the Whitestone!"

"Lord of heaven!" cried Eric, horrified. "Is that true, Cecile?"

"Literally true! Of course she was dizzy on the way back, came down half dead and is now sick from overexertion and the agony endured. She was ashamed to confess to you and the doctor, but you had to learn about it."

"Cecilia, how could you treat me so?" said the young man reproachfully. "Did you not think of my distress, my despair, if anything had happened to you? Had I only suspected that it was more than a jest that time when you threatened to climb it, in your talk with Egbert and me---what is the matter with you?"

At the mention of that name, Cecilia had shuddered; now a couple of tears rolled over her cheeks, while she murmured: "Pardon me, Eric--pardon me!"

Eric had never before seen his beloved weep, nor ever heard her plead for pardon. With overflowing tenderness he kissed her hands. "My Cecile, my darling girl, I am not scolding you, I only beg of you, never, never again to undertake such an adventure. You promise me that, do you not? Done! And now----"

"Now we will indulge her with a little rest. Try to sleep a few hours, Cecile; that will soothe your overtaxed nerves. Come, Eric!"

The latter followed, evidently very unwillingly, but since Cecilia, too, urged him to go with feverish impatience, he submitted. Oscar accompanied him as far as the stairs, and then went into his own room. Hardly, however, had the sound of the young man's steps died away outside, than he returned to his sister, after bolting the parlor door.

"How can you be so wanting in self-control?" said he, in a suppressed voice. "A blessed thing it was that I was by your side. Under these circumstances, the best thing to do was to make a clean breast of your mountain adventure. But the thing now is to ward off another danger. Without proof, Runeck will not venture to undertake anything against us, and meanwhile things are coming to a pass that must necessitate a rupture between him and Dernburg. Until then--well, I have been equal to worse emergencies!" These last words once more betrayed all the rash self-confidence of the man, who had already often staked everything upon the one card and won the game.

Cecilia had risen from her seat; her eyes were fastened upon him, with a singular expression in them. "Then we shall be no more at Odensburg," said she. "Do not flare up so, Oscar! I do not want to know what you conceal from me; what you said to me was enough. You must arm yourself against a danger that threatens you on the part of Runeck--he told the truth, then--he can accuse

you. But I *shall* not be an adventuress, who has thrust herself in here and who will one day be driven away in shame and disgrace--do you hear?--I *shall* not! Let us begone, no matter whither, under some pretext or other--only away from here, at any price!"

"Are you out of your senses?" cried Wildenrod, while he seized her arm, as though he had to hinder her from taking to flight that very moment. "Away? Whither? Think you that I can again open to you our former mode of life? That is past--my sources of revenue are at an end!"

"I hate to think of those sources of revenue," cried Cecilia, trembling. "I want to work----"

Oscar laughed aloud and bitterly. "With those hands, perhaps? Do you know, what it is to toil for daily bread? One has to be brought up to it--people like us would starve at it."

"I cannot stay here, though, now, when my eyes are opened, I cannot! Do not try to force me, else I'll tell Eric this very hour, that I do not love him, never have loved him; that our engagement has been solely your work."

Oscar turned pale. Cecilia had outgrown his power, nothing was to be effected here by commands and threats, so he caught at a last expedient.

"Do so, then," said he suddenly with a cold, resolute look, "destroy yourself and me with you! For, so far as I am concerned the question here is 'to be or not to be.' An hour ago I became engaged to Maia."

"To whom?" Cecilia looked at him, as though she did not comprehend his words.

"To Maia. She loves me, and all left for me to do now, is to obtain Dernburg's consent. If you break with Eric, and tell him the truth, then to me, too, Odensburg will be closed forever and then--I follow the example of our father."

"Oscar!" It was a shriek of horror.

"I'll do it, my word upon it! Think you that it has been easy for me to lead the life of an adventurer, for me, a Wildenrod? Do you know what I suffered before it came to that? How often I sought afterwards to burst my bonds and soar upwards? Always in vain! And now at last deliverance draws near, salvation through the hand of a sweet child, now, at last, I grasp the long-sought, so ardently desired happiness--and at the very moment, when I am about to clasp it in my arms, it is again to be torn from me! Am I to be thrust back and put under the old ban? That is what I cannot endure. Rather the end!"

There was an iron determination upon his features and in his tone; that was no empty threat. Cecilia shuddered.

"No," whispered she, with failing voice. "No, no, anything but that!"

"Is what I require of you anything so dreadful?" asked Wildenrod, more mildly. "You are only to be silent and forget this unhappy hour! I wanted to save you from the life into which I had to lead you, ere your eyes were opened to its nature, and now I save myself with you. I cast behind me the past, and begin a better life. Here at Odensburg a grand new field opens before me, and Dernburg is to find in me what his son could never be to him. You will be Eric's wife; he loves, idolizes you; you can make him happy, and yourself be happy at his side!"

He had stooped over her, and his voice had a tender sound. The eyes of his sister were uplifted to him with an expression of infinite woe.

"How am I now to endure Eric's presence with his demonstrations of affection? Just now those few minutes put me on the rack. And if I meet Runeck again, and have to read in his eyes the same contempt as I did early this morning, without being able to feel that he is the slanderer of the innocent--contempt from that Runeck!"

This last sentence rang out like a scream. Wildenrod started and fixed a strange look upon her.

"Do you dread his contempt so much?" asked he, slowly. "Rest easy, after that scene he will himself avoid any meeting; independently of that, he enters the family circle no more. Leave everything else to me! You have only to keep silent and make yourself easy. Promise me that."

"Yes," murmured Cecilia almost inaudibly.

Oscar bent down and touched her forehead with his lips. "I thank you! And now I really shall leave you alone, for I see that you can no longer stand this conversation."

He turned to go, but once more paused and gazed intently upon her face. "Egbert Runeck is our foe, a deadly foe, who wants to annihilate you and me, and if I offer him battle it must be to the knife--do not forget that!"

Cecilia gave no answer, but her whole body shook as with an ague, when the door fell to behind her brother. The truth that he no longer sought to conceal from her, had wounded her to

the very depths of her soul. The gay glittering world of pleasure and fashion with which alone she had been familiar up to this time, lay shattered at her feet, the rock was riven--what did it hide in its depths?

CHAPTER XII.

THE GOAL IN SIGHT.

Weeks had elapsed, spring had taken her leave and summer had come in the full blaze of her glory. At Odensburg, they had already begun preparations for the wedding festivities, which were appointed for the last days in August. After the ceremony a grand entertainment was to take place, to which the Dernburg family were to invite the whole circle of their acquaintance, and immediately afterwards the young couple were to set out on their trip to the South.

The officers and operatives belonging to the Dernburg works purposed to have their share in the festivities also. They wished to do honor to their chief upon occasion of the marriage of his son and heir. The director and Doctor Hagenbach were at the head of a committee, who planned a grand festal parade, and all had gone into the affair with spirit.

But in spite of these joyful preparations, there rested, as it were, a cloud over the Manor-house and the Dernburg family. The chief himself was out of sorts on account of various annoyances, public and private; the approaching elections to the Reichstag were beginning to attract sympathy even at his Odensburg, and he knew, only too well, that his men were being tampered with. Openly, this was not done, most assuredly he held the reins too firmly in his hand for this, but he was not able to steer clear of the secret, and on that very account dangerous, activity, with which the Socialistic party encroached step by step upon his works, that had hitherto been kept so clear of any such tendencies.

Moreover, Eric's health was again causing him grave anxiety; he had been obliged almost entirely to renounce the hope of introducing his son (as he had hoped and desired) to his future calling. The young man was perpetually ailing--needed to have his strength spared just as much now as before he went South. Such a thing as his engaging in systematic work was not to be thought of. Finally came Wildenrod's wooing and Maia's openly acknowledged love for him, which Dernburg had heard of with extreme surprise, yes, almost with indignation.

The Baron had asked her father for her hand, on the very same day that he had declared himself to the young girl, but had met with a much more decided opposition than he had expected. However much Dernburg might have been taken with him personally, Oscar was not the husband that he had selected for his daughter, and the thought of wedding the sixteen-year-old child to a man old enough to be her father, was just as repulsive to him as Maia's reciprocating this passion. His darling's entreaties availed in so far that the original No was rescinded, but just as little was he to be moved to give his consent for a speedy betrothal. He declared with all positiveness that his daughter was still much too young to bind herself already for a lifetime, saying that she must wait and put her feelings to the test; two years hence would be ample time to introduce the subject again.

Wait! That was a fatal, an impossible sentence for this man, with whom every minute counted, and yet, for the present, no alternative was left him, because Maia had been withdrawn from his influence. After that declaration he himself had received a gentle but unmistakable hint, that under these circumstances, daily intercourse between the pair was not to be kept up. But to leave Odensburg now, was equivalent to giving up his game as lost. The thing for him now to do was to be vigilant, and confront the danger which, since that threat of Runeck, had hung over his head like a thunder-cloud. And he must also stand by his sister, in order to be sure that she would keep her word with him--wrested from her, as it had been, almost by force. She was incredibly altered since that unhappy hour. Therefore he had not *wanted* to understand that hint, and had held his ground; but here Dernburg interposed immediately, with his wonted determination, and under pretext of her paying a visit to a friend of the family, he sent his daughter away, not to return until her brother's marriage took place.

Egbert Runeck had come from Radefeld, in order to give in his usual report to his chief. For weeks past, he had been accustomed, at these times, only to tarry awhile in the work-room and then return forthwith as soon as he had dispatched his business. He seemed to have become quite estranged from the family-circle. But to-day he had sought out Eric the first thing, who received him with joyful surprise, but also with reproaches.

"Why, Egbert, is that you,--do I actually lay eyes on you once more? I thought that you had

quite forgotten me, and laid our house under a ban. Father is the only one who ever gets a sight of you."

"You know how closely occupied I am," answered Egbert evasively. "My works----"

"Oh yes, those works of yours always serve for a pretext! But come, let us have a good chat--I am so glad to have you all alone to myself once more."

He drew his friend down on the sofa beside him and began to ask questions and narrate his own experiences. He had the conversation almost entirely to himself however. Runeck showed himself strikingly taciturn and absent-minded, and meanwhile he answered mechanically as it were, as though he had his mind bent on very different things. Not until Eric began to speak of his approaching marriage did he grow more attentive.

"We want to set off on our trip immediately after the grand entertainment to be held on our wedding-day," said the latter with a happy smile. "I think of spending a few weeks, with my young wife in Switzerland, but then we shall both wing our flight to the South. To the South! You have no idea what a charm that word has for us. This cold Northern sky, these gloomy fir-clad mountains, all the bustle and stir here, all this lies so heavy upon me. I cannot get perfectly well here. Hagenbach, who just left me, thinks so too and proposes that we spend the whole winter in Italy. Alas! father, though, will not hear of this--it will cost us a battle to carry our point with him."

"Are you feeling worse again?" asked Egbert, whose eyes rested with a peculiarly searching expression upon the pale, sunken features of his friend.

"Oh, nothing to signify," said Eric, carelessly. "The doctor is only so incredibly anxious. He has prohibited my riding, gives me all manner of prescriptions, and now wants the wedding-festivities to be on a reduced scale, because they might cause me to over-exert myself. Anything but excitement. That is the first and last word with him. I am getting rather tired of this thing, for he treats me always like a very ill patient to whom any excitement might bring death."

Runeck's gaze was fixed yet more intently and gravely upon the young man, and there was restrained emotion in his features and his voice, when he asked:

"So Dr. Hagenbach dreads excitement for you, does he? To be sure, you did have a hemorrhage that time----"

"Dear me, Egbert! that was two years ago, and every trace of it has disappeared," interrupted Eric impatiently. "The only thing is, Odensburg does not agree with me, any more than it does with Cecile, who can never feel at home here. She is made for joy and sunshine, that is the element in which, alone, she can thrive; here, where all hinges upon labor and duty, where my father's stern eyes hold her spellbound, as it were, she cannot be herself. If you knew what a change has been wrought in my Cecile, who sparkled with life and exuberant spirits, who was so captivating even in her caprices! How pale and quiet she has grown in these last weeks, how strangely altered in her whole nature. Many a time I am afraid that something quite different lies at the bottom of it. If she repents of having plighted her troth to me, if--ah, I see specters everywhere!"

"But, Eric, I beseech you," remarked Runeck soothingly. "Is this the way you follow the prescription of the doctor? You are stirring yourself up in a manner wholly unnecessary."

"No, no!" cried the young man passionately. "I see and feel that Cecile is concealing something from me--day before yesterday she betrayed herself. I spoke of our wedding-trip,--of Italy, when she suddenly burst out with: 'Yes, let us be gone, Eric, wherever you will, only far, far away from this place! I can stand it no longer!' What cannot she stand? She would not let me question her on the subject, but it sounded like a shriek of despair."

Carried out of himself he sprang to his feet. Egbert, too, got up, managing as he did so, accidentally as it were, to step out of the bright sunshine, that poured in through the window, into the shade. "Do you love your betrothed much?" asked he slowly with marked emphasis.

"Do I love her!" Eric's pale face reddened and his eyes beamed with the tenderest enthusiasm.

"You have never loved, Egbert, else you could not ask such a question. If Cecilia had rejected me that time, when I courted her, I might have stood it. If I had to lose her now--it would kill me!"

Egbert was silent. He stood with his face half-averted, his features still working from the intensity of the emotions that were warring within. At those last words, however, he drew himself up, advanced to his friend and laid his hand upon his arm.

"You are not to lose her, Eric," said he firmly, although with quivering lips. "You will live and be happy!"

"Do you know that so surely?" asked Eric, looking up in surprise. "Why, you talk as if you held the keys to life and death."

"Then take it as a prophecy, which will be fulfilled to you.--But I must go, I only came to bid you farewell, for my course at Radefeld has come to an end sooner than I had supposed."

"So much the better, for then you can come back to Odenburg, and we shall see each other frequently enough, I hope, before I leave."

"I am just on my way now to talk with your father about it."

"You are an enviable fellow!" said Eric with a sigh. "Ever forward, ever upward to new aims, without allowing yourself a moment's repose! Hardly is one task over, when you are as busy as ever carving out new ones. What sort of plans are these, pray?"

"You will hear about them better from your father, now you are in no mood for it. Then--farewell, Eric!"

With emotion that struggled for utterance, he offered him his hand, which Eric took with no sign of embarrassment.

"You do not mean this as a farewell for any length of time. You will be at Radefeld for a while yet?"

"Of course, meanwhile I may leave there very shortly, and who knows where I may have pitched my tent, by the time you come back from Italy, in the spring?"

"But then we'll see each other once more at my wedding!" remarked Eric.

"If it is possible for me----"

"It must be possible for you, I'll not let you go until you have promised me that. You will come under all circumstances, Egbert, do you hear? And now I must let you go, for I see that the ground burns under your feet. Good-bye, then--to meet again soon!"

"Yes--farewell, Eric!"

It was a vehement, almost convulsive pressure, with which Runeck clasped his old friend's hand, then he turned off hurriedly and left the room, as though he dreaded being detained. Not until he was on the pathway out of doors did he stand still, when, drawing a long breath, he murmured to himself:

"That should be overcome! He is right, it would kill him.--No, Eric, you are not to die, not through me! *That* is what I will not take upon myself."

As usual, about this time, Dernburg was found in his office. He looked grave and troubled, while he listened to Dr. Hagenbach who sat opposite to him. Oscar von Wildenrod was likewise present, but he with folded arms leaned against the window-frame, without taking any part in the conversation, the course of which, however, he followed with breathless attention.

"You give yourself too much solicitude," said the physician in a soothing tone, although his air was not exactly one calculated to inspire confidence. "Here Eric is still suffering from the after-effects of our harsh spring. He should have stayed longer in the South and then selected some half-way station; the abrupt change of climates has been injurious to him. Meanwhile, he must now return to Italy, and I have just been talking with him, persuading him to spend the winter there. He would prefer Rome, on account of his young wife. But I am for Sorrento, or if it must be a larger city than that, Palermo."

Dernburg's brow darkened yet more at these last words, and with hardly concealed displeasure he asked,

"Do you regard it as absolutely necessary for Eric to spend the whole winter away? I had hoped that he would bring his wife back to spend Christmas with us."

"No, Herr Dernburg, that will not do for this time," answered Hagenbach with decision. "That would be to stake everything that we won last winter."

"And what have we won? A half cure, that is questionable after the lapse of a few months. Be candid, Doctor. You believe that my son, in general, cannot stand this climate."

"Provisionally it would certainly be necessary----"

"Nothing about provisionally; I want to know the truth, the whole truth! Do you think that it is at all likely, that Eric can live constantly at Odenburg, that he can be my co-worker, my successor some day, as I hoped when he returned last spring, apparently cured?"

His eye hung in agonized suspense upon the doctor's lips, and Wildenrod's gaze was just as intent, as he now emerged from the window-niche.

Hagenbach was slow in answering; it seemed to cost him a great effort. At last he said earnestly:

"No, Herr Dernburg--since you desire to know the truth--as things are now, a permanent sojourn in the South is a condition of life with your son. He can come to Odenburg, for a few months in summer, but he can never stand another winter in our mountains, no more than he can the fatigues of an active calling. This is my firm conviction, and any of my colleagues will indorse my opinion."

Wildenrod made an involuntary movement when he heard this sentence pronounced so positively. Dernburg was silent; he only supported his head upon his hand, but it was easy to see what a heavy blow was inflicted upon him, by the doctor's outspoken opinion, although he must have had a foreboding of what it would be.

"That means, then, that I must bid farewell to all the plans that I have been cherishing so long," said he softly. "I hoped against hope--nevertheless, Eric is my only son. I want his life preserved, even though my dearest hopes be buried thereby. Let him, then, establish a home somewhere in the South, and limit his activity to building and adorning it--I can afford it."

A heavy, half-suppressed sigh betrayed what this resolve cost him. Then he turned to the physician and offered him his hand.

"I thank you for your candor, Doctor. Although the truth be bitter, I must accommodate myself to it. Let us speak more particularly of it another time!"

Hagenbach took his leave. For a few minutes silence prevailed in the room, then Wildenrod asked in a subdued voice: "Did that sentence surprise you? It did not me, I have long feared something of the sort. If Eric only soundly recovers, then, I hope, you and he will both find the separation a lighter trial than you apprehend."

"Eric will find it very light," said Dernburg, with swelling bitterness. "He has always dreaded assuming the position in life to which he was born. He shrank back before this mighty, restless enterprise, of which he was to be master and leader, with all its duties and responsibilities. He will far rather sit on the shore of the blue Mediterranean, making plans for his villa, and be glad if nothing disturbs him in his dreamy repose. And I am left alone here; forced, one day, to leave my Odenburg, my life-work, to pass into the hands of strangers. It is hard!"

"Must you really do that?" asked Oscar significantly, drawing nearer as he spoke. "You have still a daughter who can give you a second son, but you persistently refuse to the man of her choice the rights of a son."

Dernburg made a gesture expressive of his repugnance to the thought suggested.

"Let that be! Not now----"

"Just now, at this hour, I would like to speak to you. You have taken my wooing of Maia in a manner that I have neither expected nor deserved. You almost reproached me for it as if I had committed a crime."

"It is a crime, too, Herr von Wildenrod. You should not have spoken of love to a sixteen-year-old child, and bound her to you by the confession of your passion, without being sure of her father's consent. One pardons a youth for being carried away by the feelings of the moment, but not a man of your years."

"And yet, this moment has given me the highest happiness of my life," cried Oscar, ecstatically, "the certainty that Maia loves me. She must have repeated this confession to you--we both hoped for a father's blessing. Instead of this we are condemned to an endless probation. You have banished Maia from Odenburg, depriving yourself of her sweet presence, only to withdraw her from my neighborhood----"

"And what else was I to do?" asked Dernburg. "After your premature declaration, unembarrassed daily intercourse was no longer possible, if I did not agree to the engagement."

"Then do so now! Maia's heart belongs to me, neither time nor separation is going to alter that, rest assured, and I love her more than I can tell. You have to let your son go to a foreign land--well, then, let me step into his place! I have learned to love your Odenburg, and bring to it the unbroken energies of a man who is weary of his aimless existence and would like to begin a new life. Will you refuse me this, only because two decades divide me and her whom I love?"

He spoke with passionate entreaty, and could not have selected a better time than this hour in which the man, who sat there with darkly clouded brow, had seen shattered all the hopes which he had built upon his son and upon that other, whom he had, one day, wanted to see by the side of his weak and dependent heir--that plan, too, had been wrecked, since he knew, that Maia's heart was preoccupied. He need not be separated from his darling child if she became Wildenrod's wife, and he with his determined, strongly-marked character, offered him indemnity for all that he had lost. The choice was indeed not difficult.

"That is a serious, pregnant decision, Herr von Wildenrod," said Dernburg, whom this proposition surprised less than Oscar would have supposed. "If you really could adapt yourself to so complete a reversal of your former mode of life--it is no light task that awaits you, and perhaps

the only reason that it has a charm for you is, because it is new and strange to you. You are unaccustomed to any kind of systematic business----"

"But I shall learn method," interposed Wildenrod. "You have often called me your assistant in jest, be you now in earnest my instructor and guide. You shall have no cause to be ashamed of your scholar! I have at last come to the conclusion that one must be useful and industrious in order to be happy. And now, pray, grant my request: you have allowed Eric to be happy in his own way, will you refuse Maia and me the same?"

"We shall see," returned Dernburg, but his tone showed that his point was half-conceded. "Eric's wedding will come off in three weeks, then Maia returns to Odenburg and----"

"Then I may ask for my bride," impetuously exclaimed Oscar. "Oh, thank you, we both thank our stern but good father."

A passing smile illumined Dernburg's brow, and although he had not yet given his consent, he did not refuse the expression of gratitude.

"But enough of that now, Oscar," said he, for the first time using the familiar form of address. "Else with your impetuosity you will force everything possible from me, and I have other business to attend to. Egbert ought to be here by this time; he comes in from Radefeld to day to report to me."

The radiant expression vanished from Wildenrod's features, and gave place, for an instant, to a slightly scornful smile; then, with seeming indifference he threw out this hint: "Herr Runeck is very much engrossed in another direction, at present. He bestirs himself in his party's service at every nook and corner."

"Yes, indeed," responded Dernburg quietly, without appearing to notice the insinuation implied. "The socialists begin to feel their own importance and their combs swell visibly. They even seem to want to put up a candidate of their own in our electoral district--for the first time."

"So it is said at all events. Do you know whom they have in view for it?"

"Not yet, but I suppose that it will be Landsfeld, who acts the leader upon all occasions. To be sure he is nothing but an agitator, his affair being merely to bluster, and hound others on. He is not fit for the Reichstag, and that party usually know their men pretty thoroughly. But the question in hand is, in general, only to test their power. The men are not seriously thinking of disputing my right to a seat."

"Is that your belief?" The Baron's eye rested with a peculiar expression upon the face of the speaker. "Well, perhaps, Herr Runeck can supply you with some more exact information on the subject."

Dernburg impatiently shrugged his shoulders. "Egbert will certainly be obliged to make up his mind now, that he knows as well as I do. If he votes with his party, in this case it is to go against me, and he and I part."

"He has already decided," said Wildenrod coldly. "You do not yet know the name of the opposing candidate?--Well, I know it. It touches you and Odenburg tolerably close--it is Egbert Runeck."

Dernburg started as though he had been struck; for a few seconds he stared hard at the Baron, as though he believed he were not in his right senses, but then he declared shortly and concisely: "That is not true."

"I beg pardon, I have it from the best authority."

"It is not true, I tell you! You have been falsely informed--must have been."

"Hardly, but it can soon be settled, since you are expecting Runeck."

Dernburg started up and began to pace the floor in the greatest excitement, but let him consider the matter as he would, it appeared to him as incredible as at the first moment.

"Folly! Egbert is not going to act in such a farce. He knows that he must oppose me, and enter the lists against his old friend."

"Do you believe that will hinder him?" asked Oscar mockingly. "Herr Runeck, at all events, stands high above all those old prejudices of gratitude and dependence, and who knows whether his election is so hopeless? For months past he has been out at Radefeld, withdrawn from observation, and had a few hundred workmen at his disposal. He will, at all events, have secured their votes, and each individual ensures him ten, nay, twenty votes among his comrades here at Odenburg. He has made good use of his time, you may depend."

Dernburg gave no answer, but his step grew ever more hurried, his mien more threatening, while Wildenrod continued:

"And this is the man upon whom you have showered benefits! He has to thank you for his education, his culture,--all that he is. You gave him a position that is envied by all the officers, and he makes use of it to secretly undermine your authority and to strike a blow at you here, with the votes of your own men."

"Do you deem that possible?" asked Dernburg with sharpness. "I think we need give ourselves no anxiety on that score."

"I hope not, but it will at least be attempted, and that is enough. Up to this time Runeck has very wisely been silent, although he must have known for months what was in agitation. This will finally open your eyes to your favorite, or do you still disbelieve my report?"

"I do. As for the rest Egbert will explain matters to me."

"Because he must! It will be an evil hour for you too, for I see how the bare possibility excites you, and yet----"

"Go, Oscar!" enjoined Dernburg, frowning. "Egbert may come any minute, and whatever may be the issue of the interview, I want to talk with him alone."

He held out his hand to the Baron, who took his departure; a proud passionate pride of victory flashed from his eyes, as the latter crossed the next room. Finally he had set foot upon the ground, where his ambition hailed him as future master, sole master, when the present ruler of Odensburg should close his eyes. Eric voluntarily vacated the field to him, if he took his wife to live in a foreign country and became completely estranged from his native place. Now they were to be realized--those proud dreams of power and wealth, beside them blooming a sweet joy unknown before. A little while longer, and the goal so ardently thirsted after would be attained and the past be blotted out--buried!

Wildenrod was just entering the front hall, when the door to this opened and Egbert Runeck confronted him. Involuntarily he retreated a step; Runeck, too, started and then stood still. He saw that the Baron wanted to pass him, but he tarried upon the threshold as though he would obstruct his passage. For a few seconds they stood thus regarding one another, when Oscar asked sharply:

"Have you anything to say to me, Herr Runeck?"

"For the present--no," answered Egbert coldly. "Later, perhaps."

"It is questionable, though, whether I shall then have time and inclination to listen to you."

"I believe you will have time, Herr von Wildenrod."

The glances of the two men crossed, one sparkling with fierce and deadly hatred, the other full of dark threatening; then said Oscar haughtily:

"Meanwhile may I desire you to move aside? You see that I want to go out."

Runeck slowly retired and left the doorway clear. Wildenrod passed him by, and again there played around his lips that mocking, triumphant smile. Now he no longer dreaded the danger that had hitherto hung over his head like a thunder-cloud. If his adversary now spoke, he would no longer find an auditor. The "evil hour" preparing for him in yonder must forever annihilate his foe.

CHAPTER XIII.

RUNECK LEAVES ODENSBURG.

When Runeck entered his chief's work-room, he found him at his desk, and there was nothing unusual in the manner of his reception and the way in which his salutation was returned. Not until he took out a portfolio and opened it did Dernburg say:

"Let that be, you can report to me later; for now I must talk with you about something more important."

"I should like to have your attention for a few minutes, beforehand, if you please," said Egbert, taking a number of papers from the portfolio. "The works at Radefeld are almost finished, the

Buchberg is tunneled, and the whole water-power of the estate available for Odenburg. Here are the plans and the drawings; the only thing to do now is to conduct the supply to the works, and this can be done by some one else if I withdraw."

"Withdraw? What does that mean? That you will not carry the works on to completion?"

"No. I have come to--to beg my dismissal."

The words sounded low, and were evidently hard to utter, and the young engineer avoided looking at his superior. The latter gave no sign of surprise. He leaned back in his chair and crossed his arms.

"That, indeed! Well, you must know what you have to do. If you really want to go, I shall not detain you. But I believed that you would at least complete the work you had undertaken. It has not otherwise been your way to half do things."

"I am going for that very reason. The voice of another duty calls me, that I must obey."

"And which makes it impossible for you to remain at Odenburg?"

"Yes!"

An infinitely bitter expression flitted across Dernburg's features. Here was the confirmation of that which he had not wanted to believe; there was hardly any need to put the question.

"You mean the approaching elections?" said he with freezing calmness. "It is said that the Socialists are going to put up a candidate of their own for our district, and you, I suppose, are determined to vote for him. In that case, I can well understand how you should ask for your discharge. Neither the confidential position that you hold at Radefeld, nor your relations to me and my family comport with such a step as that. There is no deceiving of ourselves into imagining that the antagonism here is against any one but myself."

Egbert stood there speechless, his eyes fixed on the ground. One could see how hard it was for him to make a confession, which was not lightened for him by word or hint. But suddenly he straightened himself up with determination stamped upon his face.

"Herr Dernburg, I have a disclosure to make to you, which you will misinterpret, but which you must hear nevertheless. The candidate whom my party has nominated is--I."

"Do you actually demean yourself so far as to make me such a communication?" asked Dernburg slowly. "I hardly believed it. The surprise intended would have been more complete, if I had learned it through the newspapers."

"What, you know already----" exclaimed Egbert.

"What you have found good to hide from me until today. Yes, I knew it and wish you good luck in your schemes. You are not timid, with your eight-and-twenty years; you already boldly grasp at an honor which I first felt to be my due after the toil of a lifetime. You have barely left apprentice-years behind you, and already allow yourself to be lifted upon the shield, as tribune of the people. Well, good luck to you!"

Listening to the bitter sarcasm of this speech, Runeck's complexion changed rapidly, the color coming and going, while his voice had not its wonted firmness, when he replied:

"I have feared that you would take such a view of the matter, and this makes yet more painful the position into which I have been forced by the action of my party. I resisted to the last moment, but at last they----"

"Forced you, did they?" interrupted Dernburg with a bitter laugh, "of course you are nothing but a victim to your convictions. I foresaw that you would screen yourself thus. Give yourself no trouble, I understand."

"I speak truth, I think, you know that," said Egbert, solemnly.

Dernburg got up and stood close in front of him.

"Why did you come back to Odenburg, if you knew that the difference between us was an irreconcilable one? You did not need the position that I offered you. The whole world stood open to you. Yet why do I ask? The thing was to prepare for the contest with me; to undermine the ground upon which I stand; to betray me first on my own soil, and then strike----"

"No, I did not do that!" impetuously declared Runeck. "When I came here, nobody dreamed of the possibility of my election, and I least of all. Landsfeld was alone in our eye. This plan did not loom up until last month, and culminated only within the last few days, despite my opposition. I durst not speak sooner, because it was a party-secret."

"Really! Well, the calculation is very cleverly made. Neither Landsfeld nor any other person would have had the least prospect of success. Where the matter in hand was to unseat me the

plan would have been wrecked at the very outset. You are the son of a workman, have grown up among my people, gone forth from among their midst, and, in short, they are all proud of you. If you make it clear to them that I am, at bottom, a tyrant, who has been oppressing them and consuming all their substance all these years, if you promise them a return of the golden age--it takes hold upon and leads the people astray--you they will believe, perhaps; doubtless you are a distinguished orator. If the man, who has been treated almost like my own son, puts himself at their head, to lead them into battle against me, then their cause must be the right one, then they will swear by it."

These were almost the identical words which the young engineer had heard months ago from the mouth of Landsfeld, and his eyes fell before the piercing looks of Dernburg, who now drew himself up to his full height, as he continued:

"But we are not at that point yet. It still remains to be seen if my workmen have forgotten that I have labored with them and cared for them these thirty years, if a bond that has been forging for a whole generation is so easily broken. Try it. If any one can succeed, it will be you. You have been trained in my school and mayhap have learned how to strike down the old master."

Egbert had turned pale as death; upon his features was mirrored the conflict that was raging within his soul. But now he slowly raised his eyes.

"You condemn me, and yet, if put in my place, would perhaps not act differently. I have often enough heard from your own mouth that discipline is the first and highest law of every great undertaking. I have bowed and must bow to this iron law--what it has cost me, nobody but myself knows."

"I ask obedience from my men," said Dernburg coldly. "I do not compel them to commit treason."

Egbert writhed, and a glance almost threatening flashed from his eyes.

"Herr Dernburg, I can take much from you, especially in this hour; but that word--that word I cannot bear."

"You will have to bear it. What have you done out yonder at Radefeld?"

"What I can answer for, to you and myself."

"Then you have performed your task poorly and they will have their revenge upon you. Yet, why bring up the past? The question is about the present. You are the candidate of your party, then, and have accepted the nomination?"

"Since it is a party measure--yes! I must submit to it."

"You *must!*" repeated Dernburg with bitter scorn. "That is every third word with you, now; formerly you were a stranger to it. Then it was only you would. You deemed me a tyrant, because I would not forthwith adopt your sublunary ideas about the welfare of the people, and rejected this hand, that would have guided you. You wanted your course in life to be unimpeded. And, lo! now you bow your neck to a yoke, that enchains your whole being, forcing you to break with all that is dear to you, that lowers you even down to treachery--do not flare up so, Egbert, it is so! You should not have come back to Odensburg, if you had known that such an hour as the present must come. You should not have remained when you learned that they would force you to heed the opposition against me--but you did come back, and stayed because they bade you do it. Call it what you like, I call it treachery! And now go, we are done with one another!"

He turned off. Egbert, however, did not obey, but drew nearer, yielding to an irresistible impulse.

"Herr Dernburg--do not let me go thus! I cannot part from you in this way--you have been like a father to me!"

There was in this outbreak of long-pent-up anguish, an intensity of grief that was truly appalling in one usually so self-contained as Runeck, but the sorely provoked man, who stood before him did not, or would not, see it, but drew back; and his whole attitude and manner were expressive of repulse, when he said:

"And the son lifts his hand against the 'father.' Yes, I would gladly have called you son--you above every one else in the world; I showed it to you, too, plainly enough. You might have been lord of Odensburg. See if your comrades will thank you for the immense sacrifice which you have made for their sakes. And now this is all over--go!"

Egbert was effectually silenced; he made no further attempt at reconciliation, slowly he turned to go; only one last agonized glance he sent back from the threshold, then the door closed behind him.

Dernburg threw himself back in a chair and put his hands over his eyes. Of all the trials that had come down upon him to-day, like an avalanche, this was the heaviest. In Egbert he had

admired the brave, strong spirit, so like his own, that he had wanted to bind to himself for the rest of his life, and now it seemed to him that in parting from this young man, the best part of his own power and his own life had also taken their departure, never to return.

With heavy heart Runeck hurried through the entrance-hall, rushing along as though the ground burned beneath his feet. It was plain how much this hour had cost him, the hour in which he had torn loose from all that was dear to him, how dear, he now felt fully for the first time when he had lost it. "You might have been lord of Odensburg!" In that one sentence lay the greatness of the sacrifice, which he had offered up--and offered up to whom?

It had been long since he had felt any of that joyful enthusiasm which neither asks questions nor doubts. However, to resolve and act were no longer left to his free choice; it was no longer for him to will--he must.

Just then there was heard, quite close to him, the rustling of a woman's silk skirt: he looked up and found himself face to face with Baroness Wildenrod. For one instant he stood as it were, transfixed, then was about to pass by with a profound bow. But Cecilia stepped close up to him and said, in a low tone:

"Herr Runeck!"

"Gnädiges Fräulein?"

"I must speak to you."

"Me?" Egbert thought that he could not have heard aright, but she repeated in the same tone:

"Speak with you alone--please let me!"

"I am yours to command."

She took the precedence, he following her into the parlor. There was nobody there, and even if any one had appeared, the meeting might have passed for an accidental one. Cecilia had stepped up to the fireplace, as though she wanted to take refuge from the sunshine, which poured in its bright golden rays, through the lofty windows. A few minutes passed ere she spoke. Runeck, too, was silent; his eyes scanning her countenance, which was so entirely different from what it had appeared earlier.

Eric was right; the radiantly beautiful creature that he had brought home as his promised bride had strangely altered. She was no longer the gay, captivating girl, whose whole being sparkled with high spirits and the joy of existence. A pale, trembling girl leaned against the marble pillars upon which rested the mantelpiece, with downcast eyes, a painfully drawn look about the mouth, and she sought after words that *would* not cross her lips.

"I wanted to write to you, Herr Runeck," she finally began. "Then I heard to-day that you were in the Manor-house, and determined to speak to you in person. There is need of an explanation between us."

She paused, seeming to expect an answer, but as Egbert only bowed in silence, she continued with visible effort: "I must recall to your mind our interview on the Whitestone; you will have forgotten it as little as I have forgotten the words, the threats which you hurled at me. They were darkly mysterious to me at the time and are still so, even now; but, from that hour, I have known you to be the implacable foe of my brother and myself----"

"Not of you, Baroness!" exclaimed Egbert. "I had been in grievous error, which was explained away at that time. I begged your pardon, which, however, you would not grant. My words like my threats had reference to another."

Cecilia lifted her eyes to him, and the deprecatory look in them was touching to behold.

"But that other is my brother, and what touches him touches me as well. If you ever confront him as you did me that time, the issue will be a bloody, a horrible one. For weeks I have been trembling at the thought of it, and now I can stand it no longer. I must have certainty,--what do you intend to do?"

"Does Herr von Wildenrod know of that scene on the Whitestone?" asked Egbert with strong emphasis.

"Yes!" This word was well-nigh inaudible.

Runeck asked no farther. In the first place, he had no need to hear what Wildenrod's answer had been, it was written clearly enough in Cecilia's distressed looks, and he spared her the painful question.

"Compose yourself," said he earnestly. "The meeting which you fear will not take place, for to-morrow morning I quit Radefeld and Odensburg. And inasmuch as you are going to the South with Eric, Herr von Wildenrod will have no further occasion nor pretext for remaining longer after your marriage. That will rid me of the necessity for meeting him in a hostile manner. But

that there is no need to protect Odensburg and the Dernburg family against you, I well know now."

He little suspected what a blow these words inflicted upon Cecilia. She knew Oscar's vaulting schemes, she knew that through her betrothal, he had only paved the way for the accomplishment of his own aims, that the knot between him and Maia, would, sooner or later, be tied, and make him master of Odensburg; but she kept her lips tightly closed, closed although fully conscious of the wrong that she committed, in order that the specter of dread which had just been exorcised, should not again be called up, to haunt her again with new terrors.

It was still as death through the length and breadth of that vast apartment, only the monotonous ticking of the great standing-clock made itself heard, marking the flight of seconds, of minutes--how fast they did fly in that farewell hour!

Then Egbert drew one step nearer, and with a peculiarly vibrant sound in his voice said:

"I did you great injustice, with those unsparing words of mine, so great that you cannot forgive me. I had to believe that you stood, with open eyes, in the midst of the relations that encircled you; how could I imagine that they had left you in perfect ignorance? Will you, in spite of all that has happened, hear from me, one last entreaty, one warning?"

The young girl silently nodded her head in the affirmative.

"Your marriage sunders all such connections, and frees you from your brother's control--then free yourself from his influence, at any price! Let him no longer have any power over your future life, for it is unwholesome and brings destruction. What I only suspected formerly, I now know for a certainty. The Baron's path leads to an abyss--who can say where it will end?"

Cecilia shuddered at these last words. She thought of Oscar's dark threat, when she refused to stay at Odensburg, and the image of her dead father loomed up before her.

"No farther, Herr Runeck," said she, forcibly recovering her self-control. "You are talking of my brother!"

"Yes, of your brother," repeated he, with marked emphasis. "And you have nothing to say in refutation of my charge. You know then----"

"I know nothing, *will* know nothing--Oh! my God, have pity on me!"

She clasped both hands before her face, and tottered, as though she would fall. The same instant Egbert was already at her side, supporting her; just as that time on the Whitestone, the beautiful, fair head, with closed eyes, lay upon his shoulder.

"Cecilia!"

It was only a single word, but it escaped Egbert's lips in the fervent tone of passion, and at its sound, the large dark eyes opened and met his. For a second their looks mingled--rather an eternity. With loud, clear strokes, the clock told the midday hour. Egbert let his arm drop and drew himself up erect.

"Make Eric happy!" said he, with difficulty, in a hollow tone: "Farewell, Cecilia!"

In the next minute he had left the room, and Cecilia, pressing her hot brow against the cold marble of the mantel-piece, wept and wept, as though her heart would break.

CHAPTER XIV.

HOW AN OLD BACHELOR MAKES LOVE.

The dwellings of the numerous officials attached to Odensburg, formed quite a little town of themselves; there also was Dr. Hagenbach's house, a small villa, in the Swiss style. It had evidently been built for a larger family, but this elderly bachelor had not thought of marrying, and had been living alone here for years, with an old housekeeper, to whom was now added his nephew. As physician in chief of Odensburg, Hagenbach's professional services were constantly in requisition, but he also frequently had calls from abroad.

To-day, for instance, there sat in his office a patient from abroad, who, to be sure, did not look

at all like a sick man. The man was about forty years old, and very rotund in person, his hands were folded over a very capacious paunch and his eyes almost disappeared behind full, puffy, red cheeks. Nevertheless he had a long tale of miseries to relate, counting up a whole list of ailments, until Hagenbach abruptly cut him short in the midst of it.

"Oh, I know all that you are telling me, by heart, Herr Willmann. I have already told you for the last time, that you take too good care of Number One. If you will not be moderate in eating and drinking, and take no exercise, the remedies that I have prescribed for you cannot take effect."

"Be moderate?" repeated Willmann in a soft, melancholy tone. "Dear me! Doctor, I am moderation itself. But a hotel-keeper, alas! is in that particular a victim of his calling. I must occasionally sit with my guests, chatting and drinking--it brings business, you know, and----"

"You take upon yourself this martyrdom with wonderful self-denial. For all that I care--but then you have given up wanting any help from me, I perceive. I do not care at all to have outside practice; I have my hands full here at Odenburg. Why do you not consult my colleague, who has a great deal more time?"

"Because I have no faith in him," said Herr Willmann solemnly, without looking the least disconcerted by this harsh declaration. "There is something about you, Doctor, that inspires a body with confidence."

"Yes, thank God, I throw in the needful grains of rudeness," answered Hagenbach with composure of soul. "Then people always have confidence in you. You will take my prescriptions, then? Yes or no?"

"Dear me, I submit to you in every particular. If you knew what I have stood these last days--those terrible pains in the stomach----"

"For which those good meats and soups are to blame," interposed the doctor in cold blood.

"And that want of breath, that dizziness in my head----"

"Comes from the beer, to which you daily treat yourself, your own most regular customer. If you omit the beer, and limit your meals to what is absolutely necessary to sustain life--" then he began to count off a list of remedies that almost drove Herr Willmann wild.

"Why, Doctor, that is a veritable hunger-cure," lamented he. "It will put an end to me!"

"Would you rather fall a victim to your calling?" asked Hagenbach. "It is all right; but there, go off and leave me in peace!"

The patient sighed deeply and painfully. However, the doctor's faith-inspiring roughness must have won the victory over his love of good-living, for he folded his hands and looked up at the ceiling.

"If there's no help for it--in God's name!" said he unctuously.

The physician suddenly started, fastened a sharp glance upon him and then asked, wholly irrelevantly:

"Have you a brother, Herr Willmann?"

"No, I was the only child of my parents."

"Singular! I was struck with a likeness, that is to say, not exactly a likeness--on the contrary, you have not a feature like the person I am referring to."

Herr Willmann softly shook his head, in token that these dark words were unintelligible to him, while Hagenbach continued: "Can you tell me whether you have a relative who has been in Africa, in Egypt, in the Sahara or in some part of a desert in those parts?"

Herr Willmann's full cheeks lost something of their rosy tint, and he fumbled in an embarrassed way with his gold watch-chain as he answered: "Yes--a cousin."

"Was he a missionary?"

"Yes, Doctor."

"And then he died of fever?"

"Yes, Doctor."

"Was his name Engelbert?"

"Yes----"

"And what is your own name, pray?"

"Pan--cra--tius," answered Willmann, drawing it out, while he still kept playing with his watch-chain.

"A fine name! Well then, Herr Pancratius Willmann, in three weeks come again, and meanwhile, if I should be passing by the 'Golden Lamb' I'll give you a call to see how you are getting along. Adieu!"

Willmann took his leave with mild thanks for the advice wasted on him, and Hagenbach was left alone.

"The thing agrees," murmured he to himself. "He is a cousin, then, of that much lamented Engelbert, whose picture is draped in mourning. They both have that pious way of turning up their eyes; it seems to be a family-failing. Shall I tell her about it? I'll take good care not to! She would send for the dear kinsman on the spot, and then there would be a repetition of that tale of woe, and a fresh eulogium of eternal constancy. As for the rest, I must give Dagobert the prescription I promised, to take with him, as he is about to set out for the Manor-house."

So saying he went across to his nephew's room, whom he was glad to find still in. The young man had already made his preparations for going out. His hat and gloves lay on the table beside a bulky blue note-book, but he himself stood before the looking-glass, carefully considering his own precious person. He tied his cravat straight, drew his fingers through his fair locks, and tried to give a bold air to his newly-budding mustache.

Finally Dagobert seemed content with the appearance of his outer man: he retired a few steps, laid his hand most touchingly upon his heart, sighed profoundly, and then began to say something in a whisper that could not be heard by the doctor, who gazed upon the scene from the threshold of the door, with increasing astonishment.

"Fellow, have you turned crazy?" asked he, in his gruff manner.

Dagobert started and turned crimson from embarrassment.

"I believe your brain is cracked, all of a sudden," continued his uncle, advancing nearer. "What is the meaning of these preparations?"

"I--I am learning English words," declared Dagobert, the doctor, meanwhile, shaking his head suspiciously.

"English words, with such heart-breaking sighs? That is a remarkable way to learn."

"It was an English poem, that I was once more---Please, dear uncle, give it to me--those are my exercises!"

Like a bird of prey Dagobert swooped upon the table, clutching at the blue pamphlet, but too late, the doctor had already opened it and begun to turn over its leaves.

"Why so excited? You evidently need not be ashamed of your work and seem to have gotten tolerably far. Miss Friedberg, too, has given herself a great deal of trouble about you, and I hope you are grateful for it."

"Yes, indeed, she has given herself trouble--I have given myself trouble--we have given ourselves trouble," stammered Dagobert, who, manifestly did not know what he was saying, for his eyes were directed in agony to the hand of his uncle, who turned over one page after the other, while he dryly remarked:

"Well, if that is the way you are going to stammer out your thanks, she will not be greatly edified by them--yes, what is this, pray?"

He had stumbled upon a page laid loosely in, at the sight of which his unhappy nephew was ready to expire.

"To Leonie!" read Hagenbach aghast. "Here are verses!"

"Oh! be not angry if I fall
A suppliant at thy feet----"

"Oh! Oh, what does that mean?"

Dagobert stood there like a surprised criminal, while the doctor read the poem through, which was nothing more nor less than a full declaration of love to the secretly adored preceptress, vowing that these feelings should last forever, with the most solemn of oaths.

It was some while before Hagenbach could take in the idea, so monstrous did it seem to him. But when he finally apprehended the true significance of all this, a storm as of thunder and lightning burst forth upon Dagobert's devoted head. He patiently submitted to being lectured for a long while, but since it seemed as if the tempest was to know no end, he made an attempt at retort.

"Uncle, I owe you gratitude," said he solemnly, "but when the question concerns the most sacred feelings of my heart, there is an end put to your power as to my obedience. Yes, I love Leonie, I worship her--and that is no crime."

"But it is a folly!" cried the doctor, angrily, "a folly, such as has never been before! A youth who is just out of school, and not yet a student--and in love with a lady, who could be his mother. Such, then, were your 'English words'! It was a declaration of love, then, that you were studying before the looking-glass! Well, I shall open Miss Friedberg's eyes to the character of her pretty scholar, and you may be thankful to be out of the way when she learns the story. She will be indignant, infuriated."

He grimly folded the fatal sheet together and put it in his pocket. The young man saw the verses that he had forged, in the sweat of his brow, disappear in the coat-pocket of his unfeeling relative, and the spirit of despair gave back to him his self-possession.

"I am no longer a boy," declared he, smiting upon his breast. "You have no appreciation of the feelings that stir in a young man's bosom. Your heart has long since been dead. When the hoar-frost of age already covers your head----"

He suddenly stopped and took refuge as speedily as possible behind the great arm-chair, for the doctor, who could not stand the allusions to his gray hair, advanced upon him threateningly.

"I forbid such personalities!" cried he, raging. "Hoar-frost of age, forsooth? How old do you think I am? You are fancying that this old uncle will soon be departing this life, but I shall not think of such a thing for a long while to come, mark that! I am now going to Miss Friedberg with your scribbling, and meanwhile you can let the feelings in your youthful breast storm and bluster away; it will be quite a nice little entertainment!"

"Uncle, you have no right to mock at my love," said Dagobert, somewhat dejectedly from behind his arm-chair--but the doctor was already outside the door, on his way to his sitting-room, whence he got his hat and cane.

"Hoar-frost of old age!" growled he. "Silly fellow! I'll teach him whether my heart is dead or not! You are to be surprised!" And so saying, at a rapid pace he set off for the Manor-house.

Leonie Friedberg sat at her desk, finishing a letter, when the doctor was announced; amazed she looked up:

"What, is that you, Doctor? I was just looking for Dagobert, he is generally so punctual."

"Dagobert is not coming to-day," answered Hagenbach shortly.

"Why not? Is he unwell?"

"No, but I have ordered him to stay at home--the accursed boy!"

"You are too hard upon the young man. You always treat him as though he were still a boy, although he is twenty years old!"

The doctor hardly listened to the fault found with him, but seated himself and continued wrathfully:

"A wretched tale he has gotten up again. I ought not to tell you, properly, but spare you the vexation. However, there is no help for it, you must learn about it."

"Heavens! What has happened?" asked Leonie, uneasily. "Nothing serious, I hope?"

Hagenbach's looks certainly portended something serious, as he drew forth his nephew's poetic effusion from his coat-pocket, and handed it to the lady with the air of one bringing the worst of news.

"Read, please!"

Leonie began to read, conning the verse from beginning to end with an indescribable tranquillity, nay, a smile even quivered about her lips. The doctor, who waited in vain for an expression of indignation, saw himself, finally, compelled to come to the aid of her understanding.

"It is a poem," he enlightened her.

"So I perceive."

"And it is addressed to you."

"According to all probability, inasmuch as my name stands at the head."

"Why, is that pleasant to you?" cried Hagenbach hotly. "You find it all right, do you, for him to fall at your feet--' that is the phrase used by the scribbler."

Still smiling, Leonie shrugged her shoulders. "Let your nephew indulge his little romance; it is harmless enough. I really have no objection to it."

"But I?" exclaimed the doctor. "If the simpleton manages a single time more to praise you in song, and lay at your feet the passionate emotions of his youthful breast, then----"

"What is it to you?" asked Leonie, astonished at this vehement outbreak, for which, in her opinion, there was no ground.

"What is it to me? Ah! that indeed--You do not know yet----" Hagenbach suddenly arose and stepped close in front of her.

"Look at me for once, Miss Friedberg!"

"I find nothing especially remarkable about you."

"You are not expected to find anything remarkable about me, either," said the doctor, quite hurt. "But I look quite passable, considering my years."

"Certainly, Doctor."

"I have a lucrative position, not an inconsiderable fortune, a pretty house--that is much too large for me by myself."

"I do not doubt all this, but what is----"

"And as to my roughness," continued Hagenbach, without heeding the interruption, "it is only outwardly so. In the main I am a regular lamb."

Leonie looked very incredulous at this assertion and listened with increasing surprise.

"All in all, a man with whom one might live happily," wound up the doctor with great self-complacency. "Do not you agree with me that this is so?"

"Why, yes, but----"

"Well, then say 'yes,' then the story is done."

Leonie started from her chair and blushed crimson.

"Doctor--what does this mean?"

"What does it mean? Ah, yes, I have quite forgotten to make you a regular offer. But that will do to repeat. There, now--I offer you my hand and beg for your consent--let us shake hands on it!"

He stretched out his hand, but the lady of his choice drew three steps back and said sharply: "You must take account of my surprise; I have really never deemed it possible that you could honor me with an offer."

"You think so, because you have nerves!" said Hagenbach, quite unconcerned. "Oh, that is nothing, I'll soon rid you of them, because I am a doctor."

"I only regret that I shall give you no opportunity for this," was the cool response, that made the doctor open his eyes in astonishment.

"Am I to consider this as a rejection?" asked he, dejectedly.

"If you choose to call it so. At all events it is the answer to your offer put so respectfully and with such uncommon tenderness."

The doctor's face lengthened considerably. He had, most assuredly, not deemed it necessary to impose a bridle upon his well-known bluntness, and to make any circumlocution in his courtship. He knew very well that, in spite of his years and his gray hairs, he was "a good match," and that more than one lady of his acquaintance was ready to share his station in life and his property, and here where his offer was doubtless a great, hardly-dreamed-of, piece of good fortune for the portionless girl, he was unceremoniously discarded! He believed that he had not heard aright.

"You actually then reject my offer?" he asked.

"I regret to have to decline the honor destined for me."

There ensued a brief pause. Hagenbach looked alternately upon Leonie and upon the desk, or rather the portrait over it, but then his restrained vexation got the better of him.

"Why?" asked he brusquely.

"That is my affair."

"Excuse me, it is my affair, if I am discarded: I want, at least, to know wherefore."

At every question put, he took one step forward, and at last made such demonstrations against the portrait, that Leonie planted herself in front of it, as if for a shield.

"If you lay such great stress upon it," said she, suppressing her tears, "be it so, then. Yes, Engelbert was my betrothed, whom I shall eternally bewail. He stayed in the family as tutor where I was governess, our spirits were congenial and we plighted our troth."

"That must have been very touching," growled Hagenbach, fortunately so softly that Leonie did not hear him; she continued with quavering voice:

"Engelbert then went as traveling-companion to Egypt; there it came over him like a revelation, and he determined to devote the rest of his life to the conversion of the poor heathen. He magnanimously gave me back my word, which I would not accept, however, but declared myself ready to share with him his hard, self-sacrificing vocation. It was not to be! He wrote me once more before his departure for the interior of Africa, and then"--her voice broke into sobs--"then I heard nothing more of him."

Hagenbach did not at all share in this grief; he rather felt an extraordinary satisfaction over it, viz., that the aforesaid betrothed lover and converter of the heathen was really dead and out of the way; but the narration mitigated his displeasure. It took away every insulting feature of the rejection. He fell into a reconcilable mood, that extended even to his rival.

"Peace to his ashes!" said he. "But one day you will cease to bewail him, and not spend all your days grieving over him. That may have been the fashion in Werther's time, but at the end of the nineteenth century the betrothed sheds the usual tears over the departed lover, and then takes another one--if such an one, perchance, there be. In our case, he is here and repeats his offer. So, then, Leonie, will you have me? Yes or no?"

"No!" said Leonie, drawing herself up indignantly. "If I did not know what I possessed in the tender, devoted love of my Engelbert, your courtship would show me. Perhaps you would not have approached any other lady in such an--unceremonious fashion, but the lonely, faded girl, the poor, dependent teacher, must esteem it great good luck if a 'good support' is offered her. To what end use formalities? But I have too high a regard for matrimony to consider it only from this point of view. I would rather remain as I am, poor and dependent, than be the wife of a man, who, not even as a lover, thinks it worth his while to treat me with proper respect.--And now, Doctor, we may consider our interview as closed." She made him a bow and left the room.

Hagenbach stood there, confounded, watching her disappearing figure.

"That is what you call being lectured," said he. "And I have quietly submitted to it. As for the rest, she did not look bad in her excitement, with her crimsoned cheeks and flashing eyes. Humph! I didn't know how pretty she is.--Yes, these cursed bachelor-ways! One is utterly ruined by them."

CHAPTER XV.

A WEDDING DAY.

At Odensburg, flags were flying, cannon being fired off from the surrounding heights, and triumphal arches, wreaths of evergreen, and flowers, everywhere greeted the young bridal-pair who had just returned, after the performance of the marriage-ceremony.

The service had taken place in the somewhat remote church of Saint Eustace, where Dernburg, too, had once stood before the altar with his own bride. Now the wedding-procession came back, a long line of carriages, at the head of which drove the equipage of the newly-married couple.

The works were silent to-day, as a matter of course, the workmen forming a lane all the way to the Manor-house, and the golden sunshine of this beautiful day in late summer enhanced the merriment and jollity that had taken possession of Odensburg to its utmost bounds upon this great occasion.

Now the carriage drove through the grand triumphal arch, that made a gorgeous display with its banners and green wreaths, drawing up in front of the terrace. Eric lifted his bride out. The

foot of that young woman trod literally on flowers, which had been scattered along her path in profusion. The entrance-hall was transformed into a garden blooming with sweet blossoms, and the entertaining-rooms, now thrown wide open for the reception of their new mistress, were likewise adorned.

Dernburg followed, with his sister on his arm, his features betraying deep emotion, when he embraced his son and daughter-in-law. He had offered a costly sacrifice, when he consented to the separation and lasting abode of the young pair in the South, but the infinite rapture depicted upon Eric's face indemnified the father for it, in some measure. Then Dernburg's glance fell upon Maia, who now entered by Wildenrod's side. He surveyed the proud bearing and handsome appearance of the man, who seemed just fitted, one day, to be the presiding genius of Odensburg. He saw the sweet countenance of his darling equally illumined by the light of joy, and then the shadow passed away also from his own brow. Fate offered him full indemnity for what he had to give up.

Maia flew into her brother's arms and then kissed her beautiful sister-in-law with the greatest tenderness. Oscar, too, embraced the young pair, but as he stooped down to Cecilia, he gave her a dark look, half-solicitous, half-threatening: and she must have felt this, too, for she slightly shuddered, and by a quick movement, extricated herself from his arms.

Not much time was allowed, however, for family greetings, inasmuch as other carriages now drove up to the door, and the wedding-guests began to assemble. The newly-married pair were congratulated upon all sides and soon formed the center of the brilliant circle that had collected here. None of the prominent people in the neighborhood were missing, with the solitary exception of Count Eckardstein, who had declined the invitation.

The young husband was inexpressibly happy. On this day, that had witnessed the fulfillment of his most ardent desires, his health also seemed to have been given back to him. He no longer looked sickly and broken. With flushed cheeks and sparkling eyes, he accepted, with smiles, the congratulations offered him, and exhibited a cheerfulness and animation, that visually did not belong to his nature. His eyes continually turned to her, who had just linked her destiny with his own, as though he could not exist a moment without beholding her loved face.

And this admiration was pardonable enough. Cecilia looked radiantly beautiful in her bridal attire. The white satin gown, costly lace veil, and--Eric's present--the diamonds that sparkled on neck and arms, enhanced the peculiar charm of her appearance. Only her beautiful face looked strangely pale beneath her myrtle-crown. She too smiled and bowed, in acknowledgment of the congratulations that were spoken, and uttered the usual grateful speeches; but there was something forced and cold in that smile, and her voice was without ring. Fortunately this attracted nobody's attention, for the right to look pale and serious was allowed a bride.

The director of the Odensburg works and Dr. Hagenbach, who were both among the guests, stood in a window, somewhat apart. The former had undertaken the superintendence of the festal arrangements, with which the employés meant to compliment the son of their chief upon his wedding-day. All had succeeded beyond their expectations,--the triumphal arches, the decoration of the road to the church, the delegations, and congratulatory addresses in prose and verse, which had been partly attended to the day before. The main thing, however, was yet to come--the grand holiday parade of the workmen themselves, who were just now forming into line out of doors. The director was mildly excited because his management had been called in question, and spoke in a low, and forcible manner to the doctor, who, however, listened abstractedly and often looked across at the young pair, who were still surrounded by a circle of friends.

"I only wish the parade had been appointed for yesterday," said he, in a low tone. "The procession will be more than an hour in passing by, and all that time the bridal pair will be kept out upon the terrace. It is too much upon Eric. The ceremony, the parade, then the state dinner, and finally the leave-taking. From the first, I have been opposed to these great and noisy festivities, but was out-voted on all sides. Even Herr Dernburg wanted the entertainment to be as magnificent as possible."

"That is quite in the nature of things, at the wedding of his only son," suggested the director, "and the participation of the Odensburg hands was not to be rejected. I think we shall gratify him with our procession; it must make a fine show in the bright sunlight. As for the rest, I cannot understand your solicitude about the young master. He looks splendidly--I have never seen him as cheerful and fresh-looking as to-day."

"That is the very thing that makes me uneasy. There is something feverish in his excitement, and in his condition any excitement is poison. Would that he were now quietly seated in the carriage by his wife's side, having left all this jubilation behind them."

They were interrupted by a servant announcing that the procession was ready to move, only awaiting the appearance of the family. The director stepped up to the young couple, and in the name of all the Odensburg employés, asked them to accept their homage.

Eric smiled, and offered his arm to his young wife, that he might escort her to the terrace. Dernburg and the guests joined them.

That was a fascinating panorama on a grand scale that now unfolded itself before their eyes, out of doors, in the bright noonday sun. The chief officers stood at the foot of the terrace, while their subordinates headed single groups of the gay procession, which had taken its position on the broad piece of level ground extending up to the works, and now put itself in motion.

In dense and endless masses, with music and waving banners, the thousands of workmen marched past, the men from the forges up in the mountains having joined them. By a very skillful arrangement they had interspersed groups of children, that with happy effect broke the monotony of the procession. The pupils of the schools founded by Dernburg stepped proudly along, in their Sunday clothes, pleasure in a holiday beaming from every face: when they caught sight of the bride they waved caps and bunches of flowers, almost splitting their little throats with the loud cheers that they gave out one after another.

It cost trouble to keep the way clear for the procession, for the wives of the workmen, with the tiniest children in their arms, lined the sides of the road, and, besides, the inhabitants of all the region round about had streamed hither. All eyes were turned towards the terrace, to the white form of the bride, before whom all standards were lowered, and for whom all this rejoicing was made: she was the one to whom the whole entertainment was given, and received honors such as usually fall only to the lot of a princess. Incessantly she bowed her head in recognition of the people's kindness, but there was something of restraint in her action, and her large, dark eyes looked coldly upon all these demonstrations of joy, as though she saw nothing of them, and as though in far, far-off space she sought something entirely different.

Eric, on the contrary, as was most unusual with him, took the liveliest interest in all that was going on. He drew Cecilia's attention to special features of the procession, turning repeatedly to the director to thank him for all the gratification that his skill was affording them, and seemed to have entirely laid aside his timidity and reserve. At other times it had been painful and oppressive to him, to be the chief person upon occasions of the sort, but to-day he hailed it with joyful pride, for the sake of his young wife.

Dernburg stood by his son's side, and received these demonstrations of popularity with kindly gravity. Who could blame him, if his chest heaved more proudly and his massive form became more erect, at sight of the thousands who were marching by? Those were his workmen to whom, for thirty long years, he had been a master, but also a father, for whose weal he had labored and toiled as for his own, and these they would estrange from him! These were to turn from him to follow another, who, as yet, had done nothing for them; who had begun his career by setting up opposition to the man who had been a greater benefactor to him than to all besides! A contemptuous smile played about the lips of the lord of Odensburg, the ground upon which he stood was firm as a rock; of that he felt impressed more strongly than ever to-day.

But still another looked with swelling bosom and flashing eyes upon the masses flowing by.-- Oscar von Wildenrod, who stood with Maia under one of the orange-trees. Gigantic as had the control of the Odensburg works appeared to him, from the start, never had the power and importance of Dernburg's position struck him as it did to-day--and this was to be his future destination. To be the ruler of such a world, to guide it with a word, a sign,--that had been his aim since that first evening when he had looked over at those works, veiled as they were in the darkness of night. Now, at last, he stood close before his goal.

His glance turned to Maia, and the proud triumph resting upon his features melted into a blissful smile. The half-comic, half-solemn dignity, with which Maia wore the long train to her blue silk gown, unused, as she was to such an appendage, became her charmingly; her rosy cheeks glowed from joyous exhilaration. With the frolicsomeness of a child she let herself be borne along by the waves of joyful excitement that were bounding in her heart. She knew that her father had withdrawn his opposition to her love.

"Is it not beautiful?" asked she, lifting her radiant eyes to his face. "And Eric is so happy!"

Oscar smiled and bent over her.

"Oh, I know one who will be happier than Eric, when he stands there on yonder spot, with his young bride by his side, when----"

"Hush, Oscar!" interposed Maia with glowing face. "You know--papa will not allow a whisper of that now."

"Nobody hears us," said Oscar, and indeed the noise of the music and cheers drowned his passionate whispering. "And your papa is not so stern as he would have us believe. He has, it is true, denied my petition to have our engagement publicly announced to-day, it was hard enough to wrest a consent from him on any terms. But now you are here, and if his darling asks him, he will not say her nay. I shall renew the siege to-morrow--will you help me, my Maia?"

She did not answer, only her eyes told him, that he should not lack the support asked for: with soft but fervent pressure he took her hand. Wildenrod evidently had no objection to the company, guessing what at present they were not to be told.

The last group of workmen had just gone by, the marching past was at an end, and the whole mass of spectators moved in a body to the now vacant railroad station, in order to take the next

train. On the terrace, too, everything was now in motion. The director once more received the thanks of Dernburg and his son, to which were added the compliments of the guests present, for the successful manner in which the affair had been conducted, and then the young couple with their friends retired into the house.

They were greeted in the vast entrance-hall by strains of music, and a table stood in waiting, richly decorated with flowers, silver and cut-glass, whence the most tempting refreshments were served. Little as Dernburg liked ordinarily to make a display of his wealth, to-day no expenditure was spared that could add to the splendor of the occasion.

The meal passed as is usual at such times: healths were drunk, and after sitting at table for about two hours the dancing began, for which the younger portion of the company had waited longingly.

The newly-married pair only participated in the first grand promenade and then withdrew. Maia, who was escorted back to her place by Wildenrod, saw that they left the hall with some surprise.

"Why do Eric and Cecilia break up already?" asked she. "They are not to set off for an hour to come?"

"It is Dr. Hagenbach's fault," declared Oscar. "He fears that Eric has over-exerted himself--quite unnecessarily, it seems to me, for Eric has never looked better than to-day."

"So it seems to me; but Cecilia looks so much the paler. She was all the while so grave and silent--I would have imagined a happy bride looking very differently."

Wildenrod's eyes had likewise followed his sister, a dark frown gathering upon his brow the while. But then, he shrugged his shoulders and replied in a careless tone:

"She is worn out and fagged; no wonder either. The director has imposed a little too much upon us, with this endlessly long procession of his, for there we had to stay until the last company had marched by."

Maia shook her head, while her childlike features became grave and thoughtful. "Eric thinks it is something different, he is anxious to learn what."

"What is it that Eric wants to learn?" asked Wildenrod suddenly, so sharply that the young girl looked at him in surprise.

"Oh, he is mistaken perhaps, but upon my return he lamented to me the alteration that had taken place in Cecilia during the past few weeks. He is afraid that some trouble is weighing upon her mind, and hoped that she might be persuaded to confide in me, since he had failed to learn her secret. I gladly obliged him by approaching her on the subject, but got nothing for my pains. She was equally reserved with me--Eric was quite miserable about it."

Oscar bit his lip and an expression came out upon his features that terrified Maia. As soon, however, as he noticed her questioning look, he gave a short laugh and said mockingly: "I am afraid Eric will make life hard for himself and his wife, with his overstrained tenderness. Fortunately Cecilia is not attuned to such sentimentalities, and will laugh him out of his tendency to 'make mountains out of mole-hills.'"

The waltz just now beginning, interrupted the conversation between the two. A young officer to whom the daughter of the house was engaged for this dance, came up to claim her hand. Maia, who, for the first time danced in a large company, entered heartily into this amusement, but her eyes quickly turned again to the spot where the Baron stood, or rather had stood, for he was no longer there. She sought him in vain; he must have left the room.

Eric had attended his young wife to her chamber, and then repaired to his own apartments, to change his suit. He smiled over the painful solicitude of the doctor, who could never get over treating him as a sick man, no matter how well he felt, as for instance to-day. But with the prescription itself he was well pleased, for not yet had he been allowed a single minute of his wife's society in private. His traveling-suit was quickly donned, and now there was still left a half hour for a sweet, confidential chat, that nobody could disturb.

Full of impatience the young husband hurried out to go and find his wife, but at the foot of the stairs he stood still a moment and gazed through the wide-open portals of the grand reception-hall.

Out of doors lay the landscape in the full splendor of the evening-sun, whose golden light flooded also the flower-bestrewn terrace, and a broad shining beam also crossed the hall. From the works over yonder, where the festivities for the workmen took place, came sounds of music and rejoicing; and from the open windows of the ball-room, where a pause in the dancing had occurred, penetrated the gay talking and laughing of the company.

Eric's heart beat high for joy, and he drew a deep breath of satisfaction. What a lovely day it had been, this his wedding-day! And now life just began for him--now there beckoned to him the

wide world, the sunny South; he would be free from oppressive, irksome duties, and there on the shore of the blue Mediterranean, with a sweet wife by his side, dream an enchanting dream of happiness. In the depths of his soul, he was pierced with gratitude to the Giver of all good, who had showered upon him all these blessings.

With quick steps he mounted the stairs and was about to enter the small parlor which separated Cecilia's chamber from that of her brother, when he remarked that it had been bolted from the inside; also nobody opened in response to his light tap. He was impatient, and took another way.

Oscar's chamber had another peculiar entrance, a little tapestry-door, that was seldom or never used. Eric opened it and traversed the apartment of his brother-in-law and the adjoining parlor. His step was not audible upon the soft carpet, and moreover the door to Cecilia's chamber was close. Eric heard Wildenrod's voice from inside and stood still.

The brother, he supposed, had sought the bride in order to see her once more alone and to say farewell. This was natural and the parting--in any case so brief--ought not to be disturbed.

Yet what was that? The Baron's voice sounded stern and threatening, and now a wild, passionate sob was heard. Was it Cecilia's voice? It could not be she who was thus distressed, weeping so despairingly! Eric turned pale, the foreboding of a great sorrow suddenly fell upon him, as though an ice-cold hand had laid its weight upon his chest. He tarried motionless in his place, every word reaching him through the closed door.

"Be reasonable, Cecilia! Have you lost all power of self-control? You must show yourself again to the guests and bid them farewell, Eric may come in any minute. Do collect yourself!"

No answer, only convulsive, inconsolable weeping.

"I dreaded something of the sort, and therefore sought you, but I was not prepared for such an outbreak as this. Cecilia, you must compose yourself."

"I cannot!" gasped Cecilia with half-stifled voice. "Leave me, Oscar! I have been obliged to smile and lie this livelong day--must do so again when I sit in that carriage with Eric--I'll die if I cannot take my cry out this once--only this single time."

The brother must have perceived that he could effect nothing here by the assumption of a domineering tone, for his voice was milder, when he rejoined:

"There it is again, that wretched passionateness of your disposition, you should say to yourself, that this is the last of all hours, in which to abandon yourself thus. I have done everything to secure to you your happiness and you----"

"My happiness?" repeated Cecilia with sarcastic bitterness. "Why that lie, Oscar?--we are alone. You managed to deceive me so long as I was a thoughtless child, but you know the day that opened my eyes. You only wanted, through me, to pave the way to your own fortune, when you set yourself to make a match between Eric and me. You wanted to be master of Odensburg, therefore, I had to be the victim."

"And if I had this aim in view, I lifted you up with myself," cried Wildenrod with emphasis. "I have told you, often enough, that the question here for both of us is 'to be or not to be.' You consider yourself a victim do you? Why, to-day you received princely homage, and as those endless throngs of dependents marched past you, surely it must have become clear to you, what significance the name that you now bear, has in the world. That life in Odensburg, which you dreaded so, is to be spared you. You are to return to Italy. Eric worships you, he lives only in your looks, and will leave no wish of yours ungratified, showering upon you everything that wealth can give. What more can you ask of your marriage? This is good fortune, and one day you will thank me for it."

"Never! never!" cried the young woman, beside herself. "Oh! that I had fled from this good fortune! But you--you compelled my submission by the dreadful threat that you would follow our father's example, and I had to stay in order to save you. You have no idea, what torture I have endured since that time, in the midst of all Eric's goodness and tenderness. I never have loved him, never will love him, and now that the chain is irrevocably forged, I feel that it will crush me. I would rather lie down in death than in his arms!"

She suddenly hushed. "What was that?" she asked quickly.

"What?"

"I do not know--it sounded like a sigh!"

"Imagination! We are alone, I have secured ourselves against listeners. What means that desperate outbreak? Have you waited until your wedding-day to be certain that you love another? Do you not know the truth, or *will* you not? I have suspected it ever since that day when you and Runeck met on the Whitestone. It seemed as though you would lose your senses, at the bare idea of being despised by that man, of appearing before him in the light of an adventuress. I did not

want to warn or frighten you--no one arouses a somnambulist upon his dangerous walk. But now it is time to wake up. Since that Egbert has crossed your path----"

"No! no!" interposed Cecilia repelling the imputation.

"Yes!" said Oscar with cold insistency. "Do you think, it has escaped me how, this morning, when I drove to church with you as bride-man, you turned deadly pale and then like one spellbound gazed at one particular spot in the woods? You had remarked him, who, I suppose, had come to take one last look at you. He was far enough off, it is true, half-hidden behind the trees. At such a distance one recognizes only his deadly foe or the man whom one loves--and we both recognized him."

His sister made no answer, but did not contradict his assertion. But now it was Oscar who started in affright. He had heard close by a noise as of a door falling gently to, and seized by an ill-defined apprehension, he hurriedly opened the door leading into the parlor. Delusion! the parlor was empty, the bolt still undisturbed. But a glance at the mantel-clock convinced the Baron that it was high time to terminate the interview; he returned to his sister.

"I must go back to the company," said he, in subdued tones, "and you too must prepare for your journey. You have had your cry out, now consider what you owe to yourself and me! You are Eric's wife, and tomorrow miles will already lie between you and that other, whom I hope you will never see again. I have seen to it, that he can do no more harm at Odenburg, and you will forget him, because you must."

He unbolted the door and rang for the lady's maid.

The tearful eyes of the bride could be explained by the pain of parting from her brother; nevertheless, he would not leave her by herself for a single minute. Not until Nannon entered did he leave the room.

Down in the front-hall the Baron met a man-servant, bearing Eric's hand-satchel and cloak, of whom he asked in passing:

"Can you tell me if Herr Dernburg is in his own room?"

"No, Baron, he is with his lady," answered the man in surprise.

"Oh, no, I have just left my sister."

"But I saw the young master go upstairs myself," the servant ventured to reply. "It was about a half hour ago. Have you not seen him yourself, sir? He went into your room through the little tapestried door."

Wildenrod turned pale to his very lips, for of this entrance he had not thought. Whether Eric had really been in the parlor, whether he had heard what Oscar dared not carry out the thought, he left the servant standing and hurried to his brother-in-law's apartments.

Nobody was in the first room, but when the Baron had opened the chamber-door, involuntarily he started back.

Eric lay stretched out on the floor, apparently lifeless, with closed eyes. The head had fallen back; and bosom, clothes, and the carpet round about were saturated with clear, red blood, that still flowed from his lips in single drops.

For the space of a few seconds Oscar stood like one transfixed, but then he pulled the bell-rope violently. With the aid of the servants, who came running up, he raised the unconscious bridegroom from the floor and laid him on his bed, at the same time ordering Dr. Hagenbach to be called, so as to excite as little attention as possible.

In a very few minutes the physician was at his post. He silently listened to Wildenrod's report, while he felt the pulse and listened to the beating of the heart; then he drew himself up and said softly:

"Bring your sister in, Baron, and prepare her for the worst. I shall have his father and Maia called."

"Do you fear?" asked Oscar just as softly, but Hagenbach shook his head.

"There is no longer room here for either fear or hope. Lead his bride here--perhaps he may once more recover consciousness."

A quarter of an hour later, the whole house knew that Eric Dernburg, whom they had just seen at the summit of human felicity, now lay on a bed of death. It had not been possible to suppress the dread tidings; they flew like wild-fire. In the ball-room, the music ceased abruptly, the guests stood around in awe-stricken silence or whispered in mournful accents, the servants, meanwhile, running to and fro, with distorted faces. Like a flash of lightning the stroke had fallen upon the festive scene.

The family had gathered around the death-bed. Dr. Hagenbach was still busied in the application of various restoratives, but it was evident that he expected nothing more from them. By the side of the couch knelt the young wife, in her white satin bridal robe that she had not yet laid aside when the message of misfortune came. She was tearless, but pale as death. She suspected some secret, strange coincidence.

On the other side stood Dernburg, in speechless grief, his eyes riveted upon his son, for the preservation of whose life he had been willing to make any sacrifice, and, in spite of it all, he was to be snatched from him. Maia sobbed on her father's bosom. Wildenrod did not dare to approach either her or the death-bed, but, silent and moody, kept in the background. He had believed his game to be lost, and now he should win anyhow. The poor man, whose life was bleeding away there so slowly, could never bring an accusation against him, but take to the grave with him what he had heard and what had given him his death-blow.

Motionless, Eric lay there with closed eyes, seeming hardly to suffer at all. His breathing became easier and easier, until presently the physician laid down the hand which he had been holding while he counted the pulse. Cecilia saw this and guessed the significance of the act.

"Eric!" she shrieked. It was a cry of despair, of deadly anguish; and it shocked the dying man out of his stupor. Slowly he opened his eyes, that, already dimmed by death, sought the beloved countenance that leaned over him, but those eyes expressed such infinite love, so deep and silent a lament, that Cecilia shuddered and shrank back. It was only an instant of consciousness--the last. One more deep sigh from that wounded breast--and all was over.

"The end has come!" said the physician softly.

With loud weeping, Maia sank upon the corpse of her brother, and over Dernburg's cheeks, too, rolled a few big tears, as he kissed the cold brow of his son.

But then he turned to the young wife, gently lifted her up and folded her in his arms.

"Here is your place, Cecilia," said he, with deep emotion. "You are my son's widow, and my daughter. You shall find in me a father!"

CHAPTER XVI.

SCENES AT THE "GOLDEN LAMB."

In the town, that was the railroad station both for Odenburg and the whole region round about, was situated the "Golden Lamb," a well-known and much-frequented inn. The immediate neighborhood of the railroad station and the lively intercourse that continually took place between this place and the Odenburg works, brought much custom to the house. All who came from Odenburg or went thither, used to turn in at the "Golden Lamb," which had the best repute, so far as accommodations were concerned.

The original proprietor had been dead for a long while, but his widow had given him a successor in the person of Herr Pancratius Willmann. He had once chanced to call here as a guest with the purpose of looking out for some small office in the town, but he had then preferred to court the rich widow and remain in that snug nest. He had succeeded in this plan, and was very comfortably off in consequence. He left it to his wife to manage in kitchen and cellar, reserving to himself the more pleasant duties of entertaining the guests and showing them, by his own example, how excellent was the cookery of the "Golden Lamb."

It was on a gloomy, raw October day, which made one feel that autumn had come in earnest, when Dr. Hagenbach's buggy stopped before the inn; the doctor himself, though, sat in the comfortable gentlemen's parlor upstairs which was only open to favored guests. Dagobert was equipped for a journey, since he was to take the next train for Berlin, where he was to enter the high school. In spite of his uncle's rigid discipline, the young man's stay at Odenburg did not seem to have been disadvantageous to him, for he looked more manly and healthier than in the spring.

Herr Willmann, who would not let the doctor be served by anybody but himself, had informed him, with woful visage, that his health had certainly been better since he had strictly followed his prescriptions, but that he was half-starved nevertheless. Hagenbach listened, quite unmoved, and ordered the continuation of the same treatment, without paying the least heed to mine host's dismay.

"Times seem to be lively with you to-day, Herr Willmann. The sitting room downstairs is swarming like a veritable bee-hive. You are having a grand political gathering. I hear the whole social democracy of the town meet at your house. At all events it is a sign for good that the gentlemen have selected the 'Lamb' for a place of rendezvous of their own accord. It indicates peaceful intentions, at all events."

Herr Willmann folded his hands, and his visage became very rueful.

"Ah, Doctor, do not laugh at me, I am in downright despair. I built the new hall last year, for innocent and instructive entertainment--it is the largest in the whole town--and now those radicals, those revolutionists, those anarchists hold their meetings in it--it is dreadful--"

"If it is dreadful to you, why do you take such characters into your house?" asked Hagenbach dryly.

"How am I to refuse them anything? They would ruin my business, maybe blow up my house with dynamite!" Mine host shuddered at this horrible idea. "I did not dare to say no, when that Landsfeld came and demanded my hall. I trembled before that man, yes, trembled in every limb."

"That must have been very flattering to Mr. Landsfeld," said the doctor, taking a huge draught from the beer mug standing before him, while Willmann continued his lamentation.

"But how am I to answer for it to my other customers--you may depend they'll make me pay for it--and what will Herr Dernburg say?"

"I suppose Herr Dernburg will be utterly indifferent as to whether the Socialists meet at the 'Golden Lamb' or elsewhere, and that you will not lose his custom by it either for that matter he never did take a meal at your house, did he?"

"Oh, Doctor, what are you thinking of? My little house, only imagine it! The Odenburg family always drive straight to the depot. All the subordinate officers, though, deal with me; why, I put my main dependence upon Odenburg, and would not for any money in the world--"

"Have it all spoiled for the sake of one party!" said Hagenbach, finishing his sentence for him.

"Of course, that is a matter of business, Runeck is to speak to-day; not a seat will be vacant in your big hall, and it will yield you a pretty profit."

Herr Pancratius Willmann lifted both hands in deprecation and cast his eyes up at the ceiling. "What am I caring for the profit? But I cannot let my business go to rack and ruin, these hard times. I am the father of a family, have six children--"

"Why, the hard times do not seem to have preyed heavily on you," laughed the doctor. "By the way, just at this moment, you bear a most remarkable resemblance to your sainted cousin, the man of the desert, who used to cast his eyes heavenward, in the same piteous manner. But come, Dagobert, we must break up now, else the train will leave you."

He drank out his mug of beer and stood up. The portly host of the "Lamb" attended them to the front-door, and once more, in woe-begone manner, begged that his most humble respects be presented to Herr Dernburg, with the assurance that he, for his part, was firmly devoted to the party of law and order, but that, as the father of a family and under these distressing circumstances--

"I shall tell him that you are once more the victim of your calling," exclaimed Hagenbach, breaking short his wail. "You just keep on trembling in quiet and pocket the jingling cash all the same. Your beer is excellent, and no doubt the gentlemen will know how to appreciate it. It will dispose them to be more humane and save the 'Golden Lamb' from destruction, if it comes to the worst."

Herr Willmann shook his head gently and reproachfully at this waggish aspect of the case, and took leave of his guests with a reverential bow, who, on their part, now repaired to the railroad station, where the train was already in waiting. While Hagenbach was crossing the platform with his nephew, he gave him one more impressive lecture, by way of farewell. "I would like to be certain of one thing, namely, that you will set yourself to studying steadily in Berlin, and not turn aside to the follies that played the wild with that fellow Runeck's prospects in life," said he with emphasis. "He had always been very sensible until he went among those Socialists. I tell you, my boy, if you let yourself be taken in by people of that sort--"

He put on such a ferocious look that the pale-faced Dagobert shrank back in affright and laid his hand upon his breast in protestation of his innocent intentions. "I am not going among radicals, dear uncle, certainly not," asserted he, with touching candor.

"They would not make much of a haul when they caught you," opined the doctor contemptuously. "But they take all that they can get, and you, alas! are ripe for any kind of folly. I only hope that your cursed poem 'To Leonie' was your first and will be your last. At all events I made clear enough to you, I trust, the undesirableness of writing such trash.--But the signal for the cars to start has already been given! Have you got your satchel in hand? Get in, then, and a

pleasant trip to you!"

He shut the coach-door and stepped back. Dagobert really did not breathe freely until he saw himself separated from his uncle by the solid wall of the coach, for, upon his heart, in his vest-pocket rested a long, touching farewell poem "To Leonie." After the miscarriage of his first attempt, it is true that the young poet had not ventured to place in the hands of his *inamorata* this effusion of his sentiments, but he had made up his mind to send it in a letter, from Berlin, with the assurance that his love would be eternal, however cruelly the rude world might come in between himself and the object of his ardent affections.

This "rude world," in the shape of the doctor, stood upon the platform, waving another farewell greeting as the train now began to move. Then Hagenbach sought the station-master and inquired whether the fast-train from Berlin was behind time.

"No, indeed, Doctor, that train will be here punctually in ten minutes," answered that official. "Are you expecting any one?"

"Yes, young Count Eckardstein will arrive today."

The station-master's face expressed surprise. "What! Count Victor coming? It was said that an irreparable breach was made between his brother and himself, that time when he came here in the spring, and went away all of a sudden. So, the case at Eckardstein is a desperate one?"

"To this extent, at least, that Count Victor had to be informed of it. He is the only brother, you know."

"Yes, yes--the lord-proprietor is unmarried as well," wound up the railroad agent significantly. "Will you not step into the waiting-room, Doctor?"

"No, I thank you. I prefer to stay out of doors; it will be only for a few minutes."

Hagenbach was not the only expectant person there. Landsfeld appeared with a troop of workmen, who were also evidently awaiting the arrival of some one, for they planted themselves on the platform, conversing in loud, dictatorial tones about the approaching electoral assembly. Finally the train came rushing up. It brought a good many passengers, who got out here at the larger railway-station, so that, for a few minutes, there was a regular commotion in the great reception hall.

Hagenbach walked along the whole line of coaches, with scrutinizing glance, when suddenly he saw before him the tall figure of Runeck, who had just left the coach. Both stopped short, the first instant, when Egbert made a quick motion, as though he would approach the physician, but Landsfeld had already discovered him and pressed up to him with his followers. With noisy greetings they encircled the young engineer, took him into their midst and as they left the depot, raised a loud cheer for him.

"The tribune of the people sails in smooth waters," growled the doctor irritably. "A pretty surprise this, that he is preparing for Herr Dernburg! I am only curious as to what our Odensburgers are going to say. They are in it too, and, as it seems, in goodly numbers."

He quickened his pace, for he just now caught sight of Victor Eckardstein alighting from the last coach, in company with an elderly gentleman. The young Count also perceived him, and hastened to meet him".

"Nothing has happened yet at Eckardstein, has it?" asked he nervously.

"No, Count; the condition of the patient has not perceptibly altered since day before yesterday. But as I happened to be at the station, I thought I would wait to welcome you."

The young Count now turned and introduced: "Dr. Hagenbach, my uncle, Herr von Stettin."

Hagenbach bowed, recognizing the name and knowing that he had before him the brother of the deceased Countess Eckardstein. Stettin offered him his hand.

"You are treating my nephew, as I learn."

"I am, Herr von Stettin, being called in by the express desire of the family physician. My colleague did not want to undertake the responsibility alone."

"In that he did perfectly right. His report was so alarming that I determined to accompany Victor. The case is a serious one, is it not?"

"An inflammation of the lungs is always serious," answered the doctor evasively. "We must build upon the powerful constitution of the patient. We considered it a duty, at any rate, not to keep the Count in ignorance of the danger hanging over his brother."

"I thank you," said Victor with emotion. He looked pale and agitated, the thought of seeing that brother, from whom he had parted in anger, lying upon what was perhaps his death-bed, evidently oppressed him sorely. He kept silent, while Stettin asked the most particular questions,

informed himself exactly as to the condition of his elder nephew. Out of doors in front of the railroad station stood an Eckardstein carriage, and the doctor took leave of the two gentlemen, promising to be at the Castle early the next morning. Then he went over to the "Golden Lamb" to bid his coachman prepare likewise for departure.

In the hall he once more met Runeck and Landsfeld, who had rid themselves of their comrades and were just inquiring of the host if he could not furnish them with a private room, as they wanted to confer about something.

This time Egbert bowed and paused hesitatingly, as though he were in doubt whether he should address the doctor or not. At the same time he cast an almost shy glance over at the steps where Landsfeld stood.

"Well?" asked he sharply, the word sounding more like a command than a summons.

That decided the matter. The young engineer defiantly threw back his head and stepped up to the physician.

"A word with you, Doctor! How goes it at Odenburg--in the Manor-house, I mean?"

Hagenbach had responded very coolly to his greeting, and answered with reserve:

"As you would expect in a house of mourning, where death entered so suddenly and shockingly--you have heard, I suppose, how the young gentleman died?"

"Yes, I know about it," said Egbert in a voice that betrayed suppressed emotion. "How did his father bear it?"

"Worse than he would have one believe. And yet his is an iron nature that manfully resists every assault made upon it, and he has not much time to devote to his grief either. Affairs in and around Odenburg claim his attention more than ever. You will understand how this is better than I, Herr Runeck!"

The doctor's thrust, however, seemed to glance aside from the apparently thick panoply of Egbert's composure, as he calmly went on questioning:

"And Maia? She loved her brother very dearly."

"Why, Miss Maia, you know, is hardly seventeen yet. At that age one weeps freely and is then consoled. On the contrary, Mrs. Dernburg suffers more acutely under her loss than I could have supposed possible."

"The young widow?" asked Egbert in a low tone.

"Yes; those first days she abandoned herself so to grief, that I entertained serious apprehensions, and even now she is broken-hearted as it were. I would not have attributed to her such exquisite sensibility."

Runeck's lips quivered, but he made no reply to this last remark. "Remember me to Miss Maia--she perhaps will not spurn my salutation," said he hurriedly. "Farewell, Doctor."

So saying he turned to the stairs, where Landsfeld was still awaiting him, and mounted them with him, while Hagenbach called his coachman and then seated himself in his carriage.

Herr Willmann, from the front door, made another reverential bow. The very next minute, he hurried as fast as his corpulence would admit of, after the other two.

And he did not tremble at all when he stood before the dreaded Landsfeld, but bent just as low before him as he had done awhile ago to the doctor, and in the most fawning manner asked his honored guests to take possession of the gentlemen's parlor, where they should be entirely undisturbed--he would see to it that nobody came in. Whatever their honors wanted in kitchen or cellar, yes, the whole house was at their disposal.

"No, we need nothing now," said Landsfeld carelessly. "Only you see to it, mine host, that nothing is lacking this evening. The crowd will be very great."

The fat host of the "Lamb" exhausted himself in assurances that everything should be attended to in the very best of style, and then with the greatest self-complacency repaired to his assembly-room, to attend to making some arrangements in person. Herr Pancratius Willmann possessed, in the highest degree, the art of serving two masters.

The two guests meanwhile had entered. Egbert had seated himself, and his head rested in his hand. He looked pale and worn, and there was a harsh, bitter look upon his face, not at all habitual with him.

The new candidate for election did not seem, to find much pleasure in the honor that had been bestowed upon him. Landsfeld closed the door and likewise drew up to the table.

"Have you time for us, at last?" asked he with sharpness.

"I should think I always had that," was the short answer.

"And yet it does not seem so. You let me stand there on those steps like a fool, while you were talking with that doctor."

"You need not have listened. Why did you not go ahead of me?"

"Because it amused me to see how impossible you find it to break away from those to whom you have so long been in bondage. Ha, ha! to hear you inquiring after their health, in that highly sentimental manner. It was too funny!"

"What is it to you?" said Egbert harshly. "That is my own affair."

"Not exactly, my young man. You are the candidate of our party, and, as such, have decidedly and definitely to break off all connection with the enemy's camp. Before all things, you have to care for your popularity now, and you will make yourself disliked, yes, suspected, by such proceedings,—note that!"

Runeck contemptuously shrugged his shoulders. "I thank you for your good advice, but rather think that I ought to be capable of guiding my own actions."

"You speak in a very lofty tone forsooth," mocked Landsfeld. "You already behold yourself as the all-powerful party-leader, as the chief person in the *Reichstag*. You have, in general, quite a dangerous touch of the master about you. In this you bear a striking resemblance to the old man at Odensburg, no doubt having learned it from him. But that this kind of thing does not go down with us you should know by this time. If you continue to carry on so, my word for it, your election will be impossible."

Egbert suddenly rose to his feet and with furrowed brow planted himself right in front of Landsfeld.

"What is all this for? Better say, straight out, that you envy me the station to which the party has nominated me. You had calculated upon holding it and cannot forgive me for having been preferred before you. And you know best of all that this office was thrust upon me. I would have gladly committed it to you—only too gladly!"

"What I wished or expected is not to be considered here," answered Landsfeld coldly. "There was no prospect of my carrying the election; there is one for you, so I had to vacate the field for you, and this I do without murmuring. I know the discipline and adhere to it—would that others did the same."

Runeck did not seem to hear the last remark, he had stepped up to the window and looked out. "How does it stand in Odensburg?" asked he, abruptly.

"Well, better at least than we dared to hope. The old man"—Landsfeld used this designation for Dernburg by preference, because he knew that it wounded his comrade—"the old man, to be sure, feels himself impregnable in his high tower, and his eyes will not be opened, either, until election-day. But we have worked bravely, and that really was no easy matter in this case. Now it is for you to prove your strength! Much depends upon your speech this evening, perhaps everything. A part of the Odensburg workmen still stick firmly to Dernburg, the rest waver, and those are the ones that you are to capture this evening and draw over to us. You know how to do that splendidly, at least you used to."

"I shall do my duty," said Egbert glumly, without turning around. "But I am doubtful as to the result."

"Why so? Hark, it seems to me that your wings have been clipped since we played you against the old man at Odensburg. What you have spoken, these last weeks in Berlin, was tolerably flat and tiresome. Formerly you sparkled with fire and enthusiasm and carried everything before you, now when everything depends on it, you are neither cold nor hot. Can you really be as besotted over this Dernburg as he over you? I do believe he found the death of his son easier to bear than your defection. It will be a touching spectacle, to see you two pitted against one another in a life to life struggle."

"That's enough now, Landsfeld!" burst forth the young engineer, furiously excited. "I have already desired you, once before, not to disturb yourself about my personal relations; I forbid it to you now, once for all. Hush about that!"

"Yes, you threatened that time at Radefeld to put me out of doors," mocked Landsfeld, seeming only to be amused by Runeck's rage. "Here we are in another person's house, where you cannot resort to that measure. But let's to business! I only wanted to make it clear to you, that this evening you must lay aside all sentimental retrospect if your speech is to take effect. You know what the party expects of you."

"Yes—I know."

"Well, then, rally your forces! We *must* have the Odensburg workmen, for their votes will decide the matter. You must therefore make energetic front against Dernburg, and against all that he has set in motion. You must demonstrate to the people, that his schools and asylums and savings-banks, with which he decoys them, are of no value in our eyes, a beggar's pence that he casts to his workmen, while he rakes in by the million. The people do not believe us, but you they will believe, for they know to what end the old man gave you your training. You were to be the future superintendent of his works, the first after himself, and you refused to receive aught of all this from him, for the sake of our cause: this it is that makes you all-powerful among the men of Odensburg, and for this alone we nominated you for election. You will accomplish nothing by mere talk--you must make straight for your adversary and hit at a vital point."

Egbert turned, slowly around, dogged determination was stamped on his brow and his voice expressed bitter scorn, when he answered: "Yes, indeed, I must--must! I have no longer a will of my own.--Let us go and join the rest!"

CHAPTER XVII.

ELECTION TIMES.

All the brightness had departed from the social life at Odensburg, which had been so gay all the summer through, its center of attraction being ever the young engaged couple. The family were still wearing the first deep mourning for him who had been laid in the grave hardly two months before, and the atmosphere in the house was as heavy and dull as was the bleak foggy autumn day outside.

Only Maia made an exception. Dr. Hagenbach was right--at seventeen years of age one weeps out one's grief and is then comforted even for the loss of a beloved brother; and moreover here was a particular comforter quite close at hand. Oscar von Wildenrod had, of course, remained at Odensburg; and although there could be no talk now of a public betrothal, yet the father had given his consent in due form.

Maia was infinitely lovely in her deep, quiet happiness, and in the family-circle, where he needed not to be under restraint, he showed her the tenderest attention and devotion. He seemed greatly altered; the harsh features vanished more and more from his face, his whole nature being softened under the influence of that budding happiness which brought him to the goal of his desires.

Dernburg bore his grief for his son as he was accustomed to bear every hard thing in life, composedly and silently, seeking his consolation in that occupation, to which he gave himself up with greater zeal than ever. Between him and his daughter-in-law Eric's death had unexpectedly formed a close and tender tie. For, although the father had received the betrothed of his son with cordiality, and treated her as a daughter, yet in his inmost soul, he had never become really reconciled to this union; the vain, haughty child of the world had always been a creature apart from the man of strict duty. But the young widow, with her grief passionately expressed at first, but afterwards changing to a deep, settled melancholy, found a true father in him. From the moment when he had folded her in his arms at Eric's bedside, she had held a place in his heart.

He did not suspect, indeed, that this abandoned grief of Cecilia's was only remorse--remorse over that hour when she had so strongly expressed aversion for the husband, who was even then dying. She did not know the worst either, namely, that it was those unfortunate words of hers that had pronounced his death-sentence. Oscar had secured the silence of the man-servant, who had seen Eric go upstairs and enter the fatal room, and no one else was aware of the circumstance. But the young woman had some foreboding of the coincidence, and took refuge with her father, because she could not overcome a secret horror of her brother.

For that matter though, Dernburg had but little time now to devote to his family, for, besides the usual burdens that he took upon his shoulders now as ever, the impending election demanded his time and strength in large measure. It was considered a matter of course in his party that the prerogative of a seat in the *Reichstag* which he had so long exercised would this time, too, fall to his share, but they had soon become convinced that, for the first time, the victory must be a contested one, for their opponents were working under high pressure. The circumstances required activity in all directions, and here Dernburg found quite an unexpected prop in Oscar von Wildenrod.

With incredible celerity, he had made himself familiar with the political situation, and his keen penetration, accompanied by sound judgment, excited the admiration of others who had been in

the midst of these relations.

The Baron was everywhere that it seemed likely his presence could do good: he took part in all mass-meetings and consultations, and went into the campaign with the most ardent zeal. The quondam diplomat was again launched on the open sea of politics, and it was no wonder that every day increased his influence over Dernburg, whose very shadow he became.

Finally the day arrived, when the last decisive battle was to be fought at the polls. Unusual activity now prevailed in the building devoted to the offices connected with the Odenburg works, which had commenced, indeed, at an early hour in the morning. The lower floor contained the hall usually devoted to lectures and all general assemblies: here all the officials were to be found to-day, here telegraphic communications were constantly coming from the city, and messengers from the country districts, which gave, approximately, at least, the returns from the polls. The commonly peaceful assembly-room looked like a camp in war-time, the director forming its central figure: and a continuous stream of messages was conveyed to the Manor.

It was not until the afternoon was considerably advanced that Dr. Hagenbach came in, and was greeted with reproaches on the part of the gentlemen present, because of his absence.

"Where in the world have you been hiding, Doctor?" cried the director, in rather a fault-finding tone. "Here we have been sitting all day immersed in care and anxiety, while, in all tranquillity of soul, you have been visiting your patients and not pretending to show your face!"

"I cannot prevent people from getting sick and dying on election-day," said Hagenbach gravely. "I had to go to Eckardstein this morning, and there they would have me stay, until all was over."

However much engrossed the gentlemen were by other things, this news aroused universal interest.

"Is the Count dead?" asked the director in surprise.

"He died two hours ago."

"That is a sudden turn of fortune's wheel in Count Victor's favor," remarked the upper-engineer. "Yesterday a poor, dependent lieutenant, and to-day proprietor of the great Eckardstein estate. Count Conrad had not been exactly kind to his younger brother, I believe."

"No; but nevertheless he was as affectionate as possible, at the last.--And now, gentlemen, I trust that I have apologized sufficiently for my absence, and sincerely hope that I have not been sensibly missed. How goes the reckoning? Well, I hope."

"Not so particularly well, either," muttered the upper-engineer. "The reports from the country districts are satisfactory, but in town, the Socialists evidently have the whip-hand of us."

"Well, we were prepared for that from the beginning," remarked Winning, the chief of the technical bureau. "Odenburg gives the casting-vote, and with that we are sure of a majority."

"If we can unconditionally calculate upon it--yes," said the director, "but I am afraid---"

"What are you afraid of?" asked Hagenbach with a look of concern, as the other broke off in the middle of his sentence.

"That we shall be in the minority here too. Runeck's hold upon the people seems to be greater than we foresaw--signs of it, indeed, have come to light just in the last hour."

"Runeck is a forcible speaker," said Winning, earnestly, "and his great speech, recently, at the 'Golden Lamb' carried away his whole audience. To be sure it did not reach his former level. He used to speak coldly, with stern repose, but every word told--this time he stormed away like a runaway horse, without method or aim."

"He was suffering anxiety about his election," mocked the upper-engineer. "Yet there comes Helm; perhaps he brings something important."

It was one of the younger officials who now entered and handed over a telegram just received. The director opened and read it, after which he silently handed it to the doctor, who stood at his side. He glanced over it and then shook his head. "This is very disagreeable! So, in town the victory of the Socialists is already decided! Read it, gentlemen!"

The telegram went the rounds, while the director stepped to the telephone, that connected the assembly-room with the Manor, in order to report to the chief.

"Now the decision rests wholly and solely upon Odenburg," said the upper-engineer. "At all events it was imprudent to dismiss that ranter Fallner, immediately before the elections. It has made bad blood and cost us hundreds of votes, perhaps. But Herr Dernburg was inexorable!"

"Was he to submit placidly to having this man prate against him in his own workshops, setting them of his own household against him?" remarked Winning. "Things of the kind have never been

suffered at Odenburg, and now would have been an example of unpardonable weakness."

"But I am afraid that we were only the victims of a party maneuver," persisted the other. "Fallner knew exactly what was before him--must have known it--but he belonged to that new set, who do not lose much if they go, so that he could afford to give himself to the venture. He was to be dismissed, the affair was meant to stir up bad blood among the people, for that it was planned. I represented all this to the master--but in vain. 'I suffer no rebellion and no stirring up of strife on my place. Let this be announced to the man at once.' Such was his answer, and thereby he put weapons in the hands of his adversaries."

Winning was silent, vexed that nobody would take him up, and contradict his assertion. But the director, who now came back from the telephone and had heard these last words, said significantly:

"If the matter would only end with our losing votes! I was told only yesterday, that the workmen are being worked upon from all quarters, to take up for Fallner and insist upon his being allowed to remain. If they really do this, we shall have strife."

"But they will not do it, because they know the master," said Dr. Hagenbach, mingling in the conversation. "He lets nothing be forced from him, even though he should have to close all his works. Our men, here, at Odenburg would be simply mad, if they allowed it to come to that!"

"And though it were the maddest thing in the world, what care Landsfeld and his crew for that?" exclaimed upper-engineer. "They want strife, no matter at what price and what sacrifice. At the same time, I believe that it was a mistake to dismiss Fallner. Alas! he is still here, and does not leave the works until day after to-morrow. If the election is lost, and passions consequently become aroused, we may live to get a disagreeable surprise."

"Nonsense! You see ghosts!" scolded Winning; but the director said gravely:

"I would that this day were past!" Over at the Manor, they waited the returns from the elections with the same suspense, and in the master's office there was almost as much commotion as in the building where the director presided. Dernburg, indeed, took the arrival of reports and telegrams, going and coming of officers and their announcements, with his wonted calmness. For him it involved no mere question of ambition, he sacrificed to his seat in the *Reichstag*, time and strength which were needed in his calling, the want of which he sometimes felt now, at the coming on of old age. He would willingly have resigned his seat to a representative of his own way of thinking, but as things stood, the victory of his party linked itself with his name, and, besides, it was Odenburg that would decide his election. Thus this election was an affair of honor with him.

Dernburg chanced to find himself alone with his daughter-in-law. That young lady, looking grave and fair in her widow's garb, leaned against the window. She had of late been admitted more and more to the confidence of her father-in-law. He allowed her, at times, an insight into the workings of his soul, that were else a sealed book: she alone knew the reason why his brow was to-day so dark and lowering. It was not solicitude lest he be defeated, which, for that matter, he hardly deemed possible: no, the bitterness of this conflict lay for him in the thought that his opponent was Egbert Runeck.

"Oscar is as much excited as if his own election were at stake," said Dernburg, after he had once more read through his dispatches.

"It surprises me, too, to see my brother thus immersed in politics," replied Cecilia, with a slight shake of the head. "He used to care so little about them."

"Because he kept aloof from his fatherland for so many years. I just now begin to see what he is capable of, when field is given him for a great activity."

"Oh, I believe Oscar can perform wonders, if he has a mind to, and he *will* begin a new life at Odenburg: he has promised me to."

These words sounded peculiar, almost like an apology, but Dernburg paid no heed to this.

"I wish good luck to him and myself on that account," said he, earnestly. "I candidly confess to you, Cecilia, that hitherto I have entertained a certain prejudice against your brother, but it has passed away; in these last days he has been the greatest comfort to me. For this I want to thank him."

The young woman made no answer; she gazed out upon the gray, misty October day that was now fast drawing to a close. It was already twilight; the servant brought the lamp, and with it came Wildenrod and Maia into the room. The Baron looked gloomy and excited. Dernburg quickly turned to him.

"Well, how goes it, Oscar? What news do you bring? Nothing good. I see from your countenance! Have new returns come in?"

"Yes, from the city. Our fears have been confirmed, the Socialists have gotten the majority

there."

"Ah, indeed!" cried Dernburg hotly. "It is the first time that they have accomplished that. We shall soon, however, dampen the joy of their triumph with the half of our Odensburg votes!"

Cecilia's glance sought her brother's with a timid expression, and his features betrayed that he did not share this confidence. There was also a certain hesitation in his voice as he answered:

"Odensburg certainly has the deciding word, and it will, I hope, be spoken for us. Nevertheless, we must prepare for any possibility----"

"But not the possibility of my workmen leaving me in the lurch," remarked Dernburg. "Once for all, I cannot believe such a thing of my men. Possess your soul in patience, Oscar, you are marked for a novice by your feverish uneasiness. As for the rest, the election must be over directly."

He got up, but the way in which he paced up and down the room, looking ever and anon at the clock, proved that he was by no means so cold-blooded, as he would have them believe. Then his glance fell upon Maia, who had almost shyly entered the room and immediately joined her sister-in-law, and he stood still:

"My poor little girl has been quite frightened today," said he, compassionately. "Yes, bad politics! It engrosses us men to the exclusion of everything else. Come to me, my Maia!"

Maia flew to her father and nestled up to him. Her voice sounded very dejected, as she replied:

"Ah, papa, I understand so little of political affairs. I am very much ashamed of it sometimes."

Dernburg smiled and tenderly stroked the fair hair of his darling. "You are not to bother your young head about such grave affairs, my child. You can safely commit that to Oscar and me."

"But I shall be obliged to learn some time," said Maia with a heavy sigh. "Cecilia has learned, too. Ah, papa, I am jealous of Cecile. You have quite closed your heart to everybody else; you consult her about everything, while I am always shoved aside as a silly little thing."

"How abominable of me!" sportively returned Dernburg, at the same time casting an affectionate glance upon his daughter-in-law. The latter smiled, but it was a melancholy, joyless smile.

"I almost believe Maia is put out with me, too, because I have had so little time to give her to-day," said Oscar, stepping up to his betrothed and taking her hand.

"Yes, to-day you have no thought but for dispatches and election-returns," pouted the young girl. "I really do not comprehend, why you are all in such anxiety and excitement. Papa will be elected as he always is!"

"I think so too," said Dernburg, with calm confidence.

"Well, then, everything is going on right and we need not worry ourselves about it," declared Maia, shaking her wise head indignantly. "That tactless Egbert, indeed, gives papa a great deal to do. Everybody is talking about him and----"

"Silence on that score, Maia!" interposed her father abruptly and with an air of displeasure. "The name of Engineer Runeck is daily forced upon me in the political arena, but I do not wish to hear it mentioned in my family. His relations with us are forever at an end!"

The girl ceased, intimidated by the unwonted tone, and a long silence ensued. Time slipped by, but the looked-for tidings still tarried. Finally the servant entered and spoke a few whispered words to the Baron, who got up quickly and went out. In the dimly-lighted hall he found the director and Winning, who awaited him there.

"Do you wish to speak with me, gentlemen?" asked Wildenrod quickly. "What brings you?"

"Something unpleasant, alas, Baron," began the director hesitatingly, "very unpleasant! Herr Dernburg will have to be prepared for a severe disappointment."

"What does that mean? Have you received the expected returns?"

"Runeck is elected!" said the director in a low voice. "Three quarters of the Odensburg votes were for him."

The Baron turned pale and his hand doubled up convulsively. "Incredible! Unheard of!" he gasped. "And the country-districts? Our forges and mines? Have you heard from there already?"

"No, but they can make no alteration in the main result. Runeck has won in the city and Odensburg; that is enough to ensure to him the majority. Here are the numbers registered."

Wildenrod silently took the paper from the hands of the officer, and read the notices through: they agreed--the election was decided, in due form, against Dernburg and his party.

"We did not dare to break this news to the Master abruptly," said Winning. "He is not at all prepared for it. Perhaps you'll undertake it, Baron? He will have to learn the truth; in a half hour all Odensburg will have the news."

"I'll communicate it to him," said the Baron, as he folded the paper up and put it in his pocket. "But, one thing more, gentlemen! It is just possible that when this result of the election gets abroad manifestations may be attempted, that, in this case, will be a direct insult to our chief. That mad crew, drunk with victory----" here all his vexation broke through the self-restraint, that he had heretofore with difficulty maintained. "Any attempt at demonstrations of rejoicing will be suppressed with the greatest severity, no matter what comes of it. We have no longer any motive to consider them, and they shall be made to feel this." With a haughty nod, he left.

The two officers looked at one another, and finally the director said, with a depressed air: "I wonder who is properly our chief now,--Herr Dernburg or Baron Wildenrod?"

"The Baron, it would seem," answered Winning, irritably. "He gives orders independently, and orders, too, that may entail the most serious consequences. These demonstrations are bound to come. Fallner and his adherents are already seeing to that---"

It was no enviable task that Wildenrod had undertaken. When he again entered Dernburg's room, he was received with the impatient question:

"What was that message about, pray? They are not tormenting us now about other things, I hope--we really have no time for them. But I cannot understand the meaning of this obstinate silence over at the other house. They should have got the news by this time, at least in part, and still not a word do they send us."

"The news has already come, as I have just learned," replied Wildenrod.

"How is that? Why is the announcement delayed then?"

"The director and Winning wanted to bring it over in person. They came to me----"

Dernburg started; for the first time a foreboding of ill darted through his soul. "To you? Why not to me? What are those men thinking of?"

"They wanted to transfer to me the duty of making the revelation," said the Baron, with bridled excitement. "The officers did not dare to approach you with it themselves."

Dernburg changed color, but firmly drew himself up to his full height. "Has it come to their wanting to act a comedy with me? Out with what you have to say!"

Wildenrod looked at the man who confronted him so coldly and wrathfully. It was impossible to delay longer. "Runeck has won the victory in town----" he began.

"I know that! What else?"

"And in Odensburg as well."

"In Odensburg?" repeated Dernburg, looking at the speaker as if he had not taken in his meaning. "My workmen----"

"Have for the most part voted for your opponent, Runeck is elected."

A half-suppressed shriek rang through the apartment; it came from Cecilia's lips. Maia looked anxiously upon her father; so much she comprehended, namely, that a terrible blow was inflicted upon him by these tidings, Dernburg did not speak and did not stir. A dismal silence ensued. Finally he held out his hand for the paper that Wildenrod had drawn out of his pocket.

"You have the electoral returns?"

"Yes, here they are."

Dernburg approached the table, in order to read, always preserving his rigid composure, but as he stood there, in the full light of the lamp, he looked deadly pale. Motionless, he gazed at the numbers that spoke their relentless message. At last he said coldly: "Quite right. Three-quarters of the votes are for him, and me they have cast overboard. It is regular treachery--an unparalleled deserting of one's colors. To be sure when one has been digging and delving for months--my deputy was in a place of trust, having full access to the people, and well knew how to turn the situation to----"

"Your magnanimity, your unlimited confidence is to blame for it all," remarked Wildenrod. "You knew the designs, the connections of this man, and notwithstanding, let him again set foot upon your soil. He wisely profited by this to secure constituents for himself. Now, he had only to beckon, and crowds flocked to his standard. You gave him the rights of a son--behold the return

he makes you this day!"

"Oscar, for heaven's sake desist!" implored Cecilia softly. She saw and felt that each one of his words fell like corroding poison into the soul of the man, whose heart was as deeply wounded as his pride.

But Oscar could not use forbearance toward his hated adversary, and continued with increasing warmth:

"Runeck will triumph and he has every reason to. This is a brilliant victory that he has won, to be sure, and over whom? That he gained it over you, that alone makes him a famous man. And in this hour the result of the election will be known in Odensburg--they will have a celebration, vaunting their candidate, and rejoicing until the sound of their shouts will be heard at the Manor-house, and you will have to listen to them----"

"I shall do no such thing!" declared Dernburg with vehemence, retiring a step. It was evident that the poison was taking effect, the man was extremely provoked. "The people have used their right to vote--well, I shall use mine as a householder, and know how to protect myself against insults. Any demonstrations, whatever following upon this election will be suppressed. The director must take the proper measures; tell him so, Oscar!"

"It has already been done. I foresaw your order, and gave the needful directions. I thought that I could be responsible in this case."

On any other occasion, Dernburg would have considered an interference of the sort without his knowledge as an unwarrantable piece of presumption; now, he only saw in it an evidence of solicitude and did not think of censuring.

"It is well," answered he shortly.

"Represent me for to-day, if you please, Oscar; I can see nobody now--go, then, and leave me alone!"

"Papa, let me, at least, stay with you," pleaded Maia in touching entreaty; but for this once her father did not reciprocate her tenderness, but gently put her away.

"No, my child, not even you! Oscar, take Maia with you--I want to be by myself."

Oscar whispered to his betrothed a few words, and then led her from the room. The door closed behind them, and now, when Dernburg believed himself to be alone, his with difficulty maintained composure forsook him. He pressed his clinched fists to his temples, a groan heaved his chest. He did not feel at this moment the humiliation of the defeat; there was something in his grief nobler than mortified ambition. Deserted by his workmen, whose gratitude he believed himself to have earned through a thirty years' course of fatherly kindness to them! Given up for the sake of another, whom he had loved like an own son, and who now thanked him in this fashion! His unflinching fortitude gave way under this blow.

Then he felt how two arms were thrown around his neck, and starting up he perceived his son's young widow, whose pale, tearful countenance met his gaze with an expression that he had never seen in it before.

"What means this, Cecilia?" asked he roughly. "Did I not tell you I wanted to be alone? The others have gone----"

"But I am not going," said Cecilia with quivering voice. "Repulse me not, father! You took me in your arms and pressed me to your heart in the hardest hour of my life; now that hour has come to you, and I want to share it with you."

Then the stolid bitterness of the horribly excited man broke down, and he did not again reject her sympathy. Silently he drew Cecilia to his bosom, and as he stooped over, a glowing tear fell upon her forehead. She shuddered slightly, stung by remorse--she knew for whom that tear was shed.

CHAPTER XVIII.

FORTUNE SMILES ON VICTOR ECKARDSTEIN.

Eckardstein had a new master. Count Conrad had lain eight days in the family vault, and his younger brother had taken the reins of authority. That young officer, who had hitherto known no other home than in barracks save that spring, when he had paid only a short visit to his ancestral halls, now suddenly saw himself confronted by quite a new task, and placed in entirely new circumstances. It was certainly fortunate for him, that he had at his side his uncle and former guardian, who was himself a landed proprietor, and now prolonged his stay, in order to support his nephew both with advice and by action.

The gray, foggy weather of the last weeks had been followed by a mild autumnal day. The sunshine lay bright upon the extensive forests that stretched between Odenburg and Eckardstein, belonging, however, for the most part, to the latter domain, for in Odenburg the woods had had to give way constantly to the great industrial establishments, that had continued to spread from year to year. Only a hunting-ground of moderate dimensions and a forester's preserve remained.

Upon one of the woodland paths Count Victor and Herr von Stettin were walking along. They had been inspecting the condition of the forests and had now started on their return to the Castle.

They were about to cross the public road, that here led through the middle of the woods, when, an open carriage rolled rapidly by, in which sat two ladies in deep mourning. The younger turned with an expression of joyful surprise when she perceived the young Count, and upon her speaking a few words to the coachman the carriage stopped.

"Oh, Count Victor, I am very glad to see you again--if the occasion had only not been such a melancholy one!"

Victor stepped up to the carriage-door with a low bow, but looked as if he would rather have paid his respects from a distance. He only touched lightly the little hand that was cordially extended to him, and there was a perceptible reserve in his words as he answered:

"Yes indeed, a very melancholy occasion--but allow me, ladies, to introduce my uncle, Herr von Stettin--Fräulein Maia Dernburg--Fräulein Friedberg."

"Properly, I have only to renew an old acquaintance," said Stettin, smiling, as he likewise drew near. "Years ago when I was on a visit at Eckardstein, I used to see Fräulein Dernburg, but of the child of those days, indeed, a young lady has grown up who may not remember me."

"Only dimly, at least, Herr von Stettin, but so much the more plainly do I remember all the glad hours that I have passed at Eckardstein, with Count Victor and Eric----" The young girl's eyes suddenly filled with tears as she pronounced her brother's name. "Ah, death has invaded our household too! You know, I suppose, Victor, when and how our poor Eric died?"

"I have heard the particulars," said the young Count softly, "and have bitterly felt how much I lost in the friend of my youth. His widow remains at Odenburg, for the present, I learn."

"Oh, certainly, we could not let her leave us! Eric loved Cecilia so dearly! She lives with us."

"And--Baron von Wildenrod?" Victor put this question quite irrelevantly; his eyes at the same time being fastened upon the young girl's countenance with a look of intense anxiety. She blushed deeply.

"Herr von Wildenrod?" she repeated with embarrassment. "He is also at Odenburg."

"And stays there, I presume?"

"I believe so," said Maia with a singular sense of oppression that she could not control, and which seemed altogether irrational. What was there against it, if her youthful playmate should guess to-day, what was no longer to be kept secret? But why did he look at her, in general, so coldly and so reproachfully? What was the matter with him?

Herr von Stettin, who, meanwhile, had been talking with Fräulein Friedberg, now turned again to the others; a few more questions were asked, a few more pieces of information exchanged, then Victor--who seemed strangely impatient to move on--closed the interview with the remark:

"I am afraid, uncle, that we are detaining the ladies too long. May I ask that our compliments be presented to Herr Dernburg?"

"I shall deliver your message to papa--but you will come yourself to Odenburg, will you not?"

"Certainly, if it is possible," declared the young Count in a tone that betrayed the impossibility of such an occurrence. He bowed and retired, the ladies returned his salutation, and the next minute the carriage was rolling away.

"That Maia Dernburg has developed into a charming girl!" said Stettin. "It strikes me that it would be to your advantage to be a little less formal than you were just now. I think you used to be an intimate friend of her brother!"

Victor did not answer, and he cast down his eyes before the searching glance of his uncle, who now paused in his walk.

"I have long since remarked that something was preying on your mind," said he--"something that has altered your whole being. What has gone wrong with you? Be candid, Victor, and maybe your fatherly friend can advise and help you."

"You cannot help me," gloomily declared the young lord, "but I will confess to you--it may lighten the load on my heart.--You know the ground of dissension between Conrad and me. At times Conrad was hard upon me, and finally made his assistance, that I absolutely needed, dependent upon one condition. He planned a union between Maia Dernburg and me, that should henceforth lift me above care, and I--well, I was irritated, embittered, I wanted to be rid of that galling dependence at any price--and I acquiesced. I came here, saw Maia again, and then all was over with calculation and sordid considerations of any kind--for I fell ardently in love with the sweet girl the very first time we met. And then--then I was punished severely enough, for having once calculated."

"You were rejected? Impossible! The young girl awhile ago was as cordial and unconstrained in her manners as possible."

"Maia knows nothing of my proposing to address her; it did not even come to a declaration. Conrad's plan was reported to her father in the most hateful manner. He took me to task about it, and as I could not and would not deny the truth, he treated my courtship as a speculation of the basest sort, myself as a fortune-hunter. He said the most unfeeling things to me----" Victor clinched his teeth at the bare recollection. "Excuse me from saying any more."

"So that is the way the matter stands?" said Stettin reflectively. "To be sure, what cares this proud industrial prince for a Count Eckardstein! Well, do not look so desperate though, my boy; circumstances are entirely different from what they were six months ago. Providence meanwhile has made you lord of Eckardstein, and you have it in your power, by a renewal of your courtship, to prove to that old hard-head the purity of your motives."

"I cannot get my own consent to do so--never! Maia is lost to me now and forever."

"Do not be so rash, please! A few harsh words can always be borne with from a future father-in-law, especially when he has not been altogether wrong in the matter. If your pride forbids the making of any advance, then let me take the initiatory steps. I shall have a talk with Dernburg."

"Just to have it announced to you, with polite regret, that his daughter is engaged to Baron von Wildenrod?" said Victor bitterly. "We may as well spare ourselves that mortification!"

"What are you thinking of? Wildenrod is in his forties and Fräulein Dernburg----"

"Oh, he has some demoniacal power of enchantment, and knows how to use it. I am convinced that the insinuation which so infuriated Dernburg against me originated with him. I was in his way, he was already basing his calculations upon Maia's fortune. And Maia has not remained indifferent to him; already they are everywhere talking of an engagement, and just now I gained certainty as to the state of her affections. Maia betrayed herself--I have nothing more to hope for."

The desperation of the young man plainly showed how deep was the passion for his young playmate that stirred in his heart.

Stettin had become very serious.

"That would certainly be Wildenrod's master-stroke," said he, with knitted brow. "So, it was not enough for him to share his sister's portion, but he must needs win the Odensburg millions for himself! There is still time for opening Herr Dernburg's eyes--his daughter shall not become the prey of this adventurer."

"An adventurer! Baron von Wildenrod!"

"He became so when fortune and splendor deserted his house. Perhaps fate had as much to do with it as guilt--never mind! He has forfeited the right to connect himself with an honorable family."

"And were you aware of this that time at Nice, and did you keep silence?" asked the young Count with bitter reproach in his tone.

"Was I to turn informer? And for the sake of whom? What right had I to force myself upon the confidence of a strange family? At that time what were these Dernburgs to me? One does not expose to public odium the son of a man at whose house you had been received as a friend for long years, without stringent necessity--and in this case I refrained."

"But you might have warned Eric in some way!"

"No warning would have availed at that period. If Eric had wanted to see--the double part that his future brother-in-law played was known all through Nice: I was not the only knowing one. But

he walked blindly into the snare spread for him. But comfort yourself. Now when I know how close to your heart his sister is, no consideration shall hinder his exposure."

"Yes, Maia must be protected from this man, cost what it will!" cried Victor impetuously. "Uncle, I have concealed nothing from you, now; be as candid towards me! Who and what is this Wildenrod?"

"You shall learn," said Stettin gravely. "But we cannot discuss such things here, in the open woods. In ten minutes we shall be in the Castle, where we can talk farther on the subject."

CHAPTER XIX.

"OFF WITH THE OLD LOVE, ON WITH THE NEW.----"

Maia and her companion, meanwhile, had continued their ride. Their destination was the railroad station, whither they went to bring home Frau von Ringstedt, who had repaired to Berlin, to prepare the family residence there for occupation during the winter. Dernburg's re-election had been expected with such certainty, that it had been considered in making their household arrangements. Now, whether they should go at all to Berlin was questionable, and the old lady was returning, for the present, to Odenburg.

"What was the matter with Count Victor to-day?" said Maia thoughtfully. "His manners were entirely different from what they usually are, and he did not seem at all rejoiced to see us again."

"He is still in first mourning for his brother," objected Leonie. "It is to be expected, as a matter of course, that he should be graver and more reserved than formerly."

Maia shook her little head; the explanation did not satisfy her. "No, no--this was something quite different. Victor went away last spring, too, without taking leave! Papa said, it is true, that he had been suddenly called away to attend to some military duty, but then he could have written. And just now when I invited him to come to Odenburg, he looked as if he did not care to do so. What is the meaning of all this?"

"I, too, was struck by the Count's restraint of manner," said Leonie, "and for that very reason you should not have been so cordial in your advances, Maia. You are a grown-up young lady now, and should not permit the same freedoms to the country neighbors as when you were a child."

"Victor is no mere country neighbor!" cried the young girl indignantly. "He was the friend of Eric's youth, and, when a boy, used to be almost as much at Odenburg as at Eckardstein. It is ugly of him to be so cold, all of a sudden, and act so formally, and I shall tell him so, too, when he comes to see us. Oh, I shall read him a good lecture!"

Fräulein Friedberg assumed the air of a monitor, and once more enlarged upon the need of circumspection on the part of a grown girl, but she preached to deaf ears. Maia dreamed on with open eyes: she was still haunted by the gloomy, reproachful glance of the playmate of her youth, and although she was far from fathoming the real ground for his altered behavior, his reserve grieved her. She realized, for the first time, how pleasant his cheerful society had been to her.

At the depot, Dr. Hagenbach received the two ladies with disagreeable tidings. He had heard in town of a railroad accident, that was said to have occurred in the forenoon. Since he knew that Frau von Ringstedt was aboard, he had telegraphed at once for the facts, which, fortunately, were comforting. In consequence of the recent violent rains, a land-slide had taken place, the track was blocked up for a considerable distance, and the passengers had been obliged to take another route. The Berlin fast train, then, could only arrive after a good deal of delay: no accident, however, had happened to the train itself.

After this communication, nothing was left for them to do but to wait. There happened to be, however, at the station a large body of troops, which had returned from maneuvering, and was now awaiting transportation; thus all the space was over-crowded, the waiting-room pre-empted by officers, and on all sides there reigned an alarming confusion, that made a long stay for the ladies very unpleasant. The doctor, therefore, advised that they should go over to the "Golden Lamb," secure an apartment, and there await the arrival of the train.

This proposition was adopted, and since Herr Willmann was not at home just now, the guests were received by his spouse, who, upon getting word that the ladies from Odenburg were honoring the "Golden Lamb" with their presence, a thing that had never before happened, came

rushing out of the kitchen to acknowledge this honor, in the most humble and grateful manner.

Frau Willmann's attractions must have lain in the domestic virtues, for, most assuredly, they were not in outward appearance. She was considerably older than her husband, with repulsive features and a loud, sharp voice that lent something rasping to her words. And the house-dress in which she received her guests left much to be desired both as regards taste and neatness.

She opened the best of her guest-chambers as speedily as possible, tore open the window to let in fresh air, set to rights chairs and table, while she assured the ladies that she would have brought to them the most excellent of coffee, in the shortest space of time possible. She then vanished quickly, all zeal and desire to serve.

According to the assertion of the railroad officials, they had to wait at least another hour for the Berlin train. Fräulein Maia found it very tiresome; she felt a desire to make a tour of discovery in the "Golden Lamb," and when, besides, from the window she caught sight of a troop of children, who were playing in the yard behind the house, she could sit still no longer. In spite of all the exhortations of her teacher, she slipped out of the room and left her companions to themselves.

An embarrassed silence reigned for a few minutes. The doctor and Fräulein Friedberg had, it is true, long ago come to a sort of tacit understanding that that unfortunate offer of marriage should be considered as unsaid. It was the only possible way to preserve the necessary ease in the almost daily intercourse to which they were forced; and, to be candid, they were neither of them so easy in one another's company as was desirable. Hagenbach could not help giving bent to his mortification at being rejected in various covert ways, and, in spite of herself, Leonie continually found herself acting on the defensive when he was present. But, in spite of these awkward relations, it was a fact that the doctor expended much more care upon his outward appearance than ever before, and made every effort to rein in his harshness of manner as much as possible. In this latter particular he succeeded only to a very moderate extent, but he at least showed a desire to be more gentle.

"Maia is not to be calculated upon!" began Fräulein Friedberg finally, with a sigh. "I am actually in despair at times. What is one to do with a young lady, who is already engaged to be married, and yet cannot appreciate the necessity of conforming to social usages?"

"But there is room for a difference of opinion as to that necessity," remarked the doctor, irritably.

"I beg your pardon, the position is not to be disputed at all," was the very decided answer. "It is the foundation upon which the whole social fabric rests."

"You may well say so--*forms!*" mocked Hagenbach, with unconcealed irritation, "they are the main things in the world. What avails it if a man be honorable, upright, and true--he must yield to the first goose that comes along, who knows how to make bows and exchange polite speeches--he, of course, has the precedence!"

"I did not say so."

"But thought it! I have not given much attention to forms in the course of my life, have not found it needful either in my practice or the management of my household. I am a bachelor, though--thank God!"

The returned thanks, however, to Heaven, on account of his fortunately preserved bachelor's estate was in so grim a tone that Leonie preferred not to answer. She stepped to the window and looked out. Fortunately one of the maids now appeared with the coffee-cups and a huge cake, sufficient for at least ten persons, bringing the message that, if the ladies and doctor would be patient for a little while longer, Fräulein Willmann would prepare the coffee herself.

Leonie started at the name, and turned around eagerly:

"Who did you say?"

"Fräulein Willmann, lady."

"Such is the name of the hostess of the 'Golden Lamb,'" explained Hagenbach, who now perceived that silence would profit nothing any longer, and that the whole melancholy story would have to be recapitulated. Leonie, indeed, did not say a word, but the mantling color that mounted to her cheeks betrayed her exceeding sensitiveness to anything that reminded her of her former lover. The doctor preferred, therefore, to introduce the subject himself, as soon as the maid had left the room.

"Does the name strike you?" he asked.

"It was once very dear to me, and still is. The coincidence here can only be the result of accident, but I shall try to find out from the hostess----"

"That is not necessary, when you can learn of me just as well. The proprietor of this inn is a

cousin of the lamented Engelbert, the converter of heathen, who lies buried in the sands of the desert. He has told me so himself--that is to say, not the buried man, but the living Herr Pancratius Willmann of the 'Golden Lamb.'"

"A cousin of Engelbert's?" repeated Leonie, in surprise. "To judge by the age of his wife, this Herr Pancratius Willmann must be quite far advanced in years?"

"Heaven forbid! he is at least twelve years younger than his better half, not much over forty. He was just a poor starving wretch and she a rich widow. As for the rest, the man is not uncultivated--he has even been a student, as he recently informed me, but then concluded that he would rather clothe himself in the wool of the 'Golden Lamb.'"

Leonie's lips curled contemptuously. "What a conclusion! This ordinary woman----"

"Has money and is a splendid cook," chimed in Hagenbach, who felt a satisfaction in this, that at least the lamented Engelbert's cousin had no part in the halo of ideality that encircled his kinsman. "As for the rest, the marriage of this pair seems to be a very happy one, and they also have a numerous progeny--only look at the six young lambs disporting themselves in the garden down yonder!" He had likewise stepped to the window and pointed down into the small garden, where the offspring of the Willmann family were running about, shrieking and hallooing. They were certainly not marked by any special attractions, but were little well-fed, thick-skulled creatures with yellow locks, seeming to take after their mother in things essential.

Leonie shrugged her shoulders. "I do not understand how a cultivated man can condescend to such a union. To be sure, self-interest regulates the world nowadays. Who asks after the ideal?"

"Not Herr Pancratius Willmann certainly," dryly opined Hagenbach. "He holds with the practical, in complete contrast to his cousin. Herr Engelbert left home in the lurch, in order to baptize the black heathen back in Africa. Now he lies in the sand of the desert--that is the return he got."

Leonie looked daggers at him. "You certainly cannot appreciate such a resolve, Doctor. Engelbert Willmann had an ideal nature, that followed a higher inspiration without any reference to worldly advantages, and one must have somewhat of the same nature in order to understand it."

"No, I do not pretend to understand it," declared Hagenbach with an outburst of vexation. "I am not constituted 'ideal.' I am a plain healer of men's diseases, without higher inspiration, and am myself quite an ordinary man, without any ideal--therefore of no account whatever."

Thus were they fairly launched into another discussion, when the door opened, and Herr Pancratius Willmann appeared upon the threshold, in all the stateliness of his obesity, with broad red countenance. He made a low bow before the physician, a second one before the lady at the window, and then began in his soft, melancholy voice: "I have just heard from my wife that the Odensburg family were here, and could not deny myself the pleasure of expressing my joy and gratitude for the honor that has been done my modest house."

"It is well that you have come, mine host!" said the doctor. "I was just talking about you with Fräulein Friedberg----" He was not allowed to proceed farther, in consequence of the scene that now unfolded before his eyes.

Leonie had started in alarm at the sound of the strange voice, and Herr Willmann showed no less agitation at the sight of the lady at the window. He fairly quaked, his red cheeks turned pale, and, utterly disconcerted, he stared at the lady who now approached him.

"Sir," she began in quavering voice, "you bear a name that is familiar to me, and I learn from the doctor here that a relation does, in fact, exist----"

She paused and seemed to await an answer, but Herr Pancratius only nodded his head in the affirmative; but so low was his bow, that hardly a glimpse of his face was to be gotten.

"I certainly discover some resemblance in your features," continued Leonie, "and your voice, too, has an almost terrifying similarity with that of your deceased cousin, of whom you probably have slight recollection."

Willmann did not answer this time either, but shook his head, in sign of dissent, but without looking up.

"Why, man, have you lost the power of speech?" cried the doctor, vexedly. "What means this dumb show of nodding and shaking your head?"

But Herr Pancratius persisted in his silence; it seemed as though he had a regular dread of hearing the sound of his own voice again. Instead of this, he cast a shy glance at the door, as though he were weighing the possibility of a retreat. Now Hagenbach lost patience.

"What is concealed behind that demeanor?" cried he with aroused suspicion. "Is that whole tale of relationship a falsehood after all? Out with what you have to say, man!"

The craven, pressed upon two sides, evidently saw no way of escape. He cast his eyes up at the ceiling, with exactly the same pious, woe-begone expression that had startled the doctor at first, and sighed:

"Oh, oh, Doctor, Heaven is my witness----"

A loud shriek interrupted him. Leonie had suddenly turned pale as death, and with both hands convulsively clasped the back of the chair standing in front of her.

"Engelbert! Gracious master, it is he himself!"

At this instant Herr Willmann seemed to cherish the fervent wish that the earth would open at his feet and swallow him up. But as no such interposition on the part of Heaven took place, he remained standing in the middle of the room, in the full light of day. Dr. Hagenbach, however, dropped into the nearest chair; he had strong nerves, and yet, somehow, this revelation had a stunning effect upon him.

In spite of this discovery, which must have been an appalling one to her, Leonie recovered her self-command in an astonishing manner. She neither fell in a swoon, nor fell into convulsions; motionless she stood there gazing upon him who had once been her betrothed lover, and made no attempt to deny it.

"Leonie, you here?" he stammered in mortal confusion. "I had no idea--I will explain everything----"

"Yes, I too would earnestly beg you to do so!" cried the doctor, who had now recovered breath and sprang up in a rage. "What! for twelve long years, you allowed yourself to be wept as a martyred apostle to the heathen, while all the time you were alive and merry here at the 'Golden Lamb,' flourishing as a happy husband and a six-fold father of a family? That is vile."

"Doctor," interrupted Leonie, still trembling in every limb, but still with perfect composure, "I have to talk with this--this gentleman. Please leave us!"

Hagenbach looked at her rather critically, for he did not exactly trust this composure. Yet he could but perceive that during such an explanation the presence of a third party would be superfluous. He therefore left the room. Little as he was in the habit of playing the eavesdropper, this time he kept his post close to a slit in the door, without any scruple of conscience whatever. The affair that was being settled inside was partly his concern as well.

Herr Engelbert Willmann seemed to be greatly relieved when the witness to this painful scene departed, and now prepared finally for the promised explanation. He began in a penitential tone: "Leonie, hear me!"

Still she kept her place without stirring, and looked as if she would not and could not believe that this coarse, common-looking individual was one and the same with the ideal being upon whom her youthful affections had been set.

"No explanation is needed," said she, with a tranquillity incomprehensible to herself. "I only desire you to answer me a few questions. Are you really the husband of the woman who received us just now; the father of the children playing in the garden down there?"

"Highly rational and practical!" growled the doctor approvingly outside. "No sign of convulsions! Matters are progressing quite well."

Leonie's question seemed utterly to confound Herr Willmann. "Do not condemn me, Leonie!" he implored stammeringly. "The force of circumstances--an unfortunate chain of peculiar----"

"Do not address me in the familiar tone of long ago, Herr Willmann," said Leonie, cutting him short in the midst of his sentence. "How long have you been married?"

Willmann hesitated. He would have gladly given as recent a date as possible to his admission into the order of Benedict; but there were his children making their presence noisily manifest out of doors, his eldest, a boy of ten, being likewise in the game of romps. "Eleven years," he finally said in a low voice.

"And twelve years ago you wrote me that you wanted to go as missionary into the interior of Africa, and from that time your letters ceased. Immediately afterwards you must have returned to Germany--without letting me know?"

"It was done only for thy--for your sake, Leonie," Engelbert assured her, with an attempt to give a tender intonation to his voice. "We were both poor, I had no prospects, years might elapse ere I should be in a situation to offer you my hand. Should I allow you to waste your youth, mourning over me, and perhaps forfeiting a different and a happier fate? Never! And since I knew your magnanimity, knew that you would never have broken your word to me, with a bleeding heart I did what I had to--I restored your freedom to you through my supposed death----"

"Give yourself no trouble. I am not to be deceived again," replied she, contemptuously. "Pray remember, Herr Willmann, that all is at an end between us, and we have nothing more to say. I

only ask one thing of you: if accidentally our paths should ever cross again, pass me as a stranger and never show by any sign that we were ever friends."

Engelbert secretly breathed more freely at this declaration, for he had not hoped to be let off so easily, and now prepared to depart in a very dignified manner. "You condemn me--well, I must bear it!" said he softly, and in an aggrieved tone. "Farewell, Leonie, appearances are against me, but for all that you have been my first and only love!"

He cast a wofully sentimental glance upon his former lady-love, and then beat a hasty retreat. But outside fate overtook him in the person of Dr. Hagenbach, who unceremoniously grabbed him by the arm. "Now we shall have a few words together, Herr Engelbert Willmann," said he, dragging the terrified creature regardlessly to the other end of the passage, where one was out of ear-shot of the guest-chamber. "I shall certainly not have much to do with you, but this one thing I must tell you, that you are a rascal!"

Once more he gave the annihilated Willmann another good shaking, then left him standing and returned to the room, where he was confident his medical services would be in requisition.

"I wanted to see how you were," said the doctor, with a certain embarrassment. "I was afraid--yes, my dear young lady, I admit that to-day, for once, you have a right to be nervous.--You need not dread ever being ridiculed. Mind!"

"I am quite well," protested Leonie, without raising her eyes. "I have gone through a very painful experience in having my illusions dispelled. You may easily guess, Doctor, how the story runs--spare me the shame of repeating it in detail."

"You have nothing to be ashamed of!" cried Hagenbach, with warm feeling. "There is no shame in putting firm, inviolable faith in the goodness and nobility of a man's nature. And if one has deceived you, you need not therefore lose faith in everybody. There is many a one among us who deserves to be trusted."

"I know it," replied Leonie, softly, extending her hand to him, "and I shall not waste time crying over a recollection that is not worth having tears shed over it. Let it be buried!"

"Bravo!" cried the doctor, grasping her proffered hand, as though about to shake it. But suddenly he bethought himself, and paused. The "rough diamond" must have really been well on the way towards being polished, for an unheard-of thing happened--Dr. Hagenbach stooped down and imprinted upon that hand an extremely tender kiss.

CHAPTER XX.

MAIA MUST BE SAVED.

The gentlemen's room at the "Golden Lamb" was almost entirely empty, as was commonly the case in the early afternoon hours. The visitors were not accustomed to come in until towards evening. At present only a single guest was there, namely, Landsfeld, who had come to consult with the host concerning a mass-meeting that was to take place in the course of the next few days. Herr Willmann did not happen to be at home, and Landsfeld, who wanted to have the matter settled, had taken possession of the gentlemen's room, without further ceremony, where he had already been waiting for a quarter of an hour. He had no idea that Herr Willmann had already got home and knew of his being there, but preferred making a servile bow to the Odensburg family ere he gave as respectful a greeting to the leader of the Socialists. Already he began to grow impatient, when finally the door opened. But instead of the party expected Egbert Runeck came in.

The young delegate, who had gone to Berlin for a few days immediately after his election to consult with the leaders of his party, gave a strikingly cold and short salutation to his comrade, who, on his side, acknowledged it only by a slight nod.

"Back already from Berlin?" asked Landsfeld.

"I got here about an hour ago," answered Runeck. "I went straight to your house and heard there that I would be sure to find you at the 'Golden Lamb.'"

"To my house? That is a rare honor! I want to secure the hall for the day after to-morrow, since there turns out to be a necessity for a second mass meeting. As for the rest, we did not

expect you back. Are you through with your business already?"

"Yes, for the time being only some preliminaries were to be settled. My permanent presence in Berlin will not be required for four weeks yet, when the sessions of the *Reichstag* begin, and so it seems to me I am more needed here just now than there."

"You are mistaken," declared Landsfeld. "We need you here no longer, now that your election has been carried. But I thought to myself that you would return as speedily as possible, when you heard that trouble was brewing for your beloved Odenburg. Yes, we have beaten it into the old man's brain at last that he is not infallible. Until now he was so inaccessible that nothing could come nigh him; now that he has to wrestle with us like the rest of his colleagues, it may go hard enough with him!"

"I rather think you have no occasion to triumph," said Egbert gloomily. "Dernburg has responded to your challenge by a wholesale discharge."

"Of course! That was to be expected of the obstinate old man, and we were perfectly prepared for it."

"Or rather, you have planned for it. And what now?"

"Well, it means bend or break. Either the old man withdraws his discharge of the workmen, or all his enterprises come to a standstill."

"Dernburg is not going to bend, that you all know, and to break him you have not the power. But he has it, and will use it unsparingly now that he has been goaded so far. He can hold out if his works lie idle for weeks and months--but not you. The strike is perfectly senseless, and the leaders of our party do not wish it--never have wished it. Now the decision against it has been definitely made."

"Ah, indeed! I know you did your very best to persuade them to come to this decision. Now, didn't you?" asked Landsfeld with a piercing glance. "You are one of the leaders yourself now! The youngest and most masterful of all. You seem to have got the whip-hand of the others already."

Runeck made an unequivocal sign of impatience.

"Have you only personal attacks against me, where the question concerns a party measure? I bring you the positive direction, not to proceed to extremities--conform to it."

"I am sorry, it is too late; the direction should have come earlier," answered Landsfeld coldly. "The offer has been made, and in case of its non-acceptance the strike is announced. The people cannot retract--they will see it so in Berlin also."

"Ah, ah, you show your true colors at last," cried Egbert in embittered tone. "You, who have always had the word discipline in your mouth, have followed your own head entirely!"

"Acted upon my own responsibility, yes! Those narrow-minded cowards, those Odenburgers, must at last be thoroughly aroused from their dream of security. What trouble we have had in getting them to elect you, under what high pressure did we have to work, and all was left in doubt, up to the last minute! Now the dull mass is at last in motion; now it is of moment to urge them forward!"

"And whither? To certain defeat! They have followed you to the polls, and even now they go with you blindly--the intoxication of victory has mounted to their heads! You have not preached to them in vain that they were almighty. But the intoxication will pass away. Just let the people come to their senses for once, and perceive what they lose when they turn their backs upon Odenburg, and what sorrows they thereby entail upon their wives and children--I tell you, you will not be able to hold them together for eight days; they will run back to Dernburg as fast as their legs can carry them. But he will be a different man from what he has been heretofore; he will not and cannot pardon the insult that they have inflicted upon him."

The young engineer had long since lost the cool calmness with which he had opened the interview, and had worked himself up into continually greater excitement. Landsfeld quietly kept his seat and looked at him fixedly: an evil smile played about his lips, as he replied:

"You seem to find this quite in order. On what side do you really stand, may I ask?"

"On the side of reason and of right!" exclaimed Runeck passionately. "That the workmen elected me in opposition to Dernburg was their right, and he would not contest that, either, deeply as it might mortify him. But that they celebrated my victory in his works, that they had processions and rejoiced over his defeat, almost under his windows, that is a bold challenge, and he has given them, in reply, the answer they deserved!"

"Ah, indeed? They deserved it, did they?" repeated Landsfeld, in a tone that should have warned his young comrade; but he paid no heed to it and continued with gathering warmth:

"You had the people stirred up through Fallner, I know this; you goaded them into making that

senseless demand, which is equivalent to inflicting incredible humiliation upon their chief. Is it that you so entirely mistake the man with whom you have to deal, or would you have war to the knife? Well, you shall have it! Dernburg has shown himself the protector of the workman long enough, now he will reveal himself as the master, and he does right in this--I would not act differently in his place!"

A loud, bitter laugh from Landsfeld brought Egbert to a stop, for he had uttered those last words inconsiderately, stung into revolt.

"Bravo! Oh, that is an inestimable confession! There at last you show your true face! It was the old man of Odenburg to the life--you are a worthy pupil of your master's school. What think you if I report the sentiment just heard from you in Berlin?"

Runeck could hardly fail to be aware that he had allowed himself to go too far, but he only straightened himself up more defiantly.

"What care I? Do you suppose that I allow myself to be such a slave, that I dare not express my opinions freely, when we are among ourselves?"

"Among ourselves! Do you actually do us the honor to account yourself one of us? It is true you are our delegate! I have warned and counseled enough, for I knew long ago how far we would probably get with you. They would not listen to me, would secure that genial power to our party, and therefore the election must be pushed with all the means at our command. It was the hardest to manage of any in the electoral campaign--and for whom? The eyes of the others will soon be opened too."

"If you want to help them in this, then do so!" said Egbert harshly and proudly. But now Landsfeld jumped up and planted himself close in front of him.

"Perhaps you would be quite agreed to this. You are regularly planning, I believe, to lead up to a breach. Give yourself no trouble, young man: we will not do you that favor, we will not release you. If you choose to turn traitor and runagate, then let the whole disgrace of it fall upon you!"

A bitter expression curled Runeck's lips at these scornful words.

"Traitor! This, then, is what I get for giving myself up to you, body and soul, for sacrificing to you a future grander and more brilliant than falls to the lot of one in a thousand."

"And now you are on the stool of repentance, naturally?" remarked Landsfeld slyly.

"The sacrifice--no! But association with you--yes, I have long ago repented of that."

"You are candid, anyhow," mocked Landsfeld, "and recklessly show us what a rod we have pickled for ourselves in your election. Yet there is no help for that now, and, for the present, you will be obliged to do your duty in the *Reichstag*. Fortunately your earlier speeches are in the mouths of every one. You could slap yourself in the face; you would now whistle to quite another tune, if you could. And once more, young man,"--he suddenly dropped the mocking tone and his voice became low and threatening,--"make no attempt to meddle in Odenburg affairs, which I have now taken in hand myself. I shall know how to answer for my conduct to the party--only see to it that you cope with your own responsibility. It is not going to be spared you, depend upon that!" So saying, he turned his back upon his comrade, and left the room without any greeting.

Egbert was left alone; silently and moodily he brooded, with downcast eyes. He could not hinder the continual recurrence to his mind of the last words that Dernburg had spoken to him ere dismissing him: "You might have been lord of Odenburg. See whether your associates will thank you for the immense sacrifice that you have made to them!" He had just received a token of their gratitude.

Then the door was softly opened, only half-way, however, and a lovely young girl's head appeared in the aperture. Timidly and with curiosity she peeped in. It was Maia, who, in the course of her tour of discovery in the "Golden Lamb," had finally reached the gentlemen's room. She had hardly cast in a glance, however, before an exclamation of joyful surprise escaped her lips.

"Egbert!"

He started from his reverie, looked at her for a moment in stolid amazement, and then sprang to his feet. "Maia--you here?"

Maia quickly glided into the room, drawing the door to behind her. Fräulein Friedberg and Dr. Hagenbach should know nothing of this meeting, else they would not allow her to have anything to say to Egbert--he was tabooed now at Odenburg!

Runeck, too, seemed suddenly to remember their altered relations; slowly he let the hand drop that he had stretched forth in greeting, and drew back a step.

"May we exchange greetings as we used to do?" asked he softly.

A shadow crossed Maia's face, just an instant before so radiant, but she unhesitatingly drew nearer and offered her hand to the friend of her childhood. "Alas, Egbert, that it had to come so far! If you only knew how it looks now at our house."

"I do know!" was his short and gloomy answer.

"Our Odensburg is no longer to be recognized," lamented the young girl. "Formerly, if we went through the works or had anything to say to the workmen, how joyfully we would be greeted by all; and if, moreover, papa showed himself, then all eyes were fastened upon him, and every one was proud of being spoken to by him. Now"--a subdued sob was perceptible in her voice--"now papa has forbidden Cecilia and me to leave the circuit of the park, since we are not secure against insults outside. He himself goes every day to the works, but I see on the faces of our officers that they regard it as a risk, that they fear he is in danger among his own workmen. But what more than all eats into his heart, is what happened on election-day--he did not deserve it at their hands."

She did not suspect the effect of those words upon the man, who stood half-turned away from her. Not a sound crossed his lips, but his countenance expressed tortures that were with difficulty concealed. Maia saw this and laid her hand on his arm, with the old cordiality.

"I know it," said she soothingly. "But I am the only one at Odensburg who still cleaves to you, and I hardly dare to show it. Papa is dreadfully provoked and bitter against you, and Os--I mean Baron von Wildenrod--confirms him in this. So my begging does no good whatever, and now, besides, Cecilia---"

"She too?" interrupted Runeck, turning suddenly around. "Does she condemn me too?"

"I am not sure," said Maia, frightened at the strange look which Egbert cast upon her. "But Cecilia will never listen when I talk about you, and fairly takes to flight. Ah, Egbert, if any one else stood in opposition to my father, I believe he would stand it better. That it should be you is what he cannot bear."

"Neither can I!" answered Egbert gloomily. "Tell your father so, Maia, if you choose."

The young girl mournfully shook her head. "I cannot--your name is no more to be mentioned in his presence. If it happens, by any chance, it makes him furiously angry. And he did love you so! Dear me, why do people have to hate one another so desperately, just because they belong to two different political parties? I really do not understand it."

Maia's sweet girlish voice sounded soft and pleading, but nevertheless each of her words pierced Egbert's soul, like a glowing reproach. He could stand it no longer.

"Let that be, Maia," said he, controlling his emotion by a great effort. "He must accept it as a stroke of destiny, that we all find it hard to bear. And you, poor child! have we drawn you into the net, too, and destroyed the sunny cheerfulness of your spirits?"

The face of the young girl suddenly flushed up, her head drooped, and softly, almost shyly, she answered:

"No, no--I am often enough ashamed that, in spite of all this, I am so excessively happy; and yet I cannot help it. Do not look at me in such surprise, Egbert. Strangers, to be sure, are not to know it yet, because we are still wearing mourning for our poor Eric, but I can tell you already that I--well, that I am a betrothed bride."

Egbert started back in astonishment. Hitherto he had always considered Maia in the light of a child. It had not occurred to him that love could have already come to her. Now the unexpected news called a fleeting smile to his gloomy countenance, and full of cordiality he stretched out his hands to his youthful playmate. "Does our little Maia actually have to do with such things?" asked he with an attempt at playfulness.

"But I am not so little any more," protested Maia, with a charming pout, while she stood on tip-toe and looked him roguishly in the eye. "See, I already reach up to your shoulders, and his too."

"His? Why, I have not even asked after the name of your intended. What is it?"

"Oscar," whispered Maia softly.

"What did you say?" said Egbert in shocked surprise.

"Oscar von Wildenrod! You know him, yes--dear me, Egbert, what is the matter?"

Runeck had turned pale, and his right hand clinched involuntarily with a look that was full of commiseration. He fixed his eyes upon the young girl, who returned his gaze with a troubled anxious air.

"Baron von Wildenrod is your betrothed?" repeated he at last. "And has your father consented?"

"Certainly. He was opposed to it in the beginning, on account of the great difference of age, but Oscar besieged him so long, and I, too, begged and besought him so hard to let us be happy, that at last he gave his consent."

Egbert was thunderstruck, and gazed upon the lovely young creature who so heedlessly spoke of her happiness, where misery in reality impended. For the second time fate had imposed upon him the task of inflicting a deadly blow upon a being who was dear to him, and crushing her supposed happiness with a ruthless hand. This had been spared Eric in his dying hour; he could be silent when he learned to know Cecilia as she really was; here he had no choice and could not keep silence.

"And you do not rejoice with me?" asked Maia, in a mortified and reproachful tone, as he still said nothing. "Oh, I remember you had something against Oscar, and he has a great deal against you. I have known this a long while, although neither of you will own it. But you can surely congratulate me, any way.--I am indescribably happy."

Runeck ground his teeth together. He could not wish her joy, even as a mere matter of ceremony, which under these circumstances would have been the bitterest mockery, and yet he felt that he dared not now and in this place keep his secret. Fortunately accident came to his assistance, for out in the passage became audible the voice of Dr. Hagenbach.

"Have you seen Fräulein Dernburg anywhere? We must hurry to the station,--the train will be here in ten minutes."

"I must!" whispered Maia, pricking up her ears. "Farewell, Egbert. I shall always hold you dear, whatever happens. And you cannot forget, either, that Odensburg was so long your home."

Once more the brown eyes were uplifted to him in fervent deprecation, and then the young girl glided quickly away. Runeck breathed a sigh of relief that he had no longer to withstand the battery of those happy, unsuspecting eyes, but, at the same time, great waves of rebellion came rolling over his tortured soul.

This, then, had been Wildenrod's aim. He had set his covetous eye upon Odensburg, and would never rest until the booty was his, and Maia's hand was to lay it within his grasp. And Cecilia knew this, and did not interfere. Indeed, he was her brother, whom she loved in spite of everything--it was only to save him that she had become Eric's wife. And she did not know the truth. Oh, why had he concealed it from her that time? But now her feelings were no longer to be considered, either--the thing was to rescue Maia: now, to be silent any longer were a crime.

"No, I shall not forget that Odensburg was, for so long a time, my home," murmured Egbert, drawing himself up resolutely, "if I do have to prove it in a different way from what you expect, my poor little Maia. Shall I write to Dernburg? Impossible. I am wholly out of favor with him--he believes the worst of me; he would deem the letter a wretched calumny, and Wildenrod would win his game nevertheless. There is no help for it, I must fight the battle face to face, and not give up either, until it is decided, until Maia is released from this bond. Be it so, then--I am going to Odensburg."

CHAPTER XXI.

FROM HEIGHTS OF BLISS TO DEPTHS OF WOE.

There prevailed at Odensburg the sultriness that portends the gathering storm. The air was heavy with it, and, according to every sign, when the tempest broke forth it would be a severe one.

This was the day when the workmen who had been discharged, in consequence of the proceedings of election-day, had to leave their workshops. There were hundreds of them, and all their fellows had declared that they, too, would lay down their work, if those dismissals were not withdrawn.

In Dernburg's office a conference had just taken place. There were present, besides the Baron von Wildenrod, who was never missing upon such occasions, the three highest officials; and they had tried, with all their might, to bring the chief to a milder view of what had happened. It had been in vain.

"The word stands, the orders given are to be carried through with the greatest exactness!" he

declared. "You will see to it, gentlemen, that your subordinates conform precisely to the directions given. Every special event is to be immediately announced to me. We are going to have a serious, perhaps terrible time, and I calculate upon each one of you doing his duty in fullest measure."

"With us that is a matter of course, Herr Dernburg," replied the director, "and I believe that I can also answer for our subordinates. And perhaps, after all, it will not come to the worst. Many signs go to show that the mood at the works is a very depressed one. Many are already repenting of the decision, into which they were half enticed and half forced. We know exactly what hands here have been active. The people have been put up to mischief, and goaded on in an unheard-of manner."

"I know that, but they have allowed themselves to be stirred up by strangers, and against me. Now, they can have their way."

This answer sounded so stern, that the director lost courage for making further representations; he cast a meaning glance at his colleague, and now the upper-engineer took up the theme.

"I also am convinced that the majority already begin to be conscious of having acted over-hastily. They will silently let drop that crazy petition, in which Fallner's remaining was also included. A great part will quietly work on, the others will follow sooner or later, and the whole move come to nothing, if you could make up your mind, Herr Dernburg, to show the slightest disposition to conciliate."

"No!" said Dernburg, with cold severity.

"But what is to be done with the men who go to work as usual to-morrow morning?"

"They have to make the express declaration that they are not in accord with their fellows, and intend to submit unconditionally to my requirements--then they shall be free to resume work."

"They will not come up to that," objected Winning, reflectively.

"Well, then, the workshops remain closed. We shall see who will hold out the longer--they or I!"

"Exactly my opinion," remarked Wildenrod. "That you owe to yourself and your position. You seem to be of a different opinion, gentlemen, but you will soon be convinced yourselves that this is the only right way whereby we may force the body of workmen into subjection, and that, indeed, in the shortest space of time."

The officers were silent: they were already accustomed to the Baron's thus planting himself beside their chief, and the right being conceded to him. They certainly did not deem Wildenrod's influence as especially salutary, and here he was again doing every thing he possibly could to uphold Dernburg in the stand that he had taken. But gradually they had come to see in him Dernburg's future son-in-law and the future master of Odensburg; they did not attempt, then, to controvert his position, which would have been useless; and now when Dernburg gave the sign for them to disperse, while he rose to his feet, they parted with a silent bow.

"I do believe those gentlemen are apprehensive of some sort of an insurrection," mocked Oscar, when the door had closed behind them. "They would make every possible concession for the sake of sweet peace. I am so glad that you held firm here; any yielding would have been unpardonable weakness."

Dernburg had stepped to the window. He seemed to have grown older by years in these few days, but however bitter the experience might have been, it had not quelled his spirit,--that iron will of his was stamped upon every movement. There was something that awed in the stern rigidity of his features, whence every trace of mildness had flown. He silently gazed over at the works. The chimneys there were still smoking, the furnaces glowed, all the mighty forces of those restless activities were still astir, still toiled thousands of hands. "To-morrow all this will lie there still and dead--for how long?"

Involuntarily he had spoken these last words aloud, and Wildenrod, who had drawn near, heard him.

"Why, it will not last long," said he confidently. "In your hands lies the power, and it can do the Odensburgers no harm, if at last they are made sensible of this. This riff-raff, that left you in the lurch without ceremony to run after the first hunter that whistled to them! Such a set---"

"Oscar, you are speaking of my workmen!" interrupted Dernburg angrily.

"Yes, indeed, of your workmen, who showed you their devotion in such a touching manner! I can feel with you what was then passing in your soul."

"No, Oscar, that you cannot," said Dernburg, with grave earnestness. "You have come as a stranger to Odensburg. With you, your future position here is only a question of power. Perhaps,

hereafter, it must be the same for me, but formerly it was different. I stood at the head of my workmen, but all that I did was done with them and for them, and as each one could depend upon me, in times of danger and distress, I believed that I could depend upon them, every one. That is all over now! Fool that I was! They want no peace, they want war!"

"Yes, that is what they want," remarked Wildenrod, "and they shall find us ready. We shall soon put down this rebellious Odensburg."

"Oh, certainly, we are going to conquer," exclaimed Dernburg with intense bitterness. "I shall force my workmen to subjection and they will submit; but with hatred and malice in their hearts--with hatred against me! Every apparent reconciliation will only be an armistice, during which they will gather new forces, in order to hurl them against me, and then I shall be obliged to quell them again, and thus the breach will become wider and wider, until one party is destroyed. Such a life I cannot bear!"

With an impetuous movement he turned away from the window, as though he could no longer endure the sight of his works over there, and his voice had a weary sound, as he continued:

"I have always thought that I would hold the reins at Odensburg as long as I lived, but for eight days past, I have been thinking differently. Who knows, Oscar, whether I may not turn over the management to you. even during my lifetime. In the crisis ahead of us, perhaps you would fill the place better than I."

"Heavens, what an idea!" cried Wildenrod, shocked, and at the same time dazzled by the unsuspected prospect that opened up before him. "You are not seriously thinking of retiring?"

"For the present--no!" said Dernburg, straightening himself up. "I have never yet avoided a battle when forced upon me, and shall fight this one through also."

"And depend upon me to stand by you!" said Oscar, offering him his hand. "But one thing more: the director seems to dread lest there be disturbances at the works to-day, when it comes to paying off and discharging the offenders. The necessary measures have been taken, indeed, but I place myself at your disposal, if the authority of the officers should not prove adequate. You yourself should not appear in person. You owe it to yourself and your station not to expose yourself to insults that, from words, might extend to acts. Leave that to me!"

An infinitely bitter smile played about Dernburg's lips, but he made a gesture of dissent.

"I thank you, Oscar. Of your courage I have never had a doubt, but in such affairs I allow no one to represent me. But you shall have your place by my side. People shall see and know that I concede to you the rights of a son. I no longer make any secret of that."

The two men again shook hands warmly, then Wildenrod went. In the ante-room, a servant came forward with this announcement:

"Baron von Wildenrod, you will find upon your desk a note from Castle Eckardstein, which came about a half hour ago. We did not dare to disturb you, and the messenger was not to wait for an answer."

"It is well," said the Baron, abstractedly. He had other things on his mind now--that expression which had been dropped just now, Dernburg's hint, that he might possibly give up the management of Odensburg very shortly. Had this been nothing but an ebullition of anger, a passing whim, that one was not to take in earnest? No, the man was cut to the quick; if he was actually forced into a prolonged battle with his workmen, it was likely, yea, certain, that he would put that thought into action,--and Oscar von Wildenrod would step into his place. Was it indeed true that the hotly contested goal was so close at hand? Oscar's eyes flashed. Oh, he would have no sentimental scruples like his future father-in-law--that rebellious Odensburg should learn to know its new master, this he vowed to himself.

Not until he entered his own room and saw the note lying on his desk, did he recall the servant's message, and with some surprise he picked up the communication. From Castle Eckardstein? What could they have to say to him from there? The new proprietor knew, or at all events suspected, who had stood in the way of his acceptance with Maia, and surely would not make the attempt to renew neighborly relations.

Oscar broke open the seal, ran his eye over the first lines and stopped. Quickly he turned the page over, looked at the signature, and turned pale. "Frederick von Stettin!" he murmured. "What evil spirit leads him to Eckardstein, and what does he want of me?"

He began to read uneasily, with sinister looks. "It is a very grave and painful matter that I must discuss with you," wrote Herr von Stettin. "I have long hesitated as to the way in which this should be done, and have finally adopted the mildest expedient, for I cannot and will not forget the friendship that bound me to your father. Therefore I only say to you that I know your past, from the moment when you left Germany, up to your last stay at Nice. When we again met there unexpectedly, I procured this knowledge--never mind how. Under the circumstances, you will readily comprehend why I challenge you to vacate the place that you now occupy at Odensburg. They say that you are the betrothed of the daughter of the house: but you yourself best know how

you have forfeited the right to link your fate with that of a pure young girl. It were a crime against Herr Dernburg and his family if I should allow such a thing to happen without opening his eyes. Spare me the bitter necessity of having to come forward as your accuser. Leave Odensburg! A pretext for your departure will be found--it will then be your affair to dissolve your connection with the family from a distance, in any way you see proper. I will allow you a respite of eight days; at the end of that time, if you are still at Odensburg, I must speak, and Dernburg learns the truth. I leave you time in which to make good your retreat: it is the only thing that I can do for the son of an old friend.

"FREDERICK VON STETTIN."

Oscar let the note drop. He had not known who was the uncle and former guardian of both the Counts Eckardstein. During that brief and abruptly broken-off intercourse last summer, the name had not been called, and when Stettin himself arrived, shortly before Count Conrad's death, the relations with Odensburg had already become so strained that no notice was taken of the visitors of one family by the other. But Wildenrod knew the grave and discreet man from the visits he had paid to his father of old. He was not one to deal in mere threats; were he to refuse to retire as requested, he would do what he deemed his duty, without any hesitation, and then--then all was lost!

Oscar jumped up and paced the floor with disordered steps. Just when he had stretched forth his hand to grasp the highest prize, then had come this crushing blow. Should he yield?--should he, in secret, cowardly flight, turn his back upon Odensburg, of which he had just felt himself to be the lord and master? Never!

Eight days' respite was allowed him: it was a long time: what might not happen meanwhile? He had so often, already, stood on the verge of a precipice, whence it seemed as if a fall were inevitable, and he had always been saved by some rash resolve, or unheard-of streak of luck, now the thing to do was to put this luck once more to the test. In the midst of the wild whirl of thoughts and plans that stormed through his soul, only one thing stood out before him, clear and plain: he must make sure of Maia at any price, must chain her so firmly to him, that no power of earth, not even her father's, could tear her from him. She was the shield that would cover him from any attack, she, whose whole soul he had captivated, whose every thought and feeling belonged to him--this love was to be his salvation.

Oscar again took up the letter and read it once more from beginning to end, then crushed it and threw it into the fireplace. The paper flamed up and was quickly consumed, while the Baron threw himself back in his chair and with lowering countenance gazed into the fire, ever devising new plans.

A half hour might have thus elapsed, when the door opened, and the servant, coming in, announced:

"Mr. Runeck, the engineer."

"Who?" cried Wildenrod, starting up.

"Herr Runeck wants to speak to you, Baron, about something important."

It actually was Egbert, who followed closely behind the servant. He entered without waiting for an answer, and said, with a slight bow:

"Pray do not refuse to listen to me, Baron von Wildenrod, for the business that brings me is both weighty and urgent."

Oscar had leaped to his feet, and now silently motioned to the servant to withdraw. He did not, for an instant, deceive himself as to the significance of this appearance of Runeck, but Stettin's letter had prepared and steeled him against whatever might come. He no longer took into account one danger the more or less; so far as he was concerned, the question was already "To be or not to be?"

"What brings you to me?" he asked coldly. "You will readily apprehend, Herr Runeck, that, after what has passed, your appearance is rather a surprise to me. I did not suppose that you would ever again cross the threshold of Odensburg."

"My coming has to do with yourself alone," replied Egbert in the same tone, "and in your own interest I desire you to listen to me."

"I am listening," was the curt answer.

"No introduction should be needed," began Runeck. "You know what was spoken about, that time on the Whitestone, between your sister and myself. I was then convinced that she shared your life, innocently, in utter ignorance as to its tenor, and, for her sake alone, have I kept silent so long."

"For Cecilia's sake!" exclaimed Oscar with a mocking laugh. "I understand that perfectly. She certainly has a claim to such consideration upon your part."

Egbert drew back a step, and his brow contracted threateningly.

"What do you mean to imply? I demand an explanation of that speech."

Again came that short, mocking laugh from Wildenrod's lips, as he retorted: "Act no comedy with me; I know perfectly that to which I referred. What would poor Eric have done if he had suspected that his beloved friend had stolen from him the affections of his bride? Who knows from what bitter experiences sudden death saved him?"

"That is a shameful supposition," cried Egbert, indignantly, "and you wrong your sister as you do me. You talk as if an understanding existed between us. Eric's betrothed was as unapproachable, for me, as is now his widow. As to my feelings, I am bound to render no one an account."

"Not even Cecilia's brother?"

"Such a brother--no!"

"Herr Runeck, you are in my own room," reminded Oscar, with sharpness.

"I know that, but I have not come to exchange civilities with you, but to have a settlement made that can be postponed no longer."

"About what?" asked Wildenrod, as he stood there motionless, with arms crossed.

"Is it possible that I shall have to explain it to you first?"

"If I am to understand--assuredly."

Runeck made a gesture of impatience, but restrained himself and with apparent composure went on: "It refers, in the first place, to that occurrence in Berlin, at the residence of Frau von Sarewski, that doubtless concerned all of those present. But as I did not belong to that circle of society and knew none of the participants intimately, I did not concern myself further about the matter. Not until you made your appearance at Odenburg and I recognized the danger that threatened both Eric and his father, through you, did I inquire further. I learned that the matter had been subjected to proof, and that nothing saved you but your speedy departure and the urgent desire of the participants to ward off a public scandal. The proofs then obtained I have now in my hands, and witnesses are at my disposal. In face of this will you actually play the ignorant?"

Oscar made no further attempt at denial, but his eyes flashed with deadly hatred, as fiercely as though he would annihilate his accuser. It was not the accusation itself, which left him no way of escape whatever, but it was the tone of unutterable contempt in which it was made, that provoked the Baron to the utmost. All the pride and insolence of his nature revolted against it. He drew himself up to his full height. "And what object have you in saying all this to me? I have long known what I had to expect of you, and shall know how to defend myself. What signify threats? Why have you not dealt the blow long since?"

"Because I supposed that you would sooner or later leave Odenburg. Neither Eric's marriage nor his death gave you a right to make it your permanent home. Just yesterday I learned that you and Maia were betrothed, and you will understand well when I tell you that this engagement shall not be consummated. I forbid the banns."

"Really! And with what right?"

"With the right of an honest man, who will not consent to see the daughter of Eberhard Dernburg and his Odenburg become the spoil of a villain."

Wildenrod shrank back and his face became as livid as that of a corpse. "Be on your guard!" gasped he with half stifled voice, raising his fist as if to strike. "You will answer to me for this speech."

"That will I, but not in the way you mean," said Egbert, fixing his eye firmly upon him. "Such battles are only fought out in the courts of justice, where one renders an account only through witnesses and proofs.--Do not look so earnestly at that revolver, which hangs yonder above your desk, Baron von Wildenrod. I readily believe it to be loaded, but I am on my guard--at the first step you take in that direction, I shall cast myself upon you."

Oscar's eye had indeed turned to the revolver, and a crazy idea had darted into his mind, only, however, to be rejected instantly. What good would it do if he did shoot down his adversary? Stettin was bringing up the same accusation, Victor von Eckardstein likewise knew about it, and who knows how many more besides--the net was drawing its meshes about him from every side.

"I offer you one way out--the last," began Runeck again. "Leave Odenburg forever--this very day, for Maia shall not be called your betrothed a single hour longer. Whatever people may then

guess, nobody will know the full truth, and your sister and Maia will be spared the worst. I shall say nothing, if you give me your word that you will go."

"No," said Wildenrod, with a composure that boded no good.

"Baron von Wildenrod----"

"No, I tell you."

"Then I shall go straightway to Herr Dernburg and reveal everything to him. Your game is lost; give it up!"

"Do you think so?" asked Oscar, wild with rage. "Do not boast until the end comes, Herr Egbert Runeck. Whatever may come of it, I'll not yield to you."

"And that is your last word?"

"My last--I stay!"

Egbert silently turned to the door, which, the next minute, had closed behind him.

Wildenrod was alone. Slowly he went up to his desk, and took down from the wall a revolver that he held for a long while in his hand. The way that his father had once taken, when every resource failed, was not to survive the disgrace of ruin. Here a deeper disgrace was to be expiated! The pale gleaming of the barrel of the pistol seemed to point out the same path to the son. But again strong love of life awoke in the man to whom life and its belongings had ever been more enticing than honor. Must he, indeed, give up the game as lost? He laid down the weapon and was soon lost in somber reverie, out of which he suddenly roused himself, as if by main force, and rigid determination was stamped upon his darkened countenance.

"To Maia!" said he with spirit. "I shall see whether her love for me will stand this test. If she gives me up--well, then, there is still plenty of time to speak one last word with this last friend here!"

CHAPTER XXII.

HIS SIN HAD FOUND HIM OUT.

"Where are Frau Dernburg and Fräulein Maia? They have stayed in the park, I hope, or are safe at home?" With this eager question Dr. Hagenbach entered the parlor, where, for the present, only Fräulein Friedberg was to be found.

"The ladies set out to visit the young gentleman's grave, that is all I know about it," answered she in alarm. "Has anything happened?"

"Not yet, but one cannot know what the next hour may bring forth. So the ladies have gone to the grave, have they? Well, it lies at the end of the park, in the opposite direction from the works, so that I trust there is nothing to fear. It would be well, though, for them to come back soon."

"I expect them every moment. Is it so threatening, then, over at the works?"

Hagenbach nodded and took a seat opposite the lady.

"Alas! the officers are doing their very best to get through with paying off and discharging the workmen in peace and quiet, but this does not suit Fallner and his crew, who want to have a row, whether or no. A portion of the men have announced their intention to resume work to-morrow morning, the others have responded by threats and curses: finally, here and there it has come to deeds of violence, and it seems as if an insurrection may break forth this very evening."

Leonie folded her hands with anxious mien. "Dear me! what is to be the end of all this? Herr Dernburg is as hard and inaccessible as a rock. You have no idea in what a mood he is. He will bid defiance to all--I am distressed to death."

"Why, there is no need of that! What am I here for?" said Hagenbach, with emphasis. "I should protect you in case of necessity, but such necessity is not likely to occur. This house and its inmates are unconditionally safe, even if there should be some excesses committed over there. In that case you can depend upon me."

"I know that," replied Leonie, warmly, holding out her hand to him, which he took, too, readily enough; he kept it likewise, and did not think of releasing it from his clasp.

"I called to see you this morning," he began again, "but was not admitted!"

Leonie cast down her eyes and her voice trembled, as she softly answered:

"You will understand that it was painful for me, after the events of yesterday----"

"I beg your pardon, I came only as a physician to inquire as to your health," remarked Hagenbach. "You look worn, have had a sleepless night--for that matter, so have I!"

"You, Doctor?"

"Why, yes, so many things were racking my brain. For example, I thought you were quite right in regarding me as a half bear. The only question is, whether the attempt would be worth while to try and make something human out of me. What is your opinion?"

"My opinion? I have not thought on the subject," said Leonie, with a vain effort to disengage her hand.

"But your opinion is a great deal to me," continued he. "You see, Fräulein Friedberg, if one goes through life as a bachelor, without caring for anybody in particular, and knowing that no one cares particularly about him--it is a bad case. If one has, at least, a mother or sister, then one can get along somehow; but I have only that silly fellow Dagobert, and what I have in him you know yourself."

"But, Doctor, must we discuss this subject just today?" said Leonie, trying to evade an answer. "At this hour, when all Odensburg----"

"Odensburg will, I hope, do me the pleasure to defer its rebellion until we have arranged our matters," interposed Hagenbach. "And arranged they must be now, that I solemnly swore to myself during that aforesaid sleepless night. I called upon you, for the second time, awhile ago, but did not find you, because you were with Frau von Ringstedt. Nevertheless, I took the liberty of going in, because I wanted to take a peep at your desk. Over it hangs now the picture of your blessed mother, and I yield her that place cheerfully, for she is a saint in heaven. You have made short work of it, and bravely abandoned old memories and the like--and therefore--yes. What was it that I wanted to say?"

The doctor began to get rather entangled in his talk. When he offered himself for the first time, he had gone ahead without calculation of any kind, and now, this second time, he wanted to proceed most gently and considerately--but here he stuck fast. But he made a quick resolve, got up and approached the lady of his choice, saying, with simple heartiness:

"I love you, Leonie, and although I am a rough fellow--one cannot alter the old habits in a trice--yet I mean well, and if you would risk it with me, your consent would make me very happy. You say nothing: Nothing at all? May I take this as a good sign?"

Leonie sat with glowing cheeks and downcast eyes, conscious of all the magnanimity and goodness of heart displayed by the man, whom she had so harshly rejected, and who now again offered her his heart and hand. He also understood this perfectly, and brought the matter into shape now, as quickly as possible, by taking his betrothed into his arms and kissing her.

"God be thanked that we have at last got so far," said he, from the bottom of his heart. "I shall write to-morrow to that fellow Dagobert. Now he can make a wedding-song for us, and celebrate the praises of his future aunt--a poem that I shall certainly permit him to indite."

"But, Doctor," admonished Leonie, reproachfully.

"I am called Peter," interposed he. "The name does not please you, I know that of old--it is not poetical enough for you--but I was baptized so, and you will have to get used to it. Fräulein Leonie Friedberg and Dr. Peter Hagenbach--that is the way it will stand on our betrothal cards."

"But surely you have other baptismal names besides that one?" the bride-elect ventured to suggest.

"Of course. Peter Francis Hugo."

"Hugo, how pretty! I shall call you by that in the future."

"That I protest against," declared Hagenbach, with a positiveness that already bespoke the future husband. "I am named Peter after my father and grandfather, so I have been always called, and so will my intended wife call me too."

With timid familiarity that became her very well, Leonie placed her hand on her lover's arm and pleadingly looked him in the eye. "Dear Hugo--do you not like the sound of that already?"

"No," growled the doctor, while he turned away.

"Well, as you choose, Hugo. I shall conform in this respect entirely to your wishes. But Peter and Leonie do not suit together at all, you must perceive that yourself."

Again Hagenbach growled, but this time in a much more subdued tone. He did not find his new name so bad, after all, when pronounced in this tone. But immediately there loomed up before him the horrors of petticoat government, and he felt himself pledged to guard his supremacy once for all.

"Peter it stands," he decided. "You must submit to me in this, Leonie."

"I submit myself in everything," asserted Leonie in tenderest tone. "I am, in general, a weak, dependent creature, who has no will of her own. You shall never listen to a contradiction in the whole course of our married life, dear Hugo--but surely you will not refuse the first request I make of you, and that on our betrothal-day?"

Dear Hugo began to melt under the softening influence of this gentle voice and these pleading eyes, and his constancy as well as supremacy showed signs of giving way.

"Well, if it gives you such great pleasure, you can call me so yourself," he admitted. "But on the cards of invitation it shall stand----"

"Leonie Friedberg and Dr. Hugo Hagenbach! I thank you, Hugo, with all my heart, for this proof of your love!"

What was poor Peter Hagenbach to do? He pocketed the thanks and covered his shameful retreat by bestowing a kiss upon his beloved. In this first dispute the "weaker" half had come off with flying colors and the stronger had had to lower his flag--it might be an omen---

Meanwhile Dernburg was in his office, receiving announcements from the works that were anything but quieting. At other times, any unusual occurrence had found him either in the midst of or at the head of his workmen, but now he avoided any contact with them. Of late he had not spoken a word to any of the men, or taken the least notice of any, although he went daily to the works.

He stood at the window, lost in melancholy brooding, for the moment entirely alone, and slowly turned around when the door was opened, believing that some new announcement was about to be made. In the next second, though, he shrank back and stared at the intruder, as though he could not believe his own eyes.

"Egbert!"

Egbert closed the door behind him, but paused on its threshold, while he said in a low voice:

"I beg your pardon for having once more made use of my old privilege, of entering unannounced--it happens for the last time."

Dernburg had already recovered his self-command, his eyes flashed portentously, and his voice was chilling in the extreme.

"I certainly did not expect to see you again at Odensburg. Here Runeck, pray what leads the new delegate to me? I thought that we two were to have no more to say to one another."

Runeck might have expected such a reception, but his glance was fixed reproachfully upon the speaker.

"Herr Dernburg, you are too just to make me responsible for the excesses of election-day evening. I was in town----"

"I know--with Landsfeld. And from there the movement was directed."

Egbert turned pale and quickly drew one step nearer. "Am I to bear this reproach, too? Is it possible that you believe I could have had a share in those insults, that I could have known of them and not prevented them?"

"Let us leave that," said Dernburg in the same cold tone. "We are now only political opponents, Herr Runeck. As such we shall occasionally meet in public life, but there no longer exists between us relations of any other sort. If you really have further communications to make to me, I would prefer to have them in writing. Since, however, you are here this time, what would you have of me?"

"I *could* not select writing as my medium," returned Runeck, firmly. "If my coming surprises you----"

"Not at all! I am only astonished that you seek me here in my office. Your proper place is over yonder at the works among your constituents, who are just about to repeat the proceedings of election-day. Will you not place yourself at their head, and lead them against me? I am prepared for that step!"

One who had looked at the young engineer must have seen how deeply he was wounded by these cruel words, and he was no longer able to maintain his calm demeanor. "Dernburg, not this tone!" he cried. "Shake out over me all the vials of your wrath--I will bear it--but do not speak to me in that tone; such a punishment I have not deserved."

"Punishment? I thought you had outgrown my discipline," said Dernburg, with intense bitterness, although he did indeed drop the mocking tone. "Once more, what will you have here? Would you, perhaps, offer to protect me from those over there? They will obey the mere nod of their own delegate. I thank you, I shall cope with them single-handed. Half the men already repent of their enforced resolve to lay down their work, and to-morrow will resume it. But I forbid them to go to work unless they submit unconditionally and renounce their leaders."

"Dernburg----"

"They will not venture upon that, think you? Maybe so. You hold them with too tight a rein. Well, then, war is openly declared. You forced me to extremities in the first instance, now extremities I *will* have."

Runeck was silent for a few minutes, then he said with sad earnestness: "That is a hard saying."

"I know it. Think you I do not know the trend of coming events, if the ten thousand engaged in my enterprises take holiday for weeks, perhaps for months? The people will be driven to wretchedness, to despair, and I must be the witness of it. The responsibility for this, however, rests upon you and your fellows--you have left me no choice. For a generation, peace and blessedness had their abode at Odenburg, and whatever a man could do for his workmen, that I did. You have introduced discord and hatred, the dragon-seed has sprung up. See to it, now, how you shall manage the harvest."

He turned away impetuously, and several times strode up and down the room. Then he paused in front of the young engineer, who, with clouded brow and downcast eyes, stood there without attempting a reply. "You are very likely afraid of the spirits that you have exorcised yourself, and would now like to play the part of mediator?" he asked, with scornful intonation. "You would be the last to whom I should accord such a privilege. I want to hear nothing of mediation in general. The bridges are broken down between me and these people, henceforth we have to treat with one another only as enemies."

"I have not come as a mediator," said Egbert, straightening himself up. "My coming, in general, has nothing to do with this affair. What leads me here is a painful duty that I cannot escape from. It concerns Baron von Wildenrod, to whom you have promised Maia's hand."

Dernburg started and looked at him in surprise.

"What, you know of this engagement! Never mind: I no longer make any secret of it."

"And fortunately I have heard of it in time to interpose."

"Will you make any objection to it?" asked Dernburg, sharply. "There was a time when I would have admitted your claim to her, when the way to Maia's hand and heart stood open to you.--You know what blocked it up. You have sacrificed your love, like everything else, to your 'convictions.'"

"I never loved Maia," returned Runeck, firmly. "I saw in her only my young playmate, Eric's sister, and never entertained for her any other feelings than those of a brother."

This explanation was given with such decision that it was no longer possible to doubt its truth.

"Then in this, too, I have been mistaken," said Dernburg, slowly. "But what concern, then, of yours is my daughter's marriage?"

"I want to guard Maia from becoming the prey of a--villain."

"Egbert! have you lost your senses?" exclaimed Dernburg, passionately. "Do you know what you are saying? This mad accusation----"

"I shall prove. I would have spoken long ago, but I have only just succeeded in obtaining the documents, only just learned of the Baron's plan to usurp control of Odenburg, together with Maia's hand. Now, I must speak, and you must listen to me."

Dernburg had turned pale, but still revolted against giving credence to this unheard-of thing that seemed to him inconceivable.

"I shall require the proofs of you for everything," resumed he, menacingly. "And now go on, I am listening!"

"Baron von Wildenrod has the reputation here of being rich, but in reality is not worth a stiver. It must be twelve years now since he forsook the diplomatic career, because his father's loss of fortune deprived him of all means of maintaining himself in proper style. The old Baron shot

himself, and the family had only to thank their noble name for the interposition in their favor of the reigning Prince. He bought the estates, that were heavily encumbered with debt, satisfied their creditors, and granted the widow a small pension as long as she lived. The son forsook Germany and has never since been heard of in his native land."

Dernburg listened with darkly contracted eyebrows. He had once received a different account, which, indeed, contained no direct untruth, but concealed the decisive element, namely, the ruined fortunes of the family.

"I became acquainted with Oscar von Wildenrod three years ago," continued Runeck. "It was in Berlin, at the house of a Frau von Sarewski, a wealthy widow who lived in very handsome style. I gave her children drawing-lessons, at which she was often present, and by her desire I drew a sketch of an addition planned for her villa. This met with her full approval, and she wanted to give me a sign of recognition, by inviting me to one of her evening entertainments. I dared not decline, for I was dependent upon the fees I received from teaching drawing for the means to continue my studies. A perfect stranger in that fashionable circle, which inspired me with not the slightest interest, I retired that evening into a side-room, where the brother of the lady of the house was seated at cards with a few other gentlemen. Among them was Baron von Wildenrod, who, as I learned from their conversation, had been in Berlin for three months, and expected to pass the winter there. He was strikingly favored by fortune in his play, while the others had just as decided ill-luck. The brother of Frau von Sarewski, passionately devoted to card-playing, set the stakes ever higher and higher, his losses being proportionate, while Wildenrod had already won a little fortune. This whole carrying-on was repulsive to me, and I was in the act of withdrawal, when an elderly gentleman, a Count Almers, who was likewise among the card-players, suddenly seized the Baron's hand, held it fast, and, in a voice quivering with rage, pronounced him a black-leg."

"Did you see that yourself?" asked Dernburg, sternly.

"With my own eyes! I was also a witness to that which followed. The gentlemen sprang to their feet, and everything was astir; the loud talking pro and con brought all the other guests, Frau von Sarewski also making her appearance. She begged and implored those present to let the matter rest, and spare her house the notoriety of a public scandal. Wildenrod acted the man of outraged, deeply wounded feelings: he threatened to challenge the Count, but made use of this show of indignation as a pretext to withdraw as speedily as possible. Now Count Almers declared that he had been on the track of this deceiver for a long while, but had only to-day found the opportunity to unmask him. He insisted upon following up the investigation, since Wildenrod moved in the first circles, and elements of this sort must be ruthlessly ejected. The entreaties of Frau von Sarewski and the representations of her brother finally had the effect of moving the witnesses to keep silence, provided that Wildenrod could be induced to leave the city at once. This was superfluous, for he had no idea of either challenging the Count or attempting to clear himself. The next morning it was discovered that he had taken his departure in the night."

Those were plain facts that Runeck reported, but his bearing and tone gave to the narration a frightful emphasis. It was seen what a crushing revelation this was to the listener, although he gave no outward sign of sympathy.

"What else?" said he, bluntly and roughly.

"I neither heard nor saw anything more of Wildenrod until the moment when he made his appearance at Odensburg, as Eric's future brother-in-law. I recognized him at the first glance, while he had no recollection whatever of my personality: a hint that I gave he repelled with great haughtiness."

"And you concealed this from me? You did not mention it at once?"

"Would you have believed me without proofs?"

"No, but I would have set investigations afoot and learned the truth."

"I did that in your stead. I had manifold relations with Berlin, that I now availed myself of: I turned to Wildenrod's native place and to Nice where Eric had made his acquaintance, and it was not my fault that months elapsed before my inquiries were answered. What you would have done was attended to by me, and information was given to me as a stranger that would hardly have been obtainable by you, under the circumstances. Nevertheless, I did think of warning you, provisionally, but then, I suppose, you would have dissolved the tie on which depended the happiness of Eric's life, and that would have been the death of him. He told me himself, once--when apparently without design I suggested such a possibility--that to lose Cecilia would be the death of him. I knew that he spoke the truth--such consequences I could not and would not take upon myself."

"Cecilia?" repeated Dernburg with a gleam of suspicion. "Quite right. She too is deeply concerned in this thing. What part did she play in the affair? What did she know about it?"

"Nothing--not the least thing! She lived unsuspectingly by her brother's side, deeming him a rich man. Under this impression she engaged herself to Eric, and it was here at Odensburg that she became aware of something dark and mysterious in her brother's past. What it was I did not

have the heart to tell her, but the manner in which she took my hints gave me convincing proof that not the slightest blame was to be attached to her."

Dernburg's deep sigh of relief betrayed the dread that he had entertained lest a shadow might also fall upon his daughter-in-law. A hardly audible "God be thanked!" came from his lips.

Egbert drew out a pocket-book, and took from it a number of papers.

"Here is a letter from Count Almers, who gives his word of honor for the assertion that he made that time; here are accounts as to what happened at the death of the old Baron, and here information from Nice. Eric must have been blind, or they purposely kept him aloof from other society, else he would have known that his brother already had the reputation of being a doubtful character throughout the bounds of Nice, being looked upon as a professional gambler. How he managed to force his 'luck,' was suspected here and there, perhaps, but not to be proved, and that gave him the possibility of maintaining an appearance of respectability."

Dernburg took the proffered papers and stepped at once to the table, whereon stood a bell.

"First of all I must hear Wildenrod himself! You will not shrink, I hope, from repeating your accusation in his presence?"

"I have just done that--I came from his room. It was a last effort to end the matter in a way that would spare his exposure, but it failed. The Baron knows that I am revealing all this to you, at this hour--he has not followed me to answer for himself."

"Never mind, he is to render me an account!" Dernburg pressed on the bell and called to the servant who entered: "Tell Baron von Wildenrod to come to me, please, at once."

The servant went; along, awkward silence ensued. Nothing was heard but the rustling of the papers that Dernburg opened one after the other and looked through: he turned ever paler as he proceeded. Egbert tarried, silent and motionless, in his place. Thus the minutes elapsed. It was long, very long, before the door was opened, and then it was not Wildenrod who entered but the servant who returned, saying:

"The Baron is not in his rooms, nor, indeed, anywhere about the house. Perhaps he has already ridden away."

"Ridden away? Where to?"

"Apparently to the city. He ordered the horses put to the carriage and that it should drive to the back gate of the park. He must be there by this time."

A silent nod dismissed the servant, and then Dernburg's self-control gave way. He sank into a chair, and a cry of despair escaped his lips.

"My child! my poor, poor Maia! She loves this man with all her heart."

There was something appalling in the grief of this man, who with lofty brow went into a battle that threatened his existence, but who seemed unable to bear the misfortune of his darling.

Egbert gently approached and stooped over him. "Herr Dernburg," said he, with trembling voice.

A fierce and repellent gesture waved him back. "Go! What do you here?"

"Eric is dead, and you have to spurn from you the man who was to take his place. Give me only this once more--only for this hour--the right that I once possessed."

"No," cried Dernburg, drawing himself up, and his features were again as cold and hard as ever. "You have renounced me and mine; you have forfeited the right to endure suffering with us. Go over to your friends and comrades, to whom you have sacrificed me, and who now rage around me like a pack of hounds just let loose. To them you belong; there is your place! They have treated me ill, but you worst of all, because you stood next my heart. From you I want no sympathy and no support--I will go to destruction first."

He walked into the adjacent library and slammed the door to behind him. The bridge between him and Egbert was broken.

CHAPTER XXIII.

A LOVERS' TRYST.

The park trees rocked and rustled in the wind, which now, towards evening, threatened to become a storm. It drove the red and yellow leaves whirling through the air, and a gray, cloud-covered sky looked down upon the autumnal earth.

Maia came back alone from her brother's resting-place, while Cecilia still lingered there. It had required persuasion to induce the former to go at all. In the midst of life's sunny springtime, the young girl felt a secret horror of all connected with death and burial. Existence beckoned to her, and happiness by the side of the man she loved.

On her way back she came past the Rose Lake, where Oscar had first confessed his love to her. Today, indeed, the spot looked very different from what it had done on that May-day in the splendor of sunshine and spring. Dry leaves covered the ground, and the reeds lining the shore were likewise withered and dry, while the lake itself looked black and uninviting in the dull light of that stormy day. No sweet singing of birds any longer sounded from the thicket, laid bare as it was by autumnal blasts; all was lifeless and still, while the mountain-chain, that had once looked so dreamily blue from the distance, was wrapped to-day in a dense fog.

Involuntarily Maia's steps were arrested here; she gazed fixedly upon the sadly altered spot, and, shivering, drew her mantle closer around her shoulders. Then she heard approaching steps, and the next minute Oscar von Wildenrod emerged from the coppice.

"I have been all through the park looking for you, Maia," said he, petulantly, "and had despaired of finding you."

"I was with Cecilia at Eric's grave," replied the young girl. "She is still there."

"So much the better, for what I have to say is for yourself alone. Will you listen to me?"

Without waiting for an answer, he drew her down upon the bench, over which the beech now stretched her ghostlike arms, half-stripped as they were of their foliage. Not till now had Maia observed that he wore hat and overcoat, and that his features had a strangely disordered expression.

"Nothing bad has happened, has there?" she asked in great agitation. "Papa----"

"The matter does not concern him, but me, or rather both of us. Maia, I have something serious--hard to tell you. You are to show me, now, whether your love for me stands firm. You love me still, do you not? You once gave yourself fully to me, on this very spot. I thought, then, I was asking your hand only for happiness, for a life full of sunshine and joy--have you the courage to share sorrow with me also?"

Maia was stunned, as it were, by this torrent of words; she shuddered.

"Oscar, for heaven's sake, tell me what you mean? You distress me unutterably by these dark hints."

"I ask of you a sacrifice--a great, heavy sacrifice. Will you make it for my sake?"

"If you ask it. Everything, everything that you want!"

"Suppose that I were to ask you to leave father and home, to go with me far away into a foreign land--would you follow me?"

"Father! Home!" repeated the young girl, mechanically. "But we stay here at Odensburg."

"No. I must begone--will you go with me?"

"I-I do not understand you," said Maia, trembling in every limb.

He threw his arm around her and drew her to him. His face was as pale as death, and in his eyes glowed that threatening flame which had so alarmed her when they first met.

"I told you once of my earlier life," he began, "of a wild, restless pursuit of fortune, that seemed ever to flee before me, until I finally found it here in possessing you--do you remember that?"

"Yes," whispered Maia. Did she remember it! It had been the same hour in which he had declared his love for her.

"I could not unveil that past to your pure child-eyes," continued Wildenrod, his voice sinking into a whisper; "and cannot to-day either, but there is a shadow in it----"

"A misfortune--was it not?" The question had a dispirited sound.

"Yes--a misfortune, that deprived me of my profession, and enticed me into evil and guilt. I had cast all this from me and wanted to begin a new life, here at your side. But again the old shadow looms up, and threatens me again--yes, threatens to snatch you from me, Maia."

"No, no, I am not going to leave you, whatever has happened, or may happen!" cried Maia, vehemently, clinging to him. "My father is lord of Odenburg, he will protect you."

"No, your father will dissolve our engagement, and part us irrevocably. Stern man that he is, with his rigid principles, he would rather see you dead than at the side of a husband whose past is not what it should be. There is only one way for you to be preserved to me, one single one--but you must have courage."

"What--what am I to do?" she stammered, powerless under the ban of his eyes and his voice. He stooped lower down to her and these words streamed hotly and passionately over his lips: "You are my betrothed--I have the right to claim you as my wife! Let us fly from Odenburg, and just as soon as we cross the German boundary line, I shall lead you to the altar. Then nobody, not even your father, will have the right to take you from me--no power can stand against our marriage. And you will be mine indissolubly."

Oscar von Wildenrod knew very well that a marriage of this kind was null and void in the eyes of the law; but what cared he for that, if it only satisfied Maia and made her believe herself to be his wife? Then Dernburg would have to consent; for the sake of the honor of his name, he could not admit that his daughter had lived for a while in a foreign land with a man who was not her husband, and the legal forms could be gone through with hereafter. After all, his claim to Odenburg might yet be made good. Was not Maia still her father's heir? Hence upon her hand depended freedom and wealth.

It was a wild, crazy scheme, suggested to the Baron by despair. Meanwhile it was practicable, if Maia only gave her consent. But now, in horror, she started back, releasing herself from his arms.

"Oscar! What is it that you ask of me?"

"My salvation!" he exclaimed, vehemently. "I am lost if I stay--you alone can save me. Go with me, Maia; be my wife, my shield, and I shall thank you for it on my knees. Only two paths are left to me now--the one with you leads to life, the other without you----"

"To death!" shrieked Maia. "Oh, how dreadful! Oh! no, no, Oscar, you are not to die. I am going with you, wherever you choose."

A cry of joy escaped his lips; he overwhelmed his betrothed with passionate caresses. "My Maia! I knew it. You would not forsake me, even though all others forsook me. And now, come! we have no time to lose."

"Now? This very hour?" asked Maia, shuddering. "Am I to see my father no more?"

"Impossible! You would betray yourself! We must leave on the spot. The carriage is in waiting to carry us to the station, at the gate in the rear of the park; I have with me my papers and a sum of money. In the excitement prevailing to-day at Odenburg, our departure will not be noticed. I shall see to it that they find not a trace of us, until I can announce our union to your father."

Maia's eyes were fixedly riveted upon the speaker, but hers were no longer glad, innocent child-eyes; there was an expression in them that Oscar could not fathom.

"Not say farewell to my father?" repeated she, mechanically. "Not even that, when I am giving him up forever?"

"Not forever," said Wildenrod, soothingly. "Your father will be reconciled to us. I shall take upon myself alone all the blame and responsibility of this step. We shall come back."

"Not I!" said the young girl, softly. "I shall die of that life in a foreign land, of separation from my father, of that--that dreadful thing, which you will not name before me. Oh, your love will be my death!"

"Maia!" cried he, interrupting her in angry surprise, but she would not be diverted, and continued:

"Somehow, I have always known it. When you first entered our house, and I looked into your eyes for the first time, a sense of distress came over me, as though I were standing on the edge of a precipice and must fall down. And this sense of distress has come ever again, even in that hour when you told me that you loved me, even in the midst of the happiness of these last weeks. I did not want to know the meaning of it, have struggled against it and clung to my supposed happiness. Now you point me to the abyss, and I--I must plunge down."

"And still you are willing to go with me?" asked Oscar, slowly: it was as though breath failed him.

"Yes, Oscar! You say that I can save you, how dare I hesitate?"

She laid her head upon his breast, with a low, heart-rending sob, in which the young creature buried her happiness. Wildenrod stood there, motionless, and looked down upon her: from the beech-tree withered leaves rained slowly down upon the pair.

At last Maia straightened herself up and dried her tears. "Let us go--I am ready!"

"No!" said Oscar, almost rudely, while he let her out of his arms.

The young girl looked at him in surprise.

"What did you say?"

He took off his hat and stroked his forehead, as though he would wipe something away. Suddenly his features appeared to be strangely altered: a few minutes before they had portrayed all the fierce passionateness of his nature, now they were cold and stolid in their calmness.

"I perceive that you are right," said he, and his voice sounded unnaturally composed. "It would be cruel to hinder you from taking leave of your father. Go to him and tell him--what you choose."

"And you?" asked Maia, astonished at this sudden change of mind.

"I shall wait for you here. It is better, perhaps, that you should speak to him once more, ere we venture upon that last desperate measure. Perhaps you will succeed in changing his mind."

It was only a faint glimmer of light that he showed her, but no more was needed for the rekindling of bright hopes in Maia's heart.

"Yes, I shall go to papa!" she cried. "I shall implore him on my knees not to part us. You cannot have done anything so dreadful, so unpardonable, and he will and shall hear me. But--would it not be better for you to go with me?"

"No, it would be in vain! But now go! go!--time is precious."

He urged her almost anxiously to leave, and yet when she actually did turn to go, he suddenly stretched out to her both arms.

"Come to me, Maia! Tell me once more that you love me, that you wanted to go with me, in spite of everything?"

The young girl flew back to him again and nestled up to him.

"You dread lest I should not stand firm? I'll share everything with you, Oscar, though it were the worst. Nothing can separate us. I love you beyond everything."

"Thank you!" said he, fervently. Suppressed feeling quivered in his voice; from his eyes, too, that sinister glare had departed, and they now beamed with unutterable tenderness. "Thank you, my Maia! You have no idea what a freeing, absolving influence that speech has had upon me, what a boon you bestow upon me in its utterance. Perhaps you are about to learn from your father's lips what I cannot tell you. If all of you, then, condemn and cast me from you forever, then remember that I loved you, loved you devotedly. How much I never realized until this moment--and I shall prove it to you."

"Oscar, you stay here?" asked Maia, agonized by a dark foreboding.

"I stay at Odensburg, my word for it--and now, go, my dear!"

He kissed his betrothed once more and then released her. She walked slowly away: on the edge of the thicket, she turned around. Wildenrod was still standing there motionless gazing after her; but he smiled, and that quieted the anxiety of the young girl, who now moved briskly forward into the fog, where she was soon lost in the gathering mist.

Oscar followed the slender form with his eyes until she had vanished, then he went slowly back to the bench and tentatively laid his hand upon his breast-pocket. There rested his papers, the sum of money he carried on his person, and--something else, that he had provided for all emergencies. Now, here it was safe ... but no, not here, not so near to the house! Then what mattered one hour the more or the less--night suited his purpose better.

"Poor Maia!" said he, softly. "You will weep bitterly, but your father will fold you in his arms. You are right: such a life and my guilt would kill you.--You shall be saved. I am going alone--to destruction!"

The Dernburg family burying-ground lay in the rear of the park. It was no showy mausoleum, but merely a peaceful spot, encircled by dark fir-trees. Plain marble memorial stones adorned the green hillocks that were mantled in ivy. Here rested Dernburg's father and wife, and here his son Eric had also found a resting-place.

The young widow still lingered alone at the grave, but the ever-increasing violence of the wind warned her that it was time for her, too, to be going. She had just stooped down to readjust the fresh wreath that she had laid on the grave, and was now rising, when all of a sudden she gave a start. Egbert Runeck had emerged from the fir-trees and stood opposite to her. He had evidently had no idea of meeting her here, but quickly composed himself, and said, with a bow: "I beg your pardon, lady, if I disturb you. I expected to find the place solitary!"

"Are you at Odensburg, Herr Runeck?" asked Cecilia, without concealing her surprise.

"I was calling upon Herr Dernburg, and could not let the opportunity pass by without visiting the burial-place of the friend of my youth. It is the first, and probably will be the last, time that I see it."

As he spoke his eye scanned furtively the young widow's figure that was draped in black: then he drew near the grave and looked down upon it long and silently.

"Poor Eric!" said he, after a while. "He had to depart so early, and yet--it is an enviable fate, to die thus in the midst of happiness!"

"You are mistaken--Eric did not die happy!" said Cecilia, in a low tone.

"You believe that he was conscious of approach of death and felt the pangs of parting? I heard, though, that the hemorrhage came upon him in apparently full health, and that he never recovered consciousness."

"I do not know; for me, there was something mysterious in Eric's last moments," replied Cecilia, dejectedly. "When he once more opened his eyes, shortly before he died, I saw that he recognized me. That look still pursues me; I cannot get rid of it. It was so full of woe and reproach, as though he had known or suspected----" she suddenly broke off.

"What could he have suspected?" asked Runeck, impulsively.

Cecilia was silent here; least of all could she say what she feared.

"My brother thinks it is imagination," she then replied evasively. "He may be right, and yet I can never recall that moment but with a sharp, keen pang."

She bowed distantly to Egbert and was on the point of going; he evidently struggled with himself, then made a movement as though to detain the young widow.

"I believe it will be better to prepare you, lady, for the news that you will hear when you reach the house. Baron von Wildenrod has left for good?"

"My brother?" cried Cecilia, her anxieties at once aroused. "And you here at Odensburg? What have you done?"

"Fulfilled a painful duty!" he gravely replied. "Your brother has left me no choice. He was warned through you--he should have been satisfied with what he had already accomplished--Maia ought not to be sacrificed! I have opened her father's eyes."

"And Oscar? He has gone off you say--where to?"

"That nobody knows as yet. He will certainly communicate with you after a while; you stand as high as ever in the affections of your father-in-law. He knows that not the slightest reproach attaches to you."

"The question here is not about myself, is it?" cried the young woman, vehemently. "Do you think that I can live quietly here at Odensburg, with my brother a wanderer upon the face of the earth, once more a prey to those inimical forces that have already brought him so low? You have done your duty--yes, thoroughly well! What asks a stern nature like yours, about whom and what has been crushed in the process?"

"Cecilia!" interposed Runeck, his tone betraying the torture he endured while listening to these reproaches. But Cecilia paid no heed and continued with increasing bitterness:

"Maia's hand and love would have saved Oscar, that I do know, for there was in him as mighty a power for good as for evil. Now he has been hurled back into the old life; now he is lost."

"Through me--is that what you would say?"

She did not answer, but the reproachful glance that she cast upon the young engineer was bitter in the extreme. Proudly but sadly he stood before her.

"You are right," said he, harshly. "Destiny has certainly condemned me to bring woe and misery upon all that I hold dear. I had to wound in the cruelest manner the man who had been more than a father to me. I had likewise to inflict no less a blow upon poor little Maia's heart. But the hardest of all was what I had to do to you, Cecilia, and for which you now condemn me!"

He waited in vain for a reply. Cecilia persisted in her silence. There was a rushing and roaring around the pair, as at that time when they stood at the foot of the Whitestone. Mysteriously came this roaring as from a far distance; on, on it came, ever swelling stronger and then sinking and dying away with the breath of the wind. But now the autumn storm howled furiously among the trees, half-bare of foliage as they were; the first gray shadows of evening began to steal upward, and what mingled with that rushing and roaring was not the peaceful Sabbath bells as before, but strange and dismal noises. A far-off and confused murmur it was, too undecided to determine what it was, for again and again it was swallowed up by the storm. But now the wind lulled for a few minutes, when it came across more loudly and distinctly. Cecilia drew herself up and listened intently. "What was that? Did it come from the house?"

"No, it seemed to come from the works," declared Runeck. "I heard it a while ago."

Both now listened, with bated breath, and suddenly Egbert exclaimed, with a start:

"I hear the voices of men! It is the raging of an angry mob. Something is going on over at the works--I must go over!"

"You, Herr Runeck? What would you there?"

"Protect the master of Odenburg from his people! I best know how they have been goaded and set against him. If he shows himself now, he is no longer safe among his workmen."

"For Heaven's sake!" cried Cecilia, horrified.

"Fear nothing!" Runeck hastened to assure her. "So long as I stand by his side, no one will come near him. Woe to him who risks it!"

Cecilia had sprung forward: a few minutes before she had believed that she could not pardon her brother's accuser, and now all that supposed hatred was swallowed up in anguish over him, over *his* life. She flew forward and embraced his arm with both hands.

"Egbert!"

He was in the act of hurrying away, but now stood still as though spellbound.

"Cecilia! Do you call me thus?"

"Do you mean to brave that infuriated mob over there? Oh, you court death!" cried the young widow, beside herself. "Egbert, think of me and my mortal anxiety about you!"

With an impetuous shout of joy, Egbert wanted to draw his beloved to him, but his eye fell upon her mourning garb and upon the grave of his old friend, and he only drew her hand silently to his lips; but a bright ray of happiness lit up his face, as he said softly,

"I *will* think of it--farewell, Cecilia!" With that he rushed off.

That evening the Odenburg works had been the theater of wild and stormy scenes. The moderation and circumspection with which the officers sought to keep down the angry excitement on the part of the mass of the workmen, and to maintain quiet and order among those dismissed, had been in vain; all was wrecked by the aggressive bearing of that party which Landsfeld secretly guided, and at the head of which stood Fallner here at the works.

To-day the Socialist leader had found it altogether necessary to come himself to Odenburg, a thing that he usually avoided; for he knew this time what was at stake.

Most of the workmen had already come to their senses, more than half of them having determined to resume work on the morrow, and to submit to the conditions of the chief. The effect of this example upon the others was to be foreseen. It was of importance, then, to incite to scenes of violence, cost what it would, in order that reconciliation be made impossible. And in this he had already succeeded.

The works were full of waving, noisy masses of men, who, by way of preliminary, were threatening one another. Fallner and his adherents hurled terms of opprobrium against the opposite party: "Cowards! Traitors! Hounds!" they cried, in a confused medley of invective, and those they attacked were not slow in returning the compliment. They threw it up to their comrades that they had been goaded into insurrection, and that a conclusion had been forced upon them which they had not liked. As yet fists played only a secondary part, but it was felt that a bloody encounter might ensue at any moment, and unchain all the fury of the excited multitude.

In the superintendent's building the officers had to sustain a regular siege. From the now closed workshops and bureaux, the younger ones had taken refuge here with their superiors, who were themselves thoroughly nonplused. The measures taken had proved themselves inefficacious. They were just now consulting as to the wisest thing to do.

CHAPTER XXIV.

A DEED THAT WIPES OUT OLD SCORES.

"There is no help for it, we must call in the master," said the director. "He was determined, whether or no, to interfere in case of necessity--I am at my wits' end now."

"For Heaven's sake no!" objected Winning. "He ought not to show himself. He will hardly be in the mood to speak kindly to the people, and if he meets them with asperity, then the worst is to be feared."

"What are those men out there after, anyhow?" cried Dr. Hagenbach, who was likewise present, because he feared that his medical services might be needed. "Whom are they threatening? Herr Dernburg? Us? Or are they quarreling among themselves?"

"I presume they themselves know least of all," replied the upper-engineer. "You may depend, their leader Landsfeld is at the bottom of it. He is to be in Odenburg to-day, when we may certainly expect matters to take a grave aspect."

"So much the less can I assume any longer the responsibility all by myself," declared the director. "I shall tell our chief that we are no longer masters of the situation. He can then do what he chooses."

He started for the telephone, when all of a sudden the noise ceased. He hushed quite suddenly, only a few individual voices being heard; then these too were silent and a deathlike silence prevailed. The officers hurried to the window, in order to see what was going on.

"There is the master!" exclaimed Winning. "I thought that he would appear without summons, if he heard that tumult."

"But how he does look!" added Hagenbach, in a whisper. "I fear that nature will give way."

"Let us open the doors, so that he can retreat here in case of necessity," said the director, who had likewise come up. "He is quite alone, not even Wildenrod is with him. We must go to him! Quick, gentlemen!"

The doors were opened that had been locked from the inside, but the officers could neither reach their chief, nor he them--a dense mass of men stood between, and held the square before the house. The attempt of the director and his colleagues, to break through this living wall, was vain--the workmen standing nearest assumed so threatening an attitude, the gentlemen desisted, so as not to tempt to a deed of violence that would have immediately reacted against Dernburg.

He had made use of the little by-path that led from the Manor to the superintendent's building, without going near the works. Nobody had seen his approach, and now he suddenly stood among his workmen as if he had sprung from the ground. The whole force of his personal presence was shown at this moment--his bare appearance had the most subduing effect upon the just now fiercely excited multitude, who suddenly stood, as it were, spellbound. All eyes were directed toward that tall form, with darkly knitted eyebrows; all waited for the first word from his mouth. His glance slowly swept over the crowd that he had once swayed by a single nod, and who now withstood him thus. Still he spoke not, for it seemed as though utterance had failed him.

Unfortunately it happened that Landsfeld, with Fallner, was in immediate proximity to him. There, in front of the superintendent's building, where they had cooped in the officers, the rashest of his followers had found themselves together, the Socialist leader had taken his stand. Dernburg's appearance seemed to him to be neither surprising nor undesired; on the contrary, there flashed into his eyes a look as of satisfaction, as he whispered to Fallner, who was constantly at his side, as a sort of adjutant:

"There is the old man! I knew that he would not stay quietly at home while the devil was to pay over at his works. Now the ball begins to roll!"

Finally Dernburg began to speak: his voice was loud and firm, and the deep silence round about caused every word to be distinctly heard.

"What means this noise here at the works? There is no reason for it. You gave warning, and I have had the workshops closed and shall keep them closed. You have been paid your wages, so now go home!"

The workmen were startled; they had been accustomed to their chiefs speaking shortly and

dictatorially, but this cold, contemptuous tone they heard from his lips now for the first time. They felt it at once, without being able exactly to account for it.

Now Landsfeld deemed that the hour had come for his personal interference. "You and the rest follow me," was his brief command to Fallner, and then, without further ceremony, he turned to Dernburg.

"The question here is not one of pay," he began, with insolent mien. "What the workmen want of you, Herr Dernburg, they have already communicated to you. Those unjust dismissals are to---"

"Who are you? Who gives you the right to put in a word here?" interrupted Dernburg, although he knew the speaker by sight as well as that person knew him.

"My name is Landsfeld," was the haughty reply. "I think that suffices for my justification."

"Intermeddling from without I do not brook. Leave Odenburg on the spot!"

This order sounded proud and contemptuous. Landsfeld retired a step and measured from head to foot the man who stood before him, unsupported, and yet dared to speak thus.

"Such an order I shall not heed," answered he, scornfully. "I stand here in the name of my party, which Odenburg matters very nearly concern. Comrades! do you recognize me as your proxy? Am I to speak for you?"

Fallner and his men, who had followed their leader and encircled him on all sides, answered with stormy approval, while the others remained silent. Landsfeld triumphantly raised his head.

"You hear it! I tell you, then, that the conditions imposed by you before the resumption of work are shameful and degrading. I declare the man that submits to them to be a coward and traitor."

"And I declare that I have nothing to do with you or the like of you," cried Dernburg, extremely provoked by this challenge. "I made conditions for my workmen, to whom alone I shall re-open the works--with men of your stamp I have nothing at all to do."

Landsfeld started up, enraged. "With men of my stamp? We are indeed only worms in the eyes of this high and mighty lord? Comrades! do you put up with this?"

He did not appeal in vain to his comrades. Abusive words and threats were hurled at Dernburg, who was ever more closely wedged in by the mob. Cut off from any assistance, at any instant he might look for the worst.

Then were heard in the distance loud clamor and shouts, not of a fierce and menacing kind, though, but as if some one was being joyfully received. Now they could even distinguish an enthusiastic "huzza" that was loud and long-drawn-out, and continually came nearer. "Long live Runeck! Long live Egbert Runeck!" sounded from all quarters, and, through the midst of the densely-packed masses, a way was opened for the engineer, who rapidly drew near.

Breathless from his impetuous walk, he placed himself by Dernburg's side with an air that showed plainly enough that he was determined to stand by him and fall with him. He looked defiance at Landsfeld, who returned his glance with a scornful shrug of the shoulders.

"Are you actually here, my dear fellow?" he murmured. "If you *will* break your own neck, then I need not do it for you."

Runeck, meanwhile, had taken a rapid survey of the situation; he recognized its peril, and seized the sole means that had promise of safety.

"Back from the house!" was his order to the workmen who held the superintendent's office beleaguered. "Do you not see that Herr Dernburg wants to get to his officers? I'll escort him; make room!"

The people were surprised, shocked at the part taken; they obeyed, however, and began to retire. The square in front of the house was gradually emptied, and if Dernburg were once there in the midst of his officers, he would be also in safety. If Runeck, then, remained at his side, the whole affair would wind up peacefully. But this did not at all fit into Landsfeld's plan, and again he struck in.

"What means this?" he cried in a sharp stentorian voice. "Our delegate takes part against us, and ranges himself on the enemy's side, does he? Herr Runeck! your place is with us. You have to represent us--or do you mean to turn traitor?"

That evil word "traitor" immediately took effect, and a low threatening murmur became audible. Now Runeck lost the moderation that he had hitherto found it hard enough to preserve in face of Landsfeld's effrontery.

"You yourselves are traitors and villains if you assault the man who has helped you in every way that he could," he thundered. "Back from him! whoever touches him, I shall strike to the

ground!"

His bearing was wild and threatening, so that all shrank back save Landsfeld only.

"Suppose you try that on me, then?" he yelled, rushing forward to attack Dernburg, but in the same minute, felled by a powerful blow of Egbert's fist, he sank to the ground with a loud outcry, where he lay with blood streaming over him.

The sudden lightning-like deed unchained all the passions of the raging mob.

With a fierce shout, Fallner and his fellows rushed upon Runeck, who threw himself in front of Dernburg and covered him with his body. For a few minutes his gigantic strength held out against the assailants, but the end of this unequal contest was to be foreseen. Then suddenly a knife flashed in Fallner's uplifted hand, a mighty thrust--and Egbert fell down, bleeding.

But this time the deed had a different effect from what it had had before, the multitude standing paralyzed, as it were, by horror. Suddenly the monstrous character of the whole proceeding seemed to strike them. Fallner himself stood there motionless, as though shocked by his own deed. The tumult was hushed; nobody hindered Dernburg, who, with pale face and compressed lips, slowly stooped down and took the unconscious Egbert in his arms.

Meanwhile, seeing that the square in front of the house was clear, the officers made a renewed attempt to force their way to the chief; it had only succeeded in a measure, but they already found themselves quite near to him, when that bloody incident supervened. Doctor Hagenbach, with quick presence of mind, profited by it to accomplish their end. "Room for the surgeon!" cried he, pressing forward. "Let me through!"

This word availed; a narrow path was opened for him in the densely-packed throng, and the officers crowded after; in a few minutes Dernburg was surrounded by them. But he did not concern himself on that score; he knelt by Egbert, whose head he supported, and when the doctor now stooped down and examined the wound, he asked softly, in a tone of deep distress:

"Is he--mortally wounded?"

"Very severely!" said Hagenbach, loudly and earnestly. "He must be conveyed somewhere instantly."

"To the Manor-house!" suggested Dernburg.

"Yes, indeed, that is best." He quickly put on a bandage, and then turned, in passing, to the bleeding Landsfeld, in order to examine him as well.

"There is no danger here!" he called aloud to the bystanders. "The blow has only stunned the man. Carry him into the house--he will soon again come to his senses--there is no cause for uneasiness about him. But Runeck--he is badly hurt!"

His manner showed that he feared the worst, and this decided the mood of the multitude. There arose an agitated murmur, that was transmitted from mouth to mouth, until it reached the ranks of those who had stood too far off to see what had been going on. And now, when Egbert was picked up and borne away, a movement of horror passed through the throng of human beings. They saw their deputy, whom they had elected in defiance of their chief, and lifted upon the shield with loud rejoicings lying lifeless and covered with blood, in the arms of the officers, who bore him away, and their chief walked by his side and held in his hand of the unconscious young man. No request was needed to induce them to make way: all moved silently aside, when the melancholy procession came past--not a word, not a sound was to be heard. A silence as of death fell upon all those thousands.

CHAPTER XXV.

TWIXT LIFE AND DEATH.

Meanwhile, in the Manor-house they were awaiting in terrible anxiety the issue of the noise and commotion, that were plainly audible as coming from the works. When Maia came from the park, her father had already gone forth to quell the workmen, and she could not, therefore, talk with him. She took refuge with Cecilia, wanting to unbosom herself to her, but had found her in such grief and distress, that it was useless to expect from her attention and sympathy.

"Leave me, Maia!" pleaded the young widow in accents of despair. "Only leave me now! Later, I will listen to everything you have to say, and advise you, too, but now I can think of nothing, and feel nothing but *his* danger!" So saying, she rushed out upon the terrace, whence one could overlook the works.

Poor Maia's heart grew still heavier. *His* danger! By that she could only mean her father, to whom Cecilia, too, was tenderly devoted. Was he actually in such sore peril when among his workmen?

Thus more than an hour had elapsed, and Maia could stand it no longer. What was Oscar to think of her staying away? He would believe that she had wavered in her resolution, and was minded to let him go alone to destruction. She *must* go back to him, if only for a few minutes, in order to tell him that it was impossible to speak with her father now! With quickening breath she hurried into the park, which already lay shadowed in twilight gloom. There who should come to meet her but her father.

Dernburg, with his attendants, had selected the shortest way, the same little by-path which he had used awhile ago on his way to the works, and which could not be seen from the terrace either. Through the movement of the stretcher and pain of the wound Egbert had been brought back to consciousness: his first question had reference to Landsfeld. Hagenbach assured him that the man's wound was insignificant and did not involve the slightest danger, and a deep sigh of relief showed how much comfort this assurance gave the young engineer. Maia, who at first only saw her father, threw herself impetuously on his bosom.

"You live, papa, you are saved! Thank God, now all will be well!"

"Yes, I am saved--at this price!" said Dernburg in a whisper, while he pointed behind him. Now, for the first time, the young girl caught sight of the wounded man, and uttered a shriek of horror.

"Hush, my child!" admonished Dernburg. "I did not want to frighten you. Where is Cecilia?"

"Out on the terrace. I must run and tell her; she is almost distressed to death about you," whispered Maia, with a glance at the friend of her youth, that was full of anguish, for he looked like one dying. Then she hurried off to her sister-in-law.

Dernburg had Egbert carried into his own chamber, and helped to lay him on the bed, while Dr. Hagenbach exerted himself in his behalf, and gave a few directions to the servant-man who came hurrying in. Then the door opened, and in Maia's company appeared Cecilia. Without disturbing herself about witnesses, without even seeing them, with a wild movement, she rushed up to the couch, and there fell upon her knees.

"Egbert, you had promised me to live!" she cried despairingly, "and yet you sought death."

Dernburg stood there as though struck by lightning. He had never had even the faintest suspicion of this love, and now one unguarded moment betrayed everything to him.

"I did not want to die, Cecilia, assuredly not," said Egbert, faintly. "But there was no other possibility of saving *him*."

His eye turned upon Dernburg, who now approached, and continued to look from one to the other, as though dazed.

"Is that the way it stands between you two?" asked he, slowly.

The young woman did not answer; she only clasped Egbert's right hand in both her own, as though she feared that they might be parted. He tried to speak, but Dernburg would not allow him to make the effort.

"Be tranquil, Egbert," said he, earnestly. "I know that Eric's betrothed was sacred from your approach: you need not assure me of that; and after his death, you have to-day, for the first time, entered Odensburg. My poor boy! That interposition has been fatal to you--you have been obliged to pay for it with your heart's blood."

"But this blood has forced me from that chain!" cried Egbert, with a return of his old fire. "You, none of you, have any idea how hard I have found it to wear. Now it is broken--I am free!"

He sank back, exhausted, and now Dr. Hagenbach asserted himself. In the most decided manner, he forbade any talking, and any further agitation of exciting topics, in the presence of the wounded man, from whom he did not conceal the perilous in his situation.

Dernburg looked upon his daughter-in-law, who, with folded hands, looked entreatingly at him, and he understood the silent appeal.

"Egbert, then, needs entire repose," said he, earnestly, "and self-sacrificing care. I commit him to you, Cecilia--you will be the best nurse here!" Once more he stooped down to the wounded man, exchanged a few whispered words with the surgeon, and then went into his office. Maia, who had hitherto stood silent in the doorway, now followed him, but she approached her father

as shyly and timidly as though she had some grievous fault of her own to confess.

"Papa, I have something to say to you," she whispered, with downcast eyes. "I know you have already gone through terrible experiences to-day--but I cannot wait. Somebody out in the park is awaiting your decision and mine--I must convey it to him. Will you hear me?"

Dernburg had turned to her. Yes, indeed, what he had gone through with that day was hard, but this was the hardest of all. He held out both arms, and folding his darling to his heart, said in a breaking voice:

"My little Maia! My poor, poor child----"

Night had come, a dark stormy night, with heavy clouds covering the face of the sky. The Odensburg works, which, a few hours before, had been full of boisterous life, now lay there silent and forsaken. It had needed no special regulations, not even a reminder, to induce the workmen to go home. Since their deputy-elect had struck down their leader, and fallen himself by the knife of one of themselves, consternation had laid hold of the people. They felt all that was hard in these proceedings, although they did not clearly understand their full bearing. Fallner was shyly avoided; and when the news got wind that Landsfeld--who came to in little over a half hour--had left Odensburg on foot, there was a complete revolution in the sentiments of the whole laboring community. There were bitter accusations and reproaches, but not against him who was struggling with death over yonder in the Manor-house--all the bitterness was directed against Landsfeld alone.

Through night and storm came a tall, solitary figure, that remained standing in front of the Manor-house, where dim candle-light was visible behind several windows, in the apartment where Egbert lay under Cecilia's charge, and also in the rooms of Maia and Dernburg. None of them slept that night. The man who stood so motionless below knew nothing of these last events. He had heard, it is true, the noise at the works when he left the Rose Lake, and he knew also the apprehensions entertained for the evening, but what was Odensburg to him now, or what was life in general?

Oscar von Wildenrod was ready for the final step. He knew that he could not, dared not see his beloved again, and yet, with an irresistible longing, he was drawn once more into her neighborhood, to the spot where abode the only being upon earth that he truly loved. He had proven it, although not until the very last hour. The means of escape that was offered him at that time he had put from him for Maia's sake, and with that sacrifice fell off all that had been calculating in his love. It remained the only pure sentiment in a corrupt and blasted life, which was now to be ended by a bullet.

Wildenrod lived over, in memory, the first evening that he had spent at Odensburg. Then he had stood at that window, up there, his head full of ambitious schemes and his heart swelling with the first sweet sensations of love for the charming girl, to whose hand was appended that wealth which he so ardently coveted. Then he had vowed to be, one day, lord and master of this world of industrial achievement, and in the full confidence of his coming victory had gazed proudly upon those works, out of whose gigantic furnaces mounted upward sheaves of flashing sparks. Now all lay in total quiet, the restless machinery stood still, the fires were extinguished. Only over yonder, where the rolling-mills were situated, glimmered a pale, uncertain light, that gradually, however, grew brighter. Oscar eyed this indifferently, at first, but then more sharply. Now the light vanished, to shoot up again directly afterwards; now it quivered here and there, and then all at once it was as if a flash of lightning rent the sky. A flame darted on high, and in its glare one saw that the whole environs were full of moving columns of smoke.

Wildenrod started up at this spectacle; in the next minute he had rushed to the house and was striking against the window of the porter's lodge.

"There is a fire at the works. Awaken Herr Dernburg! I'll hurry on!"

"Fire on this stormy night! God be with us!" cried the horrified voice of the man, startled out of his sleep. Oscar did not hear what he said, for he was far on his way to the works, where the conflagration became more and more distinctly visible. Where, formerly, even at night, hundreds used to be astir, to-day only the inspectors remained, and they lay wrapt in slumber.

Wildenrod knew the works thoroughly: he turned first to the cottage of old Mertens, who, since work at Radefeld had come to an end, had held a place here, and aroused him also. The alarm was sounded; in a few minutes some twenty men had assembled, and now the sensational, howling tones of the fire-horn were heard. Odensburg had the most admirable arrangements for extinguishing fire to be found far or near: Dernburg had formed a volunteer fire-company out of his working force, and the men were excellently drilled. But now all the bonds of order were loosed, the workmen were scattered in their remote dwellings, so that assistance from them was hardly to be expected.

Now appeared Dernburg himself, who had been sitting up alone in his office, when the alarm of fire was given, and at the same time came hurrying up some of the officers whose residences were near by. Wildenrod suddenly saw himself face to face with the man, who, a few hours ago,

had admitted him to the rights of a son, and who, meanwhile, must have heard that crushing revelation. Dernburg, also, involuntarily shrank back upon catching sight of the Baron, whom he had supposed to have taken to flight, and imagined already as far away. But now there was no time for any discussion whatever--Oscar had resolutely gone up to Dernburg.

"I was the first to discover the fire," said he, "and had the fire-signal sounded at once. The flames seem to have broken out in the rolling-mills."

"Yes, that is the place!" agreed Dernburg. "But it cannot have arisen there through heedlessness--no work has been done there since noon. It must be the work of an incendiary!"

Those present all shared his opinion, it was plain, but Wildenrod cut off any further remarks. "Never mind, we must penetrate to the seat of the fire!" he cried. "In this wind all the works are in the greatest danger."

"In this wind they are lost!" said Dernburg, gloomily. "We have not the hands for putting it out."

"But our fire-company! The workmen----" objected old Mertens, but a bitter laugh from his master interrupted him.

"My workmen? They will let burn whatever is afire. Call them up as much as you please with your fire-horns, nobody is coming--nobody, I tell you! They are my works, not a hand will stir!"

But, as if in reply, loud shouts and voices were now heard, and torches were seen gleaming at the entrance to the works. A troop of workmen appeared in closed ranks, with fire-helmets on their heads and asbestos frocks thrown on, while behind them thundered the engines. And after five minutes came a second troop, and then a third and a fourth. Now the cry of "fire!" was heard on all sides; near and far it resounded, until the whole valley was alive, and lights were shining in all quarters. The works filled with men; all came and all were prepared to help.

In the beginning Dernburg had been almost petrified at the sight of these arrivals; but now, when one procession after the other emerged from the darkness, when the people came as though on a race between life and death--anything so as only to arrive in time--when the engines drove up at a gallop, then the lord of Odenburg heaved a long, deep sigh; he straightened himself up, as though he had cast from him a burden long borne, and shouted:

"Well, men, if you want to help, then, forward! Down with the fire!"

This was done, but the conflagration had already found too abundant aliment. The whole interior of the rolling-mills seemed to be in flames, and in vain they sought to force their way in. Dernburg had undertaken, in person, the superintendence of the attempts to quench the fire, and guided his men by word and look, while they obeyed him as punctually and studiously as ever.

But Oscar von Wildenrod also worked unweariedly to the same end. He did not stop to ask whether they would concede to him this right--he simply took it. He was everywhere as the emergency demanded. But although he courageously and undauntedly led forward single detachments again and again, although the engines incessantly hurled their hissing streams into the fiercest of the flames, yet the fire had an overpoweringly strong ally in the prevailing wind, and, in union with it, defied all their exertions. Like fiery serpents the flames darted out of the house windows, licking the walls and shooting their tongues forth venomously from the roof. The wind was already driving them across to other roofs; it bore burning bits of wood aloft through the air, in order to drop them again where they would kindle and extend the disaster.

Already the fire had broken out in single spots, and wherever this happened, detachments had to be sent for its extinction.

Oscar von Wildenrod had just returned from one of these side-fires, which he had had put out under his own supervision, to the starting point of the conflagration, where Herr Dernburg had planted himself like a rock. Dernburg was just talking with the upper-engineer, who stood before him with the crestfallen look of one at his wits' end.

"We are not subduing it, Herr Dernburg," said he. "Only see, the fire already threatens to catch the foundries, and if they burn, then it will make a clean sweep of the whole. There might be one expedient, perhaps, but you will not consent to it--suppose we made the attempt to turn on the water from the Radefeld aqueduct."

"No, never--that would imperil human life! Maybe volunteers might be found; in their present mood the people are capable of any sacrifice, but no man's life shall be victimized for my sake--rather let the works all burn down."

He stepped up to the engineers that were advancing to a new attack with their water-jets, and there gave a few orders, while Wildenrod, who had been listening, turned to the upper-engineer.

"What is that about the Radefeld aqueduct?" asked he, eagerly.

"The aqueduct is immediately adjacent to the rolling-mills," answered the officer. "If it had

been possible promptly to open the large main pipe, then the fire might have been quenched. But there it originated and burned most fiercely, so that we could gain no access to its focus. The pipe lies----"

"I know," interposed Wildenrod. "I was present when the conduit was joined on and tested, and saw, too, how they opened the afflux. Access is impossible to it, do you say?"

The upper-engineer shrugged his shoulders and pointed to the state of the conflagration. "Earlier it might have been possible to have cleared a way with our engines, at least for a short while, but Herr Dernburg is right, the attempt would cost human life. Who would venture into those glowing walls that may cave in at any moment? And even if one did succeed in opening the pipe, and conducting the mass of water in the reservoir to the seat of the fire, how would our men get back? The smoke would smother them. If the water escapes no one would come forth alive."

"The only question is, how one may get in alive," murmured Oscar, with his eye fixed upon the leaping flames. The upper-engineer looked at him in surprise, but before he could answer the chief came back. "You assume the command over there," was his order. "Winning can hold out no longer."

The officer hurried away, and Dernburg scanned the Baron with a forbidding look. "What do you want here?" asked he in a subdued tone. "There are hands enough for putting out the fire, we do not need your help."

"More than you think, perhaps!" said Wildenrod, with a strange smile.

Dernburg stepped close up to him. "I did not want to expose you before my officers and workmen, but now I tell you, you are no longer in place here, Baron von Wildenrod. Go!"

Wildenrod met firmly the eyes that were fastened upon him so menacingly, then said slowly and earnestly: "I am going! Bid Maia farewell for me; perhaps you will still allow her--to weep for me!"

He turned off and was lost in the crowd of toilers.

Those were awful experiences that Odensburg passed through that night. The wind-chased clouds, tinted blood-red by the aspiring flames, the waving masses of men rushing hither and thither, a commingling of dreadful sounds, shouts, cries, and the clattering of the engines--it was a dismal scene.

Then, all of a sudden, there arose a mighty column of smoke from the very center of the fire, that spread out farther and farther, while at the same time a peculiar hissing and roaring became audible. The flames no longer leaped up so high as before; they seemed to sink, to flee before some mysterious power, while the smoke and the roaring were ever on the increase. Those standing around could not explain the phenomenon: suppositions of all sorts were heard, but Dernburg was the first one to solve the problem. "The Radefeld aqueduct is open!" he cried. "The water has broken in. Perhaps the pipe has burst or the fire has sprung the lock. Never mind--it brings us deliverance!"

Breathlessly all watched the conflict between the two hostile elements, but soon the flood conquered, which evidently deluged the whole surface where the fire had found its chief nutriment. Different spots on the roof were still afire, it is true, but these could be put out, and were put out, when the sea of flame in the interior had disappeared for good. Again the engines played with renewed force and activity, and now a portion of the long tottering walls tumbled down, the main building caved in, its sides falling inwards. Thus was averted all danger to the neighboring houses and the fire restricted to its own hearth.

"That was help in time of need!" said Dernburg to the officers standing around. "And that the water broke loose at the critical moment was assuredly more than accident--the interposition of a Higher Hand."

"I am afraid that it was a human hand!" returned the upper-engineer, softly.

Dernburg turned to him in surprise. "What mean you to say?"

"Baron von Wildenrod is nowhere to be found," explained that official gravely. "He spoke with me awhile ago as to the possibility of opening the conduit, and at the same time made use of a singular expression that startled me at the time. A few minutes later I saw him hurrying in that direction and there vanish. There has been no accident in this case."

Dernburg turned pale: now all of a sudden Oscar's last speech became clear to him and he understood it all. "For God's sake!" he exclaimed, with a start, "then we must penetrate to the seat of the conflagration, must at least try----"

"Impossible!" interposed the director. "Beneath those glowing, smoking ruins no living thing yet breathes."

What he said was only too true, Dernburg was obliged himself to admit. Deeply shaken, he covered his eyes with his hand. For him there was no longer any doubt but that the man who had coveted Odenburg for his own, at any price, had sacrificed himself to save Odenburg!

Hours of labor were still needed at the scene of the fire. Here and there forks of flame shot up again and had to be extinguished, the area covered by the conflagration had to be isolated, and the ever-flowing streams of the Radeheld aqueduct had to be cut off.

Day had already dawned, when it was finally possible to dismiss the people, only retaining a sufficient number of men to act as a guard. All had done their utmost, vying with one another in courage and endurance; now the men waited for their chief, exhausted as they were from their long labors, with faces blackened by smoke and their clothes dripping wet. All eyes were silently and questioningly fastened upon him, as he now stepped into their midst, his voice, although full of deep feeling, was audible to a great distance.

"I thank you, children! I shall never forget you and what you have done for me this night. You gave me warning that you had quit work, and I wanted to forbid your taking it up again. Now, you have worked for me and my Odenburg, and so I think"--here he suddenly held out both hands to an old workman with hoary head, who stood close before him--"we'll stay together now, and work together as we have done for the past thirty years!"

And in the hearty shout of rejoicing that rang forth from all quarters ended the strike at Odenburg.

CHAPTER XXVI.

HOW FORCES THAT ARE OPPOSED MAY BLEND.

More than two years had elapsed since that stormy night when the conflagration had raged at the Odenburg works, but out of the wind and fire of that period, which had threatened everything with annihilation, had come forth new life and activity.

Those occurrences, which had then affected Dernburg's family circle as seriously as they had done his position as lord of Odenburg, had gradually retreated into the background, although, for a long while, they had shown their pregnant results. On the day after the fire, the charred remains of Oscar von Wildenrod had been found. His magnanimous action--of which there could be no doubt--was everywhere admired; only Dernburg and Egbert knew, while a few of the formerly initiated suspected, that a stained and abandoned life had been atoned for by this voluntary self-immolation. For all the rest, the memory of the Baron remained pure, laid to rest as he had been in the family burying-ground by Eric's side, and beneath the rustling fir-trees of the Odenburg park.

The universal impression continued to be that the fire had been the work of an incendiary, but the proof of this had not been found, and was not to be, either. Fallner, to whom one suspicious circumstance pointed, had left Germany, to escape the prosecution impending over him, on account of his murderous assault upon Runeck. Since all these events had acquired a publicity that was altogether undesirable, they wanted, by all means, to avoid being forced into notice again through a lawsuit.

On this point Dernburg and his opponents were fully agreed.

He did his very best to cause the mantle of silence to be thrown over the whole affair, in order that the newly-won peace with his workmen might not be imperiled by bitter memories and discussions.

From his sick-bed Runeck had sent word to his party, that he must lay down his commission. This resolve would have been unavoidable, even without the severe wound which chained him to his couch for weeks, and forbade his engaging in any serious business for months. The bond between him and his former comrades, which already, for a long time, had only existed outwardly, was now definitively severed. The result of the new election might have been easily predicted: there was only one man who could have disputed the place with the master of Odenburg, and he had withdrawn. From the second casting of the ballot Eberhard Dernburg came out with an overwhelming majority, and this time his Odenburg employés all stood by him to a man. The reconciliation had been complete.

After his recovery, Egbert had left Odenburg and stayed away for a long while. He, like

Dernburg, felt that the new future, about which they were fully agreed, was not to be linked immediately and unceremoniously to the past, seeing that many an inward wound must close up ere the outward one should be perfectly healed. The young engineer had traveled widely and spent a full year in America, where there was so much for him to see and learn. There he had completed the studies which he had once begun in England. Now, when at last he returned to Odensburg, his long waiting was at an end, and he dared to claim the good fortune that had once bloomed for him on the very verge of the grave; after a short engagement, his marriage with Cecilia took place in all quietness.

To-day the cheerful sounds betokening festivity were to be heard in the Manor-house, for they were looking for the return of the bridal pair from their wedding-trip. And Frau Dr. Hagenbach was just adding a few last touches to the preparations for their reception, that lady having retained her old intimate relations with the Dernburg household after her marriage. The rooms that were now fitted up for Egbert and Cecilia Runeck were entirely different from those that had once received Eric's betrothed, being situated on the opposite side of the house, and destined for their permanent abode.

Leonie placed a few more flowers in the reception-room. From the sickly, nervous, and rather wan old maid had emerged a smiling and graceful matron: Dr. Hagenbach having asserted his rights as a physician as well as husband, and completely cured his wife of those detested nervous attacks.

Frau Hagenbach had just completed her task, when the door opened and her husband entered. Wedded life seemed to have agreed well with him, too, for he had a highly contented look, while both his manners and mode of speech were changed for the better.--It was easy to see that he had gone to work in earnest to become "humanized." He nodded to his wife and said:

"I have come up only for a minute, to let you know that I have to visit one more patient first. It will not take me long, though, so that I shall be in time for the reception, anyhow."

"They will not arrive much before two o'clock," remarked his wife. "One more question, though, dear Hugo--have you considered that matter of Dagobert's?"

The doctor again made one of those grimaces, once so common with him, and his voice sounded rather gruff as he answered:

"There is nothing to be considered! I shall take care not to send the fellow the three hundred marks, that, according to his assertion, he needs so urgently. He must make out with the allowance that I have settled upon him, once for all."

"But the sum is not so large after all," objected Mrs. Hagenbach, "and in other respects you have no fault to find with Dagobert. He works industriously, writes to us frequently----"

"And still persistently reviles you in prose and verse," said Hagenbach, finishing her sentence for her. "To be sure no rational man would demean himself by being jealous of such a simpleton, although he did presume to write to me, after the reception of our wedding-cards, that I had inflicted a mortal wound upon his betrayed heart. A pierced heart does not, however, hinder him from hiding behind his aunt, when he wants to get anything out of me, the traitor, and she, alas! always takes his part. But this time nothing helps him--he does not get that money, so much is settled!"

Leonie did not contradict him, she only smiled with a submissive look, and let the subject drop.

"We shall be in the strictest seclusion to-day," she remarked. "Count Eckardstein is the only person invited."

"Well, I hope that means that we are soon to have another bride in the house, and that it will not be too long before a young countess makes her entrée into Eckardstein."

His wife shook her head dubiously. "I am afraid this is by no means settled. Herr Dernburg doubtless desires it, but Maia's demeanor is anything but encouraging. Who knows what answer she will give, if the Count actually proposes."

"But she cannot grieve forever over her former betrothed--she was little else than a child then."

"And yet his death very nearly cost her her life."

"Yes, a fine time we had of it, truly!" said Hagenbach with a sigh. "On one side there was Egbert, who for weeks hovered between life and death, on the other Fräulein Maia, likewise making preparations to die, and between them Madame Cecilia, who, one day, when Runeck was at the worst, coolly declared to me, that if I did not save her Egbert, she did not care to live longer, either. We did not have the jolliest of times during our engagement, did we, my dear? Thank God, it has been better since we were married. But I must be gone! I must go home. First, though, have you any order to give?"

"Only a trifle to be attended to. You were going to send the coachman to the station, you know--he can take with him the letter and post-office order."

"What post-office order?" asked the doctor, suspiciously.

"Why, the three hundred marks for Dagobert. I have already filled out the order, which is lying on your desk; you will have nothing to do but to supply the money----"

"I am not thinking of such a thing," cried the doctor, fuming.

"Yes, but you are thinking of it, though," protested Frau Dr. Hagenbach, with a decision, alas! that was not to be gainsaid. "You are only afraid of somewhat weakening your authority, and in this you are right, as you always are. Therefore I acted in your stead and wrote to Dagobert myself. It was done only for your sake, you perceive that, dear Hugo."

"Leonie, what are you thinking of?" exclaimed Hagenbach, irritably. "I have told you once, and now tell you again----"

He did not succeed in repeating his remark, however, for his wife interrupted him. "I know, Hugo, you are in the habit of representing yourself as hardhearted when you are goodness itself. You made up your mind long ago to send the poor youth that money, dear Hugo----"

The "dear Hugo" had learned many a thing already since he had entered the estate of matrimony. He never heard a contradiction, it is true, and everything was done exclusively out of deference to his will--this his wife told him daily, and he believed it, too, for the most part; but the Odensburg people were of a different opinion. In that village it was positively asserted, that "the madam ruled the roost." In this particular case, it is certain that the post-office order for three hundred marks was sent off in the course of the next hour.

In the parlor sat Maia Dernburg alone, at the window: at her feet lay the elderly Puck: he had become orderly and intelligent, and had entirely laid aside his inclination to attack in the rear men who wore plaid pantaloons. To be sure he was not so much teased as formerly; his young mistress stroked and caressed him still, it is true, but the merry romps that she used to carry on with him had long since ceased. In general, "little Maia" no longer existed, that fascinating childlike creature with exuberant spirits and laughing eyes. The slender, white-robed young lady there at the window certainly possessed great attractions, having developed from the laughing child into the quiet, gentle maiden, and in those brown eyes lay, as it were, deep, dark shadows, telling of a grief not yet altogether overcome.

It was quiet round about, and Maia was looking dreamily out upon the bright summer landscape, when her father entered. His hair had turned gray during these last years, but in every other respect he was the same erect, hale old man that we have known.

"Are you already on the lookout for the carriage?" he asked.

"No, papa, it is too early for that as yet," replied the young girl. "Egbert and Cecilia cannot be here for an hour yet, but as we have finished all our preparations for their reception----"

"So much the better, for then we shall have an hour to devote to our guest alone. Eckardstein is already here--over in my office."

"Ah! Why, then, did he not come with you?"

"Because he deemed it necessary to send me in advance, as his spokesman. We have had a long and interesting interview--am I to repeat to you what was said, or do you guess the tenor of our remarks?"

Maia had risen to her feet: she had become pale, while her eyes were full of entreaty as she fixed them upon her father.

"Papa--could you not spare me this?"

"No, my child," said Dernburg, earnestly. "Victor has determined to bring the matter to an issue, and you will be obliged to listen to his suit. He has begged me to intercede for him, and I have promised him to do so, for I owe him reparation for the injustice I once did him. He asked for leave to pay his addresses to you three years ago, although it did not come to an open declaration; in this wooing of a portionless young officer I saw nothing but calculation, and my insinuations made him feel very bitterly. He has proved, however, that his love was true and genuine. The lord-proprietor of Eckardstein needs to ask for no dowry with his bride, and I would gladly, very gladly, place my Maia's happiness in his hands."

"I should like to stay with you, papa," whispered the young girl, in painful agitation nestling up to his side. "Will you not keep me, then?"

"My child, we shall not be separated, even if you do become Victor's wife. You best know what has hitherto kept him aloof from Eckardstein: your consent would immediately determine him to resign his commission in the army, and henceforth devote himself to the care of his estates. Then we should still be together, Eckardstein is so near, you know."

"I cannot!" cried Maia, vehemently, while she drew herself up. "Oscar chained me indissolubly to himself in life, and I am not free from him in death, either! How often has my heart been heavy when I caught the expression of Victor's speaking eyes, not being able to misunderstand the mute plea that I read there--but I cannot be happy at the side of any other."

"There are only a few destined to be happy," said Dernburg, with strong emphasis, "but the duty of making others happy, when it is in our power, that duty belongs to us all. Victor knows what has happened, and does not demand of you that passionate love which linked you to Oscar--perhaps, he would not even understand it. But you are necessary to his happiness, and his faithful, honorable devotion is well worth the sacrifice of those memories. Of course, you are at full liberty to do as you choose, Maia--only consider this one thing: whoever would truly live, must also live for others!"

The young girl made no answer, a few large tears rolled slowly down her cheeks; the grave admonition had not been without effect.

"Well, what am I to say to the Count?" asked Dernburg, after a pause.

Maia pressed both hands to her heart, as though she would keep down a self-asserting pain there, then she bowed her head and answered, almost inaudibly:

"Tell him--that I am expecting him!"

Then she felt her father's lips upon her forehead, and folding her in his arms, he said with profound emotion:

"That is right, my poor--my brave child!"

Five minutes later Victor Eckardstein entered, almost unaltered in his outward appearance, save that his features were graver and more manly. Now, indeed, his whole manner bespoke nothing but excitement and uneasiness.

"Your father told me that I would find you alone, Maia," he began. "I have so much that I should like to confide to you, and yet know not whether you will listen to me."

Maia stood before him with downcast eyes; a slight blush mantled her cheek, as she bowed her head in acquiescence, without opening her lips.

The Count seemed to have expected some other sign of encouragement, for his voice acquired a touch of bitterness, as he continued:

"It has been hard enough for me to approach any other with my entreaties and desires, even although it was your father. But your manner to me has always been so distant, allowing me room for so little hope, that I did not dare to address to you first the question, on which the happiness of my life depends. I feel only too sensitively that here I needed an intercessor."

"I would not willingly hurt you feelings, Victor, certainly not," Maia assured him, and with her old childlike cordiality she held out her hand to him, which he firmly clasped in his own.

"You have given me pain enough by that constantly kept-up cold reserve of yours," said he, reproachfully. "Oh! from the hour when I found that little elf in the cottage in the woods, from the moment when the sweet little face of my former playmate emerged from the gray hood that had concealed it, I knew where centered the happiness of my life. May I speak now, at last? Maia, I love you beyond everything; I cannot live without you!"

These were no glowing, impassioned words of love, such as the young girl had once listened to from the lips of another, but they expressed warm, fervent devotion, and Maia would have been no true woman had she remained indifferent, in presence of this constant, true love.

"You will have it so--then take me?" said she in a low tone. "I have cared for you since we were children."

With an exclamation of joy, Victor clasped her to his heart, to the admiration of Puck, who stared at them both, and evidently could not exactly understand the situation.

The engagement, which, was now announced to her father, as may well be understood, so engrossed the minds of all the inmates of the Manor-house, that they no longer thought of keeping a lookout for the carriage, that could now be espied making its way along the wooded heights. The road led for some distance over this plateau, ere it dipped into the valley. There, in the midst of green, fir-clad hills, was situated that mighty hive of industry, Odenburg. The rolling-mills had long since arisen from their ashes, more capacious in extent than before, and new establishments of a different kind had been associated with them, for there was no standstill in the Dernburg works, and they expanded with every year.

The bride, in a simple, gray traveling-suit, leaned out of the open carriage, eager to catch a glimpse of the Manor-house, now visible behind the trees of the park. Cecilia had always been a beautiful girl, but the woman was, if possible, more beautiful, in the full development of that peculiar charm, which had, at all times, won her affection. There could, indeed, be no greater

contrast than was presented by this refined, still rather foreigner-like being and the husband who sat by her side. This was the same old Egbert Runeck, so far as his somewhat rough, forceful personality was concerned, impressing one as ready to defy the whole world and fight the battle through. Only the gray eyes beneath that broad, massive brow had a different expression from what they had had before; they diffused a warm, bright radiance, and it was not hard to guess whence this light emanated.

"There lies our home, Cecilia!" said Runeck, while he pointed down into the valley. "You, indeed, have never liked Odensburg--will you be able, think you, to endure permanent residence there?"

"If I am with you!--How can you ask that question again?" replied his young wife, somewhat reproachfully.

"Yes, with me, your headstrong Egbert, who will not always have time to devote even to you, when he once again becomes immersed in work. On our wedding-trip I have belonged to you alone: then we could dream our fairy-dreams; but now come earnest workdays with their duties and cares, and often enough will they call me from your side. Will you understand how that is, Cecilia? Hitherto you have stood so far aloof from all this."

He looked upon his wife with a certain uneasiness, but the response that he met in her eyes was cheerful and reassuring.

"Well, then, I must learn to take part in your cares and duties. Will you teach me how, Egbert? But what do you know of fairy-dreams, you man of stern reality, that you are? Where did you learn about them?"

Runeck's eye swept over the mountain range until it rested upon the distant, solitary peak, from the summit of which, glittering in sunlight, greeted them a cross--the symbol of the Whitestone.

"Up there," said he, softly, "when the forest made music around us and the voice of the bells came up from below. Oh, that was a trying hour--a horrible one for you, my poor wife. Pitilessly I had to arouse you, acquainting you with the unreality of your future, and crumbling into ruins the gay, glittering world, in which you had hitherto lived--that I might point out to you the precipice on which you stood."

"Find no fault with that hour!" pleaded Cecilia, nestling up to his side. "Then I awoke, there I learned to see and to think. Do you know, Egbert," and a playful smile took the place of the gravity that had rested upon her features, "I never think of it without being reminded of the old legend of the caper-spurge, that cleaves the rock where buried treasures lie? At that time, you indeed, without any compassion at all, called out to me: 'The deep is empty and dead, and there are no longer any such things as hidden treasures!' And now----"

"Now, I have myself turned out to be a digger after buried treasures!" chimed in Egbert, while he stooped down and gazed into the dark, lustrous eyes of his young wife. "You are right, that was the hour in which I won you, in spite of everything.

"I lifted out of night and gloom
That wondrous golden shrine,
And all its sparkling treasures
And all its gold are mine!"

It was a few hours later; the reception and welcome to the Manor-house were over, and while Cecilia was still in the parlor chatting with Maia and Count Eckardstein, Dernburg went with Runeck out upon the terrace.

"It was high time for you to come, Egbert," said he. "The director in his present weak state of health is no longer equal to the duties of his office: months ago, he wanted to send in his resignation, and was only induced to remain until you should arrive and undertake the superintendence of the works. I am also very glad to have Cecilia in the house again, for I am not to keep Maia much longer. Victor is already talking of the wedding, being quite carried away with his happiness."

"But Maia herself does not look as happy as I should like to see her, under the circumstances. Did she give her consent gladly?"

"No, but of her own free will. And now that her promise has once been given, it will chase away the dark shadow that Oscar's love and death have cast over her life. Now a duty stands between her and that memory, she will overcome it."

"And Count Victor will make this easy for her," suggested Egbert. "Of that I am convinced; his is no nature on a grand scale like"--Dernburg cast a side-glance at his adopted son--"like another person of my acquaintance, whom I had selected for Maia at one time, but that other one, alas! would always go his own way and follow his own hard head, and thus he has done in love as in all things else."

"Truly you have so far had but little satisfaction in your son," said Egbert, with difficulty

controlling his deep emotion--"he even stood in open opposition to you; but, believe me, father, I have been the severest sufferer from this cause, and now all my powers belong to you and your Odensburg."

"We can make good use of them," declared Dernburg. "At times I feel my age and the decline of strength--who knows how long it will last? Meanwhile, you stand by my side, and I think, upon the ground of common work, we shall find the accommodation for all that still divides us the one from the other. We talked over this, you remember, when you returned from America."

Fully and clearly Egbert's eye met that of the speaker. "Yes, and I recognized that I owed it to you to tell the entire truth, when you summoned me to the guidance of your works. I have forever renounced my former party, but not that which is great and true in that movement. This I cleave to still. This I shall stand up for and contend for so long as life shall last."

"I know it," said Dernburg, offering him his hand. "But I too have learned something during these days of trial. I am no longer the old blockhead who supposed that, alone, he could stem the tide of a new era. I cannot, indeed, welcome this new era with open arms; for the period of a whole generation I have stood on different ground and cannot be untrue to myself, but I can summon to my side a young, fresh force that is in sympathy with the present. When, hereafter, I give Odensburg entirely into your hands, then keep it up with the times, Egbert. I shall not oppose it! Until then, though, let there be for us all a clear track!"

FOOTNOTE:

[Footnote 1](#): Caper-spurge.

THE END.

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK "CLEAR THE TRACK!" A STORY OF TO-DAY

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