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COUNTESS ERIKA'S

APPRENTICESHIP

TRANSLATED FROM THE GERMAN

OF

OSSIP SCHUBIN

AUTHOR OF "O THOU, MY AUSTRIA!" ETC.

BY

MRS. A. L. WISTER

PHILADELPHIA
J. B. LIPPINCOTT COMPANY
1891

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PREFACE BY THE AUTHOR.

A friend returning from a stroll round the globe brought back an odd volume of my work picked up in San Francisco, translated without my leave, but proving by its very existence that

the American reading world take a certain interest in my show and its puppets.

Though in a certain sense these unauthorized editions are a picking of the author's pocket, yet I must confess that I felt rather flattered.

Every one possessing any feeling for modernism must highly prize what American art and American literature have done and are doing for the directness, vividness, and intensity of presentation to our eyes or our imagination either of outward objects or the silent workings of character and inner sensations.

The rapidity and intensity of picturing frequently remind us of an electric shock.

We Old World folk take life, to a certain degree, more at our leisure, but nevertheless every real artist follows the great direction that has seized all our contemporary being.

Directness of truth, vividness and intensity of presentation, exact rendering of impression, are the means by which we seek to produce life; life itself is the object, but I am afraid that to the end the life-giving spark will defy analysis.

Let me hope that the figures whose woes and weal my reader will follow through these pages may be half as alive to him as they have been to me; and let me hope, likewise, that when he closes the volume we may have become fast friends.

I cannot let this opportunity pass without thanking Mrs. Wister most heartily for her faithful and picturesque rendering of my story.

What a rare delight it is to an author to find himself so admirably rendered and so perfectly understood only those can feel that have undergone the acute misery of seeing their every thought mangled, their every sentence massacred, as common translations will mangle and massacre word and thought.

Therefore let every writer thank Providence, if he find an artist like Mrs. Wister willing to put herself to the trouble of following his intentions, and of clothing his ideas in so brilliant a garb.

It is only natural, therefore, that, having been lucky enough to find so rare a translator, I should authorize the translation to the absolute exclusion of any other.

So, hoping it may find favour in the eyes of my transatlantic readers, I should like to shake hands with them at parting and say good-bye with the Old World saw, "*Auf Wiedersehen*."

OSSIP SCHUBIN.

COUNTESS ERIKA'S

APPRENTICESHIP.

CHAPTER I.

Baron von Strachinsky reclined upon a lounge in his smoking-room, recovering from the last pecuniary calamity which he had brought upon himself. The fact was, he had built a sugar-factory in a tract of country where the nearest approach to a sugar-beet that could be found was a carrot on a manure-heap, and his enterprise had been followed by the natural result.

He bore his misfortune with exemplary fortitude, and beguiled the time with a sentimental novel upon the cover of which was portrayed a lady wringing her hands in presence of a military man drinking champagne. At times he wept over this fiction, at others he dozed over it and was

at peace.

This he called submitting with dignity to the mysterious decrees of destiny, and he looked upon himself as a martyr.

His wife was not at home. Whilst he reposed thus in melancholy self-admiration, she was devoting herself to the humiliating occupation of visiting in turn one and another of her wealthy relatives, begging of them the loan of funds necessary for the furtherance of her husband's brilliant scheme.

"It is very sad, but 'tis the fault of circumstances," sighed the Baron when his thoughts wandered from his book to his absent wife, and for a moment he would cover his eyes with his hand.

It was near the end of August, and the asters were beginning to bloom. Cheerful industry reigned throughout the village. The Baron indeed complained of the failure of the harvest, but this he did of every harvest the proceeds of which were insufficient to cover the interest of his numerous debts: the peasantry, who by no means exacted so high a rate of profit from their meadows and pasture-lands, were happy and content, and the stubble-fields were already dotted with hayricks.

Outside in the garden a little girl in a worn and faded frock was playing funeral: she was interring her canary, which she had found dead in its cage. She was very sad: the bird had been her best friend. No one paid her any attention. Her mother was away, and the Englishwoman whose duty it was to superintend her education was just now occupied in company with the bailiff, an ambitious young man desirous of improving his knowledge of languages, in studying the working of a new mowing-machine. From time to time the child glanced through the open door of the principal entrance to the castle into a rather bare hall, its floor paved with red tiles and its high vaulted walls whitewashed and adorned with stags' horns of all sizes. The Baron von Strachinsky had bought these last in one lot at an auction, but he had long cherished the conviction that they all came from his forest. He had a decided taste for fine, high-sounding expressions, always designating his wood as his 'forest,' his estate as his 'domain,' and his garden as his 'park.'

A charwoman with a flat, red, perspiring face, and a knot of thin bristling hair at the back of her head, from which her yellow cotton kerchief had slipped down upon her neck, was shuffling upon hands and knees, her high kilted skirts leaving her red legs quite bare, over the tiles of the hall, rubbing away at the dirt and footmarks with a wisp of straw, while the steam of hot soapy water rose from the wooden bucket beside her.

The little girl outside had just planted a row of pink asters upon the grave, which she had dug with a pewter spoon, and had filled up duly, when the scratching of the wisp of straw suddenly ceased.

A young fellow was standing in the hall,--very young, scarcely sixteen, and with a portfolio under his arm. His garb was that of a journeyman mechanic, but his bearing had in it something of distinction, and his face was delicately modelled, very pale, with large dark eyes, almost black, gleaming below the brown curls of his hair. The same class of countenance is frequently seen among the Neapolitan boys who sell Seville oranges in Rome; but such eyes as this lad had are seen at most only two or three times in a lifetime.

The child in the garden looked with evident satisfaction at the young fellow. Apparently he had come into the castle through the back entrance,--the one used by servants and beggars.

The charwoman wiped her red hands upon her apron and knocked at one of the doors opening into the hall. She was a new-comer, and did not know that the Baron von Strachinsky was never disturbed upon any ordinary pretext.

She knocked several times. At last a sleepy, ill-humoured voice said, "What is it?"

"Your Grace, a young gentleman: he wants to speak to your Grace."

With eyes but half open, and the pattern of the embroidered cushion upon which he had been sleeping stamped upon his cheek, the Baron von Strachinsky came out into the hall.

He was of middle height; his face had once been handsome, but was now red and bloated with excessive good living; he was slightly bald, and wore thick brown side-whiskers. His dress was a combination of slovenliness and foppery. He wore scarlet Turkish slippers, trodden down at heel, gray trousers, and a soiled dark-blue smoking-jacket with red facings and buttons.

"What do you want?" he roared, in a rage at being disturbed for so slight a cause.

The young fellow shrank from him, murmuring in a hoarse, tremulous voice, the voice of a very young man growing fast and but scantily nourished, "I am on my way home."

"What's that to me?" Strachinsky thundered, not without some excuse for his indignation.

The youth flushed scarlet. Shyly and awkwardly he held out his portfolio to the sleepy Baron. Evidently it contained drawings, which he would like to sell but had not the courage to show.

"Give him an alms!" Herr von Strachinsky shouted to the cook, who, hearing the noise, had hurried into the hall; then, turning to the scrubbing-woman, who was standing beside her steaming bucket, her toothless jaws wide open in dismay, he went on: "If you ever again dare for the sake of a wretched vagabond of a house-painter's apprentice to deprive me of the few moments of repose which I contrive to snatch from my wretched and tormented existence, I'll dismiss you on the spot!" With which he retired to his room, banging to the door behind him.

The cook offered the lad two kreutzers. His hand--a long, slender, boyish hand, almost transparent--shook, as he angrily threw the money upon the floor and departed.

The little girl in the garden had been watching the scene attentively. Her delicate frame trembled with indignation, as she rose, and, with arms hanging at her sides and small fists clinched in a somewhat dramatic attitude, fixed her eyes upon the door behind which the Baron had disappeared. She had very bright eyes for a child of nine years, and a very penetrating glance, a glance by no means friendly to the Baron. Thus she stood for a minute gazing at the door, then put her arms akimbo, frowned, and reflected. Before long she shrugged her shoulders with an air of precocious intelligence, deserted the newly-made grave, and hurried into the house, and to the pantry.

The door was open. She looked about her. By strict orders of the Baron, in his wife's absence all remains of provisions were hoarded in the pantry, although they were seldom of any use. As a consequence of this sordid housekeeping the child found a great store of dishes and bowls filled with scraps of meat and fish, stale cakes, and fermenting stewed apricots. It took her some time to discover what satisfied her,--a cold roast pheasant, and some pieces of tempting almond-cake left over from the last meal. These she packed in a basket with a flask of wine that had been opened, a tumbler, knife and fork, and a clean napkin. She decorated the basket with pink asters, and hurried out of the back door, intent upon playing the part of beneficent fairy.

Deep down in her heart there was a vein of romance which contrasted oddly with the keen good sense already gleaming in her bright childish eyes.

She ran until she was quite out of breath, searching vainly for her handsome vagabond. Should she inquire of some one if a young man with a portfolio under his arm had passed along the road? Her heart beat; she felt a little shy. From a distance the warm summer breeze wafted towards her the notes of a foreign air clearly whistled, and she directed her steps towards the spot whence it seemed to proceed.

There! yes, there----

Beside the road rippled a little brook on its way to the rushing stream beyond the village, a brook so narrow that a twelve-year-old school-boy could easily have jumped across it. Nevertheless the Baron von Strachinsky had thought best to span it with a magnificent three-arched stone bridge. In the shade thrown by this monumental structure, for the erection of which the Baron had vainly hoped to be decorated by his sovereign, the lad was crouching. He was even paler than before, and there were traces of tears on his cheeks, but all the same he whistled on with forced gaiety, as one does whistle when one has nothing to eat and hopes to forget his hunger.

The little girl felt like crying. He looked up and directly at her. Overcome by sudden shyness, she stood for a moment as if rooted to the spot; then, awkwardly offering her basket, she stammered, "Will you have it?" When he did not answer she simply set the basket down before him, and in her confusion would have avoided all explanations by running away.

But a warm young hand detained her firmly and kindly. "Did you come from there?" the lad asked, pointing to the castle. "Who sent you?"

His voice was agreeable, and his address that of a well-born youth.

"No one knows that I came," she answered, in confusion, and seeing that he frowned discontentedly at this, she added hastily, by way of excuse, "But if mamma had been at home she certainly would have sent me; she never lets a beggar leave the house without giving him something to eat."

At the word 'beggar' he turned away, whereupon she began to cry loudly, so loudly that he had to laugh. "But what are you crying for?" he asked; and she replied, in desperation, "I am crying because you will not eat anything."

"Indeed! is that all you are crying for?"

"Yes. Oh, do eat something,--do!" she sobbed.

"Well, since it is to gratify you so hugely," he replied, in a bantering tone; "but sit down beside me and help me." He looked full into her eyes with his careless, merry smile, then took her tiny hand in his and pressed his full, warm lips upon it twice.

She was greatly pleased by this courteous homage, and perhaps by the caress, for it was seldom that anything of the kind fell to her share. She had fully decided that the young fellow was no mechanic, but a prince in disguise, and in this exhilarating conviction she sat down upon the grass beside him and unpacked her basket. How he seemed to enjoy its contents, and how white his teeth were! There were also various indications of refinement and good breeding about his manner of eating, which would have given a more experienced observer than the little enthusiast beside him matter for reflection with regard to his rank in life. His portfolio lay beside him. She thrust a slender forefinger between its pasteboard covers tied together with green cotton strings, and whispered, gravely, "May I look into it?"

"If you would like to," he replied.

With great precision, as if the matter in hand were the unveiling of a sacred relic, she untied the strings and opened the portfolio. Her eyes opened wide, and an "Oh!" of enthusiastic admiration escaped her lips. A wiser critic than the little girl of nine would scarcely have accorded the sketches so much approval. They were undoubtedly stiff and unfinished. Nevertheless, no genuine lover of art would have passed them by without notice, for they indicated a high degree of talent. The hand was unskilled, but the lad had eyes to see.

The little girl gazed in rapt admiration. After a while she looked gravely up at her new friend, her compassion converted into awe. "Now I know what you are,--an artist!"

"Do you think so?" the lad rejoined, flattered by the reverential tone in which the word was uttered: meanwhile, he had finished the pheasant, and was considerably less pale than before.

"Can you paint everything you see?" she asked, after a short pause.

"I cannot paint anything," he answered, with a sort of merry discontent which, now that his hunger was satisfied, characterized his every look and movement. "I cannot paint anything," he repeated, with a little nod, "but I try to paint everything that I like."

They looked in each other's eyes, he suppressing a laugh, she in some distress. At last she blurted out, "Do you not like me at all, then?"

"Shall I paint you?"

She nodded.

"What will you give me for it?"

She put her hand in her pocket, and took out a very shabby porte-monnaie, a superannuated possession of Herr von Strachinsky's which he had given her in a moment of unwonted generosity, and in which were five bright silver guilders. "Is that enough?" she asked.

"I will not take money," he replied.

She had been guilty of another stupidity. She was bitterly conscious of it, and so, to justify herself, she put on an air of great wisdom. "You are a very queer artist," she admonished him, "not to take money for your pictures. No wonder you nearly starve."

He took the hand which held the five despised silver coins, and kissed it three times.

"I do take money for my pictures," he declared, "but not from you: I will draw your picture with all my heart."

"For nothing?"

"No: you must give me a kiss for it. Will you?" He watched her without seeming to look at her. Again the insinuating, roguish smile hovered upon his lips,--a charming smile, which he must have inherited from some kind, light-hearted woman.

She was not quite sure of the rectitude of her conduct, her heart throbbed almost as if she were on the verge of some compact with Satan, but finally, "If you will not do it without," she said, with a sigh, plucking at her hands,--very pretty hands, neglected though they were.

He nodded gaily. "All right."

Then he made her sit down on the grass opposite him, unpacked his tin colour-case, fastened a piece of rough gray paper upon the cover of his portfolio, and began.

She sat very still, very grave, her feet stretched out straight in front of her, supporting herself upon both hands. Around them breathed the soft August air, the glowing summer sunshine sparkled on the translucent waters of the little brook above which the stone bridge displayed its pompous proportions, while upon the banks grew hundreds of blue forget-me-nots, and yellow water-lilies bloomed among the trunks of the old willows, which here and there showed gaping wounds in their bark, from which meadow daisies were sprouting and, with the silvery willow leaves, showing softly gray against the green background of the gentle ascent of the pasture-land. The brook murmured dreamily, and from the distance came the rhythmic beat of the

threshers' flails. Steam threshing-machines were not then in general use.

Both were mute,--he in the warmth of his youthful artistic enthusiasm, she with expectation.

Suddenly the shrill tinkle of a bell broke the quiet. "That is the dinner-bell!" the little girl exclaimed, springing up with an impatient shrug. She knew that there could be no more pleasure and liberty for her; she would be missed, looked for, and found.

"I must go home," she cried. "Have you finished it?"

"Very nearly, yes."

She ran and looked over his shoulder, breathless with astonishment at what she saw upon the gray paper,--a little girl in a very short, faded gown, and long red stockings, also much faded, a very slender figure, a little round face, a delicate little nose, two grave bright eyes that looked out into the world with a startled expression, a short upper lip, a round chin, a very fair skin, and shining reddish-brown hair which waved long and silky about the narrow childish shoulders and was tied at the back of the head with a blue ribbon.

He had unfastened the sketch from the portfolio, and she held it in her hands, examining it narrowly. "Is it like?" she asked, and then, looking down at herself, she added, "The gown is like, and the stockings are like, but the face,--is that like?" She looked up at him eagerly.

"I cannot do it any better," he replied, rather ambiguously.

"Oh, you must not be vexed," she made haste to say. "I only wanted to know if--how can I tell--if--well, it looks too pretty to me, this picture of yours."

He gave her a comical side-glance. "Every artist must flatter a little if he wishes to please a lady," was his reply.

"And you give me the picture?" she asked, shyly, after a little pause.

"Why, you ordered it," he replied.

"I--I--thank you," she stammered, then turned away and would have run off.

But he was by no means inclined to let her off so easily. "And my pay?" he cried, catching her in his arms and clasping her so tightly that her little feet were lifted off the daisy-sprinkled turf. "Traitress!" he exclaimed, reproachfully.

She blushed scarlet, although she was but just nine years old; she put her arm around his neck and kissed him directly upon the mouth; his lips were still the lips of a girl. Then she walked away, but she could not hasten from the spot; something seemed to stay her steps. She paused and looked back.

The lad was busied with packing up his small belongings: all the gaiety had vanished from his face, he looked pale and sad again. With her heart swelling with pity, she ran back to him.

"You come for your basket," he said, good-naturedly, holding it out to her.

"No, it isn't that," she replied, shaking her head, as she put down the basket on a willow stump and came close up to him.

In some surprise he smiled down at her. "Something else to ask, my little princess?"

"No,--that is----" She plucked him by the sleeve. "See here," she began, confused and yet coaxingly, "do not be vexed,--only--I thought just now how bad it would be if before you get home you should be treated by somebody else as that man treated you,"--she pointed to the castle,--"and then--and then--oh, I know so well how dreadful it is to have no money. I--please take the guilders: when you are a great artist you can give them back to me." And before he knew what she was doing she had slipped the porte-monnaie into his coat-pocket.

The tears stood in his eyes; he put his arm around her, and looked at her as if to learn her face by heart.

"It might be," he muttered; "perhaps you will bring me luck; I may still come to be something; and if you then should be as dear and pretty as you are now----" He kissed her upon both eyes.

"Rika!" a shrill voice called from a distance.

"Is that your name?" he asked.

"Yes."

"And what is your last name?"

"My step-father's is Strachinsky. I do not know mine."

"Rika!" the shrill tones sounded nearer.

"And what is your name?" she asked him.

Before he could reply, the fluttering skirts of the English governess came in sight: suddenly aroused to a consciousness of her neglected duties, she was looking along the road for her charge.

The little girl clasped her picture close and fled.

When she reached the house she ran up-stairs to put her precious portrait safely away, and then she allowed a clean apron to be put on over her faded frock by the agitated Englishwoman,--whose name was in fact Sophy Lange, and who had been born in Hamburg of honest German parents,--after which she presented herself in the dining-room with an assured air as if unconscious of the slightest wrong-doing.

Her step-father received her with a stern reproof, and instantly inquired where she had been. She replied, curtly, "To the village;" upon which he read her a tremendous lecture upon the enormity of idly wandering about the country, addressing at the same time a few annihilating remarks to the Englishwoman from Hamburg. He had exchanged his bright-blue morning coat for a light summer suit, in which he presented a much better appearance. But he was no more pleasing to his step-daughter in his light-brown costume than in the blue coat with red facings. She paid very little attention to his discourse, but quietly went on eating. Miss Sophy, however, shed tears. The Baron von Strachinsky impressed her greatly; nay, more, she honoured him as a being from a higher sphere. He was popular with women of all ranks, from the lowest to the highest,--why, it would be difficult to tell. He possessed a certain amount of personal magnetism, but it had no effect upon his step-daughter.

They were extraordinarily antipathetic, Strachinsky and his clear-eyed little step-daughter. What she took exception to in him was of so complex and delicate a nature as to defy explanation in words. What annoyed him in her was principally the fact that, in spite of her tender age, she saw through him, was quite free of all illusions with regard to him.

It always increases our regard for our neighbour if he will but view us with flattering eyes. Some few illusions in our behalf we require from those around us; they are absolutely necessary to the pleasure of daily intercourse. But the demands of Herr von Strachinsky in this respect were beyond all reason, while his step-daughter's capacity to comply with them was unusually limited.

Dinner progressed as usual: the gentleman continued to admonish, Miss Sophy to weep, and little Rika to maintain strict silence, until dessert, when Herr von Strachinsky, for whom eating was one of the most important occupations in life, inquired after an almond-cake of which, as he assured the servant, five pieces had been left from breakfast,--yes, five pieces and a little broken one: he had counted them.

The servant repaired to the kitchen for information: the cook could give none, save that she herself had put the cake away in the pantry, whence it had vanished, without a trace, since the morning. Herr von Strachinsky was indignant; he accused every servant in the establishment of the theft, from the foremost of those employed in the house to the lowest stable-boy, and talked of having bars put up at the windows. Little Rika let him give full sweep to his anger; she fairly gloated over his irritation; at last she remarked, indifferently, "What would be the use of bars on the windows, when any one can walk in at the door? It is never locked."

"Silence! what do you know about it?" thundered her step-father.

"Oh, I know all about it," the child quietly replied, "and I know what became of the cake."

"What?"

"I took it. I carried it out to the painter whom you turned out of the house."

Herr von Strachinsky's eyebrows were lifted to a startling extent at this confession. "You--ran--after--that house-painter fellow down the road?" he asked, with a gasp at each word.

"Yes," the child replied, composedly; "and he was not a house-painter fellow, but a young artist, although I should have run after him all the same if he had been a house-painter fellow."

"Indeed! And why?" he asked, with a sneer.

She looked him full in the face. "Why? Because you treated him so badly, and I was sorry for him."

For a moment he was speechless; then he arose, seized the child by the arm, and thrust her out of the door. Without making the least resistance, carelessly humming to herself, she ran up the staircase,--a staircase that turned an abrupt corner and the worn steps of which exhaled an odour of damp decay,--whilst Strachinsky turned to the Englishwoman from Hamburg and

groaned, "My step-daughter is a positive torment. I am firmly persuaded that she will end at the galleys."

The galleys were tolerably far removed from the sphere of the Austrian penal code, but Herr von Strachinsky had a predilection for what was foreign, and had recently read a novel in which the galleys played a prominent part.

Meanwhile, little Erika had betaken herself to the drawing-room, a spacious but by no means gorgeous apartment, the furniture of which consisted principally of bookcases and a piano. She seated herself at this piano, and instantly became absorbed in the study of one of Mozart's sonatas, with which she intended to celebrate her mother's return. She had a decided talent for music; her slender little fingers moved with incredible ease over the keys, and her cheeks, usually rather pale, flushed with enthusiasm. It was going very well; she stretched out her foot to touch the pedal,--an act which in her opinion lent the crowning glory to her musical performance,--when suddenly she became aware of a kind of uproar that seemed to fill the house. Dogs barked, servants hurried to and fro, a carriage drove up and stopped before the castle door. Frau von Strachinsky had returned unexpectedly.

The child hurried down-stairs, just in time to see Strachinsky take his wife from the carriage. They kissed each other like lovers,--which seemed to produce a disagreeable impression upon the little girl; moreover, it occurred to her that she did not know whether she might venture forward under existing circumstances. Then she heard her mother say, "And where is Rika?"

Without awaiting her step-father's reply, she rushed into her mother's arms.

"You look finely, darling," the mother exclaimed, patting her little daughter's cheeks. "Have you been a good girl?"

Rika made no reply. Frau von Strachinsky's face took on a sad, troubled expression. Strachinsky frowned, and shrugged his shoulders. His wife looked from him to the child, who had taken her hand and was about to kiss it. "What has she been doing now?" she asked, turning to her husband.

"Not to speak of her behaviour towards myself,--behaviour that is perfectly unwarrantable,--I repeat, unwarrantable," said Strachinsky,--"not to speak of that, the girl has again so far forgotten herself as----well, I will tell you about it by and by."

"Tell now!" the child exclaimed. "I'd rather you would tell now!"

"Hush, Miss Impertinence!" Strachinsky ordered her; then, turning to his wife, he asked, "Do you bring good news? Is your uncle willing?"

Fran von Strachinsky shook her head sadly. "Unfortunately, no,--not quite," she murmured; "but he was very kind; he was enchanted with Bobby." Bobby was Rika's step-brother, whom the poor mother had carried with her upon her distressing journey, perhaps as some consolation for herself, perhaps to soften the hearts of her relatives. He did, indeed, seem admirably adapted to this latter purpose, for he was a charming little fellow, with a lovely pink-and-white face crowned by brown curls, and plump bare arms. His hands at present were filled with toys, which he carried to his sister to console her, since he instantly perceived that she was in disgrace.

"I cannot understand that," Strachinsky murmured. "I should have credited Uncle Nick with a more generous spirit." And he looked sternly at his wife, as if she were responsible for the ill success of her mission.

She laid her hand gently on his arm and said, "You are an incorrigible idealist, my poor Nello: you judge all men by yourself."

And Strachinsky passed his hand over his eyes, and sighed forth sentimentally, "Yes, I am an idealist, an incorrigible idealist, a perfect Don Quixote."

The rest of the afternoon was passed by the pair in the large drawing-room, trying to obtain some clear understanding of the state of Strachinsky's financial affairs,--a very difficult task.

She, pencil in hand, did the reckoning. He paced the room to and fro with a tragic air, and smoked cigarettes. From time to time he uttered some effective sentence, such as, "I am unfit for this world!" or, "Of course a Marquis Posa like myself!"

She sat quietly contemplating the figures with which the sheet before her was filled. Her face grow sad, while her husband's, on the contrary, brightened. Since he was succeeding in casting all his cares upon her shoulders, he felt quite cheerful.

"I never had the least idea of this ten thousand guilders which you tell me you owe," the tortured woman exclaimed, in a sudden access of anger.

"No?" her husband rejoined, with easy assurance. "I surely wrote you about it; or could the trifle have slipped my memory? Yes, now I remember you were with the children at Johannisbad.

Löwy came and pestered me with its being such a splendid chance,--told me I had no right to hold back; and so I bought a hundred shares of Schönfeld.' Good heavens! what do I understand of business?--how is such knowledge possible for a gentleman? In the army one never learns anything of the kind, and what can one do save follow advice? I trust others far too readily,--you have always told me so; it is the natural result of the magnanimity of my nature. I blame myself for it. I am an Egmont,--a perfect Egmont. Poor Egmont! There is nothing left for me but to sigh with him, 'Ah, Orange! Orange!'"

Strachinsky imagined that this confession, uttered with an indescribably tragic emphasis, would quite reconcile his wife to his unfortunate speculation. But, to his great surprise, the anticipated result did not ensue. Frau von Strachinsky pushed her thick dark hair back from her temples, and exclaimed, "I cannot understand you; you promised me so faithfully not to speculate in stocks again."

"But, my dear Emma, the opportunity seemed to me so brilliant a one, that I should have thought myself a very scoundrel not to try at least----"

"And you see the result."

"When a man acts conscientiously and with the best intentions, he should not be reproached, even although his efforts result in failure," he said, pompously. "No, my dear Emma, not a word; do not speak now: you will only be sorry for it by and by."

But Emma Strachinsky was not on this occasion to be thus silenced: she was indignant, and almost in despair. "You have always acted with the 'best intentions'!" she exclaimed, hoarse with agitation, "and the result of your good intentions will be to beggar my children. Can you take it ill if I withhold from you my few farthings, that there may be some provision for the children in the future?"

Jagello von Strachinsky looked her over from head to foot. "*Your* few farthings!" he said, with annihilating severity. "What indelicacy! Well, I shall steer my course accordingly. Do as you choose in future. I have nothing more to say." And, with head haughtily erect, cavalier and martyr every inch of him, he stalked from the room.

She looked after him: she had gone too far; again her impulsiveness had led her astray. Her heart throbbed; she felt sore with agitation, shame, and remorse.

When Erika, towards evening, was playing hide-and-seek with her little brother in the garden, she saw her mother and her step-father strolling affectionately along the gravel path between the hawthorn bushes. He was already rather bald; his limbs were loosely knit; he wore full whiskers, and there was a languishing glance in his eyes, but he was still handsome, in spite of a dissipated air; she was tall, slender, and erect, with large dark eyes, and a pale, noble countenance, that could never, however, have been beautiful. They walked close together, and to a casual observer presented an ideal picture of happy wedded life. And yet when one observed more narrowly--his arm was thrown around her shoulder, and he leaned upon her instead of supporting her; the swing of his heavy frame, the languishing, sentimental expression of his face, everything about him, bespoke a self-satisfied, luxurious temperament; while she----in her eyes there was restless anxiety, and her figure looked as though it were slowly being bowed to the ground by a burden which she was either unable or afraid to shake off.

She walked with a patiently regular step beneath her heavy load. Suddenly she seemed uneasy: she shivered.

"What is it, darling?" Strachinsky asked her, clinging still closer to her.

"Nothing," she murmured, "nothing," and walked on.

They were passing the spot where the little brother and sister were playing, and in the gathering twilight Emma Strachinsky became aware of a pair of clear dark-brown childish eyes that seemed to ask, "How can she love that man?"

Those childish eyes were positively uncanny!

The child's dislike dated from far in the past; it was in fact the first clearly formulated emotion of her little heart. During the first years of her second marriage the mother, prompted by an exaggerated tenderness, had concealed from her little daughter as long as possible the fact that Strachinsky was not her own father: the child had learned the truth by accident. When she rushed to her mother to have what she had heard confirmed, she was received with the tenderest caresses, as though she were to be consoled for a great grief, while she was entreated not to be sad, and was told that "'papa' was far too good and kind to make any difference between herself and his own children, that he loved her dearly," etc.

The mother's caresses were highly prized by the child, all the more that they were rather rare, but on this occasion she could not even seem to enjoy them, since she could not endure to be pitied and soothed for what brought her in reality intense relief.

Her mother perceived this, and it angered her, although at the same time the child's evident though silent dislike made a deep impression upon her. Perhaps the consciousness of its existence in so frank and childish a mind first gave occasion to distrust of the terrible infatuation to which the gifted woman's entire existence had fallen a sacrifice.

Frau von Strachinsky was wont to go herself every evening to see that all was as it should be in the large airy apartment where both the children slept. She hovered noiselessly from one bed to the other, signing the cross upon the brow of each,--an old-fashioned custom to which she still clung although she had long since adopted very philosophical views with regard to religion,--and giving each sleeping child a tender good-night kiss.

The evening after her return she went to the nursery at the usual hour, but lingered only by the crib of the sleeping boy, passing her daughter's bed with averted face. Rika sat up and looked after her; her mother had reached the door without once looking back. This the child could not endure. She sprang out of bed, ran to her mother, and seized her by her skirt. "Mother! mother!" she cried, in a frenzy, "you will not go without bidding me good-night?"

"Let go of my gown," Frau von Strachinsky replied, in a cold voice, which nevertheless trembled with emotion.

"But what have I done, mother?" the child cried, clinging to her passionately.

"Can you ask?" her mother rejoined, sternly.

"Why should I not ask? How should I know what he has told you? I was not by when he accused me."

"Erika! is that the way to speak of your father?" her mother said, angrily.

The little girl frowned. "He is not my father," she declared, defiantly.

Frau von Strachinsky sighed. "Your ingratitude is shocking," she exclaimed, and then, controlling herself with an effort, she added, "But that I cannot alter: you are an unnatural, hard-hearted, stubborn child. I cannot soften your heart, but I can insist that you conduct yourself with propriety, and I forbid you once for all to run after vagabonds in the street. And now go to bed."

"I will not go to bed until you bid me good-night!" cried the child. She stood there with naked little feet, in her white night-gown, over which her long reddish-brown hair hung down. "And I was not so naughty as you think. You ought not to condemn me without giving me time to defend myself."

The child was so desperately reasonable, her mother could not think her wrong, in spite of her momentary anger. She paused. An idea evidently occurred to the little girl. "Only wait one minute!" she exclaimed, as she flew across the room to a drawer where she kept her toys, and, returning with her *protégé's* water-colour sketch, held it up triumphantly before her mother's eyes. "Look at that!" she cried.

Involuntarily Emma looked. "Where did that come from?" she exclaimed, forgetting her vexation in freshly-aroused interest.

"Do you know who it is?" asked Erika, stretching her slender neck out of the embroidered ruffle of her night-gown.

"Of course; it is your picture. It is charming. Who did it?"

"The vagabond whom I ran after, the house-painter fellow," Erika replied. "At least you can see he was not *that*, but a young artist."

Her mother was silent.

"Ah, if you had only been at home!" the child's bare feet were growing colder, and her cheeks hotter with excitement, "you would have done just as I did. If you had only seen him! He was very handsome, and so pale and thin and weary with hunger,--why, *I* could have knocked him down,--and he never begged,--he was too proud,--only held out the portfolio to papa, and his hand trembled----" Suddenly the excitable temperament which the girl had inherited from her mother asserted itself, and she began to sob, her whole childish frame quivering with emotion. "And papa turned him out of doors, and told the cook--to give--to give him two kreutzers. He threw them away--and then--then I ran after him!"

Frau von Strachinsky had grown very pale; the child's agitated story had evidently made an impression upon her, but she did her best to preserve a severe demeanour. "But it is very improper to run after strangers in the street; you are too old."

Erika hung her head, ashamed. "But I should not have done it if papa had not abused him," she declared, by way of excuse. "I did it out of pity for him."

"Pity is a very poor counsellor." Her mother said these words with an emphasis which Erika never forgot, and which was to echo in her soul years afterwards. Then she extricated herself from the child's embrace and left the room, closing the door behind her.

A few minutes afterwards she reopened the door. Little Erika was still standing where she had left her.

"Go to bed," said her mother, in a far more gentle tone, stooping down to kiss her, "and be a better girl another time."

The child clasped her slender little arms tightly about her mother's neck in a strangling embrace, crying, "Oh, mother, mother, you do love me still?" The pale woman did not answer the question, save by a kiss; she waited until the little girl had crept back to bed, and then tucked in the coverlet about her shoulders, and once more left the room.

Erika, precocious child that she was, was a prey to emotions of a very mingled character. She had won a great victory over her step-father,--of this she was well aware,--but then she had grieved her mother sorely. All at once she was seized with profound remorse in recalling to-day's stroke of genius. Beneath her mother's severity she had been sure of having right on her side; now a great uncertainty possessed her. "It is very improper to run after strangers in the street; you are too old," she repeated, meekly, and she grew hot. "What would my mother think if she knew that I had kissed him?"

In the midst of her distress she was overpowered by intense fatigue: her eyelids drooped above her eyes, and with her nightly prayer still on her lips she fell asleep.

Emma von Strachinsky did not sleep; she sat in the bare room adjoining the nursery, the room where she taught Erika her lessons. She wrote two very difficult letters to her husband's creditors, and then proceeded to sew upon a gown for her daughter. She was proud of the child's beauty as only the mother can be who has all her life long been conscious of being obliged to forego the gift of beauty for herself. She loved her daughter idolatrously,--the daughter whom she often treated with a severity verging upon injustice, and whom she sometimes avoided for days because the glance of those clear eyes troubled her.

The windows of the room were open, and looked out upon the road. The fragrance of ripened grain was wafted in from the earth outside, resting from its summer fruitfulness and saturated with the August sunshine. A song floated up through the silent night: the reapers were working by moonlight. The low murmur of the brook accompanied the song, and now and then could be heard the soft swish of the grain falling beneath the scythe. A cricket chirped.

Emma dropped her hands in her lap and gazed into vacancy.

Suddenly she started; a step approached the door of the room, and Strachinsky, smiling sentimentally, entered. "Emma," he said, tenderly, "have you written to Franks and Ziegler?"

"Yes," she replied, and her voice sounded hoarse. "There lie the letters. Read them, and see if they are what you wish."

"Not at all," her husband exclaimed, gaily. "I have implicit confidence in your tact. H'm! the perusal of such letters is a sorry amusement."

"Do you suppose that it was a pleasure to write them?" Emma asked, with some bitterness.

Strachinsky immediately assumed an injured air. "You are irritable again. One cannot venture upon the slightest jest with you. Do you suppose that I enjoy being forced to ask you to write the letters? Good heavens! it is hard enough, but--circumstances will have it so." He passed his hand over his eyes, and stroked his whiskers with an air of great dignity.

She was silent. He watched her for a while, and then said, "That eternal sewing is very bad for you. Come to bed."

"I cannot. I am not sleepy," she replied, plying her needle; "and, moreover, I must finish this frock; let me go on with it." She bent over her work with the air of one determined to complete a task.

Strachinsky stood beside her for a while longer, hesitating and uncertain: he picked up each small article upon the table, looked at it and laid it down again after the fashion of a man who does not know what to do with himself, then he sighed profoundly, yawned, sighed again, and without another word left the room with heavy, lagging footsteps.

When he was gone she laid aside her sewing, and went to the open window to breathe the fresh air. The bluish moonlight shone full upon the whitewashed walls of the peasants' cots crowned with their dark clumsy thatch; in the distance twinkled the little stream winding its plashing way directly across the village towards the river, its banks bordered with curiously-distorted willows that looked like crouching lurking gnomes, and spanned by the huge useless

bridge. Bridge, willows, and cots all threw pitch-black shadows out into the glaring splendour of the moonlit night, which was absolutely free from mist and damp. Beyond the village stretched fields of grain and stubble in endless perspective, a surface of tarnished dull gold.

The song was still informing the silence.

At last it ceased, and shortly afterwards heavy, regular steps were heard passing along the road. The reapers were going home. They passed by Emma's windows, a little dark gray crowd of men; the scythes over their shoulders glimmered in the moonlight; then came a couple of women, bowed and weary, almost dropping asleep as they walked; and last of all the overseer, a young fellow whose hand clasped that of a girl at his side. How he bent over her! A low tender whispering sound reached Emma's ears through the dry August air which the night had scarcely cooled. She turned away, frowning. "How happy they look! and why?" she murmured to herself. Suddenly she smiled bitterly. Had she any right to sneer thus at others?--she? Surely if ever a woman lived who had believed in love and had married for love, she was that woman.

And whom had she loved? A poor weakling, who had never been worthy to unloose the latchet of her shoe!

Not only little precocious Erika, every sensible human being who had ever come in contact with the married pair had asked how such a union had been possible. And yet it was so simple a story,--so simple and commonplace,--the story of a woman lacking beauty, but gifted, enthusiastic, prone to romantic exaggeration, whose longing for affection had wrought her ruin.

Her parents belonged to the most ancient if not the most illustrious of the native Bohemian nobility; he was of doubtful descent. She had always been wealthy; he possessed nothing save a scheming brain and a soaring self-conceit that bore him triumphantly aloft through all the annoyances of life.

He was not entirely without talent, had had a good education, and was, previous to his marriage with Emma Lenzdorff, neither idle nor inactive, but possessed of a certain desire for culture, the secret springs of which, however, were to be found in an eager social ambition. At eighteen he entered the army: too poor to join the cavalry, and too arrogant to content himself among the infantry, he joined a Jäger corps. He had risen to the rank of captain when he was wounded in the Schleswig-Holstein campaign. He made his wife's acquaintance in a private hospital in Berlin, which she had arranged in her own house for the martyrs of the aforesaid campaign.

She was very young, very enthusiastic, and a widow,--widow of a cold, unloved northern German whom in accordance with family arrangements she had married while she was yet only a visionary child. The memory of her formal marriage inspired her with horror.

Before meeting Strachinsky she had given scope to her romantic tendencies by all sorts of exaggerated charitable schemes, and by a fanatical devotion to art and poetry. She had long been convinced that her thirst for affection could never be satisfied. No one had ever shown her any passionate devotion, and, conscious of her lack of beauty, she had sadly resigned herself to swell the ranks of those women whom reason might prompt a suitor to woo, but who could never hope to be wooed in defiance of reason.

The Pole had an easy task. That he was handsome even his enemies could not deny. And he knew how to make the most of his personal advantages: a century earlier he might have been taken for a Poniatowski, with a direct claim to the throne of Poland. His uniform was very becoming, and a wounded soldier is always interesting. As soon as he divined the young widow's weakness he wooed her with verses,--with passionate declarations of love.

Poor Emma! Her thirsty heart thrilled with the sudden bursting into bloom of its spring so long delayed! Her parents, who might have warned her of what she was bringing upon herself, were dead; she paid no heed to her mother-in-law, who strenuously opposed her second marriage. When Emma, with burning cheeks, and trembling to her finger-tips with emotion, repeated to her the Pole's exaggerated expressions of devotion, the elder woman rejoined, coldly, "And you believe the coxcomb?"

The words were to Emma like the sting from a whip-lash. "And why should I not believe him?" she asked, sharply. "Because, perhaps, you think me incapable of inspiring a man with affection?"

"Nonsense!" replied the sensible mother-in-law. "You could inspire affection in any honest man with a heart in his bosom, but not in that shallow Pole, that second-rate dandy."

"Perhaps you think him an adventurer, who wooes me for the sake of my money?" Emma exclaimed, indignantly.

"No, I think him a superficial man who, flattered by having made an impression upon a woman of rank, is trying to better his condition. Adventurer! Nonsense! He has not wit enough. An opportunity offers itself, and he embraces it: *voilà tout*. He is not to blame, but his suit is unworthy of you, and a marriage with him would be a misfortune for you, apart from the fact that

you would disgrace your family by it."

When a patient is to be persuaded to take a dose of medicine it ought not to be offered him in an unattractive shape.

The old lady's representations were correct, but they were humiliating. Emma turned away, stubborn and indignant, and a month afterwards married Strachinsky and parted from her mother-in-law forever.

Eight years had passed since then. First came a few months during which Emma revelled in the sensation of loving and being loved, and then--well, the bliss was still there, but a slight shadow had fallen upon it, dimming it, chilling it, a gnawing uneasiness, in the midst of which memory would suddenly suggest the sensible mother-in-law's unsparing predictions.

His marriage put an end to all exertion on Strachinsky's part: it had at a single stroke, as it were, lifted him so far above all for which his ambition had thirsted that he had nothing left to desire, save to enjoy life in distinguished society as far as was possible. With his wife's money he purchased an estate in Bohemia where the soil was the poorest, so great in extent that it made a show in the map of the country, and developed a brilliant talent for hospitality: all the land-owners in the vicinity, all the cavalry-officers from the nearest garrison, were habitués of Luzano, as the estate was called. With his wife's unceasing attentions Strachinsky's self-importance increased, and his regard for her declined. She existed simply to insure his comfort,--for nothing else. The household was turned topsy-turvy when the master's guests appeared, whether invited or unannounced. Strachinsky entertained them with exquisite suppers, at which champagne flowed freely, but at which his wife did not appear. After supper cards were produced, and it was frequently four in the morning before the gentlemen were heard driving away from the castle; sometimes they remained until the next night.

But the day came when Luzano ceased to be a branch of the military casino at K----. The life there suddenly became very quiet, and various disagreeable facts came to light which had been disregarded in the whirl of gaiety. Then first little Erika saw her mother, pencil in hand, patiently adding up her husband's debts, while Strachinsky, his hands clasped behind him, and a cigarette between his teeth, paced the room, dictating amounts to her.

In addition to losses at play and in unfortunate speculations, he had magnanimously put his name to various notes of his distinguished friends.

Emma did not even frown, but exerted herself in every way,--sold her trinkets and almost every valuable piece of furniture, that her husband might meet his liabilities, treating him all the while with the forbearance traditional in model wives, in order to save him from any depressing consciousness of his position.

Was he conscious of it? If he were, he was entirely successful in concealing any consequent depression. The morning after the first painful revelation of his indebtedness, he skipped with the gayest air imaginable into the dining-room, where the family were already assembled at the breakfast-table, and exhorted all present to economize, and especially not to put too much butter on their bread, afterwards discoursing wittily upon 'poverty and magnanimity.'

To lighten his burden,--perhaps to disguise his insensibility from her own heart,--Emma persuaded him that his course had been the result solely of warm-hearted imprudence and an exaggerated nobility of character.

This view of the case was eagerly adopted by his vanity. He paraded his martyr's nimbus, and with a self-satisfied sigh styled himself a Don Quixote.

Nothing could really be farther from Don Quixote's idealistic and unselfish craze than his utter egotism, in its thin veil of sentimentality. And as for his martyrdom, it was easily seen through. None of the misfortunes brought upon himself by himself did he ever allow to affect his existence. He possessed a kind of cunning intelligence that never forsook him, and that enabled him in the midst of ruin to insure his own personal ease.

But how could Emma have borne at that comparatively early period to see him as he really was? She seized upon every excuse for him; she patched up her damaged illusions; she would support, restrain him, develop all that was really noble in him.

In her jealous ambition to make his home so delightful that he would never look for entertainment elsewhere, she exerted herself to the utmost, pandered to his love of eating, even cooked herself when they were no longer able to bear the expense of such a cook as he had been accustomed to, tried to conform her intellectual interests to his lack of any such,--in short, did everything to strengthen the tie between herself and him. She succeeded completely: she made the tie so strong that no loosening of it was possible.

She tried to withdraw him from all outside influences, to win him wholly to herself, and she succeeded; her presence, her tenderness, became an absolute necessity of existence to him; he had never so adored her even during their honeymoon.

Good heavens! now she would have given everything in the world for any breach between

them that could be widened beyond all possibility of healing. It was too late; she must drag on the burden with which she had laden herself; it was her duty; she could not sink beneath it; she had no right to.

But in spite of all her efforts her nerves at length gave way. She became irritable. At times she grieved over the change which she saw in him; at other times the thought would suggest itself that this change was merely superficial, that he had never really been any other than at present. Then her blood would seem to run cold; she could have screamed. No, no, she would not see!

There is nothing sadder in this world than the dutiful, tortured life of a woman with a husband whom she has ceased to love.

CHAPTER II.

Full four years had passed by since Erika had kissed the young artist. She recalled the little adventure, which had taken upon itself quite magnificent dimensions in her lively imagination, with secret delight and a vague sense of shame.

Emma was bearing her cross as best she might, but at every step she well-nigh fell exhausted. Her wretchedness not unfrequently found vent in angry words, for which she was sure to repent and apologize.

Her relation with her daughter, now a tall, slender, and unusually clever girl of fourteen, suffered from her general wretchedness. She still loved the child tenderly, but the girl's clear, observant gaze pained her. It had grown much clearer and more penetrating with years.

A certain weight, an oppression, seemed to brood over Luzano like the sense of an impending catastrophe.

The only ray of sunshine in the unhappy wife's gloomy lot was her little son. Out of several children by her second marriage he alone had survived. He was strong and healthy, the darling of all, his sister's idol. Then--he had hardly passed his seventh birthday when he too died.

The little fellow had sickened in the midst of his play, had run to his sister and had fallen asleep with his head in her lap. The girl sat still, not to disturb him, and enjoined silence upon Miss Sophy, who was in the room. The twilight stole gray and vague in upon the bare apartment. The maid-servant--there were no longer any men-servants at Luzano--brought in a lamp, and a plate of rosy-cheeked apples for the children's supper. The boy opened his eyes, but closed them again with a low moan and turned his head away from the light.

His mother appeared, saw at a glance how matters stood, and put the little fellow to bed. She did not come down to supper, and when Erika went, as was her wont, to say good-night to her brother, she was not allowed to enter his room. The next morning the doctor was sent for.

Whilst he was in the sick-room Erika was taking her daily lesson in English with Miss Sophy, with no thought of any trouble. She was learning by heart her scene from Shakespeare, when her mother suddenly put her head in at the door and said, "Diphtheria!" The tone of her voice and the expression of her face were such as to terrify the girl. But when Erika, trembling with dread, ran towards her, she waved her off and vanished.

Miss Sophy was established in the sick-room, which Erika was not allowed to enter. No one paid her any attention, and she spent hours forlornly watching at the end of a long gloomy corridor the door behind which so much that was terrible was going on. If she was seen she was sent away; but before long the entire household was too anxious to pay her the slightest heed.

It was about eleven in the forenoon of the fifth day since the first symptoms of the disease had appeared. Erika stood listening eagerly near the door, trembling with a sense of something vaguely terrible going on behind it. Suddenly it opened, and her mother staggered out, her dress disordered, her face distorted with agony, and supported by the little boy's nurse. Behind her came Strachinsky, his handkerchief at his eyes.

In absolute terror Erika looked after her mother, who passed her by, even brushing her with her skirt, without seeing her. Then she entered the room which the wretched woman had just left. The bed was covered with a white sheet, which revealed the outline of the little form beneath it. The girl's heart throbbed almost to bursting. She lifted a corner of the sheet: there lay her little brother, dead, so white, and with his sweet face unchanged by disease. The little hands lay half open upon the coverlet, as though life had just slipped from them. A grace born of death

hovered above the entire form. His sister gazed in tearless distress. She could not cry; she felt no definable pain, only a terrible heaviness in her limbs, and a weight upon her heart that almost choked her. She bent over the corpse to kiss it, when Miss Sophy rushed into the room, seized her by the arm, and thrust her out of the door.

Of course the first thing Erika did was to look for her mother. She found her in the morning-room, seated in a large arm-chair, quivering in every limb. Minna, the nurse, was moistening her forehead with cologne, but she seemed entirely unconscious. Her hands were folded in her lap, and her gaze was fixed on vacancy. Erika could not summon the courage to approach her.

Meanwhile, Strachinsky was pacing the room in long strides: his tears were already dried; every now and then he would pause and heave a profound sigh. At first Emma seemed not to notice him, but on a sudden she roused from her apathy, and, passing her hand over her brow, with a feeble, wailing cry, she said, "For God's sake, stop, Nello!"

He paused, cleared his throat several times, took an English penknife from his pocket, began to pare his nails, and then went to his wife and stroked her cheek. She shrank from him involuntarily.

He groaned feelingly, left her, and went to the window: with one hand he stroked his whiskers, with the other he jingled the keys in his pocket.

After a while he began in an undertone, probably with the foolish expectation of distracting the wretched mother's thoughts, to detail what was going on outside, all in a melancholy, sentimental monotone, that would have set healthy nerves on edge. "Ah, see that little sparrow with a straw in its beak! it must be fitting up its winter nest."

Poor Emma sat bolt upright, except that her head inclined somewhat forward, and gazed at the man at the window.

Suddenly she uttered a short, shrill scream, and, pressing both hands to her temples, rushed out of the room.

When she had gone Strachinsky shrugged his shoulders, sighed as if gross injustice had been done him, and retired to his room to make a list of the names of all those whom he wished notified of the death.

The funeral took place the third day afterwards.

On that day they assembled at the dinner-table as on other days. The poor mother ate nothing, and Erika could scarce swallow a morsel. The tears which had refused to come at first were falling fast upon her new black gown.

Strachinsky ate, but after a while he too pushed his plate away. For the first time in her life his stepdaughter was conscious of an emotion of compassion for him. She thought that his grief had made eating impossible, when he cleared his throat, and, "This is intolerable," he whined; "at best I have no appetite, and here is tomato sauce! You know I never eat tomato sauce."

His wife made no reply: she only looked at him with her strange new gaze, with eyes from which the last veil had fallen, and which were pained by the light. The look in those eyes would have made one shudder.

The clock in the castle tower struck one quarter of an hour after another, bringing ever nearer the time for the interment. The little body was already laid in the coffin. The coffin-lid leaned up against the wall. A fierce restlessness, the strained expectation of a certain moment which was to be the culmination of an intolerable misery, possessed Erika: she hurried from place to place, and at last ran after her mother, who had gone into the garden.

It was cold and stormy. The autumn had come late and suddenly. Some bushes had kept all their leaves, but they were blackened and shrivelled; others had retained only a few red and yellow leaflets that fluttered in the wind. The trees, on the other hand, were almost entirely bare. The naked boughs showed dark gray or purplish brown against the cloudy sky: the birches alone could still boast some golden-coloured foliage. On the moist gravel paths and the sodden autumn grass lay wet brown leaves mingled with those but lately fallen. The asters and chrysanthemums, nipped by the first frost, hung their heads, and among all the autumnal decay the poor mother wandered about, seeking a few fresh flowers to lay in her dead child's coffin. With faltering steps, tripping now and then over the skirt of her gown, she tottered from one ruined flower-bed to another. The sharp autumn wind fluttered her dress and outlined her emaciated limbs. From her lips came a low moaning mingled with caressing words. She kissed the few poor flowers, frost-touched, which she held in her hand. Erika walked close behind her. Once or twice she stretched out her hand to grasp her mother's skirt, but withdrew it hastily, as if fearing to hurt her by even the gentlest touch.

Ten minutes afterwards the sharp strokes of a hammer resounded through the castle, and the unhappy woman was crouching in the farthest corner of her room, her hands held tightly to her

ears.

In the night following the funeral Erika was waked from sleep by a low moan. She started up. By the vague light of early dawn, in which the windows were defined amid the darkness, she saw something dark lying upon the floor beside her bed. She cried out in terror, and then it stirred. It was her mother lying there upon the hard floor, where she must have been for some time, for when Erika touched her she was icy-cold. The girl took her in her arms and drew her into the soft warm bed beside her. Neither spoke one word, but their hearts beat in unison: all discord between them had vanished.

She had thrown off her burden; she breathed anew; she would stand erect once more. Then she discovered that a heavier burden yet, a fresh tie, bound her to the husband whom now, stripped of all illusion, she detested. The consciousness of this misfortune crept over her slowly; at first she would not believe it, and when she could no longer doubt, it seemed to her that her reason must give way.

Erika soon perceived that her mother's misery was not due alone to the loss of her child. No, that pain brought with it a tender and gentle mood. Another burden oppressed her, something against which her entire nature angrily rebelled, and under the weight of which she displayed a gloomy severity from which her daughter alone never suffered. Towards her since the boy's death Emma had shown inexpressible tenderness, and the girl, thirsting for affection, was never weary of nestling close in her mother's arms, receiving her caresses with profound gratitude, almost with devout adoration. Sometimes the mother would smile in the midst of her grief as she stroked the gold-gleaming hair back from her child's pale face with its large dark eyes. "They do not see it," she would murmur, "but I see how pretty you are growing. Poor little Erika! you have had a sad youth; but life will atone to you for it when I am no longer here."

"Do not say that!" cried the girl, clasping her mother in her arms. "As if I could endure life without you! Mother! mother!"

"You do not dream of what can be endured," her mother said, bitterly. "One submits. Learn to submit; learn it as soon as may be. Do not ask too much from life; ask for no complete happiness: it is an illusion. You, indeed, are justified in claiming more than your poor, ugly mother had any right to, my beautiful, gifted child!" She uttered the words almost with solemnity. Something of the romantic strain which had characterized her through every stage of her prosaic, humiliating existence came to light now in her worship of her daughter.

She strongly impressed Erika with the idea that she was an exceptional creature, and, although she was always admonishing her to expect nothing of life, she nevertheless gave her to understand that life was sure to offer something extraordinary for her acceptance. On the whole, in spite of the girl's grief at the loss of her little brother, she would have been happier than ever before had it not been for a growing anxiety with regard to her mother, whose health had entirely given way. Whereas she had been wont from early morning until late at night to make her presence felt throughout the household and on the estate, grasping with a firm and skilled hand the reins which her husband had idly dropped, now she took an interest in nothing.

Erika was tortured by anxiety, an anxiety all the more distressing from the fact that she could not define her fears.

Towards her husband Emma displayed a daily increasing irritability. But his easy content was not at all disturbed by it. Thanks to a fancy which was ever ready to devise means for sparing and nourishing his self-conceit, he discovered a hundred reasons other than the true one for his wife's attitude towards him. Her irritability was all due, so he informed Miss Sophy, to her situation. And in receiving Miss Sophy's admiring and compassionate homage he found, and had found for some time, his favourite occupation.

Emma now lived apart in a large room, which, besides her bed and wash-stand, was furnished only with a couple of book-shelves, two straight-backed chairs covered with horsehair, and a round tiled stove decorated with a rude bas-relief of a train of mad Bacchantes and bearing on its level top a large funeral urn. The boards of the floor were bare, and in a deep window-recess there was an arm-chair. In this chair the miserable woman would sit for hours, her elbows resting upon its arms, her hands clasped, staring into vacancy.

In the garden upon which this window looked the snow lay several feet deep; upon the meadow beyond, which sloped gently to the broad frozen river, and upon its icy surface, it was so deep that meadow and river were undistinguishable from each other; upon the dark pine forest that bounded the horizon--upon everything--it lay cold and heavy. All cold!--all white! Huge drifts of snow; no road definable; never a bird that chirped, never a leaf that stirred; all cold and white, without pulsation, without breath, dead,--the whole earth a lovely stark corpse.

And the wretched woman's gaze could fall upon naught outside save this white monotony.

Spring came. The dignified repose of death dissolved in feverish activity, in the restless change of seasons, vibrating between fair and foul, between purity and its opposite.

The earth absorbed the snow, except where in dark hollows it lingered in patches, to disappear slowly in muddy pools.

Emma still sat for hours daily in her room with hands clasped in her lap, but her eyes were no longer fixed on vacancy; they had found an object upon which to rest. Among the tender green of the meadows so lately stripped of their snowy covering, glided the river, dark and swollen. How loudly it exulted in its liberation from its icy fetters! "Freedom!" shouted its surging waves,--"Freedom!"

Upon this river her gaze was now riveted.

Days passed,--weeks; the air was warm and sweet; the window by which she sat was open, and the voice of the river was clear and loud.

One afternoon at the end of April the ploughs were creaking over the road, there was an odour of freshly-turned earth in the air, and the fruit-trees were already enveloped in a white mist.

The sun had set, and in the west the crescent moon hung pale and shadowy.

Erika was standing at the low garden wall, looking down across the meadow. Her youthful spirit was oppressed by anxiety so vague that she could neither define it nor struggle against it: she seemed to be blindly dragged along to meet the inevitable.

Her mother had to-day been especially tender to her, but sadder than ever before. She had talked as if her death were nigh at hand, and had spent a long time in writing letters.

On a sudden the girl perceived a dark object moving rapidly along in the warm damp evening air,--a tall figure in a black gown which fluttered in the south wind. It was her mother.

How quickly she strode through the high rank grass! how strange was her gait! Erika had never before seen any one hasten thus, with long strides, and yet falteringly as though borne down by weariness, on--on towards the dark-flowing river.

Suddenly the girl divined what her mother intended to do. She would have screamed, but for an instant her voice failed her, and in the next she was silent from presence of mind, the clear-sight of terror.

She clambered over the low wall and flew after her mother, her feet scarcely touching the ground, her breath coming in painful gasps.

The dark figure had reached its goal, the river-bank; it leaned forward,--when two nervous, girlish hands clutched the black folds of her gown. "Mother!" shrieked Erika, in despair.

She turned round. "What do you want?" she said, harshly, almost cruelly, to her daughter. Then she shuddered violently, and burst into a convulsive sobbing which it seemed impossible to her to control.

Her daughter put her arm around her, nestled close to her, and kissed the tears from her cheeks. "Mother," she cried, tenderly, "darling mother!" and without another word she gently led the wretched woman away from the water. The mother made no resistance; she was mortally weary, and leaned heavily upon the slender girl of fourteen.

They slowly returned to the house. A white translucent mist was rising from the fields, and flying through it with drooping wings, so low that they almost stirred the grass, a flock of hoarsely-croaking ravens passed them by.

In the night Erika suddenly aroused from sleep, without knowing what had wakened her. She rubbed her eyes, and turned to sleep again, when just outside of her door she heard a voice exclaim, "Ah, God of heaven!" In an instant, barefooted and in her nightgown, she was in the corridor, where she saw the cook hurrying in the direction of her mother's room. "What is the matter?" the girl cried, in terror. The cook looked round, shrugged her shoulders, and hurried on.

Erika would have followed her, but Strachinsky appeared at the turning of the corridor where the cook had vanished. He looked as if just roused from sleep; he had on a flowered dressing-gown, and carried a lighted candle. Beside him Minna walked, pale as ashes.

Strachinsky set the candlestick down upon a long low table in the passage. "Have the horses harnessed immediately," he ordered, "and send the bailiff to K---- for the doctor."

"Will not the Herr Baron go himself? People are not always to be relied upon," said Minna, with a significant glance at the master of the house.

"Oh, no; the bailiff will attend to it perfectly, and then--you can understand that I do not wish to be away at this time from my wife, who will of course ask for me----" Minna's eyes still being fixed upon him with a very strange expression in them, he added, snapping out his words in childish irritation, "And then--then--it is no business of yours, you stupid fool!" And, turning on his

heel, he left her.

Minna shrugged her shoulders, and turned towards the staircase to give the necessary orders.

Neither she nor Strachinsky had noticed Erika. The girl ran to the nurse and plucked her by the sleeve. "Minna," she asked, in dread, "what is the matter? Is my mother ill?"

"Yes."

"What is the matter with her? Tell me, Minna! oh, tell me!"

But the nurse shook off her clasping hands. "Let me alone, child. I am in a hurry," she murmured.

Erika advanced a step, hesitated, and then returned to her room, where she found Miss Sophy in great distress, her head crowned with curl-papers, which she cut out of the *Modern Free Press* every evening and which made her look half like Medusa and half like a porcupine.

"Where are you going?" she asked, seeing that Erika began to dress hurriedly. "To my mother; she is ill."

Miss Sophy gently detained her. "Do not go," she said, softly: "they would not let you in; you would only be in the way, now. Wait a little. Your mother does not want you there." And she wagged her porcupine head with melancholy solemnity as she added, "I believe--I think you will perhaps have a little brother, or sister."

Erika stared at her. This it was, then!

Among the many sad experiences that were to fall to Erika's lot there were none to equal the dull restlessness, the mortal dread mingled with a mysterious, inexpressible emotion, of these hours.

She went on dressing, striving only to be ready quickly, as one dresses when the next house is on fire. Then she seated herself opposite Miss Sophy, at a tottering round table upon which stood a guttering candle.

For a while all was silent; then there was a noise outside the door. The girl sprang up and hurried out, to see a stout, elderly woman in a tall black cap, with the phlegmatic flabby face of a monk, going towards her mother's room. Erika recognized her as the needy widow of a stone-mason; she was wont to doctor both men and cattle in the village. Her name was Frau Jelinek. The scullery-maid who had brought her was just behind her.

They passed Erika without heeding her, and the girl looked after them in a fresh access of dread.

Two hours passed. Miss Sophy was asleep; Erika still waked and watched. A light rain had begun to fall; the drops pattered against the window-panes.

Once more Erika arose and crept out into the corridor. Trembling in every limb, she stood at the door of the room through which her mother's sleeping-apartment was reached. It was ajar, and light streamed through the crack. She looked in. Strachinsky was seated at a table, playing whist with three dummies. It had for some time past been his favourite occupation. A maid stood in a corner, arranging a pile of linen. Erika was about to address her, when Frau Jelinek, her black leathern bag on her arm, came out of her mother's bedroom.

"May I not go to mamma,--just for a moment?" the girl asked, in an agitated whisper.

The bedroom door opened again, and Minna appeared. "Is it you, child?"

"Yes, yes," Erika made answer.

"Do not disturb your mother. Stay in your room till you are called," Minna said, authoritatively.

And from the room came the poor mother's weary, gentle voice: "Go lie down, my child; don't sit up any longer; go to bed, dear."

For a while Erika stood motionless; then she kissed the hard cold door that would not open to her, and went back to her room. She lay down on the bed, dressed as she was, and this time she fell asleep. On a sudden she sat upright. The candle on the table was still burning, and by its light she saw that Miss Sophy, who had been sleeping on the sofa, was sitting up, awake, and listening, with a startled air.

Erika hurried out; Minna met her in the corridor, and at the same moment a vehicle rattled into the courtyard.

"The doctor!" exclaimed Minna. "Thank God!"

The bailiff appeared on the staircase.

"Where is the doctor?"

"He was not at home," the man made answer.

"Did you not ask where he was and go after him?" Minna asked, impatiently.

"No," replied the bailiff, twirling his straw hat in his hands. "But I left word for him to come as soon as he got home."

"Fool!" Strachinsky, who had now come into the corridor, exclaimed, shaking his fist at the man. "You are dismissed," he added, grandiloquently. Then, turning to Minna, he said, "Good heavens, if I had a horse I could ride to K----."

Without heeding him, Minna hurried down the staircase, and a few moments later a carriage again left the court-yard.

Minna had herself gone for the doctor, before her departure beseeching Erika to keep quiet: she should be summoned as soon as it would be right for her to see her mother.

The girl obeyed, and sat in her room, rigid and motionless, at the table where the candle was burning down into the socket. At first, to shorten the time, she tried to knit, but the needles dropped from her fingers.

Miss Sophy sat opposite her, with elbows upon the table, and her head in her hands, listening.

In the distance there was a sound of wheels; it came nearer and nearer. Thank God! It was Minna, and she brought the doctor. There was a hurried running to and fro, and then all was still, still as death.

The dawn crept in at the window. The flame of the candle burned red and dim. The rain had ceased, and through the misty window-panes could be seen a glimmer of white blossoms, and behind them a pale-blue sky in which the last stars were slowly fading.

Then the door opened, and Minna entered. "Come, Erika," she said, in a low voice.

Erika arose hastily. "Have I really a little brother?" she asked, anxiously.

Minna shook her head. "It is dead."

"And my mother?"

"Ah, come quickly."

She drew the girl along with her through the long whitewashed corridor. In the room leading to the dying woman's chamber Strachinsky was standing with the physician. The latter stood with bowed head; Strachinsky was weeping.

Erika went directly to her mother's bedside. The dying woman's hair was brushed back from her temples; her lips were blue. Erika kneeled down and buried her face in the bedclothes. Her mother laid her hand upon her head and stroked it--ah, how feebly! But how soothing was the touch!

In one corner old Minna kneeled, praying.

Outside, the world was brightening; there was a golden splendour over all the earth. The birds twittered, at first faintly, then loudly and shrilly. The dying woman stirred among the pillows: Erika was to hear the dear voice once more.

"My child, my poor, dear child, I have been a poor mother to you----"

"Oh, mother, darling----"

"My death will make it all right. Write to----"

At this moment Strachinsky knocked at the door. "Emma!" he whispered.

The dying woman's face expressed positive horror. "Do not let him come in!" she exclaimed.

Erika flew to the door and turned the key; when she returned to the bedside her mother was struggling for breath.

Evidently most anxious to impart some information to her daughter, she had not the strength to do so. Once more she passed her hand over Erika's head,--it was for the last time; then the hand grew heavier; it no longer lavished a caress; it was a mere weight.

Erika moved, and looked at her mother. The tears stood in her eyes unshed, so wondrous was her mother's face. The battle was won.

All the pain of life--the sweet pain of supreme rapture hinting to us of that heaven which we cannot attain, and that other bitter pain pointing to the grave at which we shudder--was for her extinct.

Erika threw herself upon the body and covered it with kisses. With difficulty could she be induced to leave it; but when they led her from the room, as soon as the door closed behind her she was docile and gentle. She seemed bewildered, and walked slowly with bowed head beside Minna. Once only she looked back when a thin, melancholy wail resounded through the quiet morning air. It was the bell in the little tower of the castle, tolling restlessly.

Years afterwards she could not bring herself to recall in memory the terrible days that followed,--the dreary burden that she dragged about with her from morning until night, the sleep born of utter exhaustion, the slow pursuance of daily custom as in a dream, the awakening with nerves refreshed by forgetfulness, and then the sudden consciousness of misery, the sensation of soreness in every limb, a sensation intensified by every motion, by a word spoken in her presence, the restlessness which drove her hither and thither until in some dim corner she would crouch down and cry,--cry until the very fount of tears seemed dry and her burning eyes would close again in the leaden sleep which still had to yield to the terrible awakening.

She felt the most earnest desire to do something, to perform some office of love for her mother; but scarcely for one moment was she left alone with the body.

Strangers prepared the loved one for the tomb, the coachman and the gardener lifted her into the coffin. Shortly before it was closed, Strachinsky remembered that his wife had once expressed a wish to be buried in the dress and veil she had worn at her marriage with him. But neither could be found. The cabinet where she was wont to hoard her treasures was empty, except for a lock of hair of her dead boy, and this they laid beneath her head.

Her husband bestowed but little thought upon the circumstance. He honestly regretted the dead, and lost his appetite for two days; but as the time for the funeral drew near, he worked himself into an exalted frame of mind, which found vent in solemn pomposity.

He had ordered a hearse from the city. Erika was standing at a window of the corridor when, with nodding plumes, it rattled into the castle court-yard, and her misery reached the point of despair.

Until then she had not quite comprehended it all. She heard the men stagger down the stairs beneath the weight of the coffin, heard it knock against the wall at a sharp turn.

She followed it to the grave. All walked behind the hearse, the shabby splendour of which suited so ill with the rural landscape.

Most of the gentry of the surrounding country, who had long since ceased to visit at Luzano, assembled to pay the last honours to the poor woman, but they were only a speck in the endless funeral train. Behind the few black coats and high hats following close upon the hearse came a swarming crowd. All the peasants, day-labourers, and beggars from Luzano and the surrounding estates paid the last token of respect to the martyr gone to her eternal rest: she had been good and kind to all.

It was the first of May. The fields were clothed in a light green, and the apple-trees showed pink with half-open blossoms. A reddish smoke curled upward to the skies from the flames of the torches. And there was a flutter of sighs among the blossoming boughs of the trees and above the meadows,--the breath of the freshly-born spring.

Through the new life strode death.

Noiselessly the funeral train moved on. Erika walked almost mechanically, looking neither to the right nor to the left, only moving forward. On a sudden something attracted her gaze. On a little elevation by the roadside, between two apple-trees, stood a young peasant woman with a child in her arms,--a child who stared at the long procession with large eyes of wonder.

CHAPTER III.

The day after the funeral Strachinsky, in melancholy mood, paced to and fro in the room where his wife had died. From time to time he walked to the window and looked out,--then he would turn again towards the interior of the chamber. Suddenly his eyes fell upon a sheet of blotting-paper left upon the writing-table.

His wife's handwriting had been remarkably large, and the words which were of course imprinted backwards upon the sheet attracted his notice. With very little trouble he deciphered them: "My last will."

He frowned. "So she has made a fresh will," he said to himself. In spite of his enormous self-conceit, he did not doubt that it could hardly be in his favour. The blood rushed to his head. Where was the will? Probably in her writing-table. But where were the keys? The shrewdness which, in spite of his intellectual deterioration, stood him in stead whenever he feared personal inconvenience came to his aid. He remembered that his wife had been wont to keep her keys in the drawer of a small table at her bedside, and he reflected that, in the sad confusion ensuing upon her death, it was hardly likely that they had as yet been removed. In fact he found them there, and with them he opened the middle drawer of her writing-table. It contained a large sealed envelope inscribed "My last will." Strachinsky slipped the document into his pocket, and returned the keys to their place.

At that moment the door opened, and Erika entered. She looked wretchedly pale and wan, with dark rings around her weary eyes. She wore a black gown which her mother had made hastily for her when her little brother died, and which she had outgrown during the winter. Although the day was warm and sunshiny, she looked cold, and in all her movements there was something of the timorous hesitation that a dog will display after losing his master, when he seems uncertain where to creep away and hide himself. The resolute attitude she had been wont to maintain when with her step-father was all gone; heart, mind, and soul seemed alike crushed.

"What do you want here?" Strachinsky asked, suspiciously.

She looked at him in what was almost surprise, and a tremor of pain passed through her. "What should I want?" she murmured, in a hoarse whisper. "I want to go to my mother!" She said it to herself, not to him; she seemed to have forgotten his presence. Her chin trembled, her lips twitched, the tears rushed to her eyes.

No, that pitiable creature never could have come to look for a will. Strachinsky, always ready to be sentimental, gave a sigh of relief, put his hand over his eyes, and left the room. Scarcely had he gone when Erika's sad eye fell upon the bed: it had been stripped of all its coverings and looked like some couch in a lumber-room that had been unused for years. With a shudder the girl turned away. Yes, what could she want here? She asked herself the question now. But on a sudden she perceived hanging on the wall a black skirt, the hem soiled with mud. It was the gown her mother had worn when she hurried across the fields, the day before her death. Erika clutched it as if it had been a living thing, and with a low wail buried her face in its folds, about which some aroma of her dead mother seemed to cling.

Meanwhile, Strachinsky had locked himself into his room, where he walked to and fro, lost in reflection, the portentous will in his pocket, with the seal as yet unbroken. The only legal document of the kind, in his opinion, was the will made by his wife eleven years previously, shortly after their marriage, by which she constituted him her sole heir and the guardian of her daughter. Any later testamentary disposition he could not possibly regard otherwise than as the result of an aberration of mind, of which she had for some time shown symptoms, and which had, shortly before her death, come to be distinctly developed.

Poor Emma! There was no doubt that her intellect, once so clear and strong, had been clouded of late years.

So soon as he had entirely convinced himself of this fact, he broke the seal of the will.

Even in his rascality he was a thorough sentimentalist. He never could have committed a crime without first skilfully contriving to exalt in his own eyes both himself and his motives.

Whilst reading the document he changed colour several times. When he had finished he sighed thrice consecutively: "Poor Emma!" Then, after pacing the room thoughtfully, he said to himself, "She would be indeed distressed if this paper--worthless legally in view of her mental condition, and throwing so false a light upon our marriage--should ever be made public; she--to whom the tie between us was so sacred!" A flood of proofs of his wife's devotion to him, interrupted but temporarily, overwhelmed Strachinsky's soul. He lit a candle and burned Emma's last will.

And then, without the slightest pricking of conscience, he betook himself to his beloved lounge. He had the sensation of having performed an act of exalted devotion.

"No need, dearest Emma," he said, apostrophizing his wife's portrait which hung above his couch, "to say that I never shall let your child want. No legal document is necessary to insure that. Poor Emma!" And, remembering the extract-books which he had devised at a former period of his existence, he moaned, drearily, "Oh, what a noble mind was there o'erthrown!"

When, a few hours afterwards, he encountered his step-daughter, he felt it incumbent upon him to be especially kind to her. He patted her shoulder, with the insinuating tenderness people are apt to show towards those whom they have wronged, and said, solemnly, "Poor little Rika! Your loss is great. Your mother is gone; but never forget that you still have a father."

Weeks passed,--months; everything in the house went on as best it could. Strachinsky lay on the sofa from morning until night, reading novels most of the time. In the pauses of this edifying occupation he roused himself to an unedifying activity; that is to say, he scolded all the servants, without assigning any grounds for his displeasure. No one minded it much: every one knew that after such an episode he would betake himself to his sofa again and to his sentimental romances.

With regard to his step-daughter's education, he showed the same tendency to vehement attacks of zeal. He would suddenly go to the school-room, inspect her written exercises, question her as to some historical date which he had quite forgotten himself, and conclude by asking her to play something upon the piano.

During her performance he would pace the room with a face expressive of the gravest anxiety.

At first she took pains to play for him, but when she discovered that he had determined beforehand to find fault, she rattled away upon the keys of her old instrument like a perfect imp of waywardness, whenever required to show what progress she had made.

Almost before her fingers had left the key-board the scolding began. "I see no improvement; no, not the slightest improvement do I perceive! And to think of all that has been done for your education! I fairly work my fingers to the bone to give you every advantage that a princess could claim, while you--you do nothing!" And then would follow a long dramatic summary of the sacrifices that had been made for her. He always talked to her like the father addressing a worthless daughter in some popular melodrama, ending upon every occasion with, "What is to become of you? Tell me, what--what will become of you?" Then he would bring down both fists upon the top of the piano, to emphasize the horror inspired by the thought of her future, shake his head for the last time, and leave the room with a heavy stride. Afterwards he was sure to complain of the injury the agitation had caused him, and to betake himself to his sofa.

The girl was left more and more to herself. About six months after her mother's death Miss Sophy was dismissed. She was a thoroughly capable woman, personally much attached to her pupil, trustworthy and practical as a housekeeper, but prone to fall in love with every man, and to find a rival and foe in every woman who refused to be the confidante of her morbid and distorted sentimentality.

During Emma's lifetime she had been able to conceal most of her eccentricities in this respect, but afterwards she became positively intolerable,--perhaps because there was no one to restrain or intimidate her. Without a single personal attraction, she was inordinately vain, forever striving by her dress and conduct to invite attention from the other sex. In the forenoons she gave Erika lessons, in the afternoons she mended and made her clothes,--she was a skilled needlewoman,--and the evenings she devoted to music.

She sang. Her répertoire was limited, consisting principally of the soprano part of Mendelssohn's duet "I would that my love could silently flow in a single word," which she shrieked out as a solo, and in Schumann's "I'll not complain,"--which last always caused her to shed copious tears.

At last her love of self-adornment as well as her musical enthusiasm passed all bounds. She cut off her hair, dressed it in short curls, and purchased two new silk gowns. She also bought an old zither, and every evening, with her hair freshly curled, and in a rustling silk robe, she betook herself to the drawing-room, where Strachinsky, in pursuance of his boasted activity, was wont to finish the day by endless games of patience.

Her manner, the languishing looks cast at him over her instrument, left no doubt as to her sentiments towards him.

At first the master of the house took but little heed of these demonstrations. Her performance upon the zither he found rather agreeable: the whining drawl of the tones she evoked from it soothed his melancholy. But one evening when he had requested her to play for him "The Tyrolean and his Child," and also to repeat "May Breezes," she was so carried away by triumphant vanity that she attempted to sing with her instrument, accompanying her shrill notes with such languishing glances that their object could no longer ignore their meaning.

The next morning Strachinsky sent for his stepdaughter. Clad in his dressing-gown, as he reclined upon his lounge, with all the romantic drawling indifference in his air and voice which he had learned from his favourite hero "Pelham," he asked her as she stood before him,--

"The Englishwoman's behaviour must have struck you as extraordinary?"

She nodded.

He passed his hand thoughtfully across his brow. She did not speak, and he went on playing the English nobleman to his own entire satisfaction. His left hand, in which he held a French novel, hanging negligently over the arm of the lounge, he waved his right in the air, and said, "Of course I pity the poor creature, but she bores me. Rid me of the fool, I pray,--rid me of her!"

He then inclined his head towards the door, and buried himself in the perusal of his novel.

From that time Erika ceased to spend the evenings with Miss Sophy in the drawing-room; she withdrew after supper to the solitude of the old school-room, which in fact she greatly preferred.

Of course Miss Sophy suspected some plot of Erika's in Strachinsky's altered demeanour, and lost every remnant of sense still left in her silly head. She employed all her leisure moments in writing to her hero letters which she bribed the maid to lay upon the table in his dressing-room.

This would all have been ridiculous, if the affair had not taken a tragic turn.

One morning Miss Sophy did not appear at the breakfast-table, and when Minna went to call her she found the wretched woman in bed, writhing in agony. In despair at Strachinsky's insensibility she had poisoned herself with the tips of some old lucifer matches. The physician, summoned in haste, was barely able to save her life; and of course she left Luzano as soon as she was able to travel.

Strachinsky was much flattered that the poor woman's love for him had ended in madness, and he invested her memory with an ideal excellence, recalling her as brilliantly gifted by nature and endowed with many personal attractions.

Erika was now left without instruction. Her step-father decided that a young girl of her age needed no further supervision, and that the daughter of a poor farmer could lay no claim to any personal luxury.

When he spoke of himself only, it was always as an 'impoverished cavalier;' when he alluded to himself as her father, he was always degraded to simply 'a poor farmer.'

All through the summer she was alone, and during a long dreary winter, followed by another summer and another winter, she was still alone. Another girl in her place might have fallen into gossip with the servants to pass the time; another, again, might have married the bailiff out of sheer ennui: assuredly any one else would have grown stupid and uncouth. She did nothing of the kind.

She had occupation enough. She learned long pages of Goethe and Shakespeare by heart, and declaimed them, clad in improvised costumes, before a tall dim mirror; she played on the piano for hours daily, and made decided progress, despite certain bad habits unavoidable in the lack of instruction. The rest of her time was spent in building numberless castles in the air, and in taking long walks about the neighboring country.

But when three years had gone by since her mother's death, without the least alteration in her circumstances, the poor child began to be impatient and to look eagerly about for some relief from so sordid an existence. Why could she not be an artist?--an actress, a singer, or a pianist?

On a cold spring morning towards the end of April she seated herself at the big table in her former school-room and indited a letter to the director of the Castle Theatre at Vienna,--a letter in which she partially explained to him her position and requested him to make a trial of her dramatic talent, with a view to an engagement at his theatre. She declared herself ready to go to Vienna if he would promise her an audience. She had finished the clearly-written document, but when about to sign her name she hesitated. Erika Lenzdorff she signed at last. "Lenzdorff," she repeated, thoughtfully,--"Lenzdorff." What possessed her to write to the director of a theatre--an utter stranger--explaining her circumstances? Would it not be much better to turn to her father's relatives? To be sure, she knew nothing about them,--not even their address; but that, she thought, might be procured. Her mother had never spoken of them; she had always abruptly changed the subject when Erika asked about her father and his relatives. Why?

Strachinsky and his wife had often spoken of the parents of the latter, but never of those of her first husband.

"Lenzdorff." She wrote the name again and again on a sheet of paper. It looked distinguished. Perhaps they were wealthy people, who could do something for her; but----

Emma had told her daughter that her name was Lenzdorff the day after the adventure with the young painter, when the child, mortified at not having been able to tell it, had asked what it was. But when she had precociously repeated, in a questioning tone, "*Von* Lenzdorff?" her mother had replied, sternly, "What is that to you? It is of no consequence whatever."

Erika began to ponder. Her mother's parents had died long since; must not her father's parents be dead also? If they were still living, it was difficult to see why Strachinsky had not cast upon them the burden of her maintenance. Still, there were reasons why he should not have done

so.

If her father's relatives were people of integrity and refinement, any business discussion or explanation with them would have been most distressing; no wonder that he avoided it, especially since Erika's maintenance cost him little or nothing.

Thus far she had arrived in her reflections, when Minna entered and asked her to go immediately to the drawing-room, where a visitor awaited her.

A visitor at Luzano? Such an event was unheard of.

In some distress Erika looked down at her shabby gown, made out of an old dressing-gown of her mother's, black, with a Turkish border. There was a hole in the elbow of the left sleeve.

"What sort of a gentleman is it, Minna?" she asked, irritably, suspecting him to be some business acquaintance of Strachinsky's.

"A foreign gentleman."

"Old or young?"

"An elderly gentleman."

"Well, if he is elderly, and has no lady with him," she murmured, "I can go just as I am." She knew from books, whence she derived all her worldly wisdom, that ladies were much more critical than gentlemen.

"What in the world can he want of me?"

She went up to the mirror, smoothed her hair, drew together with a black thread the hole in her sleeve, and hurried down to the drawing-room. The apartment to which this name was still given was on the ground-floor, as large as a riding-school, and almost as empty.

Besides the piano it still contained two huge bookcases, a shabby sofa behind a rickety table, and a round piano-stool. The rest of the furniture had disappeared. Some chairs had been banished as unsafe; the other things had been sold piece by piece, under stress of various pecuniary embarrassments, to the Jew broker of the village.

Strachinsky had several times attempted to dispose thus of the books also, but Solomon Bondy had no market for them. Once the Pole had tried to sell the piano. But Solomon had curtly refused to find a purchaser for it, knowing that with the piano the last remnant of enjoyment would be snatched from the poor lonely girl vegetating in the castle. The Jew had shown more mercy than the Christian. And then her dead mother had been dear to him, as she was to all around her.

She had been dear to Strachinsky also, but he never allowed his affection to stand in the way of his ease.

In consequence of the total lack of furniture, Strachinsky, when Erika entered the room, was sitting beside the stranger on the sofa,--which looked comical.

The stranger, a man of middle age, tall, broad-shouldered, and erect in bearing, rose to receive her.

"May I beg you to present me to the Countess?" he said, turning to Strachinsky.

"Countess!" It thrilled her. Had she heard aright?

"Herr Doctor Herbegg--my daughter," with a wave of the hand.

"Your step-daughter," the stranger corrected him, with cool emphasis.

"I have never made any difference between her and my own children, dead in their early youth," said the other; and he was right, for he had taken very little interest in his own children. "You know that, my child," he added, in a caressing tone that in his stepdaughter's ears was like an echo of his old love-making to his wife, and which offended her. He would have taken her hand, but she withdrew it hastily from his flabby warm touch.

Since there was no other scat to be had, she turned to the piano to get the piano-stool. Doctor Herbegg arose and took it from her.

Then Strachinsky started up with incredible activity, and a positive struggle for the stool ensued, a mutual "Pray, pray, Herr Baron--Herr Doctor!"

Erika calmly looked on at their strange behaviour. Had she suddenly become of such importance that each was striving to show her courtesy? Through her youthful soul the word 'Countess' echoed again with thrilling fascination.

Strachinsky finally gained the day: he placed the piano-stool for his step-daughter, panting as

he did so, so unused was he to the slightest physical exertion.

Erika seated herself upon the stool, although each gentleman offered her a place on the sofa, assumed a dignified air, or what she supposed to be such, and calmly surveyed the situation and the stranger. Something told her that his visit was an important event for her and hinted at a turning-point in her life. She was not mistaken. Doctor Herbegg was her grandmother's legal adviser.

He began to converse upon indifferent topics, watching her narrowly the while.

Her step-father, who had become utterly unaccustomed to the reception of guests, wriggled about on the sofa as if stung by a tarantula. He had always been restless in his demeanour when he was not awkwardly stiff, but formerly his good looks had compensated for his defective training. They no longer existed: the self-indulgent indolence to which he had given himself over, so soon as all social contact with the world was at an end for him, had done its part in effecting their decay.

"A bottle of wine! Bring a bottle of wine!" he ordered the young girl, forgetting the suavity of speech he had just before adopted, and falling into his usual tone.

"Pray do not trouble the Countess on my account," Doctor Herbegg interposed. "I can take nothing. My time is limited, since I must catch the next train for Berlin."

"Surely, Herr Doctor, you will take a glass of Tokay," Strachinsky persisted, and, perceiving that his manner of addressing his step-daughter had offended the lawyer, he was amiable enough to add, "Do not trouble yourself, my dear Rika; I will attend to it." He arose, and as he was leaving the room he went on, "The Herr Doctor will inform you, meanwhile, as to the change in your prospects."

The lawyer made no attempt to detain him. He cared very little about the glass of Tokay, but very much about an interview with the young girl. When Strachinsky had left the room he approached Erika, and in a short time had explained matters to her.

The title of Countess, which her mother had concealed from her, apparently because in the circumstances in which she was forced to educate her child it would have been more of a hinderance than a help, was hers of right. Her mother's first marriage had been with the only son by a second marriage of Count Lenzdorff: he had held office under the Minister of Foreign Affairs, and two years after his marriage had been killed in a railroad accident. By her second marriage Frau von Strachinsky had alienated her mother-in-law. Meanwhile, the two sons of Count Lenzdorff's first marriage had died, childless, and finally the Count himself had died, at a very advanced age,--so old that he had persuaded himself that he had outlived death, and had therefore never taken the trouble to make a will; consequently his entire estate devolved upon his grand-daughter.

The lawyer had just imparted this intelligence to the grand-daughter in question, when Strachinsky re-entered the room, very much out of breath and excited, and followed by Minna, tall, gaunt, with the bearing of a grenadier and the gloomy air of an energetic old maid whom it behooves to be upon the defensive with the entire male sex. She carried a waiter, which she placed upon the table before the sofa.

"One little glass, Herr Doctor,--one little glass!" cried Strachinsky.

The Doctor bowed his thanks, and touched the glass distrustfully with his lips.

"The Tokay is excellent," he remarked, in evident surprise at finding anything of Strachinsky's genuine.

"Yes, yes," his host declared; "you can't get such a glass of wine as that everywhere, Herr Doctor. I purchased it in Hungary by favour of an intimate friend, Prince Liskat,--*les restes des grandeurs passées*, my dear Doctor."

After a first glass Strachinsky became tenderly condescending: he patted the lawyer on the shoulder. "Pray don't hurry, my dear Herbegg; you'll not easily find another glass of such Tokay."

Erika observed that Doctor Herbegg bit his lip and did not touch his second glass. He looked at his watch and said, "Unfortunately, Countess, I have but little time left, but I should like to inform myself upon several points, in accordance with your grandmother's wish. Where and with whom have you been educated?"

"At home, and with my mother."

"Exclusively with your mother?"

"Yes; she even gave me lessons in French and upon the piano."

She was burning to rehabilitate her mother in his eyes.

"My wife was an admirable performer, an artist, a pupil of Liszt's," Strachinsky interposed.--

"Play something to the Doctor; be quick!" he ordered, grandiloquently, dropping again his *rôle* of tender parent. His imperious tone provoked Erika unutterably: she would have liked to rush from the room and fling to the door behind her, but she conquered herself for her mother's sake and--out of vanity.

She opened the piano, and played the last portion of Beethoven's Moonlight Sonata,--the last thing that she had studied with her mother. Her execution was still rude and unequal, like that of an ardent youthful creature whose musical aspirations have never been toned down by culture, but an unusual amount of talent was evident in her performance.

"Magnificent, Countess!" exclaimed the lawyer, rising and going towards her as she left the piano.

"Very well; but you missed that last chord once," Strachinsky said, pompously.

Doctor Herbegg paid him not the least attention. "Now I am forced to go," he said to the young girl; "and you must not smile, Countess, if I tell you that I leave you with a much lighter heart than the one I brought with me. Your grandmother sent me here to reconnoitre, as it were: I find a gifted young lady, where I had feared to encounter an untrained village girl."

Then suddenly Erika's overstrained nerves gave way. "My grandmother had no right to allow of such a fear on your part; no one who had ever known my mother could have supposed anything of the kind."

He looked her full in the face more steadily, more searchingly than before, and his cold, clear eyes suddenly shone with a genial light. "Forgive me," he said, kissing the hand she held out to him; then, turning, he would have left the room with a brief bow to Strachinsky.

His host, however, made haste to disburden himself of a fine speech. "You will have something to tell in Berlin, will you not? You have at least seen how a Bohemian gentleman lives. No lounging-chairs in the drawing-room, but Tokay in the cellar. Original, at all events, eh?"

"Extremely original," the lawyer assented.

On the threshold he paused. "One question more, Herr Baron," he began, bending upon his condescending host a look of keenest scrutiny. "Did the late Frau von Strachinsky leave no written document by which she provided for her daughter's future?"

Strachinsky listened to this question with a scarcely perceptible degree of embarrassment. "Not that I know of," he said, shifting uneasily from one foot to the other.

Erika suddenly remembered that her mother had been busily engaged in writing a few days before her death.

Meanwhile, her step-father, having gained entire control of his features, continued, "Moreover, in this case any testamentary document would have been entirely superfluous. My wife knew well that should she die I should care for her daughter as for my own."

"H'm!" the Doctor ejaculated. "And did Frau von Strachinsky never speak to you of her Berlin relatives, Countess?"

"No," Erika replied, thoughtfully. "She was very restless for some weeks before her death, and often told me that as soon as we were quite sure of being uninterrupted she had an important communication to make to me. But she never did so: death closed her lips."

The Doctor reflected for a moment, and then said, "I am rather surprised, Herr von Strachinsky, that you did not advise old Countess Lenzdorff of your wife's death."

Strachinsky assumed an injured air. "Permit me to ask you, Herr Doctor," he said, with lofty emphasis, "why I should have informed Countess Lenzdorff of my adored wife's death? Countess Lenzdorff was my bitterest enemy. She opposed my wife's union with me not only openly, but with all sorts of underhand schemes, and when she could not succeed in severing the tie that united our hearts, she dismissed my wife and her daughter without one friendly word of farewell. Since she entirely ignored my wife while she lived, how was I to suppose that she would take any interest in the death of my idolized Emma?"

"But the announcement of her death would have seriously influenced your step-daughter's destiny," Doctor Herbegg observed.

"My wife considered me the guardian of her child," Strachinsky declared, with pathos. "Another man might have refused to accept a burden entailing upon him sacrifice of every kind. But I am not like other men. My wife evidently supposed that her child would be best cared for under my protection; and I was not the man to betray her confidence. You look surprised, Doctor. Yes, no doubt you think it strange for a man nowadays to vindicate his chivalry and disinterestedness, to his own ruin. But such a man am I,--a Marquis Posa, a Don Quixote, an Egmont----"

"Pardon me, Herr Baron, I shall be late for the train," said the Doctor, and, with a bow to

Erika, he left the room.

Strachinsky ran after him with astonishing celerity, expatiating upon his chivalrous disinterestedness. Shortly afterwards a carriage was heard driving out of the courtyard; and Strachinsky returned to the bare drawing-room, which his step-daughter had not yet left.

His face beamed with satisfaction; rubbing his hands, he cried out, "Now we shall lack for nothing!" Then, turning to Erika, he continued, "I shall see to it that your German relatives do not squander your property. This lawyer-fellow seems to me a schemer, a sly dog. But I shall do my best to watch over your interests. In fact, it is my duty as your guardian to administer your affairs. Moreover, in three years you will be of age, and then we can avail ourselves of your money to free Luzano from its weight of debt."

This delightful scheme made him extremely cheerful. After pacing the apartment for a while, lost in contemplation of its feasibility, he went to the table, and, taking up the Doctor's untouched second glass of Tokay, he poured its contents back into the bottle. This he called economy. Then with the bottle in his hand, apparently with a view of re-sealing it, he went towards the door, saying, "The affair has greatly agitated me. I am so very sensitive. But when one has had to wait upon fortune so long---!"

He had settled it with himself that he was the person principally interested; his step-daughter was quite a secondary consideration, at most the means to an end. But circumstances shaped themselves after what was to him a most unexpected and undesirable fashion. Erika received a brief and rather formal letter from Countess Lenzdorff, in which the old lady requested her to repair as soon as possible to Berlin, but upon no account to allow Strachinsky to accompany her; in short, the old Countess refused to have any personal intercourse with him whatever.

By the same post came a letter from Doctor Herbegg to Strachinsky, formally advising him to resign his guardianship voluntarily. Should he comply, the Countess would refrain from closer examination of his administration of the property of her daughter-in-law and of her grandchild. But if, on the other hand, he made the slightest attempt to interfere in the management of his step-daughter's German estate, she would, as the guardian appointed by the late Count, resort to legal means for relieving herself of such interference.

Had Strachinsky's conscience been perfectly clear he would probably have set himself in opposition, but as it was he contented himself with gnashing his teeth and raging for two days, indulging freely in vituperation of old Countess Lenzdorff. Then he made a final tender attempt to work upon Erika's feelings and to induce her to espouse his cause with her grandmother. When this failed, he wrapped himself in his martyr's cloak and submitted with much grumbling. Dulled as his nature was, he bore his disappointment with comparative ease. At first he assumed an air of magnanimous renunciation towards his step-daughter, but after a while he overwhelmed her with good advice, and groaned for her whenever she lifted any weight or stooped in her packing. Erika herself, meanwhile, was in a state of tremendous excitement.

On the morning of her departure, when her trunks were all packed she took a walk. She first visited her mother's grave for the last time, and then went into the garden, pausing in all her favourite haunts, and avoiding with a shudder even a glance towards the spot by the low garden wall whence she had seen her mother hurrying across the fields towards the river.

Still, in whatever direction she turned she felt the presence of the stream: she heard its voice loud and wailing as it rushed along swollen by the winter's snows. A soft breeze swept above the earth, mingling its sighs with the graver note of the water. Everything trembled and quivered; every tree, every sprouting plant, throbbed; all nature thrilled with delicious pain,--the fever of the spring. And on a sudden she felt herself carried away by a like thrill of excitement; a nameless yearning, ignorant of aim, possessed her, transporting her to the skies, and yet binding her to the earth in the fetters of a languor such as she had never before experienced.

Once more there arose in her memory the figure of the young artist who had drawn her picture there beside the brook as it rippled dreamily on its way to the river. She saw him distinctly before her: her heart began to throb wildly.

She hurried on to the spot where he had sketched her. The swollen brook murmured far more loudly over the pebbles than it had done on that hot day in midsummer; the reddish boughs of the willows began to show silver-gray buds, and on the bank there gleamed something blue,--the first forget-me-nots. She stooped to pluck them.

At that moment she heard Minna's voice calling, "Rika! where are you?"

She started, and, tripping upon the wet slippery soil, all but fell into the brook. With difficulty she regained her footing, and without her flowers; they grew too far below her. She looked at them longingly and went her way.

When she reached the house she found the carriage already in the court-yard,--a huge, green, glass coach, that clattered and jingled at the slightest movement. It was lined with dark-brown striped awning-stuff,--the shabbiest vehicle that ever ran upon four wheels.

Beside the carriage stood a clumsy cart, in which the luggage was to be piled. Herr von

Strachinsky was ordering about the servants carrying the trunks. Everything in the house was topsy-turvy. Breakfast had been hurriedly prepared, and was waiting--a most uninviting repast--upon the dining-room table. Erika could not eat. She ran to her room and put on her bonnet.

"Hurry, hurry!" Minna called up from below.

She ran down and crossed the threshold. The air was warm and damp, and a fine rain was falling. Strachinsky helped her into the carriage with pompous formality. "I shall not accompany you to the station," he said. "I do not like driving in a close carriage. Adieu!" He had nothing more affectionate to say to her, as he shook her hand. The carriage door clattered to; the horses started. Thus Erika rattled out of the court-yard, with Minna beside her. The servant looked tired out; her face was very red, and she had a hand-bag in her lap, and a bandbox and two bundles of shawls on the seat opposite her. The carriage was very stuffy, and smelled of old leather. Erika opened one of the windows. They were driving along the same road by which she had followed her mother's coffin; there beyond the meadow she could see the wall of the church-yard. She leaned far out of the window. The driver whipped up his horses; the church-yard vanished. The young girl suddenly felt as if the very heart were being torn from her breast, and she burst into tears, sobbing convulsively, uncontrollably.

CHAPTER IV.

On the evening of the same day an old lady was walking to and fro in a large, tastefully-furnished apartment looking out upon a little front garden in Bellevue Street, Berlin. Both furniture and hangings in the room, in contrast with the prevailing fashion, were light and cheerful. The old lady's forehead wore a slight frown, and her air was somewhat impatient, as of one awaiting a verdict.

At the first glance it was plain that she was very old, very tall, broad-shouldered, and straight as a fir. In her bearing there was the personal dignity of one whose pride has never had to bow, who has never paid society the tribute of the slightest hypocrisy, who has never had to lower a glance before mankind or before a memory; but it was at the same time characterized by the unconscious selfishness, disguised as love of independence, of one who has never allowed aught to interfere with personal ease. Upon the broad shoulders, so well fitted to support with dignity and power the convictions of a lifetime, was set a head of remarkable beauty,--the head, noble in every line, of an old woman who has never made the slightest attempt to appear one day younger than her age. Oddly enough, there looked forth from the face--the face of an antique statue--a pair of large, modern eyes, philosophic eyes, whose glance could penetrate to the secret core of a human soul,--eyes which nothing escaped, in the sight of which there were few things sacred, and nothing inexcusable, because they perceived human nature as it is, without requiring from it the impossible.

Such was Erika's grandmother, Countess Anna Lenzdorff.

After she had paced the room to and fro for a long time, she seated herself, with a short impatient sigh, in an arm-chair that stood invitingly beside a table covered with books and provided with a student-lamp. She took up a volume of Maupassant, but a degree of mental restlessness to which she was entirely unaccustomed tormented her, and she laid the book aside. Her bright eyes wandered from one object to another in the room, and were finally arrested by a large picture hanging on the opposite wall.

It represented an opening in a leafy forest, dewy fresh, and saturated with depth of sunshine. In the midst of the golden glow was a strange group,--two nymphs sporting with a shaggy brown faun. The picture was by Böcklin, and the forest, the faun, and the white limbs of the nymphs were painted with incomparable skill: nevertheless the picture could not be pronounced free from the reproach of a certain meretriciousness.

It had never occurred to Countess Lenzdorff to ponder upon the picture; she had bought it because she thought it beautiful, and certainly an old woman has a right to hang anything that she chooses upon her walls, so long as it is a work of art. To-night she suddenly began to attach all sorts of considerations to the picture.

Meanwhile, an old footman, with a duly-shaven upper lip, and very bushy whiskers, entered and announced, "Herr von Sydow."

"I am very glad," the old lady rejoined, evidently quite rejoiced, whereupon there entered a very tall, almost gigantic officer of dragoons, with short fair hair and a grave handsome face.

"You come just at the right time, Goswyn," she said, cordially, extending her delicate old hand. He touched it with his lips, and then, in obedience to her gesture, took a seat near her, within the circle of light of the lamp.

"How can I serve you, Countess?" he asked.

"You are acquainted with my small gallery," she began, looking around the large airy room with some pride.

"I have frequently enjoyed your works of art," the young officer replied. The phrase was rather formal; in fact, he himself was rather formal, but there was something so genial behind his stiff North-German formality that one easily forgave him his purely superficial priggishness,--nay, upon further acquaintance came to like it.

"Rather antiquated in expression, your reply," the old lady rejoined. "My small collection thanks you for your kindly appreciation; but that is not the question at present. You know my Böcklin?"

"Yes, Countess."

"What do you think of it?"

He fixed his eyes upon it. "What could I think of it? It is a masterpiece."

"H'm! that all the world admits," the old lady murmured, impatiently, as if vexed at the want of originality in his remark; "but is it a picture that one would leave hanging on the wall of one's boudoir when one was about to receive into one's house as an inmate a grand-daughter of sixteen? Give me your opinion as to that, Goswyn."

Again Goswyn von Sydow fixed his eyes upon the picture. "That would depend very much upon the kind of grand-daughter," he said, frowning slightly. "If she were a young girl brought up in the world and accustomed from childhood to works of art, I should say yes. If she were a young girl educated in a convent or bred in the country, I should say no."

The old lady sighed. "I knew it!" she said. "My Böcklin is doomed. Ah!" she exclaimed, wringing her hands in mock despair. "Pray, Goswyn,"--she treated the young officer with the affectionate familiarity an old lady would use towards a young fellow whom she has known intimately from early childhood,--"press that button beside you."

The dragoon, evidently perfectly at home in the house, stretched out a very long arm and pressed the button.

The footman immediately appeared. "Lüdecke, call Friedrich to help you take down that picture."

"Friedrich has gone to the station, your Excellency," Lüdecke permitted himself to remark.

"Yes, of course everything is topsy-turvy; nothing is as it has been used to be. 'Coming events cast their shadows before.' It will always be so now," sighed the Countess.

"I will help you take down the picture, Lüdecke," Herr von Sydow said, quietly, and before the Countess could look around there was nothing save a broad expanse of light cretonne and two hooks upon the wall where the Böcklin had hung.

Lüdecke's strength sufficed to carry the picture from the room.

"Bring in tea," the Countess called after him. "You will take a cup of tea with me, Goswyn?"

"Are you not going to wait for the young Countess?" Sydow asked, rather timidly.

"Oh, she will not be here before midnight. I don't know why Friedrich has gone at this hour to the station; probably he is in love with the young person at the railway restaurant; else I cannot understand his hurry. However, I thank you for your admonition."

"But, my dear Countess----" exclaimed the young man.

"No need to excuse yourself," she cut short what he was about to say. "I am not displeased: you have never displeased me, except by not having arranged matters so as to come into the world as my son. Moreover, I should seriously regret the loss of your good opinion. Pray forgive me for not driving myself to the railway station to meet my grand-daughter and to edify the officials with a touching and effective scene. Consider, this is my last comfortable evening."

"Your last comfortable evening," Goswyn von Sydow repeated, thoughtfully.

"Now you disapprove of me again," the old Countess complained, ironically.

"Disapprove!" he repeated, with an ineffective attempt to laugh at the word. "Really, Countess, if I did not know how kind-hearted you are, I should be sorry for your grand-daughter."

Ho cleared his throat several times as he spoke; he always became a little hoarse when speaking directly from his heart.

"Kind-hearted,--kind-hearted," the old lady murmured, provoked; "pray don't put me off with compliments. What sort of word is 'kind-hearted'? One has weak nerves just as one has an aching tooth, and one does all that one can to spare them; all the little woes one perceives one relieves, if possible,--of course it is very disagreeable not to relieve them,--but the intense misery with which the world is filled one simply forgets, and is none the worse for so doing. You know it is not my fashion to deceive myself as to the beauty of my own character. You are sorry for my grand-daughter."

He would have assured her that he spoke conditionally, but she would not allow him to do so. "Yes, you are sorry for my grand-daughter," she said, decidedly, "but are you not at all sorry for me?"

"Upon that point you must allow me to express myself when I have made acquaintance with the young Countess."

"That has very little to do with it," rejoined the old lady. "Let us take it for granted that she is charming. Doctor Herbegg says she is a jewel of the purest water, lacking nothing but a little polish; between ourselves, I do not altogether believe him. He exaggerated my grand-daughter's attractions a little to make it easy for me to receive her. He is a good man, but, like two-thirds of the men who are worth anything,"--with a significant side-glance at Sydow,--"a little of a prig. But let us take for granted that my grand-daughter is the phœnix he describes, it is none the less true that on her account I must, in my old age, alter my comfortable mode of life, and subject myself to the thousand petty annoyances which the presence of a young girl in my house is sure to bring with it. Do you know how I felt when my indispensable old donkey"--the Countess Lenzdorff was wont frequently to designate thus her old footman Lüdecke--"carried out my Böcklin?" She fixed her eyes sadly upon the bare place on the wall. "I felt as if he were dragging out with it all the comforts of my daily life! Ah, here is the tea."

"It has been here for some time," Sydow said, smiling. "I was just about to call your attention to the kettle, which is boiling over."

She made the tea with extreme precision. It was delightful to see the beautiful old lady presiding over the old-fashioned silver tray with its contents. She wore on this evening a white tulle cap tied beneath the chin, and over it an exquisite little black lace scarf. A refined Epicurean nature revealed itself in her every movement,--in the delicate grace with which she handled the transparent teacups and measured the tea from its dainty caddy,--in the gusto with which she inhaled the aroma of this very choice brand of tea.

"There!" she said, handing the young officer a cup, "you may not agree with my views of life, but you must praise my tea, which is in fact much too good for you, who follow the vile German custom of spoiling it with sugar."

She herself had put in the sugar for him, taking care to give him just as much as he liked; she handed him a plate, and offered him the delicate wafers which she knew he preferred. She was excessively kind to him, and he valued her; he was cordially attached to her; she had been his mother's oldest friend; she had spoiled him from boyhood, and had, as she said, "thought the world of him." This could not but please any man. He appreciated so highly her kindness and thoughtfulness that until to-night the selfishness of which she boasted, and by which she had laid down the rules of her life, had seemed to him little more than amusing eccentricity. But to-night her attitude towards her grandchild grieved him. Not that he regarded this grandchild from a romantic point of view. He was no unpractical dreamer, nor even what is usually called an idealist, which means in German nothing except a muddled brain that deems it quite improper to hold clear views upon any subject or to look any reality boldly in the face. On the contrary, he had a very calm and sensible way of regarding matters. Consequently he thought it probable that the poor, neglected young girl, left for three years to the care of a boorish step-father, awkward and tactless as she must be under the circumstances, would be anything but a suitable addition to the household of the Countess Lenzdorff; but, good heavens! the girl was the old lady's flesh and blood, a poor thing who had lost her mother three years previously and had had no one to speak a kind word to her since. If the poor creature were ill-bred and neglected, whose fault was it, in fact? It passed his power of comprehension that the old lady should feel nothing save the inconvenience and annoyance of the situation, that she should be stirred by no emotion of pity.

Perhaps she guessed his thoughts,--she was skilled in divining the thoughts of others,--but she cared nothing about shocking people; on the contrary, she rather liked to do so.

When he picked up one of the books on her table she said, "None of your namby-pamby literature, Goswyn, but a bright, witty book. Tell me, do you think that in my grand-daughter's honour I ought to lock up all my entertaining books and subscribe to the 'Children's Friend'?"

"Let us take for granted that your grand-daughter has not contracted the habit of dipping into every book she sees lying about," Goswyn observed.

"Let us hope so," she said, with a laugh; "but who knows? For three years she has been

without any one to look after her, and probably she has already devoured her precious step-father's entire library."

"Oh, Countess!"

"What would you have? Such cases do occur. Look at your sister-in-law Dorothea: she told me, with an air of great satisfaction, that before her marriage she had read all Belot."

"She avowed the same thing to me just after she came home from her wedding journey, and she seemed to think it very clever," replied Goswyn, slowly.

"H'm! the wicked fairy always asserts that you were in love with your sister-in-law," the old lady said, archly menacing him with her forefinger.

"Indeed? I should like to know upon what my aunt Brock founds her assertion," the young man rejoined, coldly.

"Why, upon the intense dislike you always parade for your pretty sister-in-law," the Countess said, with a laugh.

"I do not parade it at all."

"But you feel it."

Goswyn von Sydow had risen from his chair. "It is very late," he said, picking up his cap.

"I have not driven you away with my poor jests?" the old lady inquired, as she also rose.

"No," he replied,--"at least not for long: if you will permit me, my dear Countess, I will call upon you in the autumn."

"And until then----?"

"I shall not have that pleasure, unfortunately; I leave with the General to-morrow for Kiel, and came to-night only to bid you good-bye. When I return I shall hardly find you still in Berlin."

"Indeed? I am sorry," she replied, "first because I really like to see you from time to time, although you entertain antiquated views of life and always disapprove of me, and secondly because I had hoped you would help me a little in my grand-daughter's education. Of course if she has already perused all Belot----"

"It would suit you precisely, Countess," he said, rallying her, "for then you could--h'm--hang up your Böcklin in its old place."

"What an idea!" cried the Countess. "But you are quite mistaken: I should be furious if my grand-daughter should be found to have read all Belot's works."

"Indeed?"

"Of course; because then there would be absolutely no hope of your taking the child off my hands."

He frowned.

"Do you understand me?" the old lady asked, gaily.

"Partly."

"Unfortunately, you seem to have very little desire for matrimony."

"I confess that for the present it is but faint."

"Let us hope that this mysterious Erika will be charming enough to----"

Suddenly she turned her head: a carriage was rolling along Bellevue Street, already deserted at this hour because of the lateness of the season. It stopped before the house. The old lady started, grew visibly paler, and compressed her lips.

The hall door opened; the servants ran down the staircase.

"Good night, Countess!" Goswyn touched the delicate old hand with his lips and hurried away.

On the staircase he encountered a tall slender girl in the most unbecoming mourning attire that he had ever seen a human being wear, and with gloves so much too short that they revealed a pair of slightly-reddened wrists. He touched his cap, and bowed profoundly.

He carried into the street with him an impression in his heart of something pale, slender, immature, pathetic, concealing the germ of great beauty.

He could not forget the distress in the eyes that had looked out from the pale oval face. He recalled the coldly-sneering old woman in the room he had left, with her disdain of all emotion. He knew how she would be repelled by the red wrists and the disfiguring gown. "Poor thing!" he said to himself.

In thoughtful mood he walked along a path in the Thiergarten. All around reigned silence. The sweet vigour of the spring-time was wafted from the soil, from the trees, from every tender soft unfolding leaf. In the gentle light of countless sparkling stars the feathery young foliage gleamed with a ghostly pallor; here and there a lantern shone, a spot of yellow light in the dimness, colouring the grass and leaves about it arsenic-green.

No people were here who had anything to do; only here and there a pair of lovers were strolling in the warm shade of the spring night.

The insistent rhythm of some popular dance interrupted the yearning music of spring which was sighing through the half-open leaves and blossoms. The noise annoyed him, reminding him unpleasantly of the cynicism with which unsuccessful men are wont to vaunt the bitterness of their existence.

He had walked far out of his way, into the midst of the Thiergarten.

More lovers; another pair,--and still another.

Except for them the place was deserted, silent: above were the glimmering stars, and on the earth below them the tall trees full of life, striving upward to the light; everywhere breathed the fragrance of fresh young growth, mingled with the aroma of last year's decaying leaves; the thrill of life around, with the echo in the distance of the vulgar dance-music.

He could not have told how or why it was, but Sydow was more than ever conscious to-night of the discord sounding through creation, vainly seeking, as it has done for centuries, for its solution.

And in the midst of his discontent there arose within him the memory of the haunting distress in the young girl's large eyes, and he was filled with warm, eager compassion for the poor, forlorn creature for whom there was no one to care. He would have liked to take the child in his arms and soothe her distress as one would have petted a bird fallen from the nest, or a truant, beaten dog.

CHAPTER V.

The Countess Lenzdorff had gone to meet her granddaughter as far as the vestibule, which was hung with Japanese crape and lighted by red Venetian lanterns in wrought-iron frames.

She had been convinced from the first that the brilliant description which Doctor Herbegg had given of her grand-daughter was not to be trusted, and she had consequently moderated her expectations, but yet she was startled at what she encountered in the vestibule, the door of which the ever-ready Lüdecke had left open. At first she thought that the tall spare girl in that gown was her grand-daughter's attendant; but since behind the awkward creature whose clothes were all awry stalked a broad-shouldered female grenadier with a woollen kerchief on her head and a pasteboard bandbox in her hand, she doubted no longer which was her grand-daughter: it was not necessary for Doctor Herbegg to present the girl to her with, "Here is the young Countess, your Excellency."

She advanced a step and touched the girl's forehead with her lips.

"Welcome to Berlin, dear child," she said, coldly. This, then, was her grand-daughter,--this angular creature with red wrists and a servant who wore a woollen kerchief on her head and carried in her hand an archaic pasteboard bandbox. The Countess shuddered. "Will you have a cup of tea, my dear Doctor?" she said, turning to her lawyer with the hope of putting a little life into the situation. Then, seeing him look at her with something of the dismay in his expression which Goswyn von Sydow's features had shown when she had complained that this was to be her last comfortable evening, she added, hastily, "You will not? Well, you are right; it is late; another time, my dear Herbegg, you will do me the pleasure; and I--I could hardly remain with you; I am too--too desirous of making acquaintance with my grand-daughter."

The last words came with something of a stumble, as if the Countess had been obliged to give them a push before they would leave her lips.

The Doctor took a ceremonious leave. Minna, with her bandbox, which she refused to allow any one to take from her, was conducted by a footman to the servants' hall, the Countess Lenzdorff having informed her that her own maid would attend for this evening to her young mistress's wants. Erika followed her grandmother through several brilliantly-lighted apartments, the arrangement of which produced upon her the impression of a fairy-tale, to an airy little room adjoining the old Countess's sleeping-apartment.

"This is your room," said Countess Lenzdorff. "I had your bed put for the present in my dressing-room; it is the best arrangement, and--and I--I think I would rather have you close at hand. Of course it is all provisionary: I do not even know yet what is to be done with you, whether--whether you will stay with me, or go for a while to some school. At any rate, for the present you must try to feel comfortable with me."

Comfortable! It was asking much of the girl that she should feel comfortable under the circumstances! She wanted to say something: it annoyed her to have to play the part of a dunce,--her poor, youthful pride rebelled against it,--but she said not a word; she had to summon up all her resolution to keep back the tears that would well up to her eyes. With the slow stony gaze of one who is determined not to cry, she looked about her upon her new surroundings.

How airy and fragrant, how bright and fresh and inviting, it all was! But in the midst of this Paradise she stood, trembling with fatigue, sore in soul and body, timid and sad, with but one wish,--that she might creep away somewhere into the dark.

â?¢ Her grandmother perceived something of the girl's suffering, but still could not overcome her own distaste. "Will you dress first, or have some supper immediately?" she asked, with an evident effort to be kind. As she spoke, her bright eyes scanned the girl from head to foot. Poor Erika! She understood only too clearly that her grandmother was disappointed in her, that personally she was in no respect what the old lady had hoped for.

"I should like to brush off some of this dust," she stammered, meekly. Her voice was remarkably soft and sweet, and her accent brought a reminiscence of the Austrian intonation, so much admired in Berlin.

For the first time the Countess's heart was moved in favour of the young creature; some chord within her vibrated agreeably. "Well, my child, do just as you like," she said, rather more warmly, as she made an attempt to unfasten the top button of the ugly black garment that so disfigured her grand-daughter. With a shy gesture Erika raised her hands and held her poor gown together over her breast. There was something in the gesture that touched the old lady. "You may go," she said to the maid, who had meanwhile been unpacking Erika's travelling-bag. "I will ring for you when we want you." Then, turning to Erika, she added, "I will help you myself to undress."

Erika's sensations can hardly be described. Apart from the fact that in consequence of her intense shyness, the shyness of a very strong, pure nature bred in solitude, it was terrible to her even to take off her gown in the presence of a stranger, it suddenly seemed very hard to her (she had not thought of it at first) to expose to her grandmother's penetrating gaze the poverty of her wardrobe. She trembled from head to foot as her grandmother drew down her gown from her shoulders. But, strange to say, it almost seemed as if with the ugly dress some sort of barrier of separation between herself and her grandmother were removed. The old lady's bright eyes were dimmed by a certain emotion as she noticed the coarse, ill-made, but daintily white linen shift that left bare a small portion of the young, half-developed shoulders. "Poor thing!" she murmured, the words coming for the first time warm from her heart. Then, stroking the girl's long, slender, nobly-modelled arm, she said, "How fair you are! I only begin now to see what you look like." She lifted the heavy knot of shining hair from the back of Erika's neck, and, in an access of that absence of mind for which she was noted in the Berlin world of society, exclaimed, "*Mais elle est magnifique!*--In three years she will be a beauty!--Turn your head a little to the left."

Her grand-daughter's stare of dismay recalled her. "What would Goswyn say if he heard me?" she thought, and smiled.

Erika had only bathed her face and hands, and slipped on a long white dressing-gown of her grandmother's, when the maid brought in a waiter with her supper. In spite of her continued sense of discomfort, youth demanded its rights. She was decidedly hungry, and it was long since she had seen anything so inviting as this dainty repast. She sat down and began to eat.

The old Countess observed her narrowly, but saw nothing to displease her. Her grandchild's manner of eating and drinking, of holding her fork, her glass of water,--all was just as it should be.

The whole thing seemed odd to the Countess Lenzdorff: she delighted in everything odd.

Not to disturb the girl at her repast, she looked away from her, glancing at the contents of the shabby old travelling-bag which the maid had unpacked. How poverty-stricken it all looked, in almost ridiculous--no, in positively pathetic--contrast with the young creature who in spite of her awkwardness had a regal air. "*Mais elle est superbe!* Where were my eyes?" the Countess thought, as she casually picked up a book from among Erika's belongings. It was a volume of

Plutarch. "'Tis comical enough," she thought, "if I am to have a little blue-stocking in the house."

As she turned over the leaves rather absently, she noticed that passages here and there were encircled by thick pencil-marks: sometimes an entire page would be thus marked, sometimes only a few lines.

"What does that mean?" she asked.

"My mother always used to mark so in my books the parts that I must not read," Erika said, simply.

The Countess's eyes flashed. How sure a way to lead a child to taste the forbidden fruit!--or was it possible that girls growing up in the country under the exclusive influence of a mother might be differently constituted from girls in cities and boarding-schools?

"And you really did not read those portions?" she asked, half smiling.

The girl's face grew dark. "How could I?" she exclaimed, almost angrily.

"Brava!" cried her grandmother, patting her grandchild's shoulder. "You are an honourable little lady,--a very great rarity. We shall get along very well together."

But, far from the girl's expressing any pleasure at this frank recognition of her excellence, her face did not relax one whit.

Erika had gone to bed. Countess Lenzdorff was still up and pacing her chamber to and fro. She thoroughly understood the full significance of her granddaughter's being with her; she was neither heartless nor complaining, but, where emotion was concerned, a sensitive old woman who studiously avoided everything that could agitate her nerves. But at present she could not control her emotion; feeling awoke within her as from a long sleep. At first she was conscious only of a vague discomfort,--a strange sensation which she ascribed to nervousness that must be controlled; but, far from being controlled, it increased, growing stronger until it became a positive hunger of the heart.

The self-dissatisfaction which had begun to torment her when she learned that Erika after her mother's death had been entirely uncared for, left alone with her step-father, now increased tenfold. It was the fault of the Pole, who had not notified her of his wife's death. But this excuse did not content her. How could she blame him? What had he done save follow her example in caring only for his own personal ease?

The unkindness with which she had treated her daughter-in-law now troubled her more than her loveless neglect of her grandchild. Had she any right to despise and cast her off because of her weakness? Good heavens! she was a rare creature in spite of everything; she had shown herself so in her child's education. What an influence she must have exercised over the girl to preserve her from deterioration through those terrible three years. Poor Emma! The old Countess's heart grew heavy as she recalled her. Her injustice to the poor woman dated from years back. She could not deny it.

She had never been fond of her daughter-in-law: each differed too fundamentally from the other. On the one hand was Anna Lenzdorff, with her keenly observant mind, self-interested even in her strict morality which in her arrogance she regarded as the necessity of her nature for moral purity and independence, something for which she claimed no merit, since she practised it solely for her private satisfaction; good-natured, but without enthusiasm, endlessly but lovelessly indulgent to humanity, and rather of opinion that life is nothing but a farce with a tragic conclusion, something out of which the most advantage may be gained by observing it from a safe, comfortable corner, without ever making an attempt to mingle in its activities, firmly convinced that the best conduct of life consists in acknowledging its glaring contradictions, its lack of harmony, in making use of palliatives where they are of use, and in postponing for as long as possible the facing of the huge deficit sure to appear at the close of every human existence. And on the other hand was Emma,--Emma, who had a positive horror of the philosophy of life, which her mother-in-law with easy indifference denominated "my laughing despair,"--Emma, who believed in everything, in God and in humanity,--yes, even, as her mother-in-law maintained, in the cure of leprosy and the disinterestedness of English politics,--Emma, for whom an existence in which she could take no active part was devoid of interest, and who looked upon a loveless life as worse than death,--Emma, whose unselfishness bordered upon fanaticism, blinding her conscience for a moment now and then, when she would have given to one person what she had no right to take from others,--Emma, utterly unable to appreciate proportion and moderation, and who, scorning all the palliatives and make shifts with which one eases existence, demanded from life absolute happiness, and consequently, dazzled by an illusion, plunged blindly into an abyss.

Ah, if it had been only an abyss! but no, it was a slough, and Anna Lenzdorff could not traverse it.

It certainly was strange that she, who found an excuse for every criminal of whom she read in the papers, had never been able to forgive her daughter-in-law when, thanks to her inborn thirst

for the romantic, she forgot herself so far as to adore that Polish nonentity. What in the world could a woman of sense find in romance?

When Anna von Rhödern, at twenty-two, had married Count Ernst Lenzdorff, her views of life were in great measure the same that she had since elaborated so perfectly. She was of Courland descent, and the daughter of a prominent diplomat in the Russian service. Unlike her daughter-in-law, she had been a courted beauty, but at two-and-twenty she had turned her back upon all the sentimental possibilities to which in virtue of her great charm she had a right, and had married Count Lenzdorff, whose entire part in her existence she afterwards summed up in declaring that he really had bored her very little. And that, she maintained, was a great deal in a husband.

She had become acquainted with him in Paris, where he was secretary to the Prussian legation, and she married him there; afterwards he took up his abode in Berlin, where he held a distinguished position in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. In moments of insolent frankness she was wont to describe him as an automaton whose key was in the possession of whoever might be Minister of Foreign Affairs. Once wound up, he could perform all the duties of his office during the few hours in which they were required of him; when they were over he was a lifeless wooden figure-head--nothing more. A wooden figure-head whom one is obliged to drag after one in life conduces but little to one's comfort, especially when the wooden figure-head is of the dimensions of Count Ernst Lenzdorff, and of this his wife shortly became aware. With great courtesy and skill she removed him from her life as soon as possible, placing him somewhere in the background upon a suitable pedestal,--the best place for wooden figureheads, and one where they can be made to look very effective.

The Countess's only son was the very image of his father, and quite as imposingly wooden.

If Emma, following her mother-in-law's example, could have courteously and respectfully put him upon a pedestal in some corner where he would not have been in her way, she might have led a very tolerable life with him. The mistake was that she attempted to make him happy.

Poor Emma! As if one possibly could make a wooden figure-head happy! Young Count Lenzdorff was extremely uncomfortable in view of his wife's exertions to make him happy. What ensued was of a very unedifying character: from being simply a state of contented indifference, the marriage became a decidedly irksome bond. Nevertheless it was most unfortunate for Emma when Edmund Lenzdorff, two years after their marriage, lost his life in a railway accident. Had he lived, her existence might at least have been a quiet one; in time she would have relinquished her ill-judged attempts to make him happy, and have found an object in life in the education of her child; while, as it was, he was no sooner dead than her existence began to totter uncertainly, like a ship from which the ballast has been removed.

At first she sickened, as her mother-in-law expressed it, with an attack of acute philanthropy. She haunted the most disreputable corners of Berlin in search of cases of misery to be relieved, never allowing a servant to accompany her, because, as she explained, it might humiliate the poor. Upon one of her excursions her watch was snatched from her, and another time she caught spotted fever. This was very annoying to the Countess Anna, but she forgave her, with--as she was wont to declare--praiseworthy courage, in view of the terrible disease.

Six months afterwards Emma married Strachinsky; and this her mother-in-law did not forgive her.

Since then fourteen years had passed, fourteen years during which she had had nothing whatever to do with poor Emma. And now she was sorry.

Again and again did the Countess Anna revert to the education given to the young girl asleep in the next room.

A woman who could so educate her child, and who could continue so to influence her after her death, was no ordinary character.

Of course she had had fine material to work upon. And the old Countess was conscious of an emotion never awakened within her by her son, yet now aroused by her grand-daughter,--pride in her own flesh and blood. "A splendid creature!" she murmured to herself once or twice, then adding, with a sneer at her own lack of perception, "and I was fool enough to think her ugly at first. Whom does she resemble? she is not in the least like her mother,--nor like my son!" Still pondering, she paused in her monotonous pacing to and fro, strangely thrilled. Going to an antique buhl cabinet with a multitude of drawers, she opened one of them,--a secret drawer, which had long been undisturbed,--and began to look through its contents. At last she found what she sought, a lithograph representing a young girl, *décolletée*, and with the huge sleeves in fashion in 1830. A very charming young girl the picture portrayed,--Countess Lenzdorff when she was still Anna von Rhödern.

The little faded picture trembled in the old lady's hand: it worked upon her like a spell, carrying her back to a time long forgotten,--a time when life had been to her something different from a farce with a tragic ending, by which one might be vastly entertained, but in which one should scorn to play a part. She was suddenly deeply pained at sight of the beautiful, grave,

proud young face: it suggested to her something that had begun very finely and ended in unutterable bitterness, something through which the best and most genial part of her had been destroyed, or at least paralyzed. Hark! What was that? A low, suppressed sob! another! They came from the adjoining room. The old Countess dropped the little picture, and, with a candle in her hand, went to her grand-daughter's bedside. When she heard her grandmother coming, Erika closed her eyes, feigning sleep, but she had not time to wipe away the tears from her cheeks.

Her grandmother set the candle upon the table, and then, bending over the girl, whispered, softly, "Erika!" Erika did not stir. How pathetic she looked!--pale and thin, and yet so noble and charming in spite of the traces of tears.

The Countess sat down upon the edge of the bed and stroked the girl's wet cheeks. "Erika, my darling, what is the matter? Are you homesick?"

Then Erika opened her large eyes and looked gloomily at her grandmother. She answered not a word, but compressed her lips. How could her grandmother ask her if she was homesick, when all that she had of home was a grave?

For one moment the old Countess hesitated; then, lifting the reluctant girl from the pillows, she clasped her to her breast, pressing her lips upon the golden head, and murmuring softly, "Forgive me, my child, forgive me!" For one moment Erika's obstinate resistance was maintained; then she began to sob convulsively; and then--then her grandmother felt the slender form nestle close within her arms, while the weary young head fell upon her shoulder and a sensation of sweet, young warmth penetrated to the Countess's very heart, which suddenly grew quite heavy with tenderness.

Erika was soon sound asleep, but her grandmother still felt no desire to retire to rest. "I will write to Goswyn," she said to herself. "I must tell him she is charming, and that I will make her happy."

CHAPTER VI.

Nine months had passed since Erika's arrival in Berlin. She had travelled much with her grandmother, passing the time in Schlangenbad, Gastein, and the Riviera. As soon as she had become further acquainted with her, Countess Anna had relinquished all thoughts of sending her grand-daughter to a boarding-school. "What could you gain from a boarding-school?" she said. "H'm! Have your corners rubbed off? In my opinion that would be matter of regret. And as for your education, there's too much already in that head of yours for a girl of your age; but that we can't alter, and must make allowance for." And she tapped Erika on the cheek, and looked at her with eyes beaming with pride.

Erika had come to be the centre of her existence, her idol, the most entertaining toy she had ever possessed, the most precious jewel she had ever worn. Moreover, she was the late-awakened poetry of her life, the transfigured resurrection of her own youth. That was all very natural: she was not the first grand-mother in the world who had thought her grand-daughter a phenomenon; and it would have mattered little in any wise if she had not thought it necessary to impress her grand-daughter with the high opinion she entertained of her. Everything that she could do to turn the young girl's head she did, all out of pure inconsequence and love of talking, because never in her life had she been able to keep anything to herself. For in fact she was as unwise as she was clever: her cleverness was an article of luxury, something with which she entertained herself and others, with which she theoretically arranged the most complex combination of circumstances, but which never helped her over the simplest disturbance of her daily life. She was thoroughly unpractical, and was aware of it, without understanding why it was so. Since she could not alter it,--indeed, she never tried to,--she evaded every difficult problem of existence, with the Epicurean love of ease which was her only enduring rule of conduct. Her affection for Erika was now part of her egotism. She was never weary of exulting in the girl's beauty and brilliant qualities; she felt every annoyance experienced by her grand-daughter as a personal pang, every triumph as homage paid to herself; but she never thought of the responsibility she had assumed towards this lovely blossom unfolding in such luxuriance. She was convinced that Erika's life would develop of itself just as her own had done, and in this conviction she felt not the slightest compunction in spoiling the girl from morning until night, and in absolutely forcing her to consider herself the centre of the universe.

With almost equal impatience grandmother and grand-daughter awaited the moment when Erika should enchant the world of Berlin society.

And now it was the beginning of February, and the first Wednesday-afternoon reception of Countess Anna Lenzdorff after her return from Italy. She, whose social indolence had long been proverbial, had sent out numerous cards, many of them to people who had long since supposed themselves forgotten by her. All this, too, without any idea of as yet introducing her granddaughter to society, but simply that people "might have a glimpse of her."

As a result of the Countess Anna's suddenly developed amiability towards Berlin society, this reception was largely attended. Erika presided at the tea-table in a toilette of studied simplicity and with a regal self-consciousness due to the enthusiasm which her grandmother displayed for her various charms, but which the girl had the good taste to conceal beneath an attractive air of modesty. She did not rattle her teacups awkwardly, she upset no cream, she never pressed a guest to take what had once been declined; in short, she committed none of the blunders so frequently the consequence of shyness in young novices; and she was, as her grandmother expressed it, simply "wonderful." Full forty times the old lady had presented "my granddaughter," with the same proud intonation, observing narrowly the impression produced upon each guest,--an impression almost sure to be one of pleased surprise; whereupon Countess Lenzdorff--the same Countess Lenzdorff who had been always ready to ridicule, and to ridicule nothing more unsparingly than the mutual admiration characteristic of German families--would begin, in a loud whisper of which not one word escaped Erika's ears, to enumerate her grandchild's unusual attractions: "What do you think of this child who has dropped from the skies into my house to brighten my old age? 'Tis my usual luck, is it not? A charming creature; and what a carriage! Just observe her profile,--now, when she turns her head,--and the line of the cheek and throat. And to think that I was actually reluctant to receive the child! Oh, I treated her shamefully; but I am atoning to her for the past. I spoil her a little; but how can I help it? I thought it would be such a bore to have a young girl in the house, but, on the contrary, she makes me young again. No need to stoop to her intellectually: she is interested in everything. At first I was going to send her to school. H'm! there is more in that golden head of hers than behind the blue spectacles of all the school-mistresses in Germany. And that is not what interests me most: she has a certain frank honesty of nature that enchants me. Oh, she certainly is remarkable."

There the Countess Lenzdorff was right,--Erika was remarkable,--but she was wrong in parading the child before her acquaintances: first because it bored her acquaintances,--when are we ever entertained by listening to the praises of somebody whom we hardly know?--and again because her exaggerated laudation of her grandchild excited the antagonism of her listeners. On this first reception-day she laid the foundation of the unpopularity from which Erika was to suffer long afterwards.

The afternoon was nearing its close; the lamps were lit; three or four ladies only, all in black,--the court was in mourning at the time,--were still sitting in the cosiest corner of the drawing-room. Close by the hearth sat a tiny old lady, Frau von Norbin, *née* Princess Nimbsch, with a delicately chiselled face framed in silver-gray curls, a face the colour of a faded rose-leaf, and with a thin clear voice that sounded like an antique musical clock and seemed to come from far away. She was about ten years older than Countess Anna, but had been one of her most intimate friends from childhood, belonging also to an old Courland family, which had given the Vienna Congress a good deal of trouble. She had known Talleyrand in her youth, and had corresponded with Chateaubriand. Countess Lenzdorff had a water-colour sketch of her as a young girl with a wreath of vine-leaves on her head, her hair hanging about her shoulders in Bacchante fashion, and with very bare arms holding aloft a tambourine. The rococo sentiment of the faded sketch contrasted strangely with the old lady's dignified decrepitude and poetically softened charm.

Opposite her, and evidently very desirous to stand well with her, sat a certain Frau von Geroldstein, wife of a wealthy merchant who had purchased a patent of nobility in one of the petty German states, without, as he learned too late, acquiring any court privileges for his wife. Indignant at the pettiness of the German sovereign in duodecimo, he had established himself in Berlin, where his wife hoped to find a suitable stage for her social efforts. She had been there three years without finding any aristocratic coigne of vantage for her pretensions; in despair she had fallen back upon celebrities, artists, professors, politicians (even democrats), to lend a certain splendour to her *salon*. After at last finding her aristocratic vantage-ground at a watering-place in the shape of a General's widow, with debts, and a daughter of forty whom she alleged to be twenty-four, she annoyed her old acquaintances extremely. It was the business of her life to extort forgiveness from society for having once invited Eugene Richter to her house. Society never forgives, but it sometimes forgets if it be convenient to do so. It began to find it convenient to forget all sorts of things about Frau von Geroldstein, not only her political acquaintances, but also that her husband had made his fortune by furnishing army-supplies of doubtful quality.

Frau von Geroldstein was so available, and was besides so ready to make any concessions required of her. She threw Eugene Richter overboard, and developed a touching enthusiasm for the court chaplain Dryander. She bombarded society with invitations to dinners which were excellent, and at which one was sure to meet no undesirable individuals. She paid endless visits, and possessed in fullest measure the article most indispensable to the career of social aspirants,--a very thick skin.

She was about twenty-five years old, and was gifted by nature with a very small waist, which she pinched in to the stifling-point, and with a face which would have been pretty had it not given the impression, as did everything else about her, of artificiality. Of course her court mourning

was trimmed with three times as much crape as that of any other lady present; and today she had made it her special business to win the favour of little Frau von Norbin. She had offered her three things already,--her riding-horse for Frau von Norbin's daughter, her lawn-tennis ground (she had a wonderful garden behind her house, which no one used), and her opera-box; but Frau von Norbin's manner was still coldly reserved. At last Frau von Geroldstein discovered from a remark of Countess Lenzdorff's that the old lady's principal interest lay in a children's hospital of which she was the chief patroness. Frau von Geroldstein instantly declared that the improvement of the health of the children of the poor was positively all that she cared for in life: when might she visit the hospital? Countess Lenzdorff smiled somewhat maliciously when Frau von Norbin, caught at last by this benevolent birdlime, plunged into a conversation with Frau von Geroldstein upon the most practical mode of nursing children.

Meanwhile, Countess Lenzdorff turned for amusement to a young maid of honour, a charming person, whose delicate sense of humour had been uninjured by the debilitating atmosphere of the court, and who was now detailing the latest misfortunes of a certain Countess Ida von Brock.

This Countess Brock was a notorious figure in Berlin society. She was usually called the twelfth fairy, since she was frequently omitted in the invitations to some social 'high mass' (the word was of Countess Lenzdorff's invention) and was then sure to appear uninvited and to do all kinds of mischief by her malicious gossip. Every winter she looked out for fresh lions for her menagerie, as her *salon* was called in familiar conversation,--for artists sufficiently well bred to consort with men of fashion, and for men of fashion sufficiently intelligent to appreciate artists. Since, thanks to her numberless eccentricities and indiscretions, she had quarrelled with all sorts of people, she was always obliged to entreat a few influential friends to procure for her her anthropological curiosities. Some time ago she had applied to Countess Lenzdorff to provide her with 'twelve witty Counts,'--an order which Countess Lenzdorff had declined to fill, upon the plea that the supply was just then exhausted.

During the previous winter the glory of her *salon* had been a hypnotizer, a young American for whom the Countess Ida had been wildly enthusiastic.

Mr. Van Tromp was his name; he had a dome-like forehead, and he cost nothing; he was quite ready to sacrifice his time without pay for the pleasure of mingling in good society,--a pleasure more highly prized by an American, as is well known, than by any European aspirant. At the close of the season the Countess's footman had unfortunately put aqua-fortis in the chambermaid's tea, and, as the Countess ascribed the crime to the influence of Van Tromp, she straightway relinquished her hypnotic pastime, the more willingly as most of her other guests considered it a rather dangerous game.

Van Tromp was informed of this when he next visited the Countess. He acquiesced in her decision, and amiably and unselfishly hoped that without any further exercise of his peculiar talent she would allow him to visit her 'as a friend.' Countess Brock, however, wrote him a note thanking him for his great kindness, but at the same time insisting that she could not possibly allow him to waste his time at her house; the people frequenting it were in fact quite too insignificant to associate with so great a man as himself.

This mode of turning out of doors people whom she could no longer make use of she called treating them with delicacy and tact. What Mr. Van Tromp thought of it is not known: he revenged himself, however, by writing a book upon Berlin society, which, as it was full of scandalous stories and appeared anonymously, lived through twenty-five editions.

With a view of making her Thursday evenings attractive this year, Countess Brock had determined to have some one of her favourite modern dramas read aloud at each of them, and had engaged the services of a handsome young actor with a broad chest and a strong voice as reader. The readings had begun the previous week with a German translation of Dumas' "*Femme de Claude*."

The young maid of honour had been present, and she declared it "comical beyond description."

There were several young girls among the audience, and scarcely had the handsome young actor with the powerful voice reached the middle of the second act when there was a rustling in the assembly, caused by a mother's conducting her daughter from the room. This went on all through the evening. Whilst the reader pursued his way with enthusiasm, each scene frightened away some two or three delicate-minded individuals, until the hostess found herself left almost entirely alone with the handsome young actor and a few gentlemen. "I persisted in remaining," the maid of honour continued, amid the laughter of her audience, "but I assure you----"

At this moment the servant announced "Frau Countess Brock," and there entered a woman of medium height, in a large high-shouldered seal-skin coat, for which departure from the prescribed court mourning a long crape veil atoned, a wonder of a veil, draped picturesquely over a Mary Stuart bonnet and hanging down over a slightly-bent back. Her grizzled hair was arranged above her forehead in curls, and her face, which must once have been handsome, was disfigured by affected contortions, sometimes grotesque, sometimes malicious, often both together.

Countess Lenzdorff immediately presented her niece to the new-comer, but the 'wicked fairy'

paid no heed, and Erika made her a graceful courtesy which she did not see. She gave additional proof of near-sightedness by almost sitting down upon Frau von Norbin, and by mistaking Frau von Geroldstein for a distinguished authoress aged seventy.

Frau von Norbin smiled good-naturedly, and Frau von Geroldstein declared the blunder delicious. Privately she was furious, not at being mistaken for an aged woman, but at being supposed to be an authoress. However, she could endure it, since she had arranged a visit with Frau von Norbin to the children's hospital for the next afternoon. That was a triumph, at all events.

"H'm! h'm! what were you all laughing at when I came in?" asked the 'wicked fairy,' taking a seat beside Countess Lenzdorff.

Upon which a rather embarrassed silence ensued, and she went on with a sigh: "At my disaster, of course. Yes, yes, I know, Clara,"--this to the maid of honour,--"you will tell the *désastre* to all Berlin. It was terrible!--Oh, thanks, no,"--this with a polite grin to Erika, who offered her a cup of tea. "That frightful actor!" she wailed, raising her black-gloved hands, palms outward,--a gesture peculiarly her own and used to express the climax of despair. "I have already denounced him to our principal managers: he never will get any position in a Berlin theatre. Think of his insolence in reading my guests out of my drawing-room and showing me up as a lover of questionable literature."

"Was the drama one of his selection?" asked Countess Lenzdorff.

"No; I chose it myself. But, good heavens! the piece was of no importance. The mode of delivery was everything. All he had to do was to skip lightly over the questionable parts; instead of which he fairly roared them in the faces of my guests."

"Evidently he liked them best," the maid of honour said, with a laugh.

"Of course," the 'wicked fairy' went on, indignantly; "these people have neither tact nor sense of decency. Well, I have forbidden the man my house for the future."

"Like Mr. Van Tromp," Countess Lenzdorff interposed.

"Oh, I am too easily imposed upon," Countess Brock sighed. "The worst of it is that I have nothing now in prospect for my Thursdays."

"I saw in the newspaper that a couple of almehs on their way from Paris to Petersburg are to appear at Kroll's," Countess Lenzdorff observed, maliciously: "you might hire them for an evening."

"That would be against the law," remarked Frau von Geroldstein, who knew about everything and had no sense of humour. Countess Brock, who had declared that nothing should ever induce her to receive 'the Archduchess,' as she called Frau von Geroldstein, pretended not to hear; Frau von Norbin begged to be told what an *almeh* was. Countess Lenzdorff laughed, and was just enlightening her in a low tone, out of regard for her grand-daughter, as to this Oriental specialty, when Herr von Sydow was announced.

"Goswyn!" exclaimed Countess Anna, evidently delighted. "It is good of you to come at last, but not good to have let us wait so long for you."

"I came as soon as I heard of your return," Sydow replied.

"And, as usual, you come as late as possible," his old friend remarked, in an access of absence of mind, "in hopes of finding me alone."

"I call that a skilful method of turning people out of doors," exclaimed Frau von Norbin, laughing, and in spite of her hostess's protestations she arose and took her leave, accompanied by the young maid of honour.

Whilst Erika, with the modest grace which she had learned so quickly, conducted the two ladies to the vestibule, where only two or three remained of the crowd of footmen that had occupied it early in the afternoon, Goswyn's eyes rested on the wall, where, to his great surprise, hung the same Böcklin that had been removed upon his former visit in view of the expected arrival of the Countess's grand-daughter.

"So you sent the young Countess to boarding-school?" he remarked.

"What?" exclaimed the Countess, indignant at such an idea. "You must see that I am far too old to forego the pleasure of having the child with me." Then, observing that the young man's eyes were directed towards her favourite picture, she suddenly remembered the conversation she had had with him in the spring. "Oh, yes; you are thinking of how hard it seemed to me to receive the child. It makes me laugh to recall it. As for the picture, there was no need to hide it from her: she knew the entire Vatican by heart when she came to me, from photographs. She looks at everything, and sees beyond it! I am longing to have you know her: did you not notice her? though this February twilight, to be sure, is very dim. She has just escorted Hedwig Norton from

the room."

"Was that your grand-daughter?" Sydow asked, in surprise. "I thought it was your niece Odette."

"Where were your eyes?" Countess Lenzdorff asked, in an aggrieved tone. "Odette is pretty enough, but a grisette,--a mere grisette,--in comparison with Erika. Erika is a head taller; and then, my dear, *un port de reine,--absolument, un port de reine*. Ah, here she comes.--Erika, Herr von Sydow wishes to be presented to you: you know who he is,--a great favourite of mine, and the nicest young fellow in all Berlin."

Erika inclined her head graciously, and, whilst the young man blushed at the old lady's exaggerated praise, said, with perfect self-possession, "Of course my grandmother has enlightened you as to my perfections. I think we may both be quite content, Herr von Sydow."

He bowed low and took the offered chair beside his hostess. He knew that Countess Lenzdorff expected him to say something to her grand-daughter, but he could not; he was mute with astonishment. It was true that the Countess had written him shortly after the young girl's arrival that she was charming, but he had regarded this asseveration as a piece of remorse on her part, knowing that remorse will incline people to exaggerate, especially kind-hearted, selfish people, for whom the memory of injustice done by them is among the greatest annoyances of life.

He could not reconcile his memory of the distressed, pale, shy girl whom he had seen for an instant with this extremely beautiful and self-possessed young lady who seemed expressly devised to act as a cordial for her grandmother's Epicurean selfishness. He did not know why, but he was half vexed that Erika was so beautiful: the previous tender compassion with which she had inspired him seemed ridiculous.

The words for which he sought in vain with which to begin a conversation she soon found. "It is strange that you should not have recognized me here in my grandmother's drawing-room, where you might have expected me to be," she said, gaily. "I should have known you in Africa."

"Where have you seen each other before?" the Countess asked, curiously.

"On the stairs, on the evening of my arrival," Erika explained. "Evidently you do not recall it, Herr von Sydow: I ought not to have confessed how perfectly I remember."

"Oh, I remember it very well," said Sydow, and then he paused suddenly with a faint smile, a smile peculiarly his own, and behind which some sensitive souls suspected a degree of malice, but which actually concealed only a certain agitation and embarrassment, a momentary non-comprehension of the situation. He was not very clever, except in moments of great danger, when he developed unusual presence of mind.

"After all, 'tis no wonder that you made more impression upon me than I did upon you," Erika went on, easily and simply. "In the first place, you were the first Prussian officer I had ever met; I had never seen anything in Austria so tall and broad: your epaulettes inspired me with a degree of awe. And then you bowed so respectfully. You can't imagine how much good it did me. I was half dead with terror: you looked as if you pitied me."

"I did pity you, Countess," he confessed, frankly. The tone of her voice, which had first won over her grandmother, was sweet in his ears. Moreover, she seemed very much of a child, now that she was talking. The impression of self-possession which she had at first given him was quite obliterated.

"You knew that my grandmother was not glad to have me?" she asked.

"Yes, I told him so, and he scolded me for it," Countess Lenzdorff declared, with a nod.

"But, my dear Countess!" Sydow remonstrated.

"Oh, I always speak the truth," the Countess exclaimed,--"always, that is, if possible, and sometimes even oftener: it is the only virtue upon which I pride myself. And you were right, Goswyn. But do you know how you look now? As if you were ashamed of your pity. Aha! I have hit the nail upon the head, and a very sensitive nail, too. It is human nature. There is one extravagance which even the most magnanimous never forgive themselves,--wasted compassion. In fact, you must perceive that the child has no need of the article."

Goswyn was silent. If at first the Countess had hit the nail upon the head, he was by no means convinced of the truth of her last remark. Something in the old Countess's manner to her grand-daughter went against the grain with him: once while she was talking to him, and Erika, sitting beside her, nestled close to her with the innocent grace of a young creature to whom a little tenderness is as necessary as is sunshine to the opening flower, the grandmother suddenly, with a significant glance at Sydow, put her finger beneath the girl's chin and turned her face so that he might observe the particularly lovely outline of her cheek.

Meanwhile, Countess Brock was defending herself with much ill humour and many grimaces from the exaggerated amiability of the 'Archduchess,' which found vent especially in the offer of a

specific for the cure of neuralgia, from which the 'wicked fairy' suffered constantly, and which partly explained the peculiar twitching of her features. Extricating herself at last with much bluntness from the snare thus spread to entrap her favour, Countess Brock turned to the young officer, who, strange to relate, was her nephew. Strange to relate; for there certainly could be no greater contrast than that of his characteristic grave simplicity with her restless affectation.

"My dear Goswyn!" she said, in a honeyed tone, taking a chair beside him.

"Well, aunt?"

"You scarcely spoke to me when you came in," she continued, reproachfully, in the same sweet tone.

"You seemed very much occupied."

"Occupied? yes, occupied indeed. For the last quarter of an hour I have been struggling like a fly in a trap. You come just at the right moment, dear boy." And she tapped his epaulette with a caressing forefinger.

"Ah? Do you wish me to audit your accounts?" he asked, dryly: he had but slight sympathy with her.

"God forbid!" exclaimed the 'wicked fairy,' raising her black-gloved hands with her characteristic gesture. "Nothing so prosaic as that this time. It was about----"

"About your Thursdays," her nephew interrupted her.

"Rightly guessed, dear boy. I want a new star; and you can help me a little. Do you know G----?"

"The pianist?"

"Yes."

"I have practised with him once or twice." Goswyn played the violin in moments of leisure, a weakness to which he did not like to hear allusions made.

"There! I thought so. You must bring him to me."

"Pray excuse me," the young man said, decidedly. "I will have nothing to do with introducing any artist to you. I know too well what will ensue. You will squeeze him like a lemon, and then show him the door on the pretence that he outrages your æsthetic sense,--that his manners are not to your taste. You should inform yourself on that point before making use of him. We all know that artists are not always well bred."

"Too true!" sighed Frau von Geroldstein, edging her chair nearer to the speaker.

"All artists are ill-mannered," Countess Lenzdorff maintained, with her good-humoured insolence.

"Even the greatest?" asked Erika, shyly. She was thinking of the young painter whom she had met by the monster of a bridge, and she could not decide whether to resent her grandmother's arrogance or to be ashamed of the childish admiration in which she had indulged all these years for the handsome vagabond of whom she had never heard since.

As Frau von Geroldstein was gently sighing, "Ah, yes, even the greatest," Countess Anna interposed with a laugh, "They are the worst of all. Artistic mediocrities acquire a certain drawing-room polish far sooner than do the great geniuses who live in a world of their own. And, after all, average good manners are only the dress-suit for average men: they rarely sit well upon a genius. I care very little for them: a little *naïve* awkwardness does not displease me at all; on the contrary, to be quite to my mind an artist must always have something of the bear about him: I take no interest whatever in those trim dandies, 'gentlemen artists,' who think more of the polish of their boots than of their art."

"Nor do I," sighed Frau von Geroldstein.

"H'm! your discourse is always very instructive," the 'wicked fairy' declared, "but it does not help me in my trouble." She sighed tragically and arose. As she did so, her fur boa slipped from her shoulders to the ground. Erika picked it up and handed it to her. The 'wicked fairy' stared at the young girl through her eye-glass, surprise slowly dawning in her distorted features. "You are the grand-daughter from Bohemia?" she asked, still with her eye-glass at her eyes.

"Yes, Frau Countess."

"Ah, excuse me: I have been taking you all this time for my dear Anna's companion. Now I remember she died last year: I sent some flowers to her funeral. Poor thing! she was desperately tiresome, but an excellent girl; you must remember her, my dear Goswyn. You used to call her the Duke of Wellington, because she was a little deaf and used to go on talking without hearing

what was said to her. How could I make such a mistake! But I am very near-sighted, and very absent-minded." She put her finger beneath Erika's chin and smiled an indescribable smile. "And you are very pretty, my dear. What is your name?"

"Erika."

"Erika!--Heather Blossom! And you come from Bohemia. How poetic!--how poetic! She is positively charming, this grand-daughter of yours, Anna! Do you not think so, Goswyn?"

Sydow flushed crimson, frowned, and was silent.

"I must go: I seem to be saying the wrong thing," Countess Brock ran on; then, looking towards the window, "Good heavens!" she exclaimed, "it is pouring! Pray let them call a droschky."

"Erika, ring the bell," said Countess Lenzdorff.

Before Erika could obey, Frau von Geroldstein extended a detaining arm.

"But, my dear Countess Erika, why send for a droschky, when my carriage is waiting below, and it will give me the greatest pleasure to drive Countess Brock home?--Surely you will permit me?"--this last addressed to the 'wicked fairy.'

"I really cannot. I know you far too slightly to impose such a burden upon you," Countess Brock replied, crossly.

"Why call it a burden? it is a pleasure," the other insisted.

"There is no pleasure in driving with me: I am forced to have all the windows closed," said the Countess.

Meanwhile, Erika stood uncertain whether or not to ring the bell, when suddenly affairs took a turn most favourable for Frau von Geroldstein.

Herr Reichert was announced, and without another word Countess Brock vanished with Frau von Geroldstein, in whose coupé she was driven home.

She had private reasons for this hurried retreat. Reichert, a special favourite of Anna Lenzdorff's, an animal painter with a lion face and an inexhaustible fund of anecdote, was among the '*remords*' of the 'wicked fairy.' She called her '*remords*' the assemblage of men of talent of whom she had made use only to throw them aside remorselessly afterwards.

The animal painter's visit was a brief one, and none of the Countess Lenzdorff's guests remained save Sydow, who stayed in obedience to the Countess's whispered invitation.

"There! now I have had enough," she exclaimed, as the door closed behind her beloved animal painter. "Stay and dine, Goswyn: we dine early--at six--tonight, and then you can go with us to the Academy. Joachim is to play, and I have a spare ticket for you."

CHAPTER VII.

It is later by four-and-twenty hours. Countess Lenzdorff, with her grand-daughter, has just returned from a drive in a close carriage,--a drive interrupted by a couple of calls, and by a little shopping in the interest of the young girl's wardrobe.

She is now sitting near the fire, a teacup in her hand, and saying, "You cannot go out very much this season, especially since you are not to be presented until next winter, but you can divert yourself with a few small entertainments. It was well to order your gown from Petrus in time: people must open their eyes when they see you first."

Meanwhile, Erika has taken off her seal-skin jacket, and is sitting beside her grandmother, thinking of the gown that has been ordered for her to-day,--a white cachemire, so simple,--oh, so simple! "Nobody must think of your dress when they see you," her grandmother had said: nevertheless it was a triumph of art, this gown.

"Everything about you must be perfect in style upon your first appearance in the world," her grandmother now says. "People must find nothing to criticise about you at first: afterwards we may, perhaps, allow ourselves a little eccentricity. I have a couple of gowns in my head for you

which Marianne can arrange admirably, but just at first we must show that you can dress like everybody else,--with a slight difference. You must produce a certain effect. Give me another cup of tea, my child."

Erika hands her the cup. The old lady, pats her arm caressingly. "Petrus is quite proud to assist at your début: at first I thought of sending to Paris for a dress for you," she adds, and then there is a silence.

The old lady has lain back in her arm-chair and fallen asleep. She never lies down to take a nap in the daytime, but she often dozes in her chair at this hour.

Twilight sets in,--sets in unusually soon and quickly to-night, for the winter which had seemed to have bidden farewell to Berlin has returned with cruel intensity. The rain which on the previous day had forced Countess Brock into Frau von Geroldstein's arms and coupé has to-day turned to snow: it is lying a foot deep in the gardens in front of the grand houses in Bellevue Street, and is falling so fast that it has no chance to grow black: it lies on the trees in the Thiergarten, each twig bearing its own special weight, and down one side of each trunk is a broad bluish-white stripe; it lies on the roofs, on the palings of the little city gardens, yes, even on the telegraph-wires which stretch in countless lines against the purplish-gray sky above the white city.

For a while Erika gazes out at the noiselessly-falling flakes: the snow still gleams white through the twilight.

The girl has ceased to think of her gown: her thoughts have carried her far back,--back to Luzano. That last winter there,--how cold and long it had been!--snow, snow everywhere; nothing to be seen but a vast field of snow beneath a gloomy sky, the poor little village, the frozen brook, the river, the trees, all buried beneath it. The roads were obliterated; there was some difficulty in procuring the necessaries of existence. The cold was so great that fuel cost "a fortune," as her step-father expressed it. Erika was allowed none for the school-room, where she was wont to sit, nor for the former drawing-room, where was her piano. The greater part of the day she was forced to spend in the room, blackened with tobacco-smoke, where Strachinsky had his meals, played patience, and dozed on the sofa over his novels. What an atmosphere! The room was never aired, and reeked of stale cigar-smoke, coal gas, and the odour of ill-cooked food. Once Erika had privately broken a windowpane to admit some fresh air. But what good had it done? Since there was no glazier to be had immediately, the hole in the window had been stuffed up with rags and straw.

Yet the worst of that last winter had been the constant association with Strachinsky.

One day, in desperation, she had hurried out of doors as if driven by fiends, and had gone deep into the forest. Around her reigned dead silence. There was nothing but snow everywhere: she could not have got through it but that she wore high boots. Here and there the black bough of a dead fir would protrude against the sky. No life was to be seen,--not even a bird. The only sounds that at intervals broke the silence were the creak of some bough bending beneath its weight of snow, and the dull thud of its burden falling on the snow beneath.

As she was returning to her home she was overcome by a sudden weakness and a sense of utter discouragement.

Why endure this torture any longer? Who could tell when it would end, this intense disgust, this gnawing degrading misery, suffering without dignity,--a martyrdom without faith, without hope?

And there, just at the edge of the forest, close to the meadow that spread before her like a huge winding-sheet, she lay down in the snow, to put an end to it: the cold would soon bring her release, she thought. How long she lay there she could not have told,--the drowsiness which she had heard was the precursor of the end had begun to steal over her,--when on the low horizon bounding the plain she saw the full moon rise, huge, misty, blood-red. The outlying firs of the forest cast broad dark shadows upon the snow, and upon her rigid form. The snow began to sparkle; the world suddenly grew beautiful. She seemed to feel a grasp upon her shoulder, and a voice called to her, "Stand up: life is not yet finished for you: who knows what the future may have in store?"

Hope, curiosity, perhaps only the inextinguishable love of life that belongs to youth and health, appealed to her. She rose to her feet and forced her stiffened limbs to carry her home.

Good heavens! it was hardly a year since! and now! She looks away from the large windows, behind the panes of which there is now only a bluish-white shimmer to be discerned, and gazes around the room. How cosey and comfortable it is! In the darkening daylight the outlines of objects show like a half-obliterated drawing. The subjects of the pictures on the walls cannot be discerned, but their gilt frames gleam through the all-embracing veil of twilight. There is a ruddy light on the hearth, partially hidden from the girl's eyes by the figure of the old Countess in her arm-chair; the air is pure and cool, and there is a faint agreeable odour of burning wood. From beneath the windows comes the noise of rolling wheels, deadened by the snow, and there is now and then a faint crackle from the logs in the chimney, now falling into embers.

Erika revels in a sense of comfort, as only those can who have known the reverse in early life. Suddenly she is possessed by a vague distress, an oppressive melancholy,--the memory of her mother who had voluntarily left all this pleasant easy-going life--for what? Her nerves quiver.

Meanwhile, Lüdecke brings in two lamps, which in consequence of their large coloured shades fail to illumine the corners of the room, and hardly do more than "teach light to counterfeit a gloom." That grave dignitary was still occupied in their arrangement, when he turned his head and paused, listening to an animated colloquy in two voices just outside the portière which separated the Countess's boudoir from the reception-rooms. Evidently Friedrich, Lüdecke's young adjutant, who was not yet thoroughly drilled, was endeavouring to protect his mistress from a determined intruder.

"If you please, Frau Countess, her Excellency is not at home," he said for the third time, whereupon an irritated feminine voice made reply,--

"I know that the Countess is at home; and if she is not, I will wait for her."

"The fairy," said Countess Lenzdorff, awaking. "Poor Friedrich! he is doing what he can, but there is nothing for it but to put the best face upon the matter." And, rising, she advanced to meet Countess Brock, who came through the portière with a very angry face.

"That wretch!" she exclaimed. "I believe he was about to use personal violence to detain me!" And she sank exhausted into an arm-chair.

"Since I ordered him to deny me to every one, he only did his duty, although he may have failed in the manner of its performance," Countess Lenzdorff replied.

"But he ought to have known that I was an exception," the fairy rejoined, still angrily.

"Yes, he ought to have known. And now tell me what you have on your mind, for I see by your bonnet's being all awry that you have not engaged in a duel with that simpleton Friedrich without some special cause."

"Ah, yes!" Countess Brock groaned. "I have a request--an audacious request--to make, and you must not refuse me."

"We shall see. Is it fifty yards of red flannel for your association for the relief of rheumatic old women?"

"Oh, if it were only that I should have no doubt of your assent,--every one knows how generous you are; but you have certain whims." The wicked fairy's smile was sourly sweet: "I begged Goswyn to prefer my request, for I know how much you like him, and that you would not willingly refuse him anything; but he would not do it. He behaves so queerly to me."

"Tell me what you mean, without any further preliminaries. I am curious to know what the matter is with which Goswyn will have nothing to do."

"It is about my next Thursday,--no, not the next, I shall simply skip that, but the one after the next,--which, under the circumstances, ought to be particularly brilliant. I want to have tableaux, and two of the greatest beauties in Berlin have promised to help me,--Dorothea Sydow and Constance Mühlberg," Countess Brock explained, breathlessly.

"H'm! that is magnificent," her friend interposed.

"Well, yes; but every one knows them by heart, and I want to show the Berlin folk something new. In short, I have come to the conclusion that the great attraction for my next evening reception must be your enchanting grand-daughter," the 'fairy' declared, wriggling herself out of her seal-skin coat.

Erika, who had hitherto kept modestly in the background, occupying herself with some embroidery, here paused, her needle suspended in the air, and looked up curiously.

"My grand-daughter?" her grandmother exclaimed, in surprise.

"Yes, yes; I have fallen in love with your granddaughter,--actually fallen in love with her. She has a natural air of distinction, with a certain barbaric charm which is immensely aristocratic: it reminds me of some noble wild animal: the aristocracy always reminds me of a noble wild animal, and the bourgeoisie of a well-fed barn-yard fowl,--except that the former is never hunted and the latter never slaughtered. But, then, who can tell, *par le temps qui court? Mais je me perds*. The matter in hand is not socialism nor any other threatening horror, but my tableaux. There are to be only three,--Senta lost in dreams of the Flying Dutchman, by Constance Mühlberg, Werther's Charlotte, by Thea Sydow, and last your grand-daughter as a heather blossom. She will bear away the palm, of course: the others are not to be compared with her."

Countess Lenzdorff looked at Erika and smiled good-naturedly, as she saw how the young girl had gone on sewing diligently as if hearing nothing of this conversation. It never occurred to the old lady that it might not be advisable thus calmly to extol that young person's beauty in her presence.

"You will let the child do me this favour, will you not?" the 'fairy' persisted. "It is all admirably arranged. Riedel is to pose them,--you know him,--the little painter with such good manners who has his shirts laundered in Paris."

"Oh, that colour-grinder!" Countess Lenzdorff said, contemptuously.

The 'fairy' shrugged her shoulders impatiently. "Colour-grinder or not, he is one of the few artists whom one can meet socially."

"Yes, yes; and he will find it much easier to arrange a couple of pictures than to paint them," Countess Lenzdorff declared.

"Then you consent? I may count upon your grand-daughter?"

"I must first consider the matter," Countess Lenzdorff replied, but in a tone which plainly showed that she was not averse to granting her eccentric old friend's request.

"I see that affairs look favourable for me," Countess Brock murmured. "Thank heaven! I think I should have killed myself if I had met with a refusal. What o'clock is it?"

"Six o'clock,--a few minutes past. Where are you going?"

"To dine with the Geroldsteins. We are going to the Lessing Theatre afterwards. There have been no tickets to be had for ten days past."

"You--are going to dine with the Geroldsteins?" The old Countess clasped her hands in frank, if discourteous, astonishment.

"I am going to dine with the Geroldsteins," the 'wicked fairy' repeated, with irritated emphasis; "and what of it? You have received her for more than a year."

"I have no social prejudices. Moreover, I do not receive her: I simply do not turn her out of doors."

"Well, at present she suits me," Countess Brock declared, her features working violently. "I have been longing for two months to be present at this first representation, without being able to get a seat: she offers me the best seat in a box,--no, she does not offer it to me, she entreats me to take it as a favour to her. And then think how I begged Goswyn yesterday to introduce G---- to me. No, he would not do it. She will see to all that. She is the most obliging woman in all Germany. And then--this very morning I saw her driving with Hedwig Norbin in the Thiergarten. Surely any one may know a woman with whom Hedwig Norbin drives through the Thiergarten."

She ran off, repeating her request as she vanished. "You will let me know your decision to-morrow, Anna?"

Countess Lenzdorff shook her head as she looked after her,--shook her head and smiled. She is still smiling as she thoughtfully paces the room to and fro.

What is she considering? Whether it is fitting thus, in this barefaced manner, to call the attention of society to a young girl's beauty. Evidently Goswyn does not think it right; but Goswyn is a prig. The Countess's delicacy gives way and troubles her no further. Another consideration occupies her: will her grand-daughter hold her own in comparison with the acknowledged beauties who are to share with her the honours of the evening? Her gaze rests upon Erika. "That crackbrained Elise is right. Erika hold her own beside them! the others cannot compare with her."

"What do you say, child?" she asked, approaching the girl. "Would you like to do it?"

"Yes," Erika confesses, frankly.

"It would not be quite undesirable," says her grandmother, whose mind is entirely made up. "You cannot go out much this year, and it would be something to appear once to excite attention and then to retire to the background for the rest of the season. Curiosity would be aroused, and would prepare a fine triumph for you next year."

The following morning Countess Brock received a note from Anna Lenzdorff containing a consent to her request.

About ten days afterwards Countess Erika Lenzdorff presented herself before a select public, chosen from the most exclusive society in Berlin, as "Heather Blossom," in a ragged petticoat, with her hair falling about her to her knees.

It was a strange *soirée*, that in which the youthful beauty made her first appearance in the world.

Countess Brock, the childless widow of a very wealthy man who had derived much of his social

prestige from his wife, had inherited from the deceased the use during her lifetime of a magnificent mansion, together with an income the narrowness of which was in striking contrast with her residence.

The consequence whereof was much shabbiness amid brilliant surroundings.

The tableaux were given in a spacious ball-room, decorated with white and gold, at one end of which a small stage had been erected. The stage-decorations had been painted for nothing, by aspiring young artists. The curtain consisted of several worn old yellow damask portières sewed together, upon which the 'wicked fairy' herself had painted various fantastic flowers to conceal the threadbare spots.

Whatever ridicule might attach to her Thursday evenings generally, on this one her preparations were crowned with success. The effect of the whole was greatly heightened by the musical accompaniment, furnished by G---- at the instigation of the indefatigable Frau von Geroldstein.

For once this talented but shy young virtuoso forgot himself, and presented his audience with something more than a pattern-card of conquered technical difficulties.

Whether it were the result of caprice, or of a vivid impression made upon him by Erika, or of a presumptuous desire to do all that he could to add to her triumph, thus irritating the acknowledged beauties of the day, certain it is that he played all his musical trumps in his accompaniment to the representation of "Heather Blossom."

Old Countess Lenzdorff, who had been wont to compare his clear sharp performance to a richly-furnished cockney drawing-room far too brilliantly lighted, and with gas into the bargain, could scarcely believe her ears when as an introduction to the third picture the low wailing notes of the familiar but lovely melody "Ah, had I never left my moor!" rang through the crowded assemblage of fashionable people. How sweet, how melancholy, were the tones breathed from the instrument! they seemed to rouse an echo in the soul of Boris Lensky's magic violin.

The curtain drew up, and revealed a waste, dreary heath, treated with tolerable conventionality by the amiable Riedel, and in the midst of it a single figure, tall, slender, in a worn petticoat and coarse white linen shift that left exposed the nobly-formed neck and the long and as yet rather thin arms, a pale face framed in heavy gleaming masses of hair, the features delicate yet strong, and with unfathomable, indescribable eyes.

The painter Riedel had tried to force the Heather Blossom into the attitude of Ary Scheffer's Mignon. She had apparently yielded to his efforts, but at the last moment had posed according to her own wish, with her head bent slightly forward and her arms hanging straight by her side.

The audacious simplicity of her pose puzzled the spectators, and those elegant votaries of fashion, weary of counterfeit presentments of art and poetry, were in a manner shaken out of the monotonous indifference of their lives at sight of the blank dumb despair embodied in this young creature. They seemed suddenly to feel among them the working of some mysterious force of nature.

The curtain remained lifted for a longer time than usual; the young girl maintained her motionless attitude with a strength born of vanity; the wailing, sighing music sounded on.

The curtain fell. The public was wild with enthusiasm. Three times the curtain rose; but when there was a demand for a fourth glimpse of the strange, pathetic picture, it remained obstinately down: Erika had retired.

"Oh, the witch!" murmured old Countess Lenzdorff to Hedwig Norbin, who sat beside her.

The stupidest and most innocent of country grandmothers could not have exulted more frankly in her grand-daughter's triumph than did the clever Countess Lenzdorff. She was never weary of hearing the child praised: her appetite for compliments was inappeasable.

When Erika, transformed and modestly shy in her new gown from Petrus, appeared among the guests, she aroused enthusiasm afresh, and was immediately surrounded. She won the admiration not only of all the men present, but also of all the old ladies. Of course the younger women were somewhat envious, as were likewise the mothers with marriageable daughters. In a word, nothing was lacking to make her appearance a brilliant success.

Her grandmother presented her right and left, and was unwearied in describing in whispered confidences to her friends the girl's extraordinary talents and capacity. Any other grandmother so conducting herself would have been called ridiculous, but it was not easy so to stigmatize Anna Lenzdorff; instead there was some irritation excited against the innocent object of such exaggerated praise, the girl herself, to whom various disagreeable traits were ascribed. The younger women pronounced her entirely self-occupied and thoroughly calculating.

She was both in a certain degree, but after a precocious, childish fashion, that was diverting, rather than reprehensible.

Countess Mühlenberg, the wife of an officer in the guards who did not appreciate her and with whom she was very unhappy, had appeared as Senta out of pure good nature, and held herself quite aloof from Erika's detractors,--in fact, she showed the young *débutante* much kindness,--but Dorothea Sydow's dislike was almost ill-bred in its manifestation.

She was a strangely fascinating and yet repulsive person,--very well born, even of royal blood, a princess, in fact, but so wretchedly poor that she had rejoiced when a simple squire laid his heart and his wealth at her feet. Her family at first cried out against the misalliance, but finally consented to admit that the young lady had done very well for herself. Some of her equals in rank came even to envy her after a while, for all agreed that there was not in the world another husband who so idolized and spoiled his wife, indulging her in every whim, as did Otto von Sydow his Princess Dorothea.

He was Goswyn's elder brother, and the heir of the Sydow estates, which was why there was such a difference in the incomes of the brothers. In all else the advantage was decidedly on Goswyn's side.

Otto looked like him, but his face lacked the force of Goswyn's; his features were rounder, his shoulders broader, his hands and feet larger, and he had a great deal of colour. The 'wicked fairy' maintained that he showed the blood of his bourgeoise mother.

Countess Lenzdorff, who had been an intimate friend of the late Frau von Sydow, denied this, insisting that the Sydow mother had enriched the family not only by her money but also by her pure, strong, red blood. In fact, Otto was a genuine Sydow: such types are not rare among the Prussian country gentry.

He was one of the men who always show to most advantage in the country and out of doors, for whom a drawing-room, even the most spacious, is too confined. In a brilliant crowd he looked as if he could hardly catch his breath. With the shyness not unusual in men with much-admired wives, he was wont to efface himself in a corner, emerging to make himself useful at supper-time, and never speaking except when he encountered some one still less at home in society than himself. He was never weary of watching his wife, devouring her with his eyes, drinking in her grace and beauty.

Many people declared that she was not beautiful, only distinguished in appearance. In fact, she was both to an astonishing degree, and aristocratic to her finger-tips. Tall, slender almost to emaciation, with long, narrow hands and feet, a head proudly erect, and sharply-cut features, her carriage was inimitable, her walk grace itself. Wherever she went she attracted universal attention. She wore her fair hair short in close curls about her small head, a piece of audacity indeed, and she talked quickly in a rather high voice, and with a slight defect in her utterance, characteristic of the royal family to which she was related, and which made some people nervous, while her countless adorers declared it enchanting.

However, beautiful or not, she had been a leader in Berlin society for two years, and would brook no rival near her throne.

The evening ran its course; the servants opened the doors into the dining-hall; the ladies took their places at small tables, while the gentlemen served them--the entertainment being but meagre--before satisfying their own appetites. Some of them performed this duty with skill and dexterity, while others rattled plates and glasses and invariably dropped something.

Erika, paler than usual, with sparkling eyes and very red lips, sat at a table with a charmingly fresh young girl about her own age, but ten years younger intellectually. Nevertheless the child's development might almost be said to be finished, while Erika's had scarcely passed its first stage. She had honestly tried to talk with this companion, but without success; nor had she much to say to the young men who, attracted by her beauty, thronged around her. Reaction had set in: her enjoyment of her triumph had been succeeded by a strange restlessness.

Dorothea von Sydow was sitting near by at a table with one of the most fashionable women in Berlin, an Austrian diplomat, an officer of cuirassiers, and one of her cousins, Prince Helmy Nimbsch. All five had remarkably good appetites and talked incessantly. In their midst sat Frau von Geroldstein, a vacant place on each side of her,--solemn and mute. No one knew her, no one spoke to her, but she was sitting among people of rank and was content. Her only regret was that she had mistaken the continuance of the court mourning by a day, and had consequently appeared in a plain black gown in an assemblage of women in full dress with feathers and diamonds in their hair. To justify her error she had hastily trumped up a story of the death of a near relative.

Goswyn's place was with the elder women, a distinction that frequently fell to his share. He looked grave and anxious, and Countess Lenzdorff, who had commanded his presence at her table, with her usual imperiousness, reproached him for being tiresome and bad-tempered. From time to time he glanced towards Erika, of whom he could see nothing save a slender neck with a knot of gold-gleaming hair, a little pink ear, and now and then the outline of a softly-rounded cheek.

Yes, she was bewitching, there was no denying it, but she must be insufferable, there was no

doubt of that either. The idea of thus making a show of a girl scarcely eighteen! It was in such bad taste: it was absolutely unprincipled: the old Countess, in her senseless vanity, was doing the child a positive injury. At times a kind of rage half choked him: he could have shaken his old friend, to whom he had been as a son, and who had from his boyhood petted him far more than her own child. Again he glanced towards Erika. Then his thoughtful gaze wandered across to the round table where his sister-in-law was sitting. She looked particularly well in a dress of white velvet with an antique Spanish necklace of emeralds around her slender neck. It was all very lovely, but her short hair was not in harmony with it.

Beside her sat her cousin, Prince Helmy Nimbsch, a good-tempered dandy, scarcely twenty-five years old, with large light-blue eyes and a face smoothly shaven, except for a moustache. As Goswyn looked at Thea, she was laughing at her cousin over the champagne-glass which she held to her lips. Her eyes were her greatest beauty,--large hazel eyes, but with no soul in them, no expression, not even a bad one. Her charm was entirely physical, but it was very great. It was a pity that her manners were so loud. That perpetual giggle of hers rasped Goswyn's nerves. But he was alone in his dislike: her adorers were legion.

He looked away from her. Where was his brother? Over in a corner, at a table without ladies, he was sitting with another gentleman. Fortunately he had found a man who was even more uncomfortable than himself in this brilliant assemblage.

This was Herr Geroldstein, husband of the ambitious dame, a pale little man with a bald head and mutton-chop whiskers, who looked for all the world like a man who had wielded a yard-stick behind a counter all his life long,--a decent enough little man, with an air of being perpetually ashamed of himself, who never made use for his own part of the title which he had purchased as a birthday-present for his wife. He spoke very softly and ate and drank but little, while Otto von Sydow did both with great gusto, now and then uttering some oracular remark as to the best wine-merchant in Rheims. His face was redder than usual, and produced the impression of rude health beside the pale tradesman who had passed his life in his office. There was in Goswyn's opinion no denying that no man in the room was as ill fitted to be the husband of the slender Princess Dorothea as was his brother Otto.

After supper there was a little music. When Goswyn was relieved from duty with Countess Lenzdorff, he was about to leave the house unnoticed, but longed for one more glimpse of Erika, whom he wished to remember as she looked to-night. "The dew will be brushed off so soon," he said to himself, adding, "Oh, the pity of it!" He could not find her anywhere. "Ah, of course she is surrounded somewhere by a crowd of detestable admirers!" he said to himself, and turned to go. Why he had thus decided that all her admirers were detestable we shall not attempt to explain.

The fourth and last in the suite of the 'wicked fairy's' reception-rooms was empty and dimly lighted. He suddenly seemed to hear low suppressed sobs, as he looked in. A red gleam of light played about the folds of a white gown behind a huge effective artificial palm. Involuntarily he advanced a step. There sat Erika, the youthful queen of beauty, whom he had supposed entirely absorbed in receiving the homage of her vassals, curled up in an arm-chair, her handkerchief to her eyes, crying like a tired child. Usually deliberate in thought and action, when once his nerves were irritated he became quick and impetuous. He did not hesitate a moment, but, bending over the girl, exclaimed, "Countess Erika! in heaven's name what is the matter? Can any one have offended you?" His voice grew angry at the bare suspicion.

"Ah, no, no!" she sobbed.

"Shall I go for your grandmother?"

"No--no!"

He paused an instant. Then, in a very low and kindly voice, he asked, "Do I annoy you? Would you rather be alone? Shall I go?"

She took the handkerchief from her eyes and assured him frankly and cordially, "Oh, no, certainly not: I am glad to have you stay with me," adding, rather shyly, "Pray sit down."

Nothing was left of the self-possessed young lady: here was only a little girl dissolved in tears and dreading lest she should seem impolite to a friend of her grandmother's.

"She treats me exactly like an old man," the young captain said to himself, at once touched and annoyed; nevertheless he accepted her invitation, and took a seat near her.

"It will soon be over," she said, trying to dry her tears. But they would not be dried; they welled forth afresh: she was evidently quite unnerved by the excitement of her *début*, poor thing!

"Oh, heavens," she cried, making a supreme effort to control herself, "I must stop crying! What a disgrace it would be if any of those people should see me!"

Apparently there was a great gulf in her mind between Goswyn and "those people." He was glad of it. For a while he was sympathetically silent, and then he said, kindly, "Countess Erika, would you rather keep your sorrow to yourself, or will you confide it to me?"

His mere presence had had a soothing effect; her tears ceased to flow; she only shivered slightly from time to time.

"Ah, it was not a sorrow," she explained,--"only a distress,--something like what I felt on the night when I first came to Berlin. It was not homesickness,--what have I to be homesick for?--but suddenly I felt so lonely among all those strangers who stared at me curiously but cared nothing for me. I seemed to feel a great chill around me: it all hurt me; their way of speaking, their way of looking down upon everything that was not as fine and proud as themselves, went to my heart. You--you cannot understand it, for you have grown up in the midst of it; you have breathed this air from your childhood."

"I think you do me injustice, Countess Erika," he interposed. "I can understand you perfectly, although I have grown up in the midst of it all."

"I felt as if I hated the people," she went on, her large melancholy eyes flashing angrily, "and then--then, amidst all this elegance and arrogance,"--she named these characteristics in a perfectly frank way, as if they were elements but lately introduced into her life,--"the thought came to me of the misery in which I grew up, and of all the little pleasures and surprises which my mother prepared for me in spite of our poverty,--ah, such poor little pleasures!--those people would laugh at the idea of any one's enjoying them,--but they were very much to me. Oh, if you knew how my mother used to look at me when she had contrived a new gown for me out of some old rag!--No one will ever look at me so again. And then"--she clinched the hand that held the poor wet handkerchief--"to think that my mother belonged of right to all this bright gay world, and to remember how she died, in what sordid distress, and that it is past,--that I can give her nothing of all that I have---- My heart seemed breaking." She paused, breathless.

"Poor Countess Erika!" he murmured, very gently. "It is one of the miseries of this life to remember our dead and to be powerless to be kind to them. All that we can do is to bestow as much love as we can upon the living."

"But whom have I to bestow my love upon?" Erika cried, with such an innocent insistence that, in spite of his pity, Goswyn could hardly suppress a smile. "I cannot offer it to my grandmother: she would not know what I meant, and would simply think me ill."

"But in fact," he said, now openly amused, "it is not to be supposed that you will all your life have only your grandmother to love."

"You mean that----" She looked at him in sudden dismay.

"I mean that--that----"

The sound of a ritornella drummed upon the piano suddenly fell on their ears, and then came the notes of a thin, clear, expressionless soprano.

His sister-in-law was singing. He listened breathless.

Just then Countess Lenzdorff with Frau von Norbin appeared. "Ah, here you are, Erika!" she exclaimed. "This I call pretty conduct. I have been looking for you everywhere. H'm! to run away from one's admirers, to be made love to by a young gentleman---- What do you say to it, Hedwig?" This last to Frau von Norbin.

"It was only Goswyn," the old lady replied, in her musical-box voice.

"Yes, that is an extenuating circumstance," Countess Anna admitted.

"And he did not make love to me," Erika assured them.

"Indeed? That I take ill of him," Countess Lenzdorff said, with a laugh, while Erika went on with sincere cordiality. "I suddenly felt so lonely and sad, and he was very, very kind to me!" She raised her eyes gratefully to his.

"Ah, well----but come now, child; we are going home. I have had quite enough of this.--Adieu, Goswyn."

"Perhaps you will permit me to take you home," said Goswyn.

"You had much better go in there and put a stop to the mischief which, if I am not mistaken, is being largely added to to-night." This with a significant glance towards the music-room.

"I am powerless," Goswyn observed, dryly. He conducted the ladies to the anteroom, where a regiment of lackeys were in waiting. After attending to the old ladies, he had the pleasure of helping Erika to put on her cloak. He had a strange sensation as he wrapped it about the girl's slender figure. The white fur with which it was trimmed was wonderfully becoming to her.

"A heather blossom in the snow," the vain grandmother remarked, with a glance in his direction, whereby she discovered that there was no necessity for calling his attention to her grand-daughter's charms. This discovery rejoiced her. She bade him good-night with unusual cordiality, smiling to herself as she descended the brilliantly-lighted staircase.

Meanwhile, Goswyn had returned to the music-room. His sister-in-law was still standing by the piano, singing. G---- was accompanying her, good-humouredly ready to burden his soul with any musical misdeed that could give pleasure to his audience, a readiness arising partly from the prosaic view which he took of his "trade," as he was wont to call his music. Quite a little throng of ladies had already rustled out of the room.

Countess Brock was beginning to be uneasy. The effect of the Princess's performance vividly reminded her of the effect which the young actor's reading had had upon her guests.

Goswyn glanced at his brother. Otto von Sydow was a picture of distress: he looked as if threatened with an apoplectic stroke; he alternately clinched and opened his gloved hands, looked uneasily at the men whom he saw laughing, and at the women whom he saw leaving the room; he stood first on one foot and then on the other; but he allowed his wife to go on singing.

The first verses of the music-hall song she had now selected were simply coarse. Goswyn comforted himself with thinking that perhaps she would not sing the last. He had underrated his sister-in-law's temerity. She went on. Sight and hearing seemed to fail him.

Suddenly there came a loud burst of applause. A few of the men present, in pity for the unhappy husband, had thus drowned the improprieties of the last verse.

Princess Dorothea looked round,--saw men laughing significantly and women hurriedly leaving the room. She grew pale, and there came into her Spanish face a look of indescribable hardness. She was about to continue, when her hostess approached her.

"Charming!" exclaimed the 'fairy,'--"charming, my dear Thea, but you must not exert yourself further: you are a little hoarse."

It was too unequivocal. Princess Dorothea understood. Her assumed gaiety took another turn. "I have a sudden longing for a dance!" she exclaimed. "G----, play us a waltz: we will extemporize a ball."

G---- began to play with immense spirit one of Strauss's waltzes, when a gray-haired old General raised his voice,--a clear, sharp voice,--and said, "It would be a little difficult to extemporize a ball, for, with the exception of the hostess, your Excellency is the only lady present."

Dorothea grew paler still, held herself rather more erect than usual, threw back her head, and smiled. Just thus, deadly pale, hard, erect and smiling, Goswyn was to see her once again in his life, a couple of years later, when all her world was pointing at her the finger of scorn.

"You will let me drive Helmy home, will you not, Otto?" Dorothea asked in the hall, where she was holding a kind of little court amid her admirers, a yellow lace scarf wound around her head, and a black velvet wrap about her shoulders. "Helmy has such a cold, and there is no finding a droschky at this hour."

Involuntarily Goswyn, who was just buckling on his sabre, paused to listen to this little speech of his fascinating sister-in-law's, uttered in the tenderest tone.

He had no idea that his brother had anything to fear from Prince Helmy: this was only Dorothea's way of escaping any admonition from her husband. If Otto did not scold on the spot he never scolded at all. There really was nothing objectionable in her driving home alone with her cousin, but then---- She laid her little hand on her husband's breast as she spoke: the gentlemen around her looked on. Without waiting to hear his brother's reply, Goswyn left the house. He had gone but two or three steps in the street when some one joined him: it was Otto.

"Have you a light?" he asked, in a rather uncertain voice. Goswyn struck a match for him, and paused in silence while his brother lighted his cigar with unnecessary effort.

"I am really very glad to walk," said Otto, keeping pace with his brother. "Thea cannot bear to have me smoke in the coupé."

Goswyn was silent.

"I know Thea through and through," Otto continued: "she is as innocent as a child, but a little imprudent; and then all those starched, stiff-necked Berlin women cannot forgive her for being more fascinating and original than the whole of them together. And, after all, what harm was there in her singing those songs? It was easy enough to see that she did not understand what she was singing, or at least did not think. The purest women are always the most imprudent. These people do not understand her. They admire her,--no one can help that,--but they do not appreciate her. When she saw that she was shocking those Philistines she sang on out of sheer bravado. It was perhaps not wise to brave public opinion."

Each time that Otto von Sydow had broken the thread of his discourse in hopes that Goswyn would assent to his view of the situation, he had been disappointed. His brother was persistently

mute.

Otto's footsteps sounded louder, his breath came more heavily; Goswyn, who knew him thoroughly, saw that he was struggling against an access of rage. For a while he maintained a silence like his brother's; then, pausing, he addressed Goswyn directly: "Do you find anything to blame in my allowing my wife to drive home alone with a cousin who is not well, and who may thereby be saved a fit of illness,--a cousin, too, with whom her relations have always been those of a sister?"

Goswyn shrugged his shoulders. "Since you ask me, I must speak the truth," he replied. "On this particular evening I think it would have been wiser for you to drive home *tête-à-tête* with your wife than to let her go with young Nimbsch."

Otto's breathing became still more audible; he stamped his foot, and, before Goswyn could look round, had turned off into a side-street with a sullen "good-night."

He was greatly to be pitied: he had hoped that Goswyn would comfort him, but Goswyn had not comforted him.

"He never understood her, and therefore never liked her," he muttered between his teeth. "He is the worst Philistine of all."

And then he recalled Goswyn's persistent opposition to his marriage with the Princess Dorothea, how passionately--for Goswyn, calm as he seemed, could be passionate--he had entreated his brother not to propose to her. "A blind man could see how unfitted you are for each other: you will be each other's ruin!" he had said. The words rang in his ears now with vivid distinctness.

It was about two o'clock in the morning: the streets were dim, deserted. At intervals of a hundred steps the reddish lights of the street-lamps were reflected from the brown muddy surface of the asphalt. From time to time a carriage casting two bluish rays of light before it shot past Otto with an unnaturally loud rattle in the dull silence. The windows of the houses were all dark and quiet, except where from one open building came the muffled notes of some light popular airs: it was a cheap kind of music-hall. Involuntarily Sydow listened: something in the faint melody commanded his attention. They were playing the music of the very song his wife had sung but now.

His wretchedness was intolerable; his limbs seemed weighed down with fatigue. "Pshaw! it is this confounded thaw," he said to himself. In his ears rang the words, "You are utterly unfitted for each other." What if Goswyn had been right, after all?

Good God! No one could have resisted her.

They had met first in Florence. The two brothers had made a tour through Italy just after Otto's attaining his majority. They travelled together so far as that means having the same starting-point and the same goal, but each followed his own devices, stopping where he liked, so that sometimes they did not meet for a long while. While Goswyn underwent all kinds of inconveniences for the sake of visiting many interesting little towns in Northern Italy, Otto, whose first requirement was a good hotel, went directly from Venice to Florence. He had been there for five days, and was terribly bored; he missed Goswyn. Although Otto was the elder of the two, he had always been in the habit of letting Goswyn think for him. Old Countess Lenzdorff maintained that when they were children she had often heard him ask, "Goswyn, am I cold?" "Goswyn, am I hungry?"

He had carried with him through life a certain sense of dependence upon his younger brother, looking to him for help in every difficulty, for support in every sorrow.

He had no acquaintances in Florence, the food was not to his taste, the wine was poor, the beds, in which so many had slept before him, disgusted him, the theatres did not edify him. He took no pleasure in the opera; he was thoroughly--and for a German remarkably--devoid of a taste for music; and the Italian drama he did not understand. Consequently he found his evenings intolerably long: he spoke no Italian, and very little French. Since there were no Germans in the hotel save those with whom, in spite of his homesickness, he did not choose to consort, he led a very lonely life. And, as he took not the slightest interest in art, it was no wonder that on the fifth day of his sojourn in Florence he declared such an "Italian course of culture" the "veriest mockery of pleasure in which a Prussian country nobleman could indulge."

The queerest thing was that Goswyn seemed to be enjoying himself so much. He received delighted post-cards from him from all kinds of little out-of-the-way places of which Otto had never before even heard the names, not even when he studied geography at school, and he seemed entirely independent of discomfort as to his lodgings in his enjoyment of all that "art-stuff," as Otto expressed it to himself.

One afternoon in the cathedral, in an access of most depressing ennui, he was sauntering from one shrine to another, when he suddenly heard a sigh. He looked round. A young girl in a large Vandyke hat and a dark cloth dress trimmed with silver braid had just seated herself in one of the chairs, and was opening a yellow-covered novel. Everything about her, her hat, her dress, as well

as her own striking figure, gave an impression of distinction, although of distinction somewhat down in the world.

She was very young, and yet did not seem at all affected by her loneliness. Before long she noticed that Otto was observing her, and she bestowed a scornful glance upon him over the pages of her book.

He instantly flushed crimson, and turned away, feeling very uncomfortable. Then in the twilight silence of the spacious church, always deserted at this hour of the day, he heard a delicate insinuating voice call, "Feistmantel, dear!"

Involuntarily he looked round: it was the slender girl in the chair who had called.

He then observed hurrying towards her a short, stout individual in a striped gray-and-black water-proof with an opera-glass in a strap,--a wonderful creature, whom he had noticed before strolling about the church, but without an idea that she had anything to do with the attractive occupant of the chair.

"Feistmantel, dear."

"Princess!"

"I am so hungry. Have you not seen enough of those stupid old relics?" And the girl yawned, sighed, and rubbed her eyes.

"Oh, pray, Princess!"

Both ladies then walked to the door of exit, where they paused dismayed.

It was raining in torrents, that steady downpour that gives no hope of any speedy cessation.

"This is intolerable!" exclaimed the young girl, in her insinuating and now melancholy voice, and with a slight imperfection of speech which struck kindly, awkward Sydow as something too charming ever to be forgotten. "Insufferable! We cannot put our skirts over our heads, like female pilgrims."

"Pray permit me to call a droschky for you." With these words the young Prussian approached the pair; then when the girl measured him from head to foot with a half-merry, half-haughty stare, he added, with a bow, by way of explanation, "Von Sydow."

The ladies bowed without finding it necessary to mention their names, and the younger said, with her bewitching voice and imperfection of speech, "You will greatly oblige us if you will be so kind as to take the trouble."

And in fact it was a trouble. It is difficult to withstand the insistence of Italian droschky-drivers in fine weather, when one wishes to walk, but to find a droschky in bad weather, when one wishes to drive, is more difficult still.

When he at last succeeded he feared to find that the ladies had left in despair at the delay; but no, there they were still, the companion in the striped waterproof with her face shining with the rain which had drenched it as she stretched her neck to see if he were coming, and her curls dangling limp in damp disorder; the girl more bewitching than ever, her cheeks slightly flushed by the fresh damp breeze, and evidently exhilarated in mind, flattered by her conquest. She had grown gracious, and she smiled her thanks, as she hurried into the carriage, lifting her skirts to avoid wetting them, and thereby displaying a pair of the prettiest little feet imaginable.

"What address shall I give to the coachman?" he asked, after helping the ladies to ensconce themselves in the vehicle.

"Hôtel Washington."

He had no umbrella; he was wet to the skin, and the day was cold. But that was of no consequence. Otto von Sydow had never felt so warm since he had been in Italy.

That very evening he moved to the Hôtel Washington from the Hôtel de la Paix. Since the entire first floor was occupied by a banker from Vienna, and the hotel was overcrowded, the room assigned him was far from comfortable; but he did not mind that.

And that very evening, before the *table-d'hôte* dinner, he found his fair one. She was in the reading-room, reading a Paris paper. He also learned who she was,--Princess Dorothea von Ilm.

She was an orphan, and very poor. The family, originally distinguished, had degenerated sadly, principally through the dissipated habits of the Princess's two brothers, notably through the marriage of the elder to a French circus-rider. Since her installation in Castle Egerstein the Princess Dorothea had been homeless, and had been wandering about the world with very little means and a companion who was half instructress, half maid.

This individual, whom Prince Ilm had hurriedly engaged for his sister through a newspaper advertisement, was named Alma Feistmantel, and came from Vienna, where she belonged to those æsthetic circles, the members of which interest themselves chiefly for artists and the drama. For ten years she had cherished a hopeless passion for Sonnenthal: her chief enthusiasms were for broad-shouldered men, Wagner's music, and novels which exalted "the sacred voice of nature."

Under the protection of this lady the Princess Dorothea had for three years been completing her education in Vienna, Rome, and Paris successively.

The Princess enlightened her admirer as to her affairs with the greatest candour, informing him that her brother had treated her shamefully, but that it was all the fault of the circus-rider, who could make him do just as she chose; and in spite of it all Willy was the most fascinating creature imaginable: he looked like a Spaniard. Sydow remembered him: he had served a year in the same regiment with him during his term of compulsory service.

With equal frankness Princess Dorothea explained that she was often embarrassed pecuniarily; once she had been so pinched that she had sold her dog to an Englishman for three hundred francs; she had hated to part with him, for she never had loved any creature as she did that dog, but she needed a ball-dress to wear at an entertainment in Rome at the German embassy. Her aunt, Princess Nimbsch, had chaperoned her when she went into society: sometimes she went, and sometimes she did not; it depended upon her circumstances. In fact, she did not care much about going into society, it prevented you from doing so many amusing things; you could not go to the little theatres, where the funniest farces were played. Therefore she preferred to be in Paris, where not a soul knew her, and she and Feistmantel could go everywhere together.

Feistmantel had frequently during these confessions admonished the Princess to greater discretion by a touch of her foot beneath the table: of one of these hints Sydow's boot had been the recipient. But when she found that she could thus make no impression upon her charge the Viennese interposed with some temper: "Pray, Baron Sydow, discount all this talk some fifty per cent. You must not believe that I would take any young girl intrusted to my care where it was not proper that she should go."

"I know nothing about proper or improper: I only know what is amusing and what is tiresome," the Princess said, with a laugh, "and we went everywhere. Feistmantel is putting on airs because of my exalted family, but do not you believe her, Herr von Sydow. We saw 'Ma Camarade,' and 'Niniche,' and we even went one evening to the Café des Ambassadeurs. Eh?" And she pinched her companion's ear.

"But, Baron Sydow, do not allow yourself to be imposed upon," Feistmantel exclaimed, almost beside herself. "The Café des Ambassadeurs,--why, that is a *café chantant*. There is not a word of truth in all her nonsense."

"Not true? oh, but it is," the Princess retorted, quite at her ease. "Of course it was a *café chantant*, and the singer sang '*Estelle, où est ta flanelle?*'--it was too funny; but I can sing it just like her. I practised it that very evening. I must sing it to you some day, Herr von Sydow,--that is, when we are better acquainted. Oh, is there no *café chantant* in Florence to which you could take us?"

"But, Princess----!" exclaimed Feistmantel.

"Why, a gentleman took us to the Café des Ambassadeurs, a man whose acquaintance we made in the hotel," Dorothea ran on. "He was an American,--a Mr. Higgs: he came from Connecticut, and dealt in cheeses. He was very rich, and he sent us tickets for the theatre. Afterwards he wanted to marry me: I liked him very well, and would have accepted him, but my brother said he was no match for me. Well, I did not break my heart, but I should have liked to marry him for all that. We Princesses Ilm have the right, it is true, to marry crowned heads, but I never mean to avail myself of it. If I were an Empress I should always travel incognito. As soon as I am of age I shall marry a chimney-sweeper--if he is a millionaire, or if I fall in love with him."

"Both contingencies seem highly probable," Sydow observed, laughing. It was the only remark he allowed himself during the conversation,--a conversation which took place in the reading-room of the Washington Hotel on the first evening of his stay there.

After the Princess had finished her confessions, she went to the window, and looked out upon the Arno. For a while she was perfectly silent; but when Alma Feistmantel, recovering from her dismay, began to invent all sorts of falsehoods with which to impress Sydow, Dorothea quietly turned to him and said, "Herr von Sydow, will you not take a walk with us? Florence is so lovely at night!"

The next day he drove with the ladies to Fiesole. He sat on the front seat of a very uncomfortable droschky and felt as happy as a king.

It was the middle of April, and an upright crest of white and purple iris crowned the white wall bordering the crooked road leading to the famous old town. Here and there the rose-bushes trailed their blossoming branches in the dust. Barefooted Italian children, with dishevelled hair

and glowing eyes tossed nosegays into the carriage and offered their straw wares to the ladies with persistent entreaties to buy. How many liri and fifty-centesimi pieces Sydow threw away on that wonderful day! The more he gave the rein to his liberality the longer grew the train of children, laughing, gesticulating, all pretty, with light in their eyes and flowers in their hands. Suddenly the driver shouted to some one who would not get out of the way. Sydow sprang out of the droschky and saw creeping along the dusty road a pair of wretched beggars, old and bent, their weary feet wrapped in rags. The sight of anything so miserable on the lovely spring day cut him to the heart. He could do no less than toss them some money.

Alma Feistmantel, as a member of the society for the suppression of mendicancy, lectured him for his lavish alms, and the Princess laughed at the beggars, whose misery struck her as comical. She flung a sneering "Baucis and Philemon!" after them. This shocked Sydow for an instant; the next he gave her a kindly glance, saying to himself, "Ah, she is but a child!" He was already incapable of finding any harm in her.

The next morning the German clerk of the hotel came to him, and, after some circumlocution, asked him if he were intimately acquainted with the Princess. Quite confused, and without a suspicion of the clerk's motive in asking, he explained that his acquaintance with her was of the most superficial kind. The clerk suppressed a smile beneath his bearded lip. Sydow was sorely tempted to knock him down, and was restrained only by regard for the Princess's reputation. It appeared, however, that the clerk's question was not the result of impertinent curiosity; he had no interest in the young Prussian's relations to the fair Princess, he only wished to discover whether Sydow knew anything of her family,--if she were a genuine Princess, and if they were people of wealth. She was travelling without a maid, and had not paid her hotel bill for a month.

Whereupon Sydow snubbed the clerk sharply, informing him that he need be under no anxiety, the Ilms were among the first families of Germany. The Princess had simply forgotten to pay, supposing it to be a matter of small importance. The clerk was profuse in apologies.

Sydow spent three hours considering how he should offer his aid to the Princess. At last--it was raining, and the ladies were at home--he knocked at their door.

"Who is it?" Feistmantel's harsh voice inquired.

"Sydow."

"Oh, pray come in," called the high voice of the Princess. He entered.

It was a small room in the third story. Feistmantel was sitting by the window, mending some article of dress; the Princess was sitting on her bed, reading "Autour du Mariage," by Gyp.

The Princess moved no farther than to offer him her hand with a charming smile; Feistmantel cleared off the articles from an arm-chair, that he might sit down.

"Oh, what a dreary day! I am so glad you are come! We are nearly bored to death," said Dorothea, rubbing her eyes, and gathering her feet under her so that she sat cross-legged on the bed. "Can you give me a cigarette? mine are all gone."

Feistmantel said something in disapproval of a lady's smoking, when Dorothea remarked, composedly, "Don't listen to her; she is putting on airs again because of my exalted family, when the fact is that it was from her that I learned to smoke. Oh, what a wretched world! 'Who but ducks and pumps can keep out of the dumps, in a world that is never dry?' Oh, I am so bored,--so bored!" She stretched herself slightly. "I should like at least to go to Doney's and get an ice, but we cannot; we have no money."

Then Sydow blurted out the little speech he had composed with infinite pains, coming to a stand-still three times during the recital.

He had heard that the ladies had been expecting remittances from Germany. Of course there was some mistake: would they permit him to relieve them--from--their temporary embarrassment?

He paused in great confusion. Would they turn him out of the room? No! The Princess simply held out her hands and exclaimed, "You are an angel! I could really embrace you!" which of course she did not do, but which she could have done without thinking much of it.

That same evening the Princess's bill was paid.

Two days later Goswyn arrived in Florence. He surprised his brother at dinner with Dorothea and Feistmantel at a small table at the extreme end of a long close dining-room, beside a window looking out upon the Arno.

The Princess was giggling and chatting in her clear high voice, which could be heard outside of the dining-hall; she wore a white dress, and a diamond ring sparkled upon her hand. At first Goswyn smiled at his brother's charming travelling acquaintances, but in a very little while the state of affairs made him grave. Of course he took his place at the table with the three. The Princess instantly began to flirt with him. First she congratulated herself that they were now a

partie carrée; it was very jolly; until then Herr von Sydow had cut but a sorry figure between two ladies, now they could be taken for two couples on a wedding-tour. Then, planting both elbows upon the table, she leaned across to Goswyn and asked, "Which of the gentlemen will appropriate Feistmantel?"

"That is for the ladies to decide," Goswyn replied, laughing.

"Then my guardian spirit shall fall to your lot," said Dorothea, "for I prefer your brother. I perceived the instant that you appeared that you are a very disagreeable fellow, Herr Goswyn von Sydow," pronouncing the name with mock pathos,--"yes, a thoroughly disagreeable fellow. I could not live with you three days; while I could endure a lifetime with your brother. He is such an honest, clumsy bear: I have always had a liking for bears. Look, he gave me this ring as a keepsake: is it not pretty?"

Otto von Sydow long remembered the look which his brother gave the ring.

That evening the brothers had a violent dispute.

Goswyn admitted that the Princess was charming in spite of her wretched training and impossible behaviour; that there could not be a more amusing transient travelling acquaintance; that, finally, she certainly did come of very good stock, and was, in spite of her free and easy style of conversation, a pure-minded woman,--which should make it still more a matter of conscience with Otto not to compromise her as he was doing; for a marriage with her, even although her poor but haughty family could be brought to consent to the misalliance, was out of the question.

The result of this conversation was that Otto at last hung his head and admitted that his wiser, stronger brother was right; he promised to leave Florence with Goswyn the next morning; but when the trunks were all piled on the coach for their departure he met the Princess Dorothea on the stairs, and did not leave, but stayed and was betrothed to her.

It would be doing her injustice to say that she married him solely for his money. No, she really had a decided liking for "bears," and, as far as she could love any one, she loved her big, clumsy husband, just as she preferred brown bread and sour milk to all the delicacies of the table. During the honey-moon, which she spent with Otto upon his estate in Silesia, she developed an astonishing degree of tenderness, but she could not love anything for any length of time. Then, too, she was entirely unused to any regular life, and the dull routine at Kosnitz soon bored her to death. At first it delighted her to revel in her husband's wealth, to have dress after dress made, to adorn herself with all sorts of trinkets; but she soon found it tiresome and monotonous. Oh for a small room on the third floor of some hotel in Paris with Feistmantel, and poverty, and liberty, and a fresh conquest every day! how she longed for it all!

At first in Berlin, in honour of her husband, she had assumed the conventional air of a great lady; but of that she soon became desperately tired: it was the most wearisome of all the weariness in her new life.

In spite of all that evil tongues might say of her, she was as yet perfectly innocent: of that her husband was convinced.

"She is utterly unsusceptible,--utterly," he said to himself, as he tramped home through the mud and wet. And with this poor consolation he was obliged to be content.

But, slow-witted as he was, he was aware that women unsusceptible to temptation are apt to be equally unsusceptible to the disgrace of a fall. The matter is simply of no importance to them. Princess Dorothea would never be led astray through passion; but at the thought of the devouring, degrading ennui which was continually dragging her downward, Otto von Sydow shuddered.

Suddenly his cheeks burned; he could have boxed his own ears for such thoughts with regard to his wife.

CHAPTER VIII.

A few days after the wicked fairy's successful Thursday two fresh pieces of news were circulated in Berlin: one was that Goswyn von Sydow had fought another duel in his sister-in-law's behalf, and the other stated that Countess Lenzdorff had given the fashionable artist Riedel permission to paint her grand-daughter as "Heather Blossom." The truth as to the duel was never fully discovered. Goswyn von Sydow certainly appeared for a while with his arm in a sling, but, as

he stoutly maintained that he had sprained his wrist in a fall from his horse, people were forced to be satisfied with this explanation. If some very sharp-sighted men added that in certain cases it was a man's duty to lie, no matter how strict might be his ideas of truth,--why, that was their affair.

As for the portrait, it was true that the old Countess had acceded to Riedel's request to be allowed to paint Erika as "Heather Blossom," of course not in the artist's studio, but in the Countess Lenzdorff's drawing-room, where Riedel worked away for a week, three hours daily, seated before a large easel, with colour-boxes beside him.

The result of his well-meant efforts was a commonplace affair, something between Ary Scheffer's Mignon and Gabriel Max's "Gretchen at her Wheel."

Naturally the Countess Lenzdorff was in no wise charmed by this picture, although in view of the ability of the artist in question she had not expected anything better.

"A 'Book of Beauty' painter, that Riedel," she said of him: "he flatters every one alike, and is blind to wrinkles, scars, and what he calls defects of all kinds. Such fellows as he are sure to be a success in the present day, when truth is at a discount. They never dissipate a single illusion, and the world--the world of society--delights in them."

She certainly took no pains not to dissipate illusions for the world to which she belonged: on the contrary, she delighted to destroy them, jeering *coram publico* at the beautifying salve which the model members of society as well as her favourite artists and literary men plastered over every peculiarity of humanity, and which in life passes for 'kindly criticism' and in art for 'idealistic conception.' She spent her time in tearing down the rose-coloured curtains from the windows of her acquaintances, and naturally her acquaintances did not like it; they loved their rose-coloured curtains, which excluded the pitiless garish daylight, admitting only a becoming twilight in which all the sharp edges and dark stains of life faded into indistinctness.

The Countess's rage for broad daylight seemed cruel to her acquaintances, while she in her turn called their love of twilight cowardly and when she alluded to the fashionable world usually designated it briefly as "Kapilavastu."

Erika asked her grandmother the meaning of this word. Upon which the old lady shrugged her shoulders and replied, "Kapilavastu is the name of the town in which Buddha grew up, the town where his parents hoped to shield him forever from the sight of old age, death, and disease!" Then, with a quiet laugh, she added, as if to herself, "Oh, what a world it is!"

All her life long she had sneered at the 'world of fashion,' which did not at all interfere with the fact that she would have greatly disliked being aught but 'a great lady.'

When Riedel had completed his picture of "Heather Blossom" to his own satisfaction, and enriched it with his valuable signature, he laid it as a tribute at the feet of the Countess Lenzdorff, begging permission to exhibit his masterpiece at Schulte's, 'unter den Linden.'

Permission was accorded him,--of course with the proviso that the name of the model should be strictly concealed.

Whether the picture were the 'sentimental daub' which the old Countess dubbed it, or the exquisite work of art which Riedel's numerous admirers pronounced it, certain it is that it attracted a great deal of attention,--so much, indeed, that the Countess Anna was one day seized with a desire to witness for herself the effect produced by it upon a gaping public.

It was a fair, sunshiny day in March when she walked to the end of the Thiergarten with Erika, slowly followed by her carriage. It was a pleasure to her to observe the undisguised admiration excited by her grand-daughter. And the girl was worthy of it. Tall, distinguished in air and bearing, faultlessly dressed in dark-gray cloth with a long boa of blue-fox fur and a black hat and feathers, she walked with an air and a bearing that a young queen might have envied.

"Every one looks after you, as if you were the Empress herself," said her grandmother, with a laugh, as she espied a young officer of dragoons, who with his hand at his cap saluted the grandmother but looked at the grand-daughter.

"Goswyn! this is lucky," she exclaimed, beckoning to him. "We are on our way to Schulte's to look at Erika's portrait. Will you come with us?"

"If you will let me," he replied. "But you will probably not see the portrait," he went on, smiling,--"only a great crowd of people. At least that was almost all I could see the last time I was there."

"Oh, you have been there?" said the old Countess, with a merry twinkle of her eye. "Then, of course, you do not care to go again."

"No, certainly not to see the picture; but you cannot get rid of me now, Countess."

Beneath the lindens on one side of the way stood a crippled boy with a huge hump, playing the accordion. The squeaking tones of the miserable instrument were but little in harmony with the splendour of the Thiergarten at this hour. A lady, as she passed the child, turned away with a shudder, and tears started in the boy's eyes and rolled down his pale, precocious face, as he retreated into still deeper shade.

Without interrupting what he was saying to the old Countess, Goswyn gave the boy some money. On a sudden Countess Lenzdorff noticed that Erika was not beside her. "Where is the child?" she exclaimed, looking round. Erika had fallen behind to stroke the little cripple's thin cheeks.

When she perceived that she was observed, she hastily left the child. Her own cheeks were flushed, and there were tears in her eyes.

"Why, Erika!" her grandmother cried out, in dismay, "what are you about?"

"I could not help it," the girl replied: "it was so hateful of that woman to show the boy her disgust at the sight of him." She could scarcely restrain her tears.

"But, Erika,"--her grandmother put her hand on the girl's arm, and spoke very gently,--"you might catch some disease."

"And if I did," Erika murmured, still under the influence of strong emotion, "I should not be half so wretched as that child. Why should I have everything and he nothing?"

To this no reply could be made; even the Countess's talent for repartee failed her, and the three walked on together silently. The Countess Anna glanced towards Goswyn. Never before had she seen him so gravely impressed; and on a sudden the despair that had possessed her in view of the unjust arrangement of human affairs was converted into pride and joy.

When they reached the picture-dealer's they found the portrait in an inner room, surrounded, in fact, by quite a crowd of people, although it was not great enough to satisfy the old Countess's pride: it could hardly have been that, indeed. Still, she did not express her disappointment in words, but ridiculed the assemblage.

The words 'Heather Blossom' were carved in the very effective frame of the portrait, and on one side could be traced a coronet.

"A beggar-girl and a coronet! nothing could appeal more strongly to these plebeians," the old lady exclaimed; and then she whispered to Erika, "Thank God, no one could recognize you from that daub, or we should have the whole rabble around us. What do you think of the picture, Goswyn?"

"Miserable," Goswyn replied, with a frown. "Between ourselves, I cannot understand your allowing the fellow to exhibit it."

"What could I do?" said the Countess, shrugging her shoulders: "he talked of the effect it would produce upon people generally, and in fact he seems to have been right. The Archduchess Geroldstein has already ordered her portrait of him. I cannot understand it. To me Riedel is absolutely uninteresting. If he has a really fine model he seems to lose even the power to flatter, upon which his reputation is chiefly based. Erika is ten times more beautiful than that picture."

This was Goswyn's opinion also, but he remained silent, asking himself whether it could be that the absent old Countess had actually forgotten her granddaughter's presence. Such, however, was not the case. It simply had never occurred to her to regard Erika's beauty as a secret to be confided to all the world except to the girl herself: she would as soon have thought of concealing from her the amount of her yearly income.

"I want you to look at a picture which has charmed me," Goswyn said, after a pause, desirous to change the subject, and as he spoke he pointed to a picture at sight of which the old lady uttered an exclamation of admiration, while Erika gazed at it pale and mute.

The picture was called 'The Seeress,' and represented a peasant-girl standing wan and rapt, her eyes gazing into the unseen, her hand stretched out as if groping. On the right of the girl were a couple of willows in the midst of the level landscape, their trunks rugged and scarred and here and there tufted with wild flowers, while in the background a little trickling stream was spanned by a huge stone bridge, through the arches of which could be seen glimpses of a miserable village half obscured by rising mists.

The Berlin public were too much spoiled by the mediocre artistic euphemism of the day to have the taste to appreciate this masterpiece. A couple of art critics passed it by with a shake of the head, muttering, "Unripe fruit."

Countess Lenzdorff repeated the phrase as the wise-acres disappeared. "Unripe fruit!--Quite right, but a most noble specimen. I only trust it may ripen under favourable conditions. The thing is full of talent. 'A Seeress.' Apparently a Jeanne d'Arc."

"Probably," said Goswyn. "It certainly is original in conception: there is nothing conventional in it. What inspiration there is in the pale face! what maidenly grace in the noble and yet almost emaciated figure! It is a most attractive picture."

"The strange thing about it is that this Seeress in reality looks far more like Erika than does Riedel's 'Heather Blossom,'" exclaimed the old lady. "I must have this picture!"

"You are too late, Countess," rejoined Goswyn.

"Is it sold already? What was the price?"

"It was very reasonable,--a beginner's price," Goswyn replied, with a slight blush.

The old Countess laughed: she had no objection that Goswyn, with his limited means, should buy a picture just because it resembled her grand-daughter.

Meanwhile, Erika was trembling in every limb. Who but *he* could have painted the picture?--who else had seen Luzano,--Luzano, and herself? She felt proud of her *protégé*. In the corner of the picture she read 'Lozoncyi.' It pleased her that he had so fine-sounding a foreign name.

"You shall find out for me where the young man lives," Countess Lenzdorff cried, eagerly: "he must paint Erika for me while his prices are still reasonable."

Goswyn cleared his throat. "Much as I admire this young artist," he observed, "if I were you I would not have him paint Countess Erika."

"Why not?"

"Because he has another picture on exhibition here, to see which an extra price of admission is asked."

"Indeed!" cried the old lady. "Is it so very bad?"

"The worst of it is the curtain that hides it from the public, and the extra price paid to look at it," Goswyn replied, half laughing. "It certainly is a powerful thing,--painted later than 'The Seeress,' and under a different inspiration. If you would like to see it, let me play the part of Countess Erika's chaperon for a few minutes: you go behind that curtain."

The Countess Anna could not let such an opportunity slip. She was an old woman; no one--not even the over-scrupulous Goswyn--could object to her looking at the picture. So she blithely went her way.

Meanwhile, Erika had grown very pale. She felt as if some dear old plaything, to which she had attached all sorts of pathetic memories, had fallen into the mire! It was gone; let it lie there: she would not stoop to pick it up and wipe it off.

Goswyn, who was observing her narrowly, could not understand the sudden change in her face. He had often had occasion to notice the sensitiveness of her moral nature, but to-day the key to the riddle was lacking. What could it possibly matter to her whether or not an obscure artist painted an improper picture?

He tried to begin a conversation with her, but had hardly done so when Countess Lenzdorff returned, walking slowly, with her head held haughtily erect, a sign with her of extreme indignation.

"You seem more shocked, Countess, than I expected you to be," Goswyn remarked, as she appeared. "Do you think the picture so very bad?"

"Nonsense!" the old lady replied, impatiently. "It was not painted for school-girls and boys: it did not shock me. It is not the picture that has made me angry, but--whom do you think I found in the room with her cousin Nimbsch and two or three other young men? Your sister-in-law Dorothea! So young a woman had better not look at a picture before which it is thought necessary to hang a curtain, but it is beyond a jest when she takes a train of young men with her to see it. If one is without principles,--good heavens! it is hard enough to hold on to principles in this philosophic age, when one is puzzled to know upon what to base them,--one ought at least to have some feeling of decency, some æsthetic sentiment."

CHAPTER IX.

For some time of late the loungers in Bellevue Street had enjoyed an interesting morning spectacle. Before the hotel the first story of which was occupied by Countess Anna Lenzdorff, three beautiful thoroughbred horses pawed the ground impatiently between the hours of eight and nine. A stable-boy in velveteens held two of the horses, while a groom in a tall hat and buckskin breeches reverently held the bridle of the third steed, which was provided with a lady's saddle. The groom was bow-legged and red-faced, very English in appearance,--in fact, an ideal groom.

Before long a young lady would appear at the tall door of the house, a young lady in a close-fitting dark-blue riding-habit and a tall silk hat beneath which the knot of her gleaming hair showed in almost too great luxuriance, and close behind her would come a fair-haired officer of dragoons. After stroking her steed and feeding it with sugar, the young lady would place her foot in the willing hand of her tall escort and lightly leap into the saddle. Then there would be a slight arrangement of skirt and stirrup, and "Is it all right, Countess Erika?"

"Yes, Herr von Sydow."

And in an instant the officer and his groom would mount and the little cavalcade would wend its way with clattering hoofs to the adjacent Thiergarten.

At the close of the season Countess Lenzdorff had declared that her grand-daughter looked ill and needed exercise.

At first she prescribed a course of riding-lessons in the Imperial School; but Erika found this very irksome, and Goswyn was intrusted with the task of procuring her a riding horse and of teaching her to ride. Under his guidance she made astonishing progress, and then--she looked so lovely on horseback. When she began, the Thiergarten was cold and bare,--it was towards the end of March: now it was the end of April, and there was spring everywhere.

On the tall old trees the foliage, young and tender, drenched with sunlight, showed golden green, gleaming brown, and rosy red, shading off into transparency in the gradations of colour native to early spring, and in the midst of this harmonious variety here and there a grave dark fir would show its dark boughs not yet decorated with the slender green fingers in the gift of May. Among the trees the smooth surface of a pond would reflect the myriad tones of colour of the spring; the long shadows of morning stretched dark across the level sunlit sward of the openings in the woodland. The air was fresh and filled with the fragrance of cool moist earth and young vegetation, but mingling with its invigorating breath there was suddenly wafted a languid odour, intoxicatingly sweet, but with something sickening in its essence, and as the riders looked for its source they perceived among the spring greenery, covered to the tip of every bough with gleaming white blossoms, the luxuriant wild cherry.

Erika inhaled its heavy breath with eager delight, while Goswyn's dislike of it amounted almost to disgust.

Every day they rode thus together along the avenues of the Thiergarten, until they became familiar with every pond, every statue,--yes, even with the appearance of every rider. At times they would meet a couple of cavalry officers and exchange greetings; or a few infantry officers, much-enduring warriors, who seemed to find riding the most difficult duty required of them; or some gentleman in trade testing upon a hired steed his skill in horsemanship and pale with terror if he happened to lose a stirrup. Squadrons of young girls under the guardianship of a riding-master would come cantering along the smooth drive, some overflowing with youthful vitality, others evidently taking the exercise by order of a physician.

Of course Countess Lenzdorff had requested Goswyn's supervision for only the few first efforts in horsemanship made by her grand-daughter, never dreaming that he would sacrifice two hours of each day in trotting about the Thiergarten with the young girl. But week followed week and he was still riding daily with Erika. In themselves there could have been but little pleasure in these excursions always along the same familiar avenues,--longer flights into the surrounding country with only a groom as escort would have been thought indecorous,--and yet the two morning hours thus passed were more to the young dragoon than the whole day beside.

The girl was in such harmony with the early, fresh nature about them. She was still but a child; but just as she was, with her unblunted sensibilities, her eager warm-heartedness, he would fain have clasped her in his arms, and have claimed the right to cherish and nurture to their glorious development all the fine qualities now dormant within her, before she should be wounded and sore from the thorns that beset her pathway.

That her sentiments towards him bore no comparison with those he cherished for her he was perfectly aware; but what of that? Passion too easily aroused on her part would not have pleased him, and she frankly showed her preference for him among all the men of her acquaintance.

The old Countess did all that she could to further his wooing: if he had not been in love he would have thought that she did too much. It was foolish to delay.

The leaves had lost their first tender beauty and were full-grown, strong, and shining, as they

rode one day along one of the narrowest bridle-paths in the Thiergarten,--a path where here and there a huge tree, which those who had laid out the park had not had the heart to sacrifice, almost obstructed the way. They trotted along briskly, like all beginners. Erika preferred a very swift pace, at which Goswyn sometimes demurred. On a sudden the girl's horse shied, violently startled by a wayfarer who had fallen asleep in the shade by the side of the path.

Very calmly, with no thought of danger, Erika not only kept her seat in the saddle, but quickly succeeded in soothing her horse.

All the more was Goswyn terrified, and no sooner was he convinced that Erika did not need his assistance than he turned angrily and soundly berated the unfortunate man, who was apparently intoxicated. Then, somewhat ashamed of his outburst, he rejoined Erika, who awaited him with a smile of surprise. He frowned; his cheeks were flushed. "Pardon me, Countess; I am very sorry," he said. "I could think of nothing but that you might have been thrown,---that tree--if you had lost your presence of mind----" He shuddered.

She shrugged her shoulders. "And what if I had? You were by."

At these words his face cleared. "Do you really feel such confidence in me?" he asked.

"I?" She looked at him in utter surprise. Why should he ask a question to which the reply was so self-evident?

His grave, manly face took on an expression of almost boyish embarrassment, and suddenly she became aware of his sentiments,--for the first time. She made a nervous effort to devise something that should hinder his confession, something that should spare him humiliation and herself pain: she could invent nothing. In vain did she search her mind for some, even the smallest, sensible evasive phrase, and at last she murmured, "The trees are very green for the time of year. Do you not think so?"

He smiled in spite of his agitation and confusion, and then said, in the slightly hoarse tone which always with him betokened intense earnestness, "Countess Erika, beyond a certain point twilight, lovely as it is, becomes intolerable; one longs for light." He paused, looked full in her face, and cleared his throat. "You must long have been aware of how I regard you?"

But she interrupted him hurriedly: "No, no; I have been aware of nothing,--nothing at all."

She trembled violently, and turned into a broad road, where a gay cavalcade came cantering towards her,--the Princess Dorothea and her train of several gentlemen.

"Turn to the right," called Goswyn, and the cavalcade passed, the dust raised by their horses enveloping everything like a misty cloud.

Erika coughed slightly. "Good heavens! perhaps he understood, and will save me from replying," she thought.

But no, he did not save her from replying.

"Well, Countess Erika?" he began, after a short pause, gently, but very firmly.

"Wha--what?" she stammered.

"Will you be my wife?"

She gasped for breath: never could she have believed that she should find it so hard to refuse an offer. But accept it--no; something within her rebelled against the thought--she could not.

"N--no. I am very sorry," she stammered, every pulse throbbing wildly. She was terribly agitated as she glanced timidly up at him. Not a muscle in his face moved.

"I was prepared for this," he murmured.

"Thank God, he does not care very much!" she thought, taking a long breath; and the next moment--nay, even that very moment--she was vexed that he did 'not care very much.'

They had reached the railway bridge, beneath which they were wont to turn into the grand avenue for a final gallop. For a moment she contemplated sacrificing to her rejected suitor this gallop, the crown and glory of their daily ride. She reined in her horse.

"No gallop?" he asked, as if nothing had passed between them, except that his voice was still a little hoarse.

"Oh, if you will. I only thought----" she stammered.

He replied with the chivalric courtesy with which he always treated her, "I am entirely at your service."

For a moment she hesitated; then, with a touch of the whip on her steed's right shoulder, she

started.

"Oh, how glorious!" she exclaimed, as they turned just before reaching the pavement. "Shall we not have one more?"

And so they rode twice up and down the grand avenue. The air was clear and cool, and there was in it the fragrance of freshly-planed wood, coming from a large shed that was being erected on one side of the avenue for an exhibition of horses.

Years afterwards Erika could never recall that ride and her miserable cruelty without again perceiving that peculiar fragrance.

The young man was in direful plight. Whatever he might say, he had not been prepared for this. The last few days had been passed by him in a state of blissful agitation in which, try as he might, he could not torment himself with doubts. He had fallen from an immense height, and he was terribly bruised. In spite of all his self-control, he began to show it. Erika grew more and more depressed, glancing sympathizingly aside at him from time to time. Now she would far rather that he had not cared so much. Evidently she did not herself know what she really wished.

They trotted along side by side; then just as they turned into Bellevue Street he heard a low distressed voice say,--

"Herr von Sydow--I would not have you think that--that--I--intended to say that to you. I so value your friendship--I should be so very sorry to lose it--and--and----" She threw back her head slightly, and, looking him in the face from beneath the stiff brim of her riding-hat, she said, with a charming little smile, "Tell me that all shall be just as it has been between us."

"As you please, Countess Erika," he replied, unable to restrain a smile at this novel way of treating a rejected suitor.

When he lifted her from her horse shortly afterwards, he just touched her gray riding-glove with his lips; she looked kindly at him, and as he gazed after her from the hall as she ascended the staircase she turned her head to give him a friendly little nod.

His heart grew lighter; he would not take too seriously her rejection of his suit; it was not final. "After all," he thought, "in spite of her precocious intelligence she is but a charming, innocent child; and that is what makes her so bewitching."

The sunlight gleamed on the gilded tops of the iron railings of the front gardens in Bellevue Street, upon the leaves of the trees, and upon the long line of red-painted watering-carts stretching away in perspective like the beads of a huge rosary. The heat was already rather oppressive in Berlin. But Goswyn was robust, and sensitive neither to heat nor to cold. His ride with Erika was but the beginning of his daily exercise, and he trotted off to finish it.

In the Charlottenburg Avenue he encountered the same cavalcade he had seen before in the Thiergarten in the midst of his declaration to Erika. Thanks to her agitation, the girl had recognized none of the party, but he had bowed to his sister-in-law and her esquires. Now she beckoned to him from a distance, and called, "Goswyn!"

She was considerably taller and more slender than Erika, but she looked well in the saddle. Her gray-green eyes sparkled with malicious mockery from beneath the brim of her tall hat. "Goswyn," she cried, speaking with her accustomed rapidity in her high piercing voice and with her strange lisp, "you were just now made the subject of a wager."

"But, Thea," Prince Nimbsch interrupted his cousin, "we none of us agreed to wager with you."

"What was it about?" asked Goswyn, with a most uncomfortable presentiment that some annoyance threatened him.

The three men with Dorothea looked at one another; Dorothea giggled. At last Prince Nimbsch said, "My cousin wished to wager that the Countess Erika would be wooed and won this spring."

"Oh, no," Dorothea interrupted him; "that was not it at all. I wagered that you had been refused by Erika this morning in the Thiergarten, Gos. Helmy would not believe me; but I have sharp eyes."

She said it still giggling, with the wayward insolence of a spoiled child, not consciously cruel, who for very wantonness pulls a beetle to pieces. "Am I not right?" she persisted.

The men turned away as men of feeling would turn away from beholding an execution.

There was a red cloud before Goswyn's eyes, but he maintained his outward composure perfectly. "Yes, Dorothea, I have been rejected," he said, and the words sounded oddly distinct in the midst of the absolute silence of the little group, surrounded as it was by the bustle and noise of the capital. "May I ask what possible interest this can have for you?"

"Oh," she laughed still more insolently, ready as she always was to exaggerate her ill-breeding when she was tempted to be ashamed of it,--"oh, I only wanted to make sure I was right. Helmy contradicted me so positively, declaring that a man like you never could be rejected. Aha, Helmy! Well, the other Berlin men will be glad!"

"And why?" Goswyn asked, with the unfortunate persistence in pursuing a disagreeable subject often shown by strong men who would fain establish their lack of sensitiveness.

"Why? Because you are a dangerous rival, Goswyn," cried Dorothea. "Do you suppose that you are the only one to covet the hand of the heiress?"

For a moment Goswyn felt as if a naming torch had been hurled in his face. He grew giddy, but, still maintaining his self-control, he simply rejoined, "Dorothea, there are circumstances in which your sex is an immense protection," and then, turning with a bow to the three men, he galloped off in an opposite direction.

Dorothea still giggled, but she turned very pale; her companions, on the other hand, were scarlet.

"Ride home with whomsoever you please: I am ashamed to be seen with you!" Prince Nimbsch said, angrily; and he hurried after Sydow. But when he overtook him the two men looked at each other and were silent. At last Nimbsch began, "I only wanted to say----"

Goswyn interrupted him: "There is nothing to be said;" and there was a hoarse tone in his voice that pained the young Austrian. "I know you to be a gentleman, Prince, and that you consider me one. There is nothing to be said."

Before the Prince could say another word, Goswyn was well-nigh out of sight.

Two hours afterwards Goswyn von Sydow might have been seen on a horse covered with foam galloping over the sandy hilly tracts of land by which Berlin is surrounded. He had never bestowed a thought upon Erika's wealth: now he felt that he never could forget it. He had been robbed of all ease in her society. It was all over.

CHAPTER X.

If Erika could have known anything of the unpleasant scene in Charlottenburg Avenue, her warm-hearted indignation would immediately have developed into vigour the germ of affection for Goswyn that already, unknown to herself, slumbered in her heart. She would certainly have committed some exaggerated, irresponsible act, which would have overthrown at a blow Goswyn's rudely-aroused, tormenting pride. She never could have borne to have another inflict upon him pain or humiliation. The entire disagreeable complication would have come to a crisis in a most touching scene, and in the end two people absolutely made for each other would have been sitting hand clasped in hand on the lounge beneath the fan-palms in Countess Lenzdorff's drawing-room, conversing in low tones, and Erika would have arrived at the sensible and agreeable conviction that there could be nothing better in the world than to share the life of a strong, noble husband to whom she could implicitly confide her happiness. The problem of her life would have found its solution, and she would have been spared the perilous errors and hard trials awaiting her in the future.

But the ugly story never reached her. The three men who had been auditors of Dorothea's coarse cruelty would have considered as a breach of honour any report of it, and the Princess Dorothea contented herself with a giggling declaration to all who chose to listen that her brother-in-law Goswyn had had the mitten from Erika Lenzdorff, without referring to the way in which her information had been procured.

Thus Erika passed the rest of the day with a rather sore, compassionate feeling in her heart, never doubting that she should have her usual ride with Goswyn the next morning, when she promised herself to be particularly amiable. All would come right, she said to herself.

But that same evening, when she was taking tea with her grandmother, old Lüdecke brought his mistress a letter which she read with evident surprise and then laid down beside her plate. She did not eat another morsel, and scarcely spoke during the meal. Observing that Erika, distressed by her silence, had also ceased eating and was anxiously glancing towards her grandmother from time to time, she asked, "Have you finished?" Her voice was unusually stern. Erika was startled. "Yes," she stammered, and, trembling in every limb, she followed her

grandmother out of the dining-room and into the Countess's cheerful, cosey boudoir. There the old lady began to pace thoughtfully to and fro: she looked very dignified and awe-inspiring. Erika had never before seen her thus, walking with short impatient steps, frowning brow, and a face that seemed hewn out of marble. She began to be frightfully uncomfortable in the presence of the angry old woman, and was trying to slip away unobserved, when her grandmother barred her way and said, harshly, "Stay here: I have something to say to you, Erika."

"Yes, grandmother."

"Sit down."

Erika obeyed.

The room looked very pleasant, with its light furniture revealed in the shaded brilliancy of coloured hanging lamps. One window was open; a low rustle of leaves was wafted in through the pale-green silken curtains upon the warm languorous breath of the spring night. Her grandmother seated herself in her favourite arm-chair beside her reading-table, with Erika opposite her on a frail-looking little chair, bolt upright, with her hands in her lap, and a very distressed expression of countenance.

"This letter is from Goswyn," the old lady began, tapping the letter in her lap.

"Yes, grandmother," murmured Erika.

"You guessed it?" the old lady asked, in a hard, unnatural voice, and with an exaggerated distinctness of utterance, which were very strange to her granddaughter.

"I know his handwriting."

"H'm! You know what is in the letter?"

"How should I?" Erika's pale cheeks flushed crimson.

"How should you? Well, then, I must tell you"--she smoothed down her dress with an impatient gesture--"that you refused his offer to-day: that is what the letter contains. Surely you should know it. Such things are not done in sleep."

"Ah, yes, I know that," Erika murmured, beginning to be irritated in her turn; "but how was I to suppose that he would write it to you? I cannot see what he does it for?"

"What for? He informs me that he must deprive himself of all intercourse with us for a time, that he has obtained leave of absence and is going away from Berlin."

"But why?" exclaimed Erika. "This is perfect nonsense! It was settled that we should ride together to-morrow as usual."

"Indeed! You expected him to ride with you after you had rejected him?"

"He was perfectly agreed," Erika eagerly declared: "we parted the best of friends. I do not want to marry him, but I prize his friendship immensely. I told him so. He has surely put that in the letter. He is never unjust; he must have told you that I was nice to him. How could I help being so, when I pitied him so much?" The girl's voice trembled. "You have missed something in the letter; you must have missed something," she persisted.

Her grandmother opened the letter again, and read, first in an undertone, then aloud: "Yes, here it is: 'Never was man rejected more charmingly, with greater sweetness, than I by the Countess Erika; but it did me no good. I only thought her more bewitching than ever before in her tender kindliness,--yes, even in all her dear, child-like, awkward attempts to reconcile what in the very nature of things is irreconcilable.

"'For a while I shall be very wretched; but you know me well enough to feel sure that I shall not go through life hanging my head, any more than I shall now butt that same head against the wall. I trust that the time will come when I shall be of some use to you, my dear old friend, and, it may be, to *her*; but at present I am good for nothing.

"'It is best that I should retire into the background. To-morrow I leave Berlin. Forgive me for finding it impossible to take leave of you in person, and believe in the faithful devotion of yours always,

"'G. Von Sydow.'"

After the old lady had finished the reading of the letter, not without a certain pathetic emphasis, she looked up. Erika's face was bathed in tears. Her grandmother was dismayed, and after a pause began again, but in a very different and a very gentle tone.

"This affair annoys me excessively, Erika."

The girl nodded.

"The fact is,"--the grandmother laid her hand on Erika's arm,--"you are very inexperienced in such affairs. Another time you must not let matters go so far. One must do everything in one's power to spare an honourable gentleman such a humiliation. Your conduct would have given the most modest of men reason to suppose you cared for him. You misled me completely."

"Misled!--cared for him!" Erika repeated, tapping the carpet nervously with her foot. "But I do like him very much."

Her grandmother all but smiled. "My dear child, I do not quite understand you. Consider! Shall I write and tell Goswyn that you were a little unprepared, and that you are sorry,--there's no disgrace in admitting that,--and--Heaven knows I shall be glad enough to write the letter!" She rose to go to her writing-table, but Erika detained her, nervously clutching at her skirts.

"No! no! oh, no, grandmother!" she almost screamed. "I do like him; I know how good he is; but I do not want to marry him, I am still so young. For God's sake do not force me to do so!" She had grown deadly pale, as she clasped her hands in entreaty.

Her grandmother looked at her with a grave shake of the head. "As you please," she said, no longer stern, but depressed, worried,--a mood very rare with her. "Now go and lie down: rest will do you good; and I should like to be alone for a while."

Far into the night did the old Countess pace restlessly to and fro in her boudoir, amidst all the graceful works of art which she had collected about her with such satisfaction and which gave her none at present. At last she seated herself at her writing-table, and before Goswyn left Berlin the next day he received the following letter:

"My Dear Boy,--

"This matter affects me more than you would think. I was so sure of my case. At first I was disposed to scold the girl; but there turned out to be no reason for doing so. Not a trace did she show of vulgar love of admiration, nor even of heartless thoughtlessness. Everything that she said to you is true: she likes you very much. I tried to set her right,--in vain! For the present there is nothing to be done with her.

"In the course of conversation I perceived that there was nothing for which the child was to blame; the fault was all mine. Can you forgive me?

"But that is a mere phrase. I know that it never will occur to you to blame me.

"My words will not come as readily as usual, and I am very uncomfortable. I am writing to you not only to tell you how much I pity you, but also to relieve my anxiety somewhat by talking it over with you.

"I have come to see that my grandchild, whom I so wrongly neglected--the words are not a mere phrase--for so long, and for whom I now have an affection such as I have never felt for any one in my life hitherto, will give me many an unhappy hour.

"Her sad, dreary youth has left its shadow on her soul, and has exaggerated in her a perilous inborn sensitiveness.

"There are depths in her character which I cannot fathom. She is good, tender-hearted, noble, beautiful, and rarely gifted; but there is with her in everything a tendency to exaggeration that frightens me. I forebode now that my long neglect of the child from mere selfish love of ease will be bitterly avenged upon me.

"If I had watched her from childhood, I should now know her; but, fondly as I love her, I cannot but feel that I do not understand her, and the great difference in our ages makes any perfect intimacy between us impossible. Moreover, in spite of my trifle of sagacity, of which I have availed myself for my own pleasure and never for the benefit of others, I am an unpractical person, and shall make many a stupid mistake in my treatment of the child. And it is a pity; for I do not over-estimate her: she is bewitching!

"Yet, withal, I cannot help thinking that you have not acted as wisely as I should have expected you to,--that with a little more heartfelt insistence you might have prevailed where my persuasion failed. In especial your sudden flight is a perfect riddle to me. I looked for more perseverance from you. But this is your affair.

"I am very sorry not to see you again before your hurried departure. I shall miss you terribly, my dear boy, I have become so accustomed to refer to you in all my small perplexities. Still hoping, in spite of everything, that sooner or later all may be as it should be between Erika and yourself, I am your affectionate old friend,

"Anna Lenzdorff."

Chafed and sore in heart as Goswyn was at the time, this letter did him good. After reading it through he murmured, "When she thus reveals her inmost soul, it is easy to understand how, with all her faults and follies, one cannot help loving the old Countess."

CHAPTER XI.

A Thread in the web of Erika's existence snapped with Goswyn's departure. The sudden separation from him without even a farewell she felt to be very sad, and long after he had gone the mere mention of his name would thrill her with a vague, restless pain, a nervous dissatisfaction with herself, with the world, with him, a dim sense that some error had crept into her life's reckoning and that the story ought to have turned out otherwise. In the depths of her heart she was bitterly disappointed when after a rather gay summer and autumn she heard upon her return to Berlin that young Sydow had been transferred to Breslau.

Soon, indeed, she lacked the time for occupying her thoughts with her dear good friend but unwelcome suitor. Existence developed brilliantly for her, and the world's incense mounted to her head, and bewildered her, as it bewilders all, even the wisest and gravest, if they are exposed to its influence.

She was presented at court, where she produced the most favourable impression, and was distinguished by the highest personages in the land in a manner to excite much envy.

Of course she went out a great deal,--so much that her grandmother, who had always been characterized by a certain social indolence, grew weary of accompanying her, and, whenever she could, intrusted her to the chaperonage of her oldest friend, Frau von Norbin.

But when Erika reached home at midnight or after it she had to recount her triumphs at her grandmother's bedside. The old Countess would scrutinize her closely, as she would have done a work of art, and once she said, "Yes, you are a rare creature, it cannot be denied: you are more lovely after a ball than before it. How life thrills through you! But I do not understand you. I know your mind, and your nerves, but I have never proved the depths of your heart." Then she shook her head, sighed, kissed the youthful beauty upon her eyelids, and sent her to bed.

Yes, there was no end to the homage paid her. No young girl had ever been so admired and caressed as was Erika Lenzdorff in the first two years after her presentation. It fairly rained adorers and suitors. Then--not because her beauty began to fade; no, she had never been more beautiful, she had developed magnificently--her conquests decreased. Her admirers were capricious, returning to her at times, and then holding aloof again; and as for suitors, they entirely disappeared.

One fact was too patent not to be acknowledged by even the girl's adoring grandmother. To the usual society man Erika was duller and more uninteresting than the rawest pink-and-white village girl whose natural coquetry taught her how to flatter his vanity and emphasize his superiority. She did not know how to talk to her admirers, and her admirers did not know how to talk to her. The men thought her 'queer.' She passed for a blue-stocking because she read serious books, and for 'highfalutin' because she speculated upon matters quite uninteresting to young girls in general. Since with all her feminine refinement of mind she combined not an iota of worldly wisdom, she harboured the conviction that every one regarded life from her own serious stand-point, and would fearlessly propound the problems that occupied her to the most superficial dandy who happened to be her partner in the german.

Her grandmother once said to her, "You scare away your admirers with your attempts to teach them to fly. Men do not wish to learn to fly: you would succeed far better if you should try to teach them to crawl on all fours. Most of them have a decided predilection for doing so, and those women who can furnish them with a plausible pretext for it--for crawling on all fours, I mean--are sure to be the most popular with them."

In reply to such a declaration Erika would gaze at her grandmother with an expression 'so pathetically stupid' that the old Countess could not help drawing the girl towards her and kissing her.

"It is a pity you would not have Goswyn," the old Countess generally concluded, with a sigh: "you are caviare for people in general, and Goswyn was the only one who knew how to value you. I cannot comprehend you, Erika. Goswyn is the very ideal of a husband; warm-hearted, brave,

and true, there is real support in his stout arm, and his broad shoulders are just fitted to bear a burden that another would find too heavy. He is no genius, but instead is brimful of the noblest kind of sense. Understand me, Erika; there is a great difference between the noblest kind and the inferior article."

But by the time she had reached this point in her eulogy of Goswyn, Erika was standing with her hand on the latch of the door, stammering, "Yes, yes, grandmother; but I--I have a letter to write."

She liked to avoid any discussion of Goswyn: a sensation of unrest, always the same, never developing into any distinct desire, was sure to assail her heart at the mention of his name.

The girls who had made their *débuts* with her were now almost all married. Very commonplace girls, whom she had treated with condescending kindness, married her own former admirers: she was no longer wooed. At first she laughed at the airs of superiority which the young wives took on in her society; but the second winter she was annoyed by them. Meanwhile, a fresh bevy of beauties made their appearance, and many a girl was admired and fêted, simply because she had not been seen as often as the Countess Erika.

In the depths of her heart, she had no desire whatever to marry. In her thoughts marriage was simply a clumsy, inconvenient requirement of our social organization, compliance with which she would postpone as long as possible. Against 'all for love' her inmost being rebelled, and yet her lack of suitors vexed her.

Then, when the first social feminine authorities of Berlin began to shake their heads over her as a 'critical case,' she suddenly startled society by the announcement of her betrothal to a very wealthy English peer, Percy, Earl of Langley.

She became acquainted with him at Carlsbad, whither her grandmother had gone for the waters. For several days she noticed that an elderly, distinguished-looking man followed her with his eyes whenever she appeared. At last, one morning he approached the old Countess, and with a smile asked whether she had really forgotten him or whether it was her deliberate intention persistently to cut him.

She offered him her hand courteously, and replied, "Lord Langley, on the Continent a gentleman is supposed to speak first to a lady. Moreover, if I had been willing to comply with your national custom, I should hardly have known whether it were well to present myself to you."

He laughed, with half-closed eyes, and rejoined that her remark could bear reference only to a period of his life long since past; now he was an old man, etc. "I have sown my wild oats," he declared, adding, "I've taken a long time to sow them, haven't I? But it's all over now!" Whereupon he requested an introduction to the Countess's companion.

From that time he devoted himself to the two ladies. Erika was flattered by his respectful admiration, and liked to talk with him. In fact, she had never conversed with so much pleasure with any other man. He had formerly belonged to the diplomatic corps, and had known personally all the people mentioned by Lord Malmesbury in his memoirs,--in short, everybody who during the past forty years had been either famous or notorious, from the Emperor Nicholas, for whom he had an enthusiasm, to Cora Pearl, concerning whom he whispered anecdotes in the old Countess's ear, and whose career he declared, with a shrug, was a riddle to him.

He was the keenest observer and cleverest talker imaginable, distinguished in appearance, always well dressed, a perfect type of the Englishman who, casting aside British cant, leads a gay life on the Continent, without faith, without any moral ideal, saturated through and through with a refined, cynical, witty Epicureanism, gently suppressed when in the society of ladies, although from indolence he did not entirely disguise it.

Two weeks after recalling himself to the Countess Lenzdorff's memory, he wrote her a letter asking for her grand-daughter's hand. The old lady, not without embarrassment, informed the young girl of his proposal. "It certainly is trying," she began. "I cannot see how it ever entered his head to think of you. A blooming young creature like you, and his sixty years! What shall I say to him?"

Erika stood speechless for a moment. The old Englishman's proposal was an utter surprise to her, but, oddly enough, it did not produce so disagreeable an impression upon her as upon her grandmother. She had always wished to mingle in English society. Wealthy as she was, she was aware that her wealth bore no comparison to that of Lord Langley. And then the position of the wife of an English peer was very different from that of the wife of any Prussian nobleman. Her fatal inheritance of romantic enthusiasm had latterly found expression with her in a certain craving for distinction. What a field opened before her! She saw herself fêted, admired, besieged with petitions, one of the political influences of Europe.

"Well?" asked Countess Lenzdorff, who had meanwhile taken her seat at her writing-table.

"Well?" Erika repeated, in some confusion.

"What shall I say? That you will not have him, of course; but how shall I courteously give him to understand---- It is intolerable! Do not get me into such a scrape again. Although, poor child, you cannot help it."

Erika was silent.

Her grandmother had begun to write, when she heard a very low, rather timid voice just behind her say,--

"Grandmother!"

She turned round. "What is it, child?"

"You see--if I must marry----"

Her grandmother stared, then exclaimed, sharply, "You could be induced----?"

Erika nodded.

The old lady fairly bounded from her chair, tore up the letter she had begun, threw the pieces on the floor, and left the room. The door was closed behind her, when she opened it again to say, curtly, "Write to him yourself!"

Two days after his betrothal, Lord Langley left Carlsbad to superintend the preparations at Eyre Castle for the reception of his bride, whom he hoped to take to England at the end of August.

The lovers shed no tears at parting, and there was no other display of tenderness than a reverential kiss imprinted by Lord Langley upon his betrothed's hand. This respectful homage appeared to Erika highly satisfactory.

After the old Countess had taken the cure at Carlsbad she betook herself with Erika to Franzensbad to complete it.

At that time a great deal was said, in the sleepy, lounging life of Franzensbad, of the Bayreuth performances. 'Parsifal' was the topic of universal interest. The old Countess at first absolutely refused to listen to Erika's earnest request to go to Bayreuth; in fact, she had been in a bad humour ever since the betrothal, and her tenderness towards Erika had ostensibly diminished. She contradicted her frequently, was quite irritable, and would often reply to some perfectly innocent proposal of her grand-daughter's, "Wait until you are married." She would not hear of going to Bayreuth, maintaining that the bits of 'Parsifal' which she had heard played as duets had been quite enough for her,--she had no desire to hear the whole performance; moreover, she had had a headache--ever since Erika's betrothal.

Her opposition lasted a good while, but at last curiosity triumphed, and she announced herself ready to sacrifice herself and go to Bayreuth with her granddaughter.

Lord Langley's last letter had come from Munich, where one of his daughters (he was a widower, and had no son) was married to a young English diplomat. Grandmother and grand-daughter were to meet him there, and then all were to proceed to Castle Wetterstein in Westphalia, the family seat of Count Lenzdorff, a great-uncle of Erika's, where the marriage was to take place.

Highly delighted at her grandmother's consent to her wishes, Erika wrote to Lord Langley asking him to meet them at Bayreuth instead of waiting for them at Munich, although, she added, he was to feel quite free to do as he pleased.

Lüdecke, the faithful, was sent to Bayreuth to arrange for lodgings and tickets, and a few days afterwards the old Countess, with Erika and her maid Marianne, left Franzensbad, with its waving white birches, its good bread and weak coffee, its symphony concerts, and its languishing, pale, consumptive beauties. The dew glistened on leaves and flowers as they drove to the station. After they had reached it, Marianne, the maid, was sent back to the hotel for a volume of 'Opera and Drama,' and a pamphlet upon 'the psychological significance of Kundry,' in the former of which the old Countess was absorbed during the journey to Bayreuth.

They were received with genial enthusiasm by the fair, fresh wife of the baker, in whose house Lüdecke had procured them lodgings, and they followed her up a bare damp staircase to the tile-paved landing upon which their rooms opened. They consisted of a spacious, low-ceilinged apartment, with a small island of carpet before the sofa in a sea of yellow varnished board floor, furnished with red plush chairs, two india-rubber trees, a bird in a painted cage, and a cupboard with glass doors, on either side of which were doors opening into the bedrooms,--everything comfortable, clean, and old-fashioned.

After some refreshment the two ladies drove about the town, and out into the trim open

country through beautiful, shady avenues, avenues such as usually lead to princely residences, and into the quiet deserted park, where there were few strangers besides themselves to be seen. Returning, they dined at 'the Sun,' at the same table with Austrian aristocrats, Berlin councillors of commerce, and numerous pilgrims to the festival from known and unknown lands. Then they sauntered about the dear old town, with its many-gabled architecture, and visited the Master's grave and the old theatre. The old Countess lost herself in speculations as to what the Margravine would have thought of the great German show that now wakes the lethargic old capital from its repose at least every other year; and Erika, laughing, called her grandmother's attention to the 'Parsifal slippers' and the 'Nibelungen bonbons' in the unpretentious shop-windows.

The sun was very low, and the shadows were creeping across the broad squares and down the narrow streets, when the old Countess proposed to go back to their rooms to refresh herself with a cup of tea. Erika accompanied her to the door of their lodgings, and then said, "I should like to look about for a volume of Tauchnitz. May I not go alone? This seems little more than a village."

"If you choose," her grandmother, already halfway up the staircase, replied.

With no thought of ill, Erika turned the corner of the nearest street.

She walked slowly, gazing up at the antique house-fronts on either side of her. Suddenly she heard a voice behind her call "Rika! Rika!"

She turned, and started as if stunned by a flash of lightning. Before her, his whiskers brushed straight out from his cheeks, rather more florid than of yore, in a very dandified plaid suit, with an eye-glass stuck in his eye, stood--Strachinsky.

"Rika, my dear little Rika!" he cried, holding out his hand. "What a surprise, and what a pleasure, to find you here, and without the Cerberus who always has barred our meeting! Fate will yet avenge it upon her."

Erika trembled with indignation, but her tongue clove to the roof of her mouth. Try as she might, she could not reply. A senseless, childish panic mastered her, as terrible as it would have been had this man still had power over her and been able to snatch her from her present surroundings and carry her back to the dreary life at Luzano.

"You are quite speechless," he went on, having meanwhile seized her hand and carried it to his lips. "No wonder, it is so long since we have seen each other. That jealous old drag----"

"I must beg you not to allude to my grandmother in that way!" she exclaimed, conscious of a benumbing, nervous pain at the remembrance of her terrible, sordid existence with this man.

"You are under the old woman's influence," Strachinsky declared, "and nothing else was to be expected; but now all will be different: when you are once married, more cordial relations will be established between us. I bear no malice; I forgive everything: I was always too forgiving,--it was my only fault. My poor wife always called me an idealist, a Don Quixote,--my poor, idolized Emma,--I never can forget her." And he passed his hand over his eyes.

"I must go home: my grandmother is expecting me," Erika murmured.

"I should think you could consent to bestow a few minutes upon your old father, if only out of regard for your mother's memory," Strachinsky observed, assuming his loftiest expression.

Regard for her mother's memory! Certainly, she would not let him starve or suffer absolute want. "Do you need anything?" she asked.

"No," he replied, curtly, with a show of wounded feeling.

Then followed a pause. She looked round, ignorant of where she was, for during this most unwelcome interview she had continued to walk on without observing whither she was going.

"Will you show me the way to Maximilian Street?" she asked him.

"To the left, here," he replied, laconically; then, with lifted eyebrows, he observed, "Unpractical idealist that I am, I was disposed to forget and forgive the outrageous ingratitude with which you have treated me in these latter years,--nay, always. I had even resolved to call upon your betrothed; although that would have been to reverse the order of affairs. But I perceive that your arrogance and pride are greater than ever. No matter! I only hope you may not be punished for them too severely!" With these words, he touched his hat with grotesque dignity and was gone before she could collect herself to reply.

CHAPTER XII.

Meanwhile, the sky had become overcast; a keen wind began to blow, and large drops of rain were falling before Erika reached the door of the lodgings in Maximilian Street.

As she mounted the staircase she heard her grandmother's voice in the drawing-room and recognized the cordial tone which she used when speaking to the few people in the world with whom she was in genuine sympathy. Nevertheless, agitated by her late interview, Erika inwardly deplored the arrangement of their apartments which made it impossible that she should reach her bedroom without passing through the drawing-room. She opened the door: her grandmother was seated on the sofa, and near her, in an arm-chair, with his back to the casement window, was a man in civilian's dress. He arose, looking so tall that it seemed to Erika he must strike his head against the low ceiling of the room. She did not instantly recognize him, as he stood with his back to the light, but before he had advanced a step she exclaimed, "Goswyn!" and ran to him with both hands extended. When, with rather formal courtesy, he kissed one of the hands thus held out as if seeking succour, and then dropped it without any very cordial pressure, she was assailed by a certain embarrassment: she remembered that she should have called him Herr von Sydow, and that it became her to receive her rejected suitor with a more measured dignity. But she was not self-possessed today. The shock of meeting her step-father had unstrung her nerves; the numbness which had of late paralyzed sensation began to depart; her youthful heart throbbed almost as loudly as it had done when she had first ascended the thickly-carpeted staircase in Bellevue Street, as strongly as upon that brilliant Thursday at the Countess Brock's, when, suddenly overcome by the memory of her unhappy mother, she had fled from the crowd of her admirers to sob out her misery in some lonely corner.

Lord Langley's worldly-wise, self-possessed betrothed had vanished, and in her stead was a shy, emotional young person, oppressed by a sense of her exaggerated cordiality towards the guest. She now seated herself as far as possible from him in one of the red plush arm-chairs.

"How long have you been in Bayreuth, Herr von Sydow?" she asked, in a timid little voice, which thrilled the young officer's heart like an echo of by-gone times.

Erika, whose eyes had become accustomed to the darkened light of the room, noted that he smiled,--his old kind smile. His features looked more sharply chiselled than formerly; he had grown very thin, and had lost every trace of the slight clumsiness which had once characterized him.

"I came several days ago: my musical feast is already a thing of the past," he replied.

"Indeed! And what then keeps you in Bayreuth?" Erika asked.

He laughed a little forced laugh, and then blushed after his old fashion, but replied, very quietly, "I learned from your factotum Lüdecke, whom I met the day before yesterday, that you were coming, and so I determined to await your arrival."

She longed to say something cordial and kind to him, but the words would not come. Instead her grandmother spoke.

"It was kind of you to stay in this tiresome old hole just to see us. I call it very kind," she assured him, and Erika added, meekly, "So do I."

A pause ensued, broken finally by Goswyn: "Let me offer you my best wishes on the occasion of your betrothal, Countess Erika." He uttered the words very bravely, but Erika could not respond: she suddenly felt that she had cause to be ashamed of herself, although what that cause was she did not know.

"Are you acquainted with Lord Langley, Goswyn?" the old Countess asked, in the icy tone which she always assumed when any allusion was made to her grand-daughter's engagement.

"No. You can imagine how eager I am to hear about him."

"He is one of the most entertaining Englishmen I have ever met,--a very clever man," the Countess declared, as if discussing some one in whom she took no personal interest.

"It was not to be supposed that the Countess Erika would sacrifice her freedom to any ordinary individual," said Goswyn, with admirable self-control.

For all reply the Countess raised the clumsy teacup before her to her lips.

With every word thus spoken Erika's sense of shame deepened, and she was seized with an intense desire to be frank with Goswyn, and to dispel any illusion he might entertain as to her betrothal. "Lord Langley is no longer young," she said, hurriedly. "I will show you his photograph."

She went into the adjoining room and brought thence the photograph in its case, which she

opened herself before handing it to Goswyn. He looked at the picture, then at her, and then again at the picture. His broad shoulders twitched; without a word he closed the case, and put it upon a table, beside which Erika had taken her seat.

An embarrassing silence ensued. The sound of rolling vehicles was heard distinctly from below, and one stopped before the dark door-way. Soon afterwards the staircase creaked beneath a heavy tread. Lüdecke opened the low door of the old-fashioned apartment, and announced, "Frau Countess Brock."

The 'wicked fairy' unconsciously had a novel experience: her appearance was a relief.

As usual, she bowed and nodded on all sides, but, as she was unable for the moment to find her eye-glass, she saw nobody, and fell into the error of supposing a tall india-rubber tree in a tub before a window to be her particular friend the chamberlain Langefeld. Not until Goswyn discovered the eye-glass hanging by its slender cord among the jet ornaments and fringes with which her mantle was trimmed and humanely handed it to her, did she find out her mistake. Goswyn was about to withdraw after having rendered her this service, but she tapped him reproachfully on the shoulder and begged him to stay a moment with his old aunt. He might have resisted her request; but when Countess Lenzdorff added that he would please her by remaining, he complied, and seated himself again, although with something of the awkwardness apt to be shown by an officer when in civilian's dress.

The 'wicked fairy' established herself beside the Countess Anna upon the sofa behind the round table, and accepted from Erika's hand a cup of tea, which she drank in affected little sips. She was clad, as usual, in trailing mourning robes, although no one could have told for whom she wore them, and the Countess Anna's first question was, "Do you not dislike wandering about Bayreuth as the Queen of Night?"

"On the contrary," replied the 'wicked fairy,' rubbing her hands, "I like it. Awhile ago one of my friends declared that I appeared in Bayreuth as the mourning ghost of classic music. Was it not charming?--but not at all appropriate, for I adore Wagner!" And she began to hum the air of the flower-girl scene, "trililili lilili----"

"What do you think of 'Parsifal'?" Countess Anna asked, turning to Goswyn. "One of the greatest humbugs of the century, eh? They howl as if possessed by an evil spirit, and call it joy,--call it song!"

"At the risk of falling greatly in your esteem, I must confess that 'Parsifal' made a profound impression upon me, Countess," Goswyn replied.

"Et tu, Brute!" his old friend exclaimed.

"I do not entirely approve of it, if that is anything in my favour," he rejoined.

"Ah, there is nothing like Wagner! there is but one God,--and one Wagner!" The 'wicked fairy' went on humming, closing her eyes, and waving her hands affectedly in the air.

"The scene containing the air which you are humming is not one of my favourites," Goswyn remarked.

"Oh, it charmed us most of all,--Dorothea and me," the 'wicked fairy' declared. "Those hovering little temptresses, so seductive, and Parsifal, the chaste, in their midst!" She clasped her hands in an ecstasy. "The other evening at Frau Wagner's we met Van Dyck. He is rather strong in his mode of speech. Dorothea seemed much entertained by him, but afterwards she thought him shocking."

"Your niece seems to have a positive mania just now for thinking everything 'shocking,'" Countess Anna said, dryly. "She sings no more music-hall ditties, and casts down her eyes modestly when she sees a French novel in a book-shop. Such a transformation is, to say the least, startling. Oh, I beg pardon, Goswyn; I always forget that Dorothea is your sister-in-law."

"No need to remember it while we are among ourselves," Goswyn rejoined. "*Coram publico*, I would beg you to modify your expressions, for my poor brother's sake."

"He cannot endure Thea," Countess Brock said, laughing, as she shook her forefinger at him; "but I know why that is so. Look how he blushes!" In fact, Goswyn had changed colour. "He fell in love with her in Florence. She told me all about it--aha!"

"Does she really fancy so, or has she invented the story for her own amusement?" Goswyn murmured, as if to himself.

The 'fairy' continued to giggle and writhe about in the corner of the sofa.

"You must have been much with Dorothea of late," the Countess Anna remarked, quietly: "you have acquired all her airs and graces. Is the lady in question in Bayreuth at present?"

"No; she left early this morning, for Berlin, where she has various matters to attend to before she goes to Heiligendamm. But we have been together for some time. We were in Schlangenbad

for six weeks. Oh, we enjoyed ourselves excessively,--made all sorts of acquaintances whom we should never have spoken to at home. But--I came to see you, Anna, for a special purpose,--two purposes, I might say. One concerns Hedwig Norbin's birthday,--her seventieth,--and the other--yes, the other--guess whom I met in Schlangenbad?" She threw back her head and folded her arms across her breast, the very impersonation of anticipated enjoyment in a disagreeable announcement.

"How can I?"

"Your grand-daughter's step-father: yes," nodding emphatically.

Erika started. Countess Lenzdorff said, calmly, "Indeed! I pity you from my heart; but, since I had no share in bringing such a misfortune upon you, I owe you no further reparation."

"H'm! you need not pity me. He interested me extremely. You and your grand-daughter have seen fit simply to ignore him; but you do not know what people say."

"Nor does it interest me in the least."

"Well, you may not care about the verdict of society, but it is comfortable to stand well with one's conscience, as Dorothea said to me the other day."

"Indeed! did she say that to you?" Countess Anna murmured in an undertone.

"Yes, and she was indignant at the way in which you have treated the poor man."

"Is it any affair of hers?" Countess Lenzdorff asked, sharply.

"Oh, she is quite right; I am entirely of her opinion," the 'fairy' went on; then, turning to Erika, "I cannot help remonstrating with you. He certainly cared for you like a father until you were seventeen. He was a man whom your mother loved passionately."

Erika sat as if turned to marble: every word spoken by the old 'fairy' was like a blow in the face to her.

The Countess Lenzdorff's eyes flashed angrily. "Do not meddle with what you do not in the least understand, Elise!" she exclaimed. "As for my daughter-in-law's passion for that stupid weakling, it was made up of pity on the one hand for a man whom she came to know wounded and ill, and on the other hand of antagonism towards me. The fact is, I provoked her; the marriage would never have taken place if I had not most injudiciously set myself in opposition to Emma's betrothal to the Pole. Her second marriage was a tragedy, the result of obstinacy, not of love."

"My dearest Anna, that is entirely your own idea," the Countess Brock asserted. "Every one knows that you cannot appreciate any tenderness of affection because your own heart is clad in armour, but you can never convince me that your daughter-in-law did not love the Pole passionately. In the first place, her passion for him was the only possible motive for her marriage; how else could it have occurred to her?--bah!--nonsense! and in the second place, Strachinsky read me her letters,--letters written soon after their marriage. He carries these proofs everywhere with him: his devotion to his dead wife is most touching. Poor man! he wept when he read the letters to us, and we wept too. I had invited a few friends, and he spent two evenings in reading them aloud to us. When he had finished he kissed the letters, and said, with a deep sigh, 'This is all that is left to me of my poor, adored Emma,' and then he told us of the tender relations that had existed between himself and his step-daughter, until she, when a brilliant lot fell to her share, had cast him aside--like an old shoe-string, as he expressed it. I do not say that such a connection is the most desirable, but *on choisit ses amis, on subit ses parents*. Certain duties must be conscientiously fulfilled, and, my dear Erika, be sure that I advise you for your good when I beg you to be friends with your step-father: you owe him a certain amount of filial affection. He is here in Bayreuth, and has requested me to effect a reconciliation between you and him."

Erika made no reply. She sat motionless, speechless. The 'fairy' played her last trump. "People are talking about your unjustifiable treatment of him," she said; "but that can all be arranged. May I tell him that you are ready to receive him, Anna?"

The Countess Lenzdorff rose to her feet. "Indeed!" she exclaimed, with an outburst of indignation; "you wish me to receive a man who, for the sake of exciting sympathy, reads aloud to your invited guests the letters of his dead wife? What do you take me for? I will have him turned out of doors if he dares to show his face here! And I have no more time at present to listen to you, Elise: I am going to pay a visit to Hedwig Norbin. Will you come with me?"

"With the greatest pleasure!" cried the 'wicked fairy,' decidedly cowed.

"Bring me my bonnet and gloves from my room, my child," her grandmother said to Erika, and when the girl brought them to her she kissed her on the cheek.

Goswyn had risen to depart with the two ladies. Erika looked after him dully as, after taking a

formal leave of her, he had reached the door of the room. Then she suddenly followed him. "Goswyn," she murmured, "stay for one moment!"

He stayed; the door closed after the others, and they were alone.

What did she want of him? He did not know: she herself did not know. He would advise her, rid her of the weight upon her heart: her old habit of appealing to him in all difficulties returned to her in full force. The time was past for her when she could relieve herself in any distressing agitation by a burst of tears: she sat there white and silent, plucking at the folds of her black lace dress.

At last, passing her hand across her forehead once or twice, she began in a forced monotone, "You know that I idolized my mother; I have told you about her; perhaps you remember----"

"I do not think I have forgotten much that you have ever told me," he interrupted her.

The words were kind, but something in his tone pained her. Something interposed between them. It had seemed so natural to turn to him for sympathy, but she suddenly felt shy. What was her distress to him?

"Forgive me," she murmured. "I longed to pour out my heart to some one. I have no one to go to, and I suffer so! You cannot imagine what this last quarter of an hour has been to me. My poor mother's marriage was a tragedy; my grandmother was right. No one who did not live with her can dream of all that she suffered for years. Her last request to me when she was dying was that I would not let him come to her. And now that wretch is boasting to strangers--oh, I cannot endure it! Can you understand what it all is to me? Can you understand?"

The question was superfluous. She knew very well that he understood, but she repeated the words mechanically again and again. Why did he sit there so straight and silent? She was pouring out her soul to him, revealing to him all that was most sacred, and he had not one word of sympathy for her. A kind of anger took possession of her, and, with all the self-control which she could summon up, she said, more calmly, "I know I have no right to burden you with my misery----"

"Countess Erika!" he exclaimed, with a sudden unconscious movement of his hand, which chanced to strike the case containing Lord Langley's photograph. It fell on the floor; Goswyn picked it up and tossed it contemptuously upon the table, while his face grew hard and stern.

He was the first to break the silence that followed. "Is this Strachinsky staying in Bayreuth?"

"Yes. I met him to-day."

"Do you know his address?"

"No. Why do you ask?"

"For the simplest reason in the world: I wish to procure your mother's letters for you."

"The letters!" she exclaimed. "Oh, if that were possible! But upon what pretext could you demand them of him? they belong to him; we have no right to them."

"Might is right with such a fellow as that," Goswyn said, as he rose to go.

She offered him her hand; he took it courteously, but there was no cordial pressure on his part, nor did he carry it to his lips.

In a moment he was gone. She stood gazing as if spell-bound at the door which closed behind him. She did not understand. He was the same, but in his eyes she was no longer what she had been. This conviction flashed upon her. He was, as ever, ready to help her, but the tender warmth of sympathy of former days had gone, as had the reverence with which the strong man had been wont to regard her weakness: she was neither so dear nor so sacred to him as she had been.

In the midst of the pain caused her by the 'wicked fairy's' malicious speeches she was aware of a paralyzing consciousness that she had sunk in the esteem of the one human being in the world whom she prized most highly.

When the Countess Lenzdorff returned at the end of an hour, her grand-daughter was still sitting where she had left her, in the dark. When Erika heard her grandmother coming, she slipped into her own room.

CHAPTER XIII.

The next forenoon Erika was sitting in the low-ceilinged drawing-room. She was alone in the house. Lord Langley had announced his arrival during the forenoon, and the Countess Anna had gone out, to avoid being present at the meeting of the betrothed couple. The young girl's pulses throbbed to her fingertips; her eyes burned, her whole body felt sore and bruised, as if she had had a fall. For an hour she sat listening breathlessly. Would Goswyn come before Lord Langley arrived? Should she have a moment in which to speak to him? Ah, how she longed for it! She wanted to explain to him---- At last she heard a step on the stair: of course it was Lord Langley. No, no! Lord Langley's step was neither so quick nor so light: it was Goswyn; she could hear him speaking with Lüdecke, and the old servant, with the garrulous want of tact at which she had so often laughed, was explaining to him that her Excellency had gone out, but that the Countess Erika had stayed at home to receive Lord Langley.

Erika listened, and heard Goswyn say, in a clear, cold tone, "In that case I will not disturb the Countess. Tell her----"

She could endure it no longer, but, opening the door, called, "Goswyn!"

"Countess!" He bowed formally.

"Come in for one moment, I entreat you," she begged, involuntarily clasping her hands. Of course he could not but obey.

They confronted each other, she trembling in every limb, he erect and unbending as she had never before seen him. In his hand he held a small packet.

"There, Countess," he said, "I am convinced that these are all the letters which this Herr von Strachinsky ever received from your mother: some of the epistles with which he edified my amiable aunt and her guests were the productions of his own pen. But you may rest assured that while I live he will not be guilty of any further indiscretion in that direction." There was such a look of determination in his eyes as he spoke that Erika easily guessed by what means he had contrived to intimidate Strachinsky.

She was filled with the warmest gratitude towards him, but there was something so repellent in his air that, instead of any extravagant expression of it, she stood before him without being able to utter a word of thanks. Instead, she fingered in an embarrassed way the packet which he had given her, a very little packet, wrapped in a sheet of paper and sealed with a huge coat of arms. In her confusion she fixed her eyes upon this seal.

"The arms of the Barons von Strachinsky," Goswyn explained. "Pray observe the delicacy with which the very letters read aloud for the entertainment of Heaven only knows how many gossiping old women are sealed up carefully lest I should read them."

Erika smiled faintly. "It is hardly necessary that you should be understood by Strachinsky," she said. "Men always judge from their own point of view. You judged me by yourself, and consequently estimated me more highly than I deserved. Sit down for a moment, I pray you."

"I do not wish to intrude," he said, bluntly, almost discourteously.

"How could you intrude? You never can intrude."

"Not even when you are expecting your betrothed?" He looked her full in the face.

She blushed scarlet; a burning desire to regain his esteem took possession of her.

"You take an entirely false view of my position," she exclaimed. "Mine is not the betrothal of a sentimental school-girl. I--I" and she burst into a short, nervous laugh that shocked even herself--"I do not marry Lord Langley for love."

There was a pause. Goswyn bowed his head; then, suddenly raising it, he looked straight into Erika's eyes in a way which made her very uncomfortable, and said, "I guessed that; but why, then, do you marry him,--you, a young, pure, gifted girl, and a man with such a past as Lord Langley's? I know that no man is worthy of such a girl as you are; but, good God, there is some difference---- Why, why do you marry him?"

"Why? why?" She tried to collect herself and to answer him truly. "I marry him because the position he offers me suits me,--because one is condemned to marry at a certain age, if one would not be sneered at and ridiculed; I marry him because he is an old man and will not require of me any warmth of affection, and because I have determined that there shall be nothing romantic in my marriage. Ah," with a glance at the small packet in her hand, "after all that you know of my wretched experience, you ought to understand why I do not choose to marry for love."

A long silence followed. He looked at her as he had never hitherto done, searchingly, inquiringly. Suddenly his glance grew tender: it expressed intense pity. "I understand that you

talk of love and marriage as a blind man talks of colours," he said, slowly. "I understand that you unwittingly contemplate the commission of a crime against yourself, and that you should be prevented from it."

He ceased speaking on a sudden, and bit his lip. A voice was heard in the hall,--the characteristic voice of an old English *bon viveur* with a Continental training. "Is the Countess at home?"

"What am I doing here?" Goswyn exclaimed, and, without touching the hand extended to him, he turned on his heel and was gone.

Outside the door stood an old gentleman with a tall white hat and a dark-blue cravat spotted with white. One glance of rage and curiosity Goswyn darted at the correct florid profile and white whiskers, and then he rushed down-stairs like one possessed.

Yes, he had not been mistaken. It was the same Englishman whom he had once seen at Monaco with a most disreputable train. Then he was travelling under an assumed name,--Mr. Steyne: his English regard for appearances forbade him in such society to profane his title and his social dignity.

Goswyn's blood fairly boiled in his veins.

When, some time afterwards, Countess Lenzdorff entered the drawing-room, after her walk, Lord Langley, rather redder in the face than usual, and with a baffled, puzzled expression of countenance, was sitting in an arm-chair; Erika, very pale, with sparkling eyes and very red lips, strikingly beautiful, and evidently tingling in every nerve, was in another on the other side of a table between the pair, upon which was an open jewel-case containing a diamond necklace. The Countess suspected that some kind of disagreement had arisen between the couple, and, as soon as she had returned Lord Langley's greeting, asked, carelessly, what it had been.

"Oh, nothing to speak of," he replied. "My queen was a little ungracious; but even that has a charm. A perfectly docile woman is as tiresome as a quiet horse: there is no pleasure in either unless there is some caprice to subdue."

Erika's grandmother bestowed a keen, observant glance, first upon the speaker, and then upon her grand-daughter, after which she remarked, dryly, "If we wish for any dinner we had better betake ourselves to 'The Sun.'"

CHAPTER XIV.

The sleepy afternoon quiet is broken by a sudden stir and excitement. It is time to go to the theatre, and the Lenzdorffs in a rattling, clumsy, four-seated hired carriage join the endless train of vehicles of all descriptions that wind through the narrow street of the little town and beyond it, until upon an eminence in the midst of a very green meadow they reach the ugly red structure looking something like a gasometer with various mysterious protuberances,--the temple of modern art.

The Lenzdorffs are among the last to arrive, but they are in time: unpunctuality is not tolerated at Bayreuth.

Summoned by a blast of trumpets, the public ascend a steep short flight of steps to a large, undecorated auditorium. The Countess Lenzdorff and her granddaughter have seats on the bench farthest back, just in front of the royal boxes.

At a given signal all the ladies present take off their hats. It suddenly grows dark,--so very dark that until the eye becomes accustomed to it nothing can be discovered in the gloom. Gradually row upon row of human heads are perceived stretching away in what seems endless perspective: such is the auditorium of the theatre at Bayreuth.

The most brilliant toilette and the meanest attire are alike indistinguishable; here is positively no food for idle curiosity, nothing to distract the attention from the stage.

Agitated as Erika already was, and consequently sensitively alive to impressions, the first sound of the trumpets thrilled her every nerve, and before the last note of the prelude had died away she had reached a condition of ecstasy closely allied to pain, and could with difficulty

restrain her tears.

All the woe of sinning humanity wailed in those tones,--the mortal anguish of that humanity which in its longings for the imperishable, the supernatural, beats and bruises itself against the barriers that it cannot pass,--that humanity which, dragged down by the burden of its animal nature, grovels on the earth when it would fain soar to the starry heavens.

Just when the music wailed the loudest, she suddenly started: some one in a seat in front of her turned round,--a handsome Southern type of man, with sharply-cut features, short hair, and a pointed beard; in the gray twilight she encountered his glance, a strange searching look fixed upon her face, affecting her as did Wagner's music. At the same time a tall, fair woman at his side also turned her head. "*Voyons, qu'est-ce qu'il y a?*" she asked, discontentedly. "*Ce n'est rien; une ressemblance qui me frappe*," he replied, in the weary tone of annoyance often to be observed in men who are under the domination of jealous women.

A couple of young Italian musicians blinding their eyes in the darkness by the study of an open score exclaimed, angrily, "Hush!" and the stranger riveted his eyes upon the stage, where the curtain was just rolling up.

Erika shivered slightly: some secret chord of her soul--a chord of which she had hitherto been unaware--vibrated. Where had she seen those dark, searching eyes before?

The musical drama pursued its course, and at first it seemed as if the enthusiasm produced in Erika's mind by the prelude was destined to fade utterly: the painted scenes were too much like other painted scenes; she had heard them extolled too highly not to be disappointed in them; the music, to her ignorant ears, was confused, inconsequent, a tangle of shrill involved discords, in the midst of which there were now and then musical phrases of noble and poetic beauty.

The effect was not to be compared with the impression produced upon the girl by the prelude,--when suddenly she seemed to hear as from another world a voice calling her, arousing her,--something unearthly, mystical, interrupted by the same shuddering, alluring wail of anguish, and when the nerves, strung to the last degree of tension, seemed on the point of giving way, there came rippling from above like cooling dew upon sun-parched flowers with promise of redemption the mystic purity of the boy-chorus,--

"Made wise by pity,
The pure in heart----"

"No one shall ever induce me to come again. I am fairly consumed with nervous fever. No one has a right under the pretence of art to stretch his fellow-creatures thus on the rack! Parsifal is altogether too fat. Wagner should have cut his Parsifal out of Donatello," exclaims Countess Lenzdorff, as she leaves the theatre at the close of the first act.

"I don't quite understand the plot," Lord Langley confesses. "The leading idea seems to me unpractical. I must say I feel rather confused." He then speaks of Kundry as 'a very unpleasant young woman,' and asks Erika if she does not agree with him; but Erika shrugs her shoulders and makes no reply.

"She is very ungracious to-day," his lordship remarks, with a rather embarrassed laugh. "Shall I take offence, Countess?" (This to the Countess Anna.) "No, she is too beautiful ever to give offence. Only look! She is creating quite a sensation.--Every one is staring after you, Erika."

The theatre is empty. The audience is streaming across the grass towards the restaurant to refresh itself.

Close behind the Lenzdorffs walks the Russian Princess B----, who hires an entire suite of rooms for every season and attends every representation. She is dressed in embroidered muslin, and from the broad brim of her white straw hat hangs a Brussels lace veil partially concealing her face, which was once very handsome.

She addresses the old Countess: "*Êtes-vous touchée de la grâce, ma chère Anne?*"

Countess Anna shakes her head emphatically: "No; the music is too highly spiced and peppered for me. It bas made me quite thirsty. I long for a draught of prosaic beer and some Mozart."

The Russian smiles, and immediately begins to tell of how she had once reproved Rubinstein when he ventured to say something derogatory with regard to Wagner.

A stout tradesman, whose poetically-inclined wife has apparently brought him to Bayreuth against his will, exclaims, "What a humbug it is!" to which his wife rejoins, "You cannot understand it the first time: you must hear 'Parsifal' frequently." "Very possibly," he declares; "but I shall never hear it again."

The Lenzdorffs and Lord Langley take their seats at a table in the airy balcony of the restaurant, to drink a cup of tea: table and tea have been reserved for them by Lüdecke's

watchful care. The greater part of the assemblage can scarcely find a chair upon which to sit down, or a glass of lemonade for refreshment. The consequence is that there is much unseemly pushing and crowding.

Erika eats nothing. Lord Langley complains, as do all Englishmen, of the German food, and the old Countess complains of the shrill music.

Meanwhile, a tall, striking woman advances to the table where the three are sitting, and where there is a fourth chair, unoccupied. "*Vous pardonnez!*" she exclaims: "*je tombe de fatigue!*"

Erika gazes at her: it is the companion of the man who had turned to look at her in the theatre during the prelude. A disgust for which she cannot account possesses her: it is as if she were aware of the presence of something impure, repulsive; and yet she could not possibly explain why the stranger should excite such a sensation: she is undeniably handsome, well formed, with regularly-chiselled features, and fair hair dressed with great care and knotted behind beneath the brim of her broad Leghorn hat. A red veil is tied tightly over her face. There is nothing else to excite disapproval in her dress, and inexperienced mortals would pronounce her age to be scarcely thirty. It would require great familiarity with Parisian arts of the toilette to perceive that her whole face is painted and that she is at least forty years old. Everything about her is exquisitely fresh and neat, and from her person is wafted the peculiar aroma of those women whose chief occupation in life is to take care of their bodies. Her air is respectable, and somewhat affected.

Lord Langley, to whom her unbidden presence seems especially annoying, is about to intimate this to her, when her escort approaches, and, hastily whispering to her, obliges her to leave her place, which she does unwillingly and even crossly. Courteously lifting his hat, the young man utters an embarrassed "Excuse me," and retires. She can be heard reproaching him petulantly as they walk away, and their places in the theatre remain unoccupied during the other acts of the drama.

"Disgusting!" mutters Lord Langley. "Do you know who it was?" he asks, turning to the Countess Anna. "Lozoncyi, the young artist who created such a sensation a couple of years ago. She was his mistress. I remember her in Rome."

Although upon Erika's account the words are spoken in an undertone, she hears them, and the blood rushes to her cheeks.

And now 'Parsifal' is over, the second act, with its fluttering flower-girl scene, in rather frivolous contrast with the serious motive of the work, its crude inharmonious decorations, and its wonderful dramatic finale; the third act too is over, with its sadly-sweet sunrise melody, its Good Friday spell resolving itself into the angelic music of the spheres.

With the hovering harp-arpeggio of the final scene still thrilling in their souls, Erika and her grandmother with Lord Langley drive back to town, leaving behind them the melancholy rustle of the forest, and hearing around them the rolling of wheels, the cracking of whips, and the footsteps of hundreds of pedestrians.

Life throbs in Erika's veins more warmly than it is wont to do; she is filled with a vague foreboding unknown to her hitherto. She seems to herself to be confronting the solution of a great secret, beside which she has pursued her thoughtless way, and around which the entire world circles.

At the door of their lodgings Lord Langley takes his leave of the ladies: with a lover's tenderness he slips down the glove from his betrothed's white wrist and imprints upon it two ardent kisses, as he whispers, "I trust that my charming Erika will be in a more gracious mood to morrow."

The disagreeable sensation caused by his warm breath upon her cheek was persistent; she could not rid herself of it.

She sent away her maid, and whilst she was undressing took from her pocket the packet of letters which Goswyn had left with her. She had carried it with her all day long, without finding a moment in which to destroy the papers. Now she removed their outside envelope, merely to assure herself that they were her mother's letters. Yes, she recognized the handwriting,--not the strong, almost masculine characters which had distinguished her mother's writing in the latter years of her life, but the long, slanting, faded hand which Erika could remember in the old exercise-books of her school-days. Nothing could have tempted the girl to read these letters: she kissed the poor yellow sheets twice, sadly and reverentially, and then she held them one by one in the flame of her candle.

Her heart was very heavy; a yearning for tenderness, for sympathy, possessed her, and she felt sore and discouraged. The wailing music, the shuddering alluring strains of sinful worldly desire, still haunted her soul with the glance of the stranger who seemed to her no stranger.

She felt a choking sensation at the thought of his companion. Never before had she come in

contact with anything of the kind.

She lay down, but could not sleep. How sultry, even stifling, was the atmosphere! The windows of the little room were wide open, but the air that came in from without was heavy and inodorous: it brought no refreshment.

The tread of a belated pedestrian echoed in the street below, and there was the sound of laughter and song from some inn in the neighbourhood. Suddenly the door opened, and the old Countess entered, in a white dressing-gown and lace night-cap. She had a small lamp in her hand, which she put down on a table, and then, seating herself on the edge of the bed, she scanned the young girl with penetrating eyes.

"Is anything troubling you, my child?" she began, after a while.

Erika tried to say no, but the word would not pass her lips. Instead of replying, she turned away her face.

"What was the difficulty between Lord Langley and yourself to-day?" the grandmother went on to ask.

Erika was mute.

"Tell me the simple truth," the old Countess insisted. "Did you not have some dispute this morning?"

"Oh, it was nothing," Erika replied, impatiently; "only--he attempted to play the lover, and I thought it quite unnecessary. Such folly is very unbecoming in a man of his age; and, besides, I cannot endure anything of the kind."

A strange expression appeared upon the grandmother's face,--the same that Goswyn had worn when his indignation had suddenly been transformed into pity for the girl. She cleared her throat once or twice, and then remarked, dryly, "How then do you propose to live with Lord Langley?"

Erika stared at her in dismay. "Good heavens! I have thought very little about it. You know well that I do not wish to marry for love. That is why I accepted an old man instead of a young one,--because I supposed he would refrain from all lover-like folly. You have always told me that you married my grandfather without love, and that it turned out very well."

Her grandmother was silent for a while before she rejoined, "In the first place, constituted as you are, I should wish for you a less prosaic companion for life than your grandfather; but, at the same time, the torture which, with your exaggerated sensitiveness, awaits you in marrying Lord Langley bears no comparison with the simple tedium of my married life. We married in compliance with a family arrangement; and if I did so with but a small amount of esteem for him, he for his part brought to the match no devouring passion for me,--which I should have found most annoying. But the case is entirely different with Lord Langley. He is as desperately in love with you as an old fool can be whose passion is stimulated by the consciousness of his age."

Something in the horrified face of the inexperienced young girl must have intensified the old Countess's pity for her. "My poor child, I had no idea of your innocence and inexperience. I have lived on from day to day without in the least comprehending the young creature beside me."

She kissed the girl with infinite tenderness, put out the light, and left her alone, her burning face buried in the pillows and sobbing convulsively, a picture of despair.

The next day Erika broke her engagement to Lord Langley.

CHAPTER XV.

Erika's betrothal to Lord Langley had produced a sensation in society, but it had been regarded as a very sensible arrangement. The girl had been envied, and all had declared that her ambition had achieved its aim in a marriage with an English peer. Malice had not been silent: she had been credited with heartlessness,--but then she had done vastly well for herself. The announcement that the engagement was dissolved gave rise to all sorts of reports. No one knew the real reason of the breach, and had it been known it would not have been credited.

The belief steadily gained ground that Lord Langley had been the first to withdraw, dismayed by the discovery of Erika's objectionable relative Strachinsky, and shocked by the girl's heartless

treatment of him.

Countess Brock furnished the material for this report, the Princess Dorothea detailed it with various additions, and in the eyes of Berlin society Erika was nothing more than an ambitious blunderer who had experienced a tremendous rebuff. It was edifying to hear Dorothea descant upon this theme, winding up her remarks with, "I do not pity Erika,--I never liked her,--but poor old Countess Lenzdorff. She has always been one of Aunt Brock's friends."

There had been an apparent change in the Princess Dorothea from the day when she had publicly insulted Goswyn von Sydow in Charlottenburg Avenue. The story had been told greatly to her discredit, and not only had her cousin Prince Helmy forsworn his allegiance to her, but the other men who had been present at that memorable interview had since held aloof from her. She found herself compelled to attract a fresh circle of admirers,--which she did at the sacrifice of every remnant of good taste which she yet possessed.

After this for a while she pursued her madly gay career; but for a year past there had been a change. The number of her admirers had greatly diminished,--was reduced, indeed, to a Prince Orbanoff, who was now her shadow. She boasted of her good resolutions, went to church every Sunday, was shocked at the women who read French novels, and was altogether rather a prudish character.

Society held itself on the defensive, and did not put much faith in her boasted virtue. But when she calumniated Erika society believed her; at least this was the case with the society of envious young beauties whom she met every Friday at the 'wicked fairy's,' where they made clothes for the poor.

When, late in the autumn, the Lenzdorffs returned to Berlin, supposing that the little episode of Erika's betrothal was already forgotten by society, they were met on all sides by a malicious show of sympathy.

Erika regarded all this with utter indifference, and withdrew from all gaiety as far as she could, but the old Countess fretted and fumed with indignation.

She could not comprehend why all the world could not view Erika from her own point of view; and her exaggerated defence of the girl contributed to make Erika's position still more disagreeable. Moreover, age was beginning to cast its first shadows over the Countess's clear mind. She was especially annoyed, also, by Goswyn's holding aloof. He had replied courteously, but with extreme reserve, to the Countess's letter informing him, not without exultation, of the breaking of Erika's engagement. This was as it should be; but when the answer to a second letter written much later was quite as reserved, the old Countess was vexed and impatient. Erika insisted upon reading this second epistle herself. Her hands trembled as she held it, and when she had finished it she laid it on the table without a word, and left the room as pale as ashes.

To the grandmother, whose heart was filled with tenderness, all the more intense because it had been first aroused in her old age, her grand-daughter's evident pain was intolerable. After a while she went to her in her room. The girl was sitting at the window, erect and pale. She had a book in her hand, and the Countess observed that she held it upside down.

"Erika," she said, tenderly laying her hand on the girl's shoulder, "I only wanted to tell you----"

Erika arose, cold and courteous. "You wanted to tell me--what?" she asked, as she laid aside her book.

"That--that----" Erika's dry manner embarrassed her a little, but after a pause she went on: "I wanted to tell you not to take any fancies into your head with regard to Goswyn."

"Fancies? Of what kind?" Erika asked, calmly, becoming absorbed in the contemplation of her almond-shaped nails.

"You would do him great injustice by supposing that his regard for you is one whit less than it ever was."

"Indeed! I should do him injustice?" Erika questioned in the same unnaturally quiet tone. "I think not. It is not my fashion to deceive myself. I know perfectly well that--that I have sunk in Goswyn's esteem; it is a very unpleasant conviction, I confess; and, to be frank, I would rather you did not mention the subject again."

"But, Erika, if you would only listen," the old Countess persisted. "He adores you. His pride alone keeps him from you: you are too wealthy; your social position is too brilliant."

Erika waved aside this explanation of affairs. "Say no more," she cried. "I know what I know! But you must not waste your pity upon me: my vanity is wounded, not my heart. I value Goswyn highly, and it troubles me that he no longer admires me as he did, but, I assure you, I have not the slightest desire to marry him. I pray you to believe this: at least it may prevent you, perhaps, from throwing me at his head a second time, without my knowledge. If you do it, I declare to you,

I will reject him." As she uttered the last words, the girl's self-command forsook her, her voice had a hard metallic ring in it, and her eyes flashed angrily.

Her grandmother turned and left the room with bowed head.

Scarcely had the sound of her footsteps died away when Erika locked her door, threw herself upon her bed, buried her face in the pillows, and burst into tears.

What she had declared to her grandmother was in a measure true: she herself supposed it to be entirely true. She really had no wish to marry, and there was in her heart no trace of passionate sentiment for Goswyn, but she was bruised and sore, and she longed for the tender sympathy he had always shown her. At times she would fain have fled to him from the cold judgment and scrutiny of the world.

After she had relieved herself by tears, she understood herself more clearly. Sitting on the edge of her bed, her handkerchief crushed into a ball in her hand, she said, half aloud, "I have lied to my grandmother. If he had come I would have married him,--yes, without loving him; but it would have been wrong: no one has a right to marry such a man as Goswyn out of sheer despair because one does not know in what direction to throw away one's life. But why think of it? He does not care for me. Why, why did my grandmother write to him? I cannot bear it!"

CHAPTER XVI.

A few days afterwards the Lenzdorffs left Berlin, to spend the winter in Rome, where Erika, incited thereto by her grandmother, went into society perpetually, without taking the least pleasure in it. And she made no secret of her indifference, her discontent. The bark of her existence, once so safe and sure in its course, seemed to have lost its bearings: she saw no aim in life worthy the effort to pursue it.

She indulged in fits of causeless melancholy; yet all the while her beauty bloomed out into fuller perfection, and all unconsciously to herself life throbbed within her and demanded its right. The old Countess, who did not understand her condition, looked upon it as a morbid crisis in the girl's life; but she never dreamed how fraught with danger the crisis was.

Thus she utterly failed to appreciate or to sympathize with her grand-daughter; and, whether because of her exaggerated admiration for her, or because her age was beginning to tell upon her powers of perception, she did not suspect the slow approach of the fever which had begun to undermine the young creature's existence.

Towards the end of February, just at the close of the Carnival, Erika told her grandmother that she was heartily tired of Rome, and wished to see Italy from some other point of view.

After much deliberation, Venice was chosen for their next abode; and here the old Countess refused to follow the usual custom of foreigners and rent a palazzo: she declared that in Venice true comfort was to be found only in a hotel. So a suite of rooms was hired in the Hotel Britannia,--four airy apartments, in which their predecessor had been a crowned head, and two of which looked out upon the church of Santa Maria della Salute, whilst the other two had a view of the small garden of the hotel, and, across its low wall, of the Grand Canal.

Of course they had a gondola for their own private use; but Erika was not fond of availing herself of it. The rocking motion, the monotonous plash of the water, excited still further her irritated nerves; she preferred taking long walks,--at first, out of deference to her grandmother's wishes, accompanied by the maid Marianne. She soon tired, however, of such uncongenial companionship, and induced her grandmother to allow her to pursue alone her investigations of the corners and by-ways of Venice. She explored the curiosity-shops, spent whole days in the galleries, and made wonderful discoveries in the way of bargains in old stuffs and artistic antiquities, until her little salon became a museum of such treasures. In one corner stood a grand piano, seated at which at times she poured out her soul in all that is most beautiful and most tragic in music.

The old Countess left her to pursue her own path, and occupied herself very differently.

In spite of her original and independent view of life, and her readiness to criticise frankly all that was artificial and conventional, she loved *les chemins battus*. She went the way of the multitude,--saw nothing of Venetian by-ways, but devoted her time to museums and works of art,

being indefatigable in her daily round of sight-seeing. And yet, although her health seemed as robust as ever, and she could apparently endure far more fatigue than her grand-daughter, she was no longer what she had been.

Her extraordinary memory began to fail, and the interest which formerly had been excited only by affairs of some moment was now ready to be aroused in petty concerns. She took pleasure in gossip, allowed Marianne to detail to her scraps of the Venetian *chronique scandaleuse* picked up from the couriers in the hotel, and, worst of all, the fine edge of her moral sentiment seemed in a degree blunted.

She would repeat to Erika, without the slightest idea of the pain she was inflicting, stories and reports of a nature to offend the girl's sense of morality and delicacy.

Nothing any longer shocked her: love and hatred of her kind seemed blunted under the influence of a low estimate of human nature which she called a philosophic view of life.

She simply never observed how Erika's cheeks burned when she suddenly disclosed to her the lapse from virtue, hidden from the superficial world, of some woman whom they had met in society; she never perceived the girl's feverish agitation upon hearing her grandmother calmly advance all sorts of excuses for the so-called indiscretion. She did not suppose her revelations could affect Erika disagreeably; although Erika did not always allow her to talk on without interruption; she would sometimes bluntly declare that she could not believe what her grandmother thus told her.

Then the old Countess would reply, "I really cannot see what reason you have to disbelieve it. You cannot alter human nature by shutting your eyes to its defects."

Whereupon Erika would say, with annihilating emphasis, "If human nature really is what you describe it, I cannot understand your pleasure in frequenting society, since you must despise unutterably those who compose it."

"Despise!" her grandmother repeated, shaking her head. "I despise no one. Knowing, as I do, how mankind struggles under the burden of animal instincts, I wonder to see it ever rise above them, and I am forced to esteem men in spite of everything."

Erika only repeated, angrily, "Esteem! esteem!" Her grandmother's mode of esteeming mankind was certainly extraordinary.

CHAPTER XVII.

The Princess Dorothea was pacing her salon restlessly to and fro. From time to time she gazed out of the window into the dreary Berlin March weather, upon the heaps of dirty snow shovelled up on each side of the street and slowly melting beneath the falling rain.

The Princess was annoyed. She had been left out in the invitation to a court ball. Usually she would have ascribed the omission to an oversight of the authorities, but to-day the matter disturbed her: instead of an oversight she suspected the omission to have been an intentional slight, and her steps as she walked to and fro were short and impatient.

Why were they so frightfully moral in Berlin, so aggressively moral? she asked herself. Everywhere else people might do as they chose, if only appearances were preserved.

What had she done, after all? Long ago in Florence Feistmantel had explained to her that marriage, as arranged in civilized countries, was entirely unnatural. The Princess, still pure, in spite of the degradation about her, had laughed aloud at the philosophic view thus advanced by her companion and guide. Years afterwards she had recalled this theory that it might serve to justify herself to herself; and lately--only yesterday--Feistmantel, who was established in Berlin and gave music-lessons in the most aristocratic circles, had enunciated the same views at a breakfast to which Dorothea had invited her, and the Princess had contradicted her positively, had been rude to her, had nearly turned her out of doors, but at the last moment had apologized almost humbly and had finally dismissed her with a handsome present.

She had suspected behind Feistmantel's assertion of her philosophic view a mean attempt to ingratiate herself with her hostess. "As if Feistmantel could suspect anything! No human being can suspect anything," she repeated several times. "And, after all, there is scarcely a woman, beautiful and admired, who is not worse than I."

In the midst of all her superficiality and moral recklessness, she had always been characterized by a certain frankness, which at times had passed the bounds of decorum; now she writhed under a burden of hypocrisy which weighed most heavily upon her.

And why was this so?

It had all been the gradual result of the tedium of the life she led. A man more coarse and rough than any of her other admirers had paid court to her in a way that flattered her vanity; he amused her, he brought some variety into her life; his lavishness was astounding. Once when he had lost a wager to her he brought her a diamond necklace in an Easter egg.

She knew that this was wrong, but she had been wont as a girl to accept presents from men, and then she had an almost morbid delight in diamonds. And what stones these were!--a chain of dew-drops glittering in the morning sun! And he had so careless a way of throwing the costly gift into her lap, as if it had been the merest trifle.

She could not resist wearing the necklace once at the next court ball,--explaining to her husband, who understood nothing of such things, that she had purchased it for a mere song at a sale of old jewelry.

She intended to return it; but she did not return it. From that moment he had her in his power. He lured her on as a serpent lures a bird, extorting from her one innocent concession after another, until one day---- Good God! if she could but obliterate the memory of that day!

To call the torment which she suffered from that time stings of conscience would be to invest it with ideality. No, she felt no stings of conscience; her moral sense was entirely blunted; but she was enraged with herself for having fallen into the snare; her pride was humbled in the dust, and she was in mortal dread of discovery. She was a coward to the core. What would she not have given to be free? She would have broken with her lover ten times, but that she feared him more than she did her husband.

He was a Russian, fabulously wealthy, and notorious in the Parisian demi-monde which he habitually frequented. Orbanoff was his name, and outside of his own country he was credited with princely rank to which he had no title,--a man with no moral sense, brutal on occasion, with no idea of the laws of honour prevailing in Western Europe, but of an undoubted physical courage, which helped him to maintain his present position.

Princess Dorothea was convinced that should she break with him he would commit some reckless, impossible crime.

Oh, if he would only release her! She began to build castles in the air. Never, never again would she be concerned in such an adventure. All the romances that she had read were lies: there was nothing in the world more hateful than just this. Only once in her life had she been conscious of any real preference for a man, and that had been for her cousin Helmy; now of all men her own clumsy, thoroughly honourable and intensely good-natured husband was the dearest. He was at present on his estate in Silesia, where he was much happier than in the society of the capital. Dorothea had made him so uncomfortable in Berlin that he always stayed as long as possible in Silesia.

To-day she longed for him; she wanted him to take her on his knee and soothe her like a tired child, and then to have him carry her in his strong arms down the broad staircase of his old castle in Kossnitz, as he used to do when they were first married. Yes, she longed for his strong supporting arm.

Ah, if she were only free! She would turn her back on Berlin and go with him to Kossnitz. She positively hungered for Kossnitz,--for the odour of stone and whitewash in the broad corridors, for the airy, bare rooms, for the farm-yard with the brown farm-buildings. How picturesque it must all look now in the snow!--for the snow was still deep in Silesia. They would go sleighing: oh, how delicious it would be to rush along, warmly wrapped up, with only her face exposed to the fresh wintry breeze, the sleigh-bells ringing merrily, the horses mad with their exciting gallop, the snow-clad forest gleaming silvery white around them!

And how delicious would be the supper when they got home!--she would have done with all fashionable division of the day: they would dine at one, and she would have potatoes in their skins at supper-time,--she had not had them since she was a child,--and black bread, and sour milk:--how she liked sour milk!

One hope she had. Was it not Orbanoff whom she had seen last night in the background of the box of a young actress? It was not his habit to conceal himself on such occasions: probably he had been thus discreet on her account. An idea suddenly occurred to her. What an opportunity this might afford her to recover her freedom! All she had to do was to feign furious jealousy, and break with her dangerous lover without wounding his vanity.

On the instant she felt relieved, and even gay, in the light of this hope.

The clock struck five,--the hour of her appointment with Orbanoff. Without ringing for her maid, she dressed herself in the plainest of walking-costumes and left the house. She walked for

some distance, then hired a droschky and was driven to a shop in Potsdam Street, where she dismissed the vehicle, bought some trifle, and walked on still farther before hiring another conveyance.

At about eight o'clock of the same day, Goswyn von Sydow, who had lately been transferred to Berlin, where he was acting as adjutant to an exalted personage, issued from the low door of a small house in a side-street where he had attended the baptism of the first-born son of one of his early friends, a young fellow of decided talent, who had married a girl without a fortune, and who did not at all regret his choice. The home was modest enough, but was so unmistakably the abode of the truest happiness that Sydow could not but envy his friend his lot in life. How pleasant it had all been!

He lighted a cigar, but held it idly between his fingers without smoking it, and reflected upon his own requirements in a wife,--requirements which one woman alone could fulfil, and she----

Could he forget his pride, and try his fortune once more? His heart throbbed. No! under the circumstances, he could not. He never could forget that he had been taunted with Erika's wealth. Even if he could win her love, their marriage would begin with a discord.

If she were but poor!

The blood tingled rapturously in his veins at the thought of how, if trial or misfortune should befall her, he might take her to his arms and soothe and cheer her, making her rich with his devotion and tenderness. He suddenly stood still, as if some obstacle lay in his path. Had he really been capable of selfishly invoking trouble and trial upon Erika's head? He looked about him like one awaking from a dream.

Just at his elbow a young woman glided out of a large house with several doors. He scarcely noticed her at first, but all at once he drew a long breath. How strange that he should perceive that peculiar fragrance, the rare perfume used by his sister-in-law, Dorothea! He could have sworn that Dorothea was near. He looked around: there was no one to be seen save the girl who had just slipped by him, a poorly-clad girl carrying a bundle.

He had not fairly looked at her before, but now--it was strange--in the distance she resembled his sister-in-law: it was certainly she.

He was on the point of hurrying after her to make sure, but second thoughts told him that it really mattered nothing to him whether it were she or not: it was not his part to play the spy upon her.

He turned and walked back in the opposite direction, that he might not see her. As he passed the house whence she had come, a man muffled in furs issued from the same door-way. The two men looked each other in the face. Goswyn recognized Orbanoff.

For a moment each maintained what seemed an embarrassed silence. The Russian was the first to recover himself. "*Mais bon soir*," he exclaimed, with great cordiality. "*Je ne vous remettais pas*."

Goswyn touched his cap and passed on. He no longer doubted.

The next morning Dorothea von Sydow awaked, after a sound refreshing sleep, with a very light heart. She was free! All had gone well. She had first regaled Orbanoff with a frightfully jealous scene to spare his vanity, but in the end they had resolved upon a separation *à l'aimable*, and the Princess Dorothea had then made merry, declaring that their love should have a gay funeral; whereupon she had partaken of the champagne supper that had been prepared for her, had chatted gaily with Orbanoff, had listened to his stories, and they had parted forever with a laugh.

Now she was sitting by the fire in her dressing-room, comfortably ensconced in an arm-chair, dressed in a gray dressing-gown trimmed with fur, looking excessively pretty, and sipping chocolate from an exquisite cup of Berlin porcelain. "Thank God, it is over!" she said to herself again and again.

But, superficial as she was, she could not quite convince herself that her relations with Orbanoff were of no more consequence than a bad dream.

She felt no remorse, but a gnawing discontent: she would have given much to be able to obliterate her worse than folly. She sighed; then she yawned.

She still longed for her husband and Kossnitz: she would leave Berlin this very evening for Silesia and surprise him. How delighted he would be! She clapped her hands like a child. Suddenly--it was intolerable--again she was conscious of that gnawing discontent. Could she never forget? And all for what she had never cared for in the least. She thrust both her hands

among her short curls and began to sob violently. Just then the door of the room opened; a tall, broad-shouldered man with a kindly, florid face entered. She looked up, startled as by a thunderclap. The new arrival gazed at her tearful face, and, hastening towards her, exclaimed, "My dear little Thea, what in heaven's name is the matter?"

She clasped her arms about his neck as she had never done before. He pressed his lips to hers.

Goswyn was sitting at his writing-table,--an enormous piece of furniture, somewhat in disarray,--trying to read. But it would not do; and at last he gave it up. He was distressed, disgusted beyond measure, at his discovery with regard to Dorothea. The Sydows had hitherto prided themselves upon the purity of their women as upon the honour of their men. Nothing like that which he had discovered had ever happened in the family. He had suspected the mischief before; since yesterday he had been sure.

Must he look calmly on? What else could he do? To open his brother's eyes, to play the accuser, was impossible. Yes, he must look on calmly. He clinched his fist. At that moment he heard a familiar deep voice outside the room, questioning his servant. "Otto! What is he doing in Berlin?" he asked himself; "and he seems in a merry mood." He sprang up. The door opened, and Otto rushed in, rough, clumsy as usual, but beaming with happiness. He laid his broad hand upon his brother's shoulder, and cried,--

"How are you, old fellow? Why, you look down in the dumps. Anything gone wrong?"

"Nothing," Goswyn declared, doing his best to look delighted.

"Is everything all right?"

"Everything."

"That's as it should be. I suppose you are surprised to see me drop down from the skies in this fashion."

"I am indeed."

"'Tis quite a story. But I say, Gos, how comfortable you are here!" and he began to stride to and fro in the bachelor apartment; "although you don't waste much time or money in decoration, old fellow: not a pretty woman on the walls. H'm! my room looked rather different in my bachelor days. What have you done with your gallery of beauties, Gos?"

"I bequeathed all my youthful follies to my cousin Brock, who got his lieutenancy six weeks ago," said Goswyn, to whom his brother's chatter was especially distasteful to-day.

"H'm! h'm! you're right: you're getting quite too old for such nonsense." And Otto stooped to examine two or three photographs that adorned his brother's writing-table. "That's a capital picture of old Countess Lenzdorff," he exclaimed,--"capital! Here is our father when he was young,--I look like him,--and here is Uncle Goswyn, our famous hero, killed in a duel at thirty years of age. They say old Countess Lenzdorff was in love with him. As if she could ever have been in love! And you look like him: our mother always said so. Oh, here is our mother!" He took the faded picture, in its old-fashioned frame, to the window to examine it. "This is the best picture there is of her," he said. "Think of your ever being that pretty little rogue in a white frock in her arms, and I that boy in breeches by her side! Comical, but very attractive, such a picture of a young mother with her children. How she clasps you in her arms! She always loved you best. Where did you get this picture?"

"My mother gave it to me when I was quite young. She brought it to me when she came to see me in my first garrison, shortly before her death," said Goswyn.

"I remember; you had been wounded in your first duel."

"Yes; she came to nurse me."

"Ah, you've a deal on your conscience. No one would believe you were worse than I; but"--with a look at the picture--"I'd give a great deal for such a little fellow as that." And he put the picture back in its place with a care that was unlike him, and that touched Goswyn.

With his usual want of tact, Otto proceeded to efface the pleasant impression he had produced. "Have you no picture of the Lenzdorff girl?" he asked, looking round the room.

"I may have one somewhere," Goswyn replied, evasively. Indeed, he had a charming picture of her in the first bloom of her maiden loveliness; but he kept it behind lock and key, that no profane eye might rest upon his treasure.

"What a tone you take!" Otto rejoined. "Why, she was a flame of yours. A capital girl, only rather too full of crotchets: she was always a little too high up in the sky for me, but she would have suited you. I cannot understand why you did not seize your chance----"

"Now you are going too far," Goswyn said, with some irritation. "Do not pretend that you do not know that Erika Lenzdorff rejected me."

"What!" exclaimed Otto, in some dismay. "True, I remember hearing something of the kind; but that was a hundred years ago. Forgive me, Gos: the 'no' of a girl of eighteen who looks at one as the young Countess looked at you ought not to be taken seriously. Why don't you try your luck a second time? You cannot attach any importance to that intermezzo with the Englishman! Why, you are made for each other; and she is quite wealthy, too----"

"Otto, for God's sake stop marching up and down the room like a lion in a cage," cried Goswyn, unable to bear it any longer; "do sit down like a reasonable creature and tell me how you come to appear so unexpectedly in Berlin."

Otto lit a cigar and obediently seated himself in an arm-chair opposite his brother. "'Tis quite a story," he began, just as he had a quarter of an hour before.

"You've told me that already."

"Now, don't be so impatient. I know I am rather slow at explanations. You see, Gos, of late matters have not gone quite right between Thea and myself. There is sure to be fault on both sides in such cases: I could not be satisfied with the stupid life here in town, and she did not care for Silesia, so we agreed that I should stay at home, while she diverted herself for a while in town, and perhaps she would come back to me and be more contented in the end. I know that certain people disapproved of my course; but I had my reasons. There's no good in fretting a nervous horse: better give it the rein. But the time seemed long to me, she wrote so seldom and her letters were so incoherent. In short,"--he suddenly began to be embarrassed,--"I got some foolish notions into my head, and so, without letting her know, I appeared in Berlin this morning. And how do you think I found poor Thea? Sitting crying by the fire. Just think of it, Gos! Of course I was frightened, and did all that I could to comfort her, and when she was calm I asked her what was the matter. Homesickness, Gos! Yes, a longing for the old home and for the clumsy bear who is, after all, nearer to her than any other human being. She reproached me for neglecting her,--said I had not even expressed a wish in my letters to see her, and she was just on the point of starting for Kossnitz; and she was jealous too,--poor little goose! In short, there were all sorts of a misunderstanding, and the end of it all was that she begged me--begged me like a child--to carry her back to Kossnitz. I wish you could have heard her describe our life together there! She would not hear of my going a few days before to make ready for her, but clung to me as if we had been but just married. What is the matter with you, Gos?" for his brother had walked to a window, where he stood with his back turned to Otto, looking out.

"What could be the matter?" Goswyn forced himself to reply.

"Then why do you stand looking out of the window as if you took not the least interest in what I am telling you?"

"Forgive me: there is a crowd in the street about a horse that has fallen down."

"Very well: if every broken-down hack in the street can interest you more than what is next my heart, there is no use in my talking. But I know what it is; you were always unjust to Thea; you never understood her. Adieu!" And Otto took his hat and walked towards the door.

Goswyn conquered himself. What affair was it of his if his brother was happy in an illusion? he ought to do all that he could to prevent his eyes from being opened.

He laid his hand upon Otto's arm and said, kindly, "Forgive me, Otto; you must not take it ill if such a confirmed old bachelor as I does not share as he should in your happiness; it all seems so foreign to such a life as mine."

Otto's brow cleared. "I was silly," he confessed. "I ought not to have been so irritable. Poor Gos! But indeed I should rejoice from my heart if you could marry. There is nothing like it in the world. You need not frown: I never will mention the subject to any one else."

"Yes, yes, Otto. And when are you going home?"

"To-morrow. We are going to spend a few weeks at Kossnitz, and then we are to take a trip together. I came to ask you if you would not lunch with us to-day, that we might see something of you in comfort. This room of yours is decidedly cold. Do you never have it any warmer? Dorothea especially begs you to come,--at one o'clock."

"Indeed! does Dorothea want me?"

"Gos!"

"I will come. I have one or two things to attend to, but I will be with you in half an hour." And the brothers parted.

A few hours have passed. Goswyn had appeared punctually at lunch, and had done his best not

to be a spoil-sport. They were now sitting by the fire in the little *salon* in which they had taken coffee, Goswyn and his brother. The early twilight began to make itself felt, but no object was as yet indistinct.

Dorothea had gone out to inform her aunt Brock of her projected departure and to ask her to make a few farewell calls for her. She had met Goswyn with such gay indifference that he had been puzzled indeed, and had finally begun to believe that he had been mistaken,--that the person whom he had supposed to be Dorothea Sydow was not she at all.

Something had happened in her life, however; of that he was convinced. Never had Dorothea been so simply charming. She gave him her hand in token of reconciliation, alluded, not without regret, to her defective education, told an anecdote or two with much grace and in a softened tone of voice, and clung to Otto like an ailing child.

"We are going to begin all over again,--all over again," she repeated, adding, "And when Gos has forgotten what a bad creature I used to be, and that he could not bear me, he will come and see us at Kossnitz: won't you, Gos? You shall see how pleasant I will make it for you there. You have absolutely hated me; or perhaps you thought me not worth hating,--you only detested me as one detests a caterpillar or a spider. I confess, I hated you. I always felt as if I ought to be ashamed in your presence; and that is not a pleasant sensation." She laughed, the old giggling silvery laugh, but there was a pathetic tone in it as she brushed away the tears from her eyes, and left the room, to return in a few moments, fresh and smiling, equipped for her walk. She kissed her husband by way of farewell, and held out her hand to Goswyn. "Shall I find you here when I return, Gos?" she asked, just before the door closed behind her.

"There is no one like her!" murmured Otto. "And to think that I could ever fancy a bachelor existence a pleasant one! But all is different now." The good fellow's eyes were moist as he passed his hand over them.

Shortly afterwards they heard a ring at the outside door. "Some visitor,--the deuce!" growled Otto. Goswyn looked about for his sabre, which he had stood in a corner.

But it was no visitor. Dorothea's maid entered. "A package has come for her Excellency," she announced. "Perhaps the Herr Baron will sign the receipt."

"Give it to me, Jenny."

Sydow signed it, and then said, "And give me the package. I will hand it to your mistress."

The maid gave it to him: it was a thick sealed envelope.

A dreadful suspicion flashed upon Goswyn's mind: in an instant he guessed the truth. What if it should occur to his brother to open the envelope? Apparently he had no thought of doing so: he simply laid it upon Dorothea's writing-table, a pretty, useless piece of furniture, much carved and decorated. Goswyn felt relieved. He suddenly became garrulous, talked of the latest political complication, told the last story of the intense piety of the Countess Waldersee, as narrated by the Prince at a recent supper-party, and described the four magnificent horses sent by the Sultan to the Emperor.

Otto sat with his back to the ominous packet. It did not escape Goswyn that he became very monosyllabic and did not show much interest in his brother's conversation.

"If she would only return!" Goswyn thought to himself. He was convinced that the packet contained Dorothea's letters to Orbanoff. He had not been mistaken the previous evening: it had been Dorothea who had passed him, evidently returning to her home from a last interview. The affair, odious as it was, was at an end: Dorothea was relieved that it was so. She was not fitted to engage in a dangerous intrigue.

Suddenly Otto began to sniff, as if perceiving some odour in the air. "'Tis odd," he said. "Don't you perceive a peculiar fragrance? If it were not too silly, I should say that it smells like Dorothea."

"That would not be odd," his brother rejoined, "since she left the room only half an hour ago."

"But I did not perceive it before," Otto said; and then, with sudden irritability, turning towards the writing-table, he added, "It is that confounded packet!"

"It probably contains something of Dorothea's which she has accidentally left at a friend's."

But Otto had taken the packet from the table. He turned it over. "I know the seal,--a die with the motto *va banque*: it is Orbanoff's seal!" His breath came quick. "What can Orbanoff have sent her?"

"Probably some political treatise. I do not see how it can interest you," said Goswyn.

Once more Otto turned the packet over in his hands. He seemed about to lay it down on the writing-table again; then, at the last moment, before Goswyn could bethink himself, he opened it hastily. About a dozen short notes, in Dorothea's childish handwriting, fell out, then a note of

Orbanoff's. Otto's eyes were riveted upon it with a glassy stare; he could not yet comprehend. Then with a sudden cry he crushed the note together, tossed it to Goswyn, and buried his face in his hands.

A dull, brooding silence followed. Goswyn held the note in his hand, without reading it: it was not for him to pry curiously into his brother's anguish and disgrace.

After a while Otto raised his head. "What have you to say?" he exclaimed, bitterly. "That such another idiot as I does not live upon the earth? Say it! Ah, you have not read the note, Goswyn. Why do you look at me so? Could you have known---- Oh, my God! my God!" The strong man buried his face in his hands again, and sobbed hoarsely.

Goswyn was terribly distressed. He had never known his brother to weep since his childhood. He would far rather have had him fall into a fury. But no; he was weeping: the sense of disgrace was drowned in agony.

Before long he collected himself, ashamed of his weakness, and there was the quiet of despair in the face he lifted to Goswyn.

"You knew it--since when?"

"I know nothing," Goswyn replied.

"No, you know nothing,--good God! who ever knows anything in such affairs?--but you suspected, did you not?"

Goswyn was silent.

"Perhaps you can tell me how many people in Berlin--suspect it?"

Goswyn bit his lip. What reply could he make? after a while he began: "Otto, I would have given anything in the world to prevent you from learning it."

"Indeed!" Otto interrupted him. "You would have let me go through life grinning amiably, ridiculously, with a stain on my name at which people would point contemptuously, and you never would have told me of that stain? Goswyn!" He started up; Goswyn also arose, and the brothers confronted each other beside the hearth, upon which the fire had fallen into glowing embers and ashes.

"I ought certainly to have given Dorothea opportunity to expiate her fault. She was in the right path," said Goswyn. "The result of her frivolity had caused her a panic of terror: the entire affair had been a burden to her from the beginning, as you can see by her relief that it is at an end. One must take her as she is. All this has less significance for Dorothea than for any other woman whom I know. It has not entered into her soul. It has left nothing behind it but a horror of it all from beginning to end."

Otto looked suspiciously at his brother. Was this Goswyn who talked thus?--Goswyn the strict,--Goswyn, so uncompromising where honour was concerned?

Yes, it was Goswyn; there was no denying it.

"And you think that I should--I should--forgive?" murmured Otto, hoarsely, as if ashamed to utter the words.

"If you can so far conquer yourself."

Otto stooped and picked up the letters that had fallen upon the floor. He glanced through one of them. "There is not much tenderness in these lines, I must say." And he dropped at his side the hand holding the packet.

"One piece of advice I must give you," said Goswyn, with a coldness in his tone which he could not quite disguise. "If you forgive, you must have the strength of soul to forgive absolutely. If you forgive, throw those letters into the fire: Dorothea must never learn that you know anything."

"Yes," Otto said, dully. Suddenly he went close to Goswyn, and, looking him full in the eye, said, between his teeth, "Would you forgive?"

Goswyn started. He had no answer ready. "I--I never should have married Dorothea," he said, evasively.

"I understand," Otto said, in the same hoarse whisper. "You never would have forgiven; but it is all right for stupid Otto."

Again there was a distressing pause. Otto had turned away from his brother, with an inarticulate exclamation of pain. Goswyn gave him some moments in which to recover himself; then, laying his hand on his brother's arm, he said, "Do not take it so ill of me, Otto; I have no doubt I talk foolishly. I cannot decide; I am confused."

"No wonder," groaned Otto. "The position is a novel one for you: there has never been anything like it in our family. Oh, God!" he struck his forehead with his clinched fist; "I cannot believe it! I used to be jealous at times, but of no special person. Never, never could I have believed,--never!"

"Otto."

"What?"

"Since you cannot bring yourself to forgive----"

"Since I cannot bring myself to forgive----" Otto repeated, with bowed head.

"You must at least look the matter boldly in the face and decide what to do."

"Decide--what--to do----"

"Are you going to procure a divorce?"

Otto stood motionless. Goswyn laid his hand upon his shoulder; Otto shrank from his touch. "Leave me, Gos!" he gasped. "I beg you, go!"

The clock on Dorothea's writing-table struck: the tone was almost like that of Dorothea's voice. Goswyn looked round. Six o'clock. At seven he was invited to dine with a great personage,--an invitation tantamount to a command: he could not be absent. It was high time for him to go home to dress, but he could not bear to leave Otto alone.

"I must go," he said, "but I entreat you to come with me; you must not see Dorothea just now, and the fresh air will do you good and clear your thoughts."

"Why should they be clearer than they are?" Otto said, wearily and with intense bitterness. "I see more than you think. But go,--go: in a few minutes she will be here, and it would be more terrible to me than I can tell you to see her before you. No need to say more: I know that you will stand by me through thick and thin! There, give me your hand. I will do nothing unworthy of us, I promise you. Now go!"

Goswyn had gone, but Dorothea had not yet returned. Otto sat alone beside the dying fire. He could not comprehend what had befallen him. He must rid himself of this terrible oppression, but how? Some way must be found,--some solution of the problem: he sought for it in vain.

"Forgive!" The word rang in his ears, and his cheeks burned. How had Goswyn dared to suggest such a thing? No, it was impossible. Be divorced,--have her name dragged in the mire, and his shame published in all the newspapers? He stamped his foot. "No! no!"

What then?

He could challenge Orbanoff, and send Dorothea adrift in the world, a wife, not divorced, but separated from her husband. This was what the world would expect of him. He shivered as with fever. Send her adrift into the world without protection, without support, without moral strength, beautiful as she was,--expose her to insult from women, to sneering homage from men: she would sink to the lowest depths, not from depravity, but from despair. He wiped the moisture from his forehead. That would be the correct thing to do,--only---- Suddenly a sound that was half laughter, half sob, burst from his lips: he knew perfectly well that, while she lived, sooner or later the moment would come when he could no longer endure life without her; and then--then he should follow her, Heaven only knew whither, and take her in his arms, even were she far, far more lost than now.

And again there rang through his soul, "Forgive!" and again his whole being revolted. The packet of letters which he had thrust into his breast weighed him down. It was all very well for Goswyn to say that Dorothea must never know that the packet had fallen into his hands. Why, she would ask for it. Ah,--he bit his lip,--he could not think of it! He could not forgive!

His burden grew heavier every moment. On a sudden he felt very tired,--overcome with drowsiness. What was that? The rustle of a gown. The door opened. Framed by the folds of the portière, indistinct in the gathering twilight, appeared Dorothea's tall, lithe figure.

She had come, and he had determined upon nothing,--nothing.

He did not stir.

"Gos not here?" she asked, in her high, twittering voice. He tried to summon up his anger against her; he told himself that he ought to strike her,--kill her. But he was as if paralyzed; he could not stir; he trembled in every limb. She did not perceive it, and she could not distinguish his features in the darkness.

"So much the better!" she exclaimed. "I am so glad of a quiet cosy evening with you. Do you want to please me, Otto? Come with me now to Uhl's and dine, and then let us go to the theatre. Will you?"

She came up to him. He had arisen, and the fresh sweetness of her feminine nature seemed to envelop him. She put both her hands on his shoulders and nestled close to him. "Will you?" she murmured again.

He put his arms around her and kissed her twice as he never had kissed her before, with a tenderness in which there was a mixture of rage and glowing, frantic passion. Twice he kissed her, and then he suddenly became aware of what he was doing. He thrust her away.

"What is the matter?" she asked, startled.

"Nothing."

"But something is the matter."

"I tell you no!" He hurled the words in her face as it were, and stamped his foot. "Go--get ready!"

She lingered for a moment, and then left the room. He looked after her.

Goswyn's state of mind was indescribable. He hastily changed his uniform and made ready for the dinner. His nerves were quivering with a dread that he could not explain. "He never can bring himself to get a divorce," he said to himself; "and if he forgives----"

Disgust seemed fairly to choke him; he took shame to himself for having suggested such a course to Otto for a moment. He had no right to despise Otto. The old family affection for his brother revived in him in full force.

As soon as he was dressed he belied his usual Spartan habits by sending for a droschky. It would give him time to stop for a moment at Dorothea's lodgings to see what was going on there. The monotonous jogging of the vehicle soothed his nerves: his thoughts began to stray. As it turned into Moltke Street the droschky moderated its speed, and at the same instant a dull sound as of the excited voices of a crowd struck upon his ear. He looked out of the carriage window, upon a close throng of human beings. The vehicle stopped; he sprang out.

There was a crowd before the house occupied by his sister-in-law. Shoulder to shoulder men were pushing eagerly forward. A smothered murmur made itself heard; now and then a cynical speech fell distinctly on the ear, or a burst of laughter that died away without an echo, mingled with the curses of coachmen who could not make their way through the mass of humanity crowding there in the pale March twilight, through which the glare of the lanterns shone yellow and dreary. At first he could not get to the house; but the crowd soon made way for his officer's uniform.

He rang the bell loudly. Some time passed before the door was opened for him. Measures had evidently been taken to baffle the curiosity of the crowd.

The door of Dorothea's apartments, however, was open. He hurried onward, finding at first no one to detain him or to give him any information.

In the cosy little room, now brilliantly lighted, where he had left his brother, stood Dorothea, evidently dressed to go out, in a gray gown, and a bonnet trimmed with pale pink roses, her cheeks ashy pale, her face hard and set in a frightful, unnatural smile.

"What has happened?" cried Goswyn.

She tried to reply, but the words would not come. The smile grew broader, and her eyes glowed. Her face recalled to him the evening at the Countess Brock's, when she looked around after her song and found herself the only woman in the room.

One or two persons had made their way into the room. Goswyn ordered them out, with an imperious air of command. "Where is he?" he asked, hoarsely. She pointed mutely to a door. He entered. It was her sleeping-room, airy, bright, luxurious; and there, at the foot of the bed, lay a dark figure, face downward, with outstretched arms.

Two officials, one of whom was writing something in a note-book, were in the room.

The servant told him it had been entirely unexpected. When her Excellency came home, she had exchanged a few words with the Herr Baron, and had then gone to dress for the theatre. The Herr Baron had gone into the other room to write a note, and then--while her Excellency was in the *salon* putting on her gloves they had heard--a shot. Her Excellency had been the first to find him.

On the table lay two notes, one to Goswyn, the other to Dorothea.

The contents of Dorothea's Goswyn never knew: in his own note there was nothing save

"DEAR GOS,--

"I have forgiven.

"OTTO."

Yes, he had forgiven, but his life had paid the forfeit.

CHAPTER XVIII.

The news of Otto von Sydow's sudden tragic death produced a profound impression upon old Countess Lenzdorff.

She immediately wrote a long letter to Goswyn,--eight pages of affectionate and sincere sympathy. Erika said very little about the matter, but she looked forward eagerly to Goswyn's reply.

When it came it was dry, almost formal,--the reply of a man crushed to the earth, who is not wont to discourse about his emotions and is shy of expressing himself with regard to them.

Thus the Countess Lenzdorff understood it. Her sympathy for the young officer increased after reading his brief note. Erika, on the other hand, after perusing the epistle, which her grandmother handed to her with a sigh, showed an unaccountable degree of irritability.

"Surely he might have written you more cordially!" she exclaimed. "Such a letter as this means nothing! It is simply a receipt for your sympathy,--nothing more."

Her grandmother shook her head, and tried to set her right. But Erika would not listen. She had greatly changed of late: her state of mind was growing more and more distressing. She ate and slept but little. Her sentiment was searching for a new stay; her life lacked a purpose. At any risk she would gladly have fled from the chill brilliance which characterized her grandmother's philosophy of life to take refuge in some inspiration of the heart, even although it might perhaps lead her astray. Religion had been taken from her, and even the sacred nimbus of morality had been frayed by her grandmother's cynicism. When her God had been taken from her she had at first wept hot, bitter tears, but she had aroused herself anew, and faith had been born within her in a transfigured form: it was no longer the conventional belief, expressed in worn-out formulas, with which the multitude satisfy themselves in view of the mysteries of creation, but an apprehension, however faulty, of an order of affairs, incomprehensible to her finite intellect, lifting her above that part of us which is of the earth, earthy,--a faith which may bring with it but little consolation, but which is certainly elevating. When her grandmother first attacked in her presence what she called the 'by God's grace principle' of morality, and coldly proved that all morals culminated in a number of laws not founded in nature,--nay, even at variance with nature,--which had been illogically framed by society for its preservation, she did not weep, but her whole being was poisoned by a discontent which she could not away with. If her grandmother had had the least idea of the effect upon the girl of her cold reasoning, she would have kept to herself the aphorisms which she was so fond of handing about like little delicately-prepared tidbits. Her nature, however, was a thoroughly sound and rather cold one, which took no pleasure in overwrought emotion, and which was absolutely free from the devouring thirst which glowed in Erika's soul. How could she understand the young creature, or know how to protect her from herself?

But if, on the one hand, the old Countess had but a poor opinion of mankind, on the other it was impossible for her to forego society. Although she had promised Erika to resist its temptations in Venice, she not only yielded to them herself, but did all that she could to induce the girl to accompany her. Her efforts were, however, of no avail, in view of Erika's misanthropic and unamiable mood; and thus it came to pass that society witnessed the unusual spectacle of a venerable matron of seventy appearing with indefatigable enjoyment at one afternoon tea after another, while her beautiful young grand-daughter at home confused her mind with the study of metaphysical works or visited the poor abroad. This last had of late been her favourite occupation: she had a long list of beneficiaries, whom she befriended with enthusiastic zeal, and of whom she had learned from the kindly hostess at the hotel and from the doctor when he came to visit his patients there.

It was on a cloudy afternoon towards the end of March, after her grandmother had parted from her with a sigh of compassion, that Erika set out on foot, as was her wont, to visit a poor music-teacher.

The way to the modest lodgings where Fräulein Horst resided led Erika far from the busy Riva by a narrow alley to the quiet Piazza San Zacharie, where grass was growing between the stones. Thence the road grew more difficult to find, and it was not without some pride that she threaded accurately the labyrinth of narrow streets and reached the small dwelling in question without having been obliged to inquire her way.

She found the poor woman in bed in a wretchedly-furnished room. A table beside her served to hold her various bottles of medicine, and a green screen before the window shut out the light. In the midst of this poverty the music-teacher lay reading "Consuelo," and--was happy.

A wave of compassion--a compassion that brought the tears to her eyes--overwhelmed Erika. She leaned over the invalid and kissed her throbbing temples. Then, with the graceful kindliness which characterized her in the presence of sickness or misery, she adorned the room with the flowers she had with her, cleared away the grim witnesses from the table, had a cup of tea made and brought, and set out various little dainties from her basket, talking the while so cheerfully that the invalid forgot her pain. The poor music-teacher followed her every movement in a kind of ecstasy; at last, taking the girl's hand and pressing her feverish lips upon it, she exclaimed, "How could I ever dream that the beautiful Countess Lenzdorff, whom I have admired at the theatre and at concerts, would ever come to drink a cup of tea with me! Ah, what a pleasure it is!"

"I am so glad," Erika replied, stroking the thin hand held out to her. "I will come often, since you really like to have me."

"One never ought to despair, while life lasts," said the sick woman. "Just now I received a letter from an old school-mate, Sophy Lange. When she was a poor girl she fell in love with a gentleman. Of course their union was not to be thought of. Now, after many years, she writes me that she has reached the goal of her desires: she is married,--she is his wife,--and she is almost crazy with delight."

"Sophy Lange!" Erika cried, with peculiar interest. "That was the name of our governess. She must be forty years old."

"About that," the woman replied, smiling to herself. "A truly loving heart keeps young even at forty years of age."

"And what is her husband's name?" asked Erika, smitten by a strange suspicion.

"Baron Strachinsky," replied Fräulein Horst. "He is of ancient Polish lineage, not very wealthy, but dear Sophy does not mind that, for a rich old gentleman whom she took care of during his ten-years' illness has left her all his property."

"And she is happy?" Erika asked, in a kind of terror.

"Oh, how happy! I am so glad!--so glad! A little romance is so refreshing in these prosaic days. They met each other again on the Rigi, at sunrise,--just think, Countess! and Sophy is not at all pretty,--only dear and kind. Now they are in Naples; but she tells me that in the course of the spring she and her husband may come to Venice. She has had a hard life, but at last--at last--it is good to hear of so happy an end to her troubles."

At this point an attack of coughing interrupted her. Ah, how terrible it was! The handkerchief she held to her lips was crimsoned. Erika did all that she could for her, supported her in her arms, and bade her take courage. When the invalid was more comfortable, she left her, promising to come again on the morrow.

"God bless you, Countess!" the poor woman murmured, faintly.

It was late, and it had begun to grow dark. Before leaving the house Erika had a short interview with the woman who rented the lodgings, and deposited with her a sum of money, that the poor music-teacher might be supplied with every comfort possible. Then, with a friendly nod, she departed.

Her heart felt lighter than it had done for some time, and it was not until she had started on her homeward way that she noticed the gathering gloom.

She was half inclined to summon a gondola, but decided that it was not worth the trouble; and, moreover, she detested the swampy odour of the lagoons. And just here the air was so sweet: a spring fragrance was wafted about her from the grassy deserted Campo.

"What mysteries people are!" the girl reflected, her thoughts reverting to her grandmother's comments upon the late elopement, with a lover, of the lovely young wife of an old German diplomat. "This is love,--Countess Ada on the one hand, poor Sophy on the other,--the one criminal, the other ridiculous. Good heavens!"

Around her breathed the sweet, drowsy air of spring; there was a distant sound of bells and of plashing water, and over all brooded something like a dim foreboding, an expectant yearning.

Erika suddenly awoke from her dreamy mood, to find that she had lost her way. She walked on to the nearest corner in hopes of finding it,--in vain! Not without a certain tremor, she resolved to go straight on: she could not but reach some familiar square or canal. She walked hurriedly, impatiently. The air was no longer fragrant, and she found herself in a narrow, poverty-stricken alley running between rows of tall, evil-looking, and ruinous houses, in which the windows showed like deep, hollow eyes. The gray mist was rising above the roofs, and the walls of the houses, as well as the stones underfoot, were slimy with moisture.

Erika had much ado to keep her footing, so slippery was the pathway. If she walked in the middle of the street she had to wade through mud and filth; and if she pressed near to the walls the green slime soiled her dress.

Darker and darker grew the night, when suddenly a rude noise broke the forlorn silence,--songs issuing from rough throats, mingled with the shrill, coarse laughter of women.

Poor Erika hastened her pace, but utter weariness so assailed her that she felt almost unable to stand upright. In an unlucky moment a drunken sailor staggered out of the wretched drinking-place whence the noise proceeded. He was a young, stalwart man, and before the girl could pass him he had stretched out his arms and barred her way.

Beside herself with terror, she screamed,--when, as if rising from the earth, a man stepped in front of her, seized the sailor by the collar, and flung him against the wall. She trembled in every limb with disgust and fear as she looked up at her rescuer, whose features she could barely distinguish, although she could see his eyes,--dark, compassionate eyes.

Where had she already seen those eyes? Before she could recall where, he said, lifting his hat, "You have evidently lost your way: will you tell me where you live, that I may guide you out of this labyrinth?" He spoke in English, but with a foreign accent: apparently he took her for an Englishwoman.

His proposal was an unusual one; and this seemed to strike him, for before she could reply he added, "Of course it is disagreeable to trust to a stranger's escort, but under the circumstances it is the only thing to do. I cannot leave you here without a protector: this is no place for a lady."

So dismayed was she by this knowledge that she could find no courteous word of thanks, and all she said in reply was to mention the name of her hotel.

"To the left," he said, motioning in the given direction. His voice, too, seemed familiar.

They passed together through the net-work of narrow streets and over a high arched bridge upon which a red lantern was burning and beneath which the sluggish water flowed slowly.

"Of whom does he remind me?" thought Erika. Suddenly her heart beat so as almost to deprive her of breath. Bayreuth--Lozoncyi!

And at the same moment she recalled also his fair companion.

Meanwhile, they had reached a large, airy square.

"Piazza San Zacharie. I know where I am now," she said, very coldly, as she took leave of him.

He stood still, evidently wounded by her tone, and looked after her with a frown.

Without thanking him, she hurried on. Suddenly she paused, unable to resist the impulse to look back. He was still standing looking after her. She half turned to retrace her steps and thank him, when indignation seemed to paralyze her. What had she to say to a man who without the least shame could appear in public with---- Without further hesitation she returned to the hotel.

She slept badly that night. Her teeth chattered with fear at the thought of her adventure. And then--then, in spite of herself, she was vexed that she had said no friendly word to Lozoncyi: he had deserved some such at her hands. What was his private life to her? She recalled the handsome half-starved lad whom she had fed beside the gurgling brook. She longed to see him again. Half asleep, she turned her head uneasily on her pillow. The plashing of the water beneath her window sounded like a low, trembling sigh, and the sigh became a song. Nearer and nearer it sounded, insinuatingly sweet,--a song of Tosti's then in fashion. She heard only the refrain:

"Ninon, Ninon, que fais-tu de la vie,
Toi, qui n'as pas d'amour?"

She sprang out of bed and threw open the window. Along the Grand Canal, illuminated by gay little lanterns, glided a gondola whence the song proceeded.

She leaned forward, but almost before she was aware of it the gondola had passed out of

sight: it was nothing more in the distance than a shadow with a little dash of colour, and the sweet melody only a sigh slowly absorbed by the rippling waves.

She still stood at the window when all was silent again. All gone! all silent! Where the gondola had passed there lay a broad moon-glade upon the black water, and mingling with the swampy odour of the lagoon Erika could perceive the breath of spring.

She closed the window, and no longer heard even the plash of the water, or aught save the beating of her own heart.

CHAPTER XIX.

The next morning after breakfast Erika stood again at her window, looking out upon the magnificence of the palaces bordering the Grand Canal, and upon the dark, sluggish water. She seemed to be looking for the spot where the gondola the previous night had passed through the silvery radiance of the moonlight. The burden of the plaintive song still rang in her ears, in her nerves, in her soul:

"Ninon, Ninon, que fais-tu de la vie,
Toi, qui n'as pas d'amour?"

Her grandmother entered, ready to go out, an opera-glass in her hand, and asked her, "Erika, will you not come with me to the exhibition in the Circolo artistico? There is a picture there of which all Venice is talking,--a wonder of a picture, they say."

"Whom is it by?"

"By Lozoncyi."

"Ah!" Erika turned away from her grandmother, and gazed out of the window into the broad Southern sunlight, until black specks danced before her eyes.

"What an indignant exclamation!" her grandmother said, with a laugh. "Your 'Ah!' sounded as if Lozoncyi were your mortal enemy. Perhaps you resent his being in Bayreuth with--with a companion. You must not be so strict with an artist: the society which these gentlemen, in pursuance of their calling, are obliged to frequent, is apt to blunt their sensibilities in that direction. Besides, he was just from Paris: such things are usual there. We are rather more strict in our notions. It is all the same. For my part, it is a matter of entire indifference to me how this Herr Lozoncyi arranges his domestic affairs. Years ago I prophesied a brilliant future for him, when our best Berlin critics condemned his efforts as unripe fruit. Of course I feel flattered at having been right. The vanity of being in the right is the last to die in the human breast. At all events, he seems to have painted a really great picture, and I thought---- But if you do not want to come with me, you prejudiced young lady, I will go alone. Adieu, my child." She stroked the cheek of the young girl, who had now turned away from the window, and went towards the door.

But before she had reached it, Erika called after her: "But, grandmother, do not be in such haste. I--I should like to take a little walk with you, and I do not care where we go."

"Very well: I will wait."

Shortly afterwards grandmother and grand-daughter walked across the little square behind the hotel, decorated in honour of the spring with orange-trees and laurels in tubs, towards the Piazza San Stefano. The day was lovely, and the streets were filled with people. Erika wore a dark-green cloth walking-suit, that became her well. Although she gave but little thought to her dress, with her good taste was instinctive: she always looked like a picture, and to-day like an uncommonly handsome picture.

"Everybody turns to look at you," her grandmother whispered to her; "and I must confess that it is worth the trouble."

This sounded like old times. The compliment had no effect upon Erika, but the tenderness that prompted it did the girl good. She smiled affectionately, but shook her forefinger at the old lady.

"What? I am to take care not to spoil you?" the old Countess said, with a laugh. "I'll answer for that. If flattered vanity could spoil, you would be quite ruined by this time. Good heavens! I would

rather you were a little spoiled,--just a little,--and happy, instead of being as you are, an angel,--sometimes an insufferable one, but still an angel,--with no sunshine in your heart." She looked askance, almost timidly, at the young girl, as if to see if she were not a little merrier to-day than usual. No, Erika did not look merry: she looked touched, but not merry.

"If I only knew what you want!" the grandmother sighed, half aloud.

Erika moved closer to her side. "I want nothing. I have too much," she whispered. "You spoil me."

"How can I help it? I am seventy-two years old: how much time is left me to delight in you? It may be all over for me to-day or to-morrow, and then----" But when she looked again at Erika the tears were rolling down the girl's cheeks. "Foolish child!" exclaimed the grandmother. "In all probability I shall not die so very soon: you need not spoil your fine eyes with crying, beforehand; but one ought to be prepared for everything, and of course I should like to see you married to a good husband."

She had rested her hand on Erika's arm, and hitherto the young girl in a child-like caressing way had pressed it close to her side, but now she extricated herself from the old lady's clasp; her lips quivered. "Whom shall I marry?" she exclaimed, with bitter emphasis.

Then both were silent. The grandmother was conscious of the blunder she had committed, and was furious with herself; which nevertheless would not in the least prevent her from making another of the same kind whenever an opportunity offered.

Erika walked stiff and haughty beside her without looking at her again.

When they reached the Circolo, after a long walk, they wandered through the splendid, spacious rooms for some time without discovering the object of their expedition. The spring exhibition at the Circolo was sparsely attended: strangers had no time for modern art in Venice, and the natives preferred a walk in such fine weather. Consequently the pictures signed by famous modern names hung for the most part upon the walls merely for the satisfaction of their originators. Bezzy's landscapes the old Countess pronounced to be masterpieces, and she became so absorbed in a sirocco by that artist that she quite forgot the purpose for which she had come hither.

It looked almost as if Erika took more interest than her grandmother in Lozoncyi's picture. She looked about her in search of it. From the next room came the sound of voices, now suppressed, then loud in talk. Her heart began to beat fast, and she directed her steps thither.

A group of six or seven men were standing in front of a large picture which hung alone on one side of the room, probably because no other artist had ventured to provoke comparison with it. The men standing before it--Erika suspected, from their remarks, that they were all artists by profession--spoke of it in low tones, as of something sacred, which the picture was not,--far from it; but it was a magnificent revelation of genius, and as such was something divine.

'Francesca da Rimini' was engraved upon the frame. The old subject was strangely treated. Trees in full leaf were cut short by the frame so that only their luxuriant foliage and blossom-laden boughs were visible, and above them against a background of dull, gloomy storm-clouds floated two forms closely intertwined.

Never had Erika seen two such figures living, as it were, upon canvas; never had she seen writhing despair so revealed in every limb and muscle. Her first sensation was one of almost angry repulsion for the artist.

"What do you say to it?" the old Countess, who had followed Erika, asked, rather loudly, as was her wont. "A masterpiece, is it not?"

Erika turned away. She was very pale, and she trembled from head to foot.

"It is wonderfully beautiful," she murmured, in a low voice, "but it is unpleasant. I feel as if it were a sin to look at it."

As they crossed the Piazza San Stefano on their way home, at the foot of Manin's statue stood a group of five street-singers, two men and three women, all over fifty, both men blind, one of the women one-eyed, another hump-backed, and the third so corpulent that she looked like a caricature.

These five monsters, the women with guitars, the men with violins, were accompanying themselves in a love-song, their mouths wide open, and the drawling notes issuing thence echoed from one end to the other of the spacious Piazza. The burden of the ditty was,--

"Tu m'hai bagnato il seno mio di lagrime,
T'amo d'immenso amor."

The old Countess, with a laugh and the easy grace of a great lady, tossed the singers a coin half-way across the Piazza. Erika frowned. A feverish indignation possessed her. Good heavens! did the whole world circle about one and the same thing? Must she hear it even from the lips of these wretched cripples? She bit her lip: from the distance came the drawling wail,--

"T'amo d'immenso amor."

"Erika, look there!"

The words are spoken by old Countess Lenzdorff in the library of the monastery of San Lazaro, and as she speaks she plucks her grand-daughter's sleeve.

The monastery is the same in which Lord Byron, more than half a century ago, was taught by long-bearded monks; and the Lenzdorffs, taking advantage of the fine weather, had been rowed over to it on the afternoon of the day on which they had visited the exhibition at the Circolo.

The monk who acted as their cicerone had conducted them to the library to show them Lord Byron's signature and his portrait, a small, authentic likeness. In addition he showed them many likenesses of his lordship which were by no means authentic, but which represented him in various costumes and at various periods of his existence, and which it was hoped romantic tourists might be tempted to purchase as *souvenirs de Venise*.

Two gentlemen are standing laughing and criticising one of these pictures, and it is to these gentlemen that the Countess directs her grand-daughter's attention. One of them is standing with his back turned to the ladies, but his faultlessly-fitting English overcoat, his gray gaiters, his way of balancing himself with legs slightly apart, the distinction and gray-haired worthlessness that characterize him, leave Erika in no doubt as to his identity. It is Count Hans Treurenberg, an old Austrian friend of her grandmother's. The other, whose profile is turned towards the ladies, is a man of middle height, delicately built, well dressed, although his clothes have not the English *cachet* that distinguishes Count Treurenberg's, and with a frank, attractive bearing and a clear-cut dark face. Taken all in all, he might be supposed to be a man of the world,--some young relative of the Count's,--were it not for his eyes, strange, gleaming eyes, which after a brief glance at the grandmother are riveted upon the grand-daughter. No mere man of the world ever had such eyes. Meanwhile, Count Treurenberg has turned round.

"Ladies, I kiss your hands!" he exclaims. "You too have employed this fine weather in an excursion: you could not do better."

The old Countess was about to reply, when Treurenberg's companion whispered a few words to him.

"Permit me to present Herr von Lozoncyi," said the Count,--whereupon the old Countess, before Lozoncyi had quite finished his formal obeisance, called out, "I am delighted to know you. I belong among your oldest admirers. Do not misunderstand me: I do not, of course, refer to my own age, but to that of my admiration."

"I am immensely flattered, Frau Countess," Lozoncyi replied, in the gentle, agreeable voice of a Viennese of mixed descent and doubtful nationality. "Might I ask when first I had the good fortune to arouse your interest?"

"How long ago is it, Erika?--five or six years?" asked the old lady. "You will know."

"Six years ago, I think, grandmother."

"Six years ago, then," the Countess went on. "It was in Berlin, where you were exhibiting two pictures, one before a curtain, the other behind a curtain. I saw both; and I have believed in your talent ever since,--which has not, however, prevented me from being surprised by your last picture in the Circolo artistico."

"You are very kind."

"One thing I should like to know: do you fancy there are trees in full leaf in hell?"

"What?--in hell?" asked the artist, lifting his eyebrows. "So far as I can tell, I have never pictured hell to myself; although I have more than once felt as if I had been there."

"Why, then, did you paint Francesca da Rimini after that fashion?"

"Francesca da Rimini?" Again he looked at her in surprise.

"The picture in the Circolo," the old lady persisted. "But"--and her tone was much cooler--"perhaps I am mistaken, and the picture is not yours?"

"No, no," he replied, laughing. "The picture to which you refer is certainly mine, Countess, but

my picture-dealer invented the title for it. I never for a moment intended to paint that most attractive of all sinning women."

"What did your picture mean, then?"

"To tell you the truth, I do not know." He said it with an odd smile in which there was some annoyance. "I want to paint a series of pictures under the title of 'Mes Cauchemars,'--' Evil Dreams,'--and the thing in the Circolo was to be number one. If I could have dared to challenge comparison with Botticelli,--which I could not,--I should perhaps have called the picture 'Spring.'"

As he spoke, his eyes had continually strayed towards Erika: at last they rested upon her with so uncivilized a stare that she turned away, annoyed, and Count Treurenberg held up his hand as a screen, saying, with a laugh, "Spare your eyes, my dear Lozoncyi: what sort of way is that to gaze upon the sun?"

"You are right, Count," the painter said, rather bluntly; then, turning again to the young girl, he said, in a very different tone, "I am not recalling our meeting in the Calle San Giacomo. If I do not mistake,--I can hardly believe it, but if I do not,--our acquaintance dates from much farther back. Have you a step-father called Strachinsky?"

"Unfortunately, yes," her grandmother replied, dolefully.

"Well, then," he said, eagerly, "I----" He made a sudden pause. "How foolish I am! You must long ago have forgotten what I am remembering."

"No, I have forgotten nothing," Erika replied, lifting her eyes to his with a strange expression of mingled pride and reproach. "I recognized you long ago; but it was not for me to tell you so."

"Countess! Allow me to kiss your hand, in memory of the dear little fairy who brought me good fortune."

"What's all this?" Count Treurenberg asked, inquisitively, and the old Countess as curiously inquired, "Where did you make each other's acquaintance?"

Erika hesitates: a sudden shyness makes her uncertain how to begin the story. Lozoncyi comes to her aid. His narrative is a little masterpiece of pathos and humour. He tells everything; how the Baron--he describes him perfectly in a single phrase--sent him off with an alms,--two kreutzers,--his own indignation, his despair, his hunger, the sudden appearance of the little girl; he describes her sweet little face, her faded gown, her long thin legs in their red stockings, and the basket of food decorated with asters; he describes the landscape, the little brook creeping shyly beneath the huge bridge,--a bridge about as suitable, he declares, as the tomb of Cecilia Metella would be as a monument for a dead dog; he repeats the little fairy's every word, and tells how, finally, she slipped the five guilders into his pocket, assuring him that she knew how terrible it was to be without money.

The old lady and Treurenberg laugh; Erika listens eagerly and with emotion. The story lacks something. Yes, in spite of its minute details, something is missing. Is he keeping it for the conclusion, or does he think it necessary to suppress this detail altogether? Erika is indignant at such discretion. When he has finished, she says, calmly, "You have forgotten one trifling incident, Herr Lozoncyi: you set a price upon your picture of me----" She pauses, and then, coolly surveying her listeners, she goes on, "I had to promise Herr Lozoncyi to give him a kiss for my portrait."

"And may I ask if you kept your word, Countess?" asks Count Treurenberg, laughing.

"Yes," Erika replies, curtly.

"Charming!" exclaims Count Treurenberg. "And, between ourselves, I would not have believed it of you, Countess! You were a lucky fellow, Lozoncyi."

Erika is visibly embarrassed, but Lozoncyi steps a little nearer to her, and says, with a very kindly smile, "What a gloomy face! Ah, Countess, can you regret the alms bestowed upon a poor lad by an infant nine years old? If you only knew how often the memory of your childish kindness has strengthened and encouraged me, you would not grudge it."

The matter could not have been adjusted with more amiable tact, and Erika begins to laugh, and confesses that she has been foolish,--a fact which her grandmother confirms gaily. The old lady is delighted with the little story: the part played therein by Strachinsky gives it an additional relish. She is charmed with Lozoncyi.

They leave the damp, musty library, and go out into the cloisters that encircle the garden of the monastery. The scent of roses is in the air, and from the monastery kitchen comes the odour of freshly-roasted coffee. Count Treurenberg is glad of the opportunity to cover his bald head with his English gray felt hat, and as he does so anathematizes the Western idea of courtesy which makes it necessary for a gentleman to catch cold in his head so frequently. He walks in front with the old Countess, and Erika and Lozoncyi follow. The two old people talk incessantly; the younger couple scarcely speak.

Lozoncyi is the first to break the silence. "Strange, that chance should have brought us together again," he says.

She clears her throat and seems about to speak, but is mute.

"You were saying, Countess----?" he asks, smiling.

"I said nothing."

"You were thinking, then----?"

"Yes, I was thinking, in fact, that it is strange that you should have left it to chance to bring about our meeting." The words are amiable enough, but they sound cold and constrained as Erika utters them.

"Do you imagine that I have made no attempt to find you again, Countess?"

"I imagine that if you had seriously desired to find me it would not have been difficult."

He does not speak for a moment, and then he begins afresh: "You are right,--and you do me injustice. When I learned that my dear little poorly-clad princess had become a great lady, I did, it is true, make no attempt to approach her; but before then---- Do you care to hear of my unfortunate pilgrimage?"

"Most assuredly I do."

"Well, eight years after our childish interview I had my first couple of hundred marks in my pocket. I bought a new suit of clothes--yes, smile if yon choose,--a new suit, which I admired exceedingly--and journeyed to Bohemia. I found the village, the brook, and the bridge, and likewise the castle; but all had gone who had once lived there,--even the amiable Herr von Strachinsky,--and no one knew anything of my little princess. I was very sad,--too sad for a fellow of three-and-twenty."

He pauses.

"And was that the end of your efforts?" asks the old Countess, whose sharp ears have lost nothing of the story, and who now turns to the pair with a laugh. "You showed no amount of persistence to boast of."

"When, overtaken by the rain, I took refuge in the parsonage of the nearest village," he continues, "I made inquiries there for my little friend. The priest gave me more information than I had been able to procure elsewhere. He told me that one fine day some one had come from Berlin to carry little Rika away,--that she was now a very grand lady----"

"And then----?" the old lady persists.

"I sought no further: the bridge between my sphere in life and that of my princess was destroyed. I quietly returned to Munich. I was very unhappy: the goal to which I had looked forward seemed to have been suddenly snatched from me."

"Oho!" exclaims the old Countess, "you can be sentimental too, then? You are truly many-sided."

"That was years ago. I have changed very much since then."

After which Count Treurenberg contrives to interest the old lady in the latest piece of Venetian gossip.

"You understand now why I did not appear before you, Countess Erika?"

But Erika shook her head: "I do not understand at all. I think you were excessively foolish to avoid me for such a reason."

"Erika is quite right," the grandmother called back over her shoulder in the midst of one of Count Treurenberg's most interesting anecdotes. "Your failing to seek us out only proves that you must have thought us a couple of geese; otherwise you would have been quite sure of a friendly reception."

"No, it proves only that I had been hardly treated by fate, that I was a well-whipped young dog," said Lozoncyi. "Now I have no doubt that I should have been graciously received by both of you; but it would not have amounted to much. You would soon have tired of me. A very young artist is sadly out of place in a drawing-room; I was like all the rest of the race."

"That I find hard to believe," the old Countess said, kindly, still over her shoulder; then, turning again to Count Treurenberg, "Go on, Count. You were saying----"

"I shall say nothing more," Treurenberg exclaimed, provoked. "I have had enough of this: at the most interesting part of my story you turn and listen to what Lozoncyi is saying to your

grand-daughter. The fact is that when Lozoncyi is present no one else can claim a lady's attention." The words were spoken half in jest, half in irritation.

"Count Treurenberg is skilled in rendering me obnoxious in society," Lozoncyi murmurs.

"Oh, I never pay any attention to him," the old Countess assures him. "I should like to know what you did after you learned that Erika had----"

"Had become a grand lady?" Lozoncyi interrupts her. "Oh, I packed up my belongings and went to Rome."

"And then?"

"There I had an attack of Roman fever," he says, slowly, and his face grows dark. He looks around for Erika, but she is no longer at his side: she has lingered behind, and has fallen into conversation with a tall, dignified monk. She now calls out to the rest, "Has no one any desire to see the tree beneath which Lord Byron used to write poems?"

They all follow her as the monk leads the way to the very shore of the island and there with pride points to a table beneath a tree, where he assures them Lord Byron used often to sit and write.

His hospitality culminates at last in regaling his guests with fragrant black coffee, after which he leaves them.

They sit and sip their coffee under the famous tree. Lozoncyi expresses a modest doubt as to the identity of the table. Count Treurenberg relates an anecdote, at which Erika frowns, and gazes up into the blue sky showing here and there among the branches of the old tree.

Suddenly an affected voice is heard to say, "*Enfin le voilà*."

They look up, and see two ladies: one is no other than Frau von Geroldstein, very affected, and looking about, as usual, for fine acquaintances; the other is very much dressed, rouged, and very pretty. Frau von Geroldstein is enthusiastically glad to see her Berlin friends, and presents her companion,--the Princess Gregoriewitsch.

The old Countess, however, is not very amiably disposed towards the new-comers. "Do not let us keep you from your friends," she says to the artist: "it is late, and we must go. Adieu. I should be glad if you could find time to come and see us."

Count Treurenberg conducts the grandmother and grand-daughter to their gondola. Lozoncyi remains with his two admirers.

"Who was that queer Princess?" Countess Anna asks of Count Treurenberg, in a rather depreciative tone, just before they reach their gondola.

"Oh, one of Lozoncyi's thousand adorers. She has a huge palace and entertains a great deal. A pretty woman, but terribly stupid. Lozoncyi is tied to a different apron-string every day."

The *table-d'hôte* is long past: the Lenzdorffs are dining in a small island of light at one end of the large dining-hall.

They are unusually late to-night. After their return from the Armenian monastery both ladies have dressed for the evening, before coming to table. At the old Countess's entreaty, Erika has consented to go into society this evening,--that is, to the Countess Mühlberg, who has been legally separated from her husband for some time and is living very quietly at Venice, where she receives a few friends every Wednesday. The old Countess is unusually gay; Erika scarcely speaks.

The glass door leading from the dining-hall into the garden has been left open for their special benefit. The warm air brings in an odour of fresh earth, mossy stones, and the faintly impure breath of the lagoons, which haunts all the poetic beauty of Venice like an unclean spirit. The soft plash of the water against the walls of the old palaces, the creaking of the gondolas tied to their posts, a monotonous stroke of oars, the distant echo of a street song, are the mingled sounds that fall upon the ear.

When the meal is ended the old Countess calls for pen and ink, and writes a note at the table where they have just dined. Erika walks out into the garden. With head bare and a light wrap about her shoulders, she strolls along the gravel path, past the monthly roses that have scarcely ceased to bloom throughout the winter, past the taller rose-trees in which the life of spring is stirring. From time to time she turns her head to catch the distant melody more clearly, but it comes no nearer. Above her arches the sky, no longer pale as it had been to-day amid the boughs of the historic tree, but dark blue, and twinkling with countless stars.

She has walked several times up and down the garden as far as the breast-work that separates it from the Grand Canal. Now as she nears the dining-room she hears voices: her grandmother is

no longer alone; beside the table at which she is writing stands Count Treurenberg. He is speaking: "'Tis a pity! he really is a very clever fellow with men, but the women spoil him. Just now he is the plaything of all the women who think themselves art-critics in Venice."

Erika pauses to listen. "Indeed! Well, it does not surprise me," her grandmother rejoins, indifferently, and Treurenberg goes on: "He is the very deuce of a fellow: with all his fine feeling, he combines just enough cynicism and honest contempt for women to make him irresistible to the other sex."

"You are complimentary, Count!" Erika calls into the dining-hall.

He looks up. She is standing in the door-way; the wrap has fallen back from her shoulders, revealing the dazzling whiteness of her neck and arms, her left hand rests against the door-post, and she is looking full at the speaker.

Old Treurenberg, who has just taken a seat beside the Countess, springs up, gazes admiringly at the girl, bows low, and says, "Pray remember that any uncomplimentary remarks I may make in your presence with regard to the weaker sex have no reference to you. When I talk of your sex in general I never think of you: you are an exception."

"We have both known that for a long while: have we not, Erika?" her grandmother says, laughing.

"But what is the cause of all this splendour, Countess Erika?" asks Treurenberg, changing the subject. "It is the first time that I have had the pleasure of seeing you in full dress."

"Erika is beginning to go out a little to please me," the old Countess explains. "I told her that, thanks to her passion for retirement, it would shortly be reported that she was either out of her mind or suffering from a disappointment in love. As this does not seem to her desirable, she has consented to go with me to Constance Mühlberg."

"I should have gone to Constance Mühlberg at all events, only I should not have chosen her reception-day for my visit," Erika declares, taking a seat beside her grandmother, leaning her white elbows upon the table, and resting her chin on her clasped hands.

Connoisseur in beauty that he is, the old Count cannot take his eyes off her. "When a woman is so thoroughly formed for society as you are, Countess Erika, she has no right to retire from it," he declares.

She makes no reply, and her grandmother asks, "Shall we see you at Countess Mühlberg's, Count?"

"Not to-night. I must go to-night to the Rambouillet of Venice."

"Oh! to the Neerwinden?"

"Yes. Why do you ladies never go there?"

"To speak frankly, I had no idea that one ought to go," the Countess says, laughing.

"Why not? Because of the Countess's reputation? Let me assure you that all ruins are the fashion in Venice. You are quite wrong to stay away from the Salon Neerwinden: it is an historical curiosity, and, to me, more interesting than the Doge's palace."

"But even if I should go to the Neerwinden I could not take this child with me!"

"Why not? The Salon Neerwinden is by no means such a pest-house of infectious moral disease as you seem to think. And then nothing could harm the Countess Erika: her life is a charmed one."

At this moment a thick-set, gray-bearded individual enters the dining-hall, very affected, and very anxious to induce his eye-glass to fit into the hollow of his right eye. He is a Viennese banker, Schmidt--he spells it Schmytt--von Werdenthal. Bowing with ease to the ladies, he approaches Treurenberg. "Do I intrude, Hans?" he asks.

"You always intrude."

The banker smiles at the jest: awkward as he may be, he displays a certain agility in ignoring a rude remark. "You know, Hans, we must go first to the Gregoriewitsch; and we shall be late."

"Confound the fellow!" murmurs the Count; nevertheless he rises to follow Schmytt, and kisses the fingertips of each lady in token of farewell. "Countess Erika," he says, with a final glance of admiration, "if I were but thirty years younger!--Ah, you think it would have been of no use," he adds, turning to the grandmother; "but there's no knowing. If I am not mistaken, the Countess Erika is zealous in the conversion of sinners, and I should have been so easily converted in view of the reward. But do me the favour to leave a card upon the Neerwinden: you will not repent it. One is never so well entertained as at her evenings; and if you would like to see Lozoncyi in all his glory----"

"But, Hans, the Princess will be waiting," Schmytt interposes.

"I am coming." And Count Treurenberg vanishes. The old Countess looks after him with a smile.

"I cannot help it, but I have a slight weakness for that old sinner," she says. "He is so typical,--a genuine Austrian cavalier,--*fin de siècle*, witty without depth, good-natured with no heart, aristocrat to his finger-tips, without one single unprejudiced conviction. How you impressed him to-night! I do not wonder. Lozoncyi ought to see you now: what a splendid portrait he would make of you! H'm! do you know I really should like to go to a Neerwinden evening?"

"That you may have the pleasure of seeing Herr von Lozoncyi in all his glory?" asks Erika.

CHAPTER XX.

Curiosity carried the day. The Countess Lenzdorff left her card at the Palazzo Luzani, and as a consequence the Baroness Neerwinden called upon both ladies and left a written invitation for them which informed them that "my dear friend Minona von Rattenfels will delight us by reading aloud her latest, and unpublished, work."

To her grandmother's surprise, Erika seemed quite willing to go to this one of the Baroness Neerwinden's entertainments, and Constance Mühlberg accompanied them. The party was full of laughing expectation, much as if the pleasure in prospect had been a masquerade.

Expectation on this occasion did not much exceed reality: the old Countess and Constance Mühlberg were extremely entertained. And Erika----? Well, they arrived at a tolerably early hour, ten o'clock, and found the three immense rooms in which the Neerwinden was wont to receive almost empty.

The lady of the house, when they entered, was seated on a small divan, beneath a kind of canopy of antique stuffs in the remotest of these rooms. Her black eyes were still fine; her features were not ignoble, but were hard and unattractive.

She received the Countess Lenzdorff with effusive cordiality, referred to several youthful reminiscences which they possessed in common, and was quite gracious to both the younger ladies. After several commonplace remarks, she dashed boldly into a discourse upon the final destiny of the earth and the adjacent stars.

She had just informed her guests that she was privately engaged upon the improvement of the electric light, and should soon have completed a system of universal religion, when a sudden influx of guests caused her to stop in the middle of a sentence, leaving her hearers in doubt as to whether the catechism of the new faith was to be printed in Volapük or in French, in which latter language most of the Baroness's intellectual efforts were given to the world.

Erika was obliged to leave her place beside the hostess and to mingle in the crowd that now rapidly filled the three reception-rooms.

She found very few acquaintances, and made the rather annoying discovery that, with the exception of a couple of flat-chested English girls, she was the only young girl present. If Count Treurenberg had not made his appearance to play cicerone, she must have utterly failed to understand what was going on around her.

The masculine element was the more strongly represented, but the feminine contingent was undoubtedly the more aristocratic. It consisted chiefly of very beautiful and distinguished women of rank who almost without exception had by some fatality rendered their reception at court impossible. Most of them were divorced, although upon what grounds was not clear.

The strictly orthodox Venetian and Austrian families avoided these entertainments, not so much upon moral grounds as because it was embarrassing to meet *déclassées* of their own rank, and because, besides, they believed this salon to be a hotbed of the rankest radicalism, both in morals and in politics.

In this they were not altogether wrong. There was nothing here of the Kapilavastu system of which the old Countess was wont to complain in Berlin; no, every imaginable topic was discussed, and after the most heterogeneous fashion. Consequently the salon was in its way an amusing one, its tiresome side being the determination on the part of the hostess not to allow her guests to amuse themselves, but always to offer them a *plat de résistance* in some shape or other.

On this evening this *plat* was Fräulein Minona von Rattenfels; and in the midst of Count Treurenberg's most amusing witticisms the guests were all bidden to assemble for the reading in the largest of the three rooms.

Here she sat, with her manuscript already open, and the conventional glass of water on a spindle-legged table beside her.

She was about fifty years old, large-boned, stout, and very florid, dressed in a red gown shot with black, which gave her the appearance of a half-boiled lobster, and with strings of false coin around her neck and in her hair.

Before the performance began, the electric lights were turned off, and the only illumination proceeded from two wax candles with pink shades on the table beside Minona. The literary essay was preceded by a musical prologue rendered by the pianist G----, who happened to be in Venice at the time.

He played a paraphrase of Siegmund's and Sieglinda's love-duet, gradually gliding into the motive of Isolde's death, all of which naturally increased the receptive capacity of the audience for the coming treat. The last tone died away. Minona von Rattenfels cleared her throat.

"Tombs!" She hurled the word, as it were, in a very deep voice into the midst of her audience. This was the pleasing title of her latest collection of love-songs.

It consisted of two parts, 'Love-Life' and 'Love-Death.' In the first part there was a great deal said about Dawn and Dew-drops, and in the second part quite as much about Worms and Withered Flowers, while in both there was such an amount of ardent passion that one could not but be grateful to the Baroness for her Bayreuth fashion of darkening the auditorium, thus veiling the blushes of certain sensitive ladies, as well as the sneering looks of others.

Of course Minona's delivery was highly dramatic. She screamed until her voice failed her, she rolled her eyes until she fairly squinted, and Count Treurenberg offered to wager an entire set of her works that one of her eyes was glass.

In most of her verses the lover was cold, hard, or faithless, but now and then she revelled in an 'oasis in the desert of life.' Then she became unutterably grotesque, the only distinguishable word in a languishing murmur being "L--o--ve!"

Suddenly in the midst of this extraordinary performance was heard the clicking of a couple of steel knitting needles, and shortly afterwards the reading came to an end.

Again the room was flooded with light. In the silence that reigned the clicking needles made the only sound. Erika looked to see whence the noise proceeded, and perceived an elderly lady with gray hair brushed smoothly over her temples, and a shrewd--almost masculine--face, sitting very erect, and dressed in a charming old-fashioned gown. Her brows were lifted, and her face showed unmistakably her decided disapproval of the performance. In the midst of the heated atmosphere she produced the impression of a stainless block of ice.

"Who is that?" Erika asked the Countess Mühlberg, who sat beside her.

"Fräulein Agatha von Horn. Shall I present you?"

Erika assented, and the Countess led her to the lady in question, who, still knitting, was seated on a sofa with three young, very shy artists, and overshadowed by a tall fan-palm.

The Countess presented Erika. The artists rose, and the two ladies took their seats on the sofa beside Fräulein von Horn.

The Fräulein sighed, and conversation began.

"If I am not mistaken, you are a dear friend of the gifted lady whom we have to thank this evening for so much pleasure," said Constance Mühlberg.

"We travel together, because it is cheaper," Fräulein von Horn replied, calmly, "but; as with certain married couples, we have nothing in common save our means of living."

"Indeed?" said Constance. "I am glad to hear it; for in that case we can express our sentiments freely with regard to the poetess."

"Quite freely."

Just then Count Treurenberg joined the group, and informed the ladies that he had been congratulating Minona upon her magnificent success.

"What did you say to her?" the truth-loving Agatha asked, almost angrily.

"'In you I hail our modern Sappho.' That is what I told her."

"And she replied----?" asked Constance Mühlberg.

The Count fanned himself with his opera-hat with a languishing air, and lisped, "'*Ah, oui, Sappho; c'est bien Sappho, toujours la même histoire*, after more than two thousand years.'"

"Poor Minona! and to think that she cudgels it all out of her imagination!" Fräulein Agatha remarked, ironically. "She has no more personal experience than--well, than I."

"'Sh!--not so loud," Constance whispered, laughing. "She never would forgive you for betraying her thus."

"I have known her from a child," Fräulein von Horn continued, composedly. "She once exchanged love-letters with her brother's tutor, and since then she has always played the game with a dummy."

The dry way in which she imparted this piece of information was irresistibly comical, but in the midst of the laughter which it provoked a loud voice was heard declaiming at the other end of the room, where, in the midst of a circle of listeners, stood a black-bearded individual with a Mephistophelian cast of countenance, holding forth upon some subject.

"Who is that?" asked Countess Mühlberg.

"I do not know the fellow," said the Count. "Not in my line."

"A writer from Vienna," Fräulein von Horn explained. "He was invited here, that he might write an article upon Minona."

"What is he talking about?" asked the Count.

Countess Mühlberg, who had been stretching her delicate neck to listen, replied, "About love."

"Indeed!" exclaimed Count Treurenberg, springing up from his seat: "I must hear what the fellow has to say." And, followed shortly afterwards by Constance Mühlberg, he joined the circle about the black-bearded seer.

Erika remained sitting with Fräulein Agatha on the sofa beneath the palm. They could hear the seer's drawling voice as he announced very distinctly, "Love is the instinctive desire of an individual for union with a certain individual of the opposite sex."

Fräulein von Horn meditatively smoothed her gray hair with one of her long knitting-needles, and said, carelessly, "I know that definition: it is Max Norden's." Whereupon she left her seat beside Erika to devote herself to the three artists, her *protégés*.

Erika was left entirely alone under the palm, in a state of angry discontent. Never before, wherever she had been, had she been so little regarded. She was of no more importance here than Fräulein Agatha,--hardly of as much. For the first time it occurred to her that under certain circumstances it was quite inconvenient to be unmarried.

At the same time she was conscious of a great disappointment: she had not come hither to study the Baroness Neerwinden's eccentricities, or to listen to Minona von Rattenfels's love-plaints: she had come---- What, in fact, had she come for?

From the other end of the room came the seer's voice: "The only strictly moral union is founded upon elective affinity."

"Very true!" exclaimed Frau von Neerwinden.

A short pause followed. The servants handed about refreshments. Rosenberg, the black-bearded seer, stood with his left elbow propped upon the back of his friend Minona's chair; in his right he held his opera-hat.

A French *littérateur*, who had understood enough of the whole performance to be jealous of his German colleague, began to proclaim his view of love: "*L'amour est une illusion, qui--que*----" There he stuck fast.

Then somebody whom Erika did not know exclaimed, "Where is Lozoncyi? He knows more of the subject than we do; he ought to be able to help us."

"I think his knowledge is practical rather than theoretical," said Count Treurenberg.

Not long afterwards a few guests took leave, as it was growing late. The circle was smaller, and Erika discovered Lozoncyi seated on a lounge between two ladies, Frau von Geroldstein and the Princess Gregoriewitsch. The Princess was a beauty in her way, tall, stout, very *décolletée*, and with long, languishing eyes. Lozoncyi was leaning towards her, and whispering in her ear.

Erika rose with a sensation of disgust and walked out upon a balcony, where she had scarcely cast a glance upon the veiled magnificence of the opposite palaces when Lozoncyi stood beside her. "Good-evening, Countess. I had no idea that you were here; I discovered you only this

moment."

In her irritated mood she did not offer him her hand. "You are astonished that my grandmother should have brought me here," she said, with a shrug.

But, to her surprise, she perceived that nothing of the kind had occurred to him: his sense of what was going on about him was evidently blunted.

"Why?" he asked. "Because--because of the antecedents of the hostess? It is long since people have troubled themselves about those, and it is the brightest salon in Venice."

"There has certainly been nothing lacking in the way of animation to-night," Erika observed, coldly.

She was leaning with both hands on the balustrade of the balcony, and she spoke to him over her shoulder. He cared little for what she said, but her beauty intoxicated him. Always strongly influenced by his surroundings, the least noble part of his nature had the upper hand with him to-night.

"Rosenberg has taken great pains to entertain his audience," he remarked, carelessly.

"And his efforts have assuredly been crowned with success," Erika replied, contemptuously. Then, with a shade more of scorn in her voice, she asked, "Is there always as much--as much talk of love here?"

"It is frequently discussed," he replied. "And why not? It is the most important thing in the world." Then, with his admiring artist-stare, he added, in a lower tone, "As you will discover for yourself."

She frowned, turned away, and re-entered the room.

He stayed outside, suddenly conscious of his want of tact, but inclined to lay the fault of it at her door. "'Tis a pity she is so whimsical a creature," he muttered between his teeth; "and so gloriously beautiful; a great pity!" Nevertheless he was vexed with himself, and was firmly resolved, if chance ever gave him another interview with her, to make better use of his opportunity.

Shortly afterwards Countess Lenzdorff, with Erika and Constance Mühlberg, took her leave. She was in a very good humour, and exchanged all sorts of witticisms with Constance with regard to their evening.

"And how did you enjoy yourself?" she asked Erika, when, after leaving Constance at home, the two were alone in the gondola on their way to the 'Britannia.'

"I?" asked Erika, with a contemptuous depression of the corners of her mouth. "How could I enjoy myself in an assemblage where there was nothing talked of but love?"

Her grandmother laughed heartily: "Yes, it was rather a silly way to pass the time, I confess. I cannot conceive why they waste so many words upon what is perfectly plain to any one with eyes. They grope about, and no one explains in the least the nature of love." She threw back her head, and, without for an instant losing the slightly mocking smile which was so characteristic of her beautiful old face, she said, "Love is an irritation of the fancy, produced by certain natural conditions, which expresses itself, so long as it lasts, in the exclusive glorification of one single individual, and robs the human being who is its victim of all power of discernment. All things considered, those people are very lucky who, when the torch of passion is extinguished, can find anything save humiliation in the memory of their love."

The old Countess was privately very proud of her definition, and looked round at Erika with an air of self-satisfaction at having clothed what was so self-evident, so cheerful a view, in such uncommonly appropriate words. But Erika's face had assumed a dark, pained expression. Her grandmother's words had aroused in her the old anguish,--anguish for her mother. It was not to be denied that in some cases her grandmother's view was the true one. Was it true always? No! Something in the girl's nature rebelled against such a thought. No! a thousand times no!

"But the love of which you speak, grandmother, is only sham love," she said, in a husky, trembling voice. "There is surely another kind,--a genuine, sacred, ennobling love!"

"There may be," said her grandmother. "The pity is that one never knows the true from the false until it is past."

Erika said no more.

The air was mild; the scent of roses was wafted across the sluggish water of the lagoon; there was a faint sound of distant music. But an icy chill crept over Erika, and in her heart there was a strange, aching, yearning pain.

CHAPTER XXI.

Three weeks had passed since Minona von Rattenfels had so effectively given vent to her languishing love-plaints.

A striking change was evident in Erika. She was much more cheerful, or, at least, more accessible; she no longer withdrew from the world in morbid misanthropy, but went into society whenever her grandmother requested her to do so. Wherever she went she was fêted and admired. Since her first season in Berlin she had never received so much homage. It seemed to give her pleasure, and, what was still more remarkable, she seemed to exert herself somewhat--a very little--to obtain it.

Wherever she went she met Lozoncyi,--Lozoncyi, who scarcely took his eyes off her, but who made no attempt to approach her in any way that could attract notice. His bearing towards her was not only exemplary, but touching. Always at hand to render her any little service,--to procure her an ice, to relieve her of an empty teacup, to find her missing fan or gloves,--he immediately retired to give place to her other admirers. Among these Prince Helmy Nimbsch was foremost: the entire international society of Venice were daily expecting the announcement of a betrothal, and one afternoon, at a lawn-tennis party at Lady Stairs's, he had given Erika unmistakable proofs of his intentions. She was a little startled, and, while she was endeavouring to lead the conversation with him away from the perilously sentimental tone it had assumed, her eyes accidentally encountered Lozoncyi's.

Shortly afterwards she managed to get rid of the Prince; and as, after a last game of lawn-tennis, she was retiring from the field, her cheeks flushed, her eyes sparkling from the exercise, Lozoncyi came up to her to relieve her of her racket. "You see how right the poor painter was, not to venture to approach his little fairy," he murmured. The words, his tone, aroused her sympathy and compassion, but before she could reply he had vanished. He did not come near her again that afternoon, but she could not help perceiving that his looks sought herself and Prince Nimbsch alternately, at first inquiringly, and afterwards with an expression of relief.

Dinner has been over for some time. The lamps are gleaming red along the Grand Canal, and their broken reflections quiver in long streaks upon the waters of the lagoon. The little drawing-room is but dimly lighted, and Erika is seated at the piano, playing bits of 'Parsifal,' her fingers gliding into the motive of sinful, worldly pleasure.

The old Countess enters, and, after wandering aimlessly about the room for a moment, goes, after her fashion, directly to the point. She pauses beside Erika, and observes, "Prince Nimbsch is courting you. People are talking about it."

"Nonsense!" Erika rejoins, running her fingers over the keys. "He is only amusing himself."

"H'm! he seems to me to be very much in earnest," murmurs the old lady; "and there is no denying that it would be a brilliant match."

Erika drops her hands in her lap. "Grandmother!" she exclaims, half laughing, "what are you thinking of? He is a mere boy!"

"A boy? He is full four years older than you; and I need not remind you that you are no child. At all events, you must consider well----"

"Before I enter into another engagement," Erika interrupts her. "I promise you I will; nay, more than that, I promise you solemnly that I will not engage myself to Prince Nimbsch."

"In fact, I must confess that I do not think him your equal." There is a certain relief in the old lady's tone, although she adds, with some hesitation, "But the position is tempting, very tempting."

"Ah, grandmother!" Erika exclaims, with reproach in her tone, as, rising, she puts her arm around the old Countess's shoulder and kisses her gray head, "do you know me so little?"

Her grandmother returns her caress with emotion, murmuring the while, as if talking to herself, "As if you knew yourself, my poor, dear child!"

"I know myself so far," Erika declares, "as to be sure that after my first unfortunate mistake I am cured of all worldly ambition."

"Oh, that was quite another thing!" her grandmother sighs. "Your marriage with Lord Langley would have been positively unnatural; but Prince Helmy Nimbsch is a fine, gallant young fellow."

"It all amounts to the same thing: old or young, he is a man whom I do not love, and never could love."

The old lady shakes her head impatiently: "Are you beginning upon that? Love? I thought you had more sense. Love!--love! Heaven preserve you from that disease! The only sound foundations for a happy marriage are unbounded esteem and warm sympathy: anything more is an evil."

Erika is silent, and the old Countess continues: "No respectable woman should indulge in passion. Passion is an intoxication, and nausea is sure to follow upon intoxication. Therefore a respectable woman, who can at the most indulge but once in such intoxication, condemns herself, after a short period of bliss, to nausea for the rest of her life. Only the unprincipled woman who cures her nausea by a fresh passion can permit herself such indulgence. It is all nonsense for one of us."

During this long speech the Countess has seated herself in an arm-chair with a volume of Taine's 'Les Origines de la France' open in her lap, and to lend emphasis to her words she taps the book from time to time with a large Japanese paper-knife.

Erika stands near her, leaning upon the piano, tall and graceful in her white gown. "And what am I to infer from your preachment? That I must marry Helmy Nimbsch, even without love?"

"Helmy Nimbsch? Who is talking of him?" The old lady almost starts from her chair.

"I thought you were, grandmother," Erika says, with a mischievous smile. "If I am not mistaken, he was the subject of our conversation."

"Nonsense! Helmy Nimbsch! *Ce n'est pas serieux!*"

"Of whom, then, are you talking?" Erika asks, looking her grandmother full in the face.

"Oh, of no one: I was talking in general," her grandmother replies, with some irritation, adding, still more petulantly, after a pause, "If you have unbounded esteem and warm sympathy for young Nimbsch, why, marry him, by all means."

Instead of replying, Erika begins to arrange the sheets of music on the piano.

A long pause ensues. From below come the murmur of voices, the ringing of bells, and the moving of trunks,--in short, all the bustle consequent upon the arrival of fresh guests at a large hotel. Countess Lenzdorff takes the opportunity to complain of so much noise, and to declare, "In fact, I am quite tired of this wandering about from place to place."

"What, grandmother? Why, you were so delighted here! Only yesterday you told me how 'refreshing' you considered your Venetian life."

"Yes, yes; but it has lasted too long for me. While you were playing lawn-tennis this afternoon with Constance Mühlberg, I went to see Hedwig Norbin. She arrived yesterday, and is at the 'Europe;' but she is only stopping for a day or so on her way home. 'Tis a pity."

"And she gave you such an alluring description of Berlin that you are anxious to fold your tent and fly back to Bellevue Street now, in the midst of this wondrous Southern spring?" Erika asks, coldly.

"Oh, spring is lovely everywhere!--lovelier in Berlin than in Venice: there is nothing more beautiful than the Thiergarten in May. And then I find there all my old habits, my old friends."

"I have no friends in Berlin," says Erika, with a strange emphasis, "and that is why I beg you to stay away from Berlin for a while longer. Next autumn you may do with me what you please. Have a little patience with me."

"Patience! patience!" The old Countess taps her book more energetically than ever.

After a while Erika begins: "Did Frau von Norbin tell you anything about Dorothea von Sydow? How is her position regarded by society?"

"How?" her grandmother exclaims. "How should society regard the critical position of a woman who has never shown the slightest consideration for any one, never conferred a benefit upon any one, scarcely even treated any one with courtesy, but lived only for her own frivolous gratification? Society acknowledges a woman in her position only when it would lose something by dropping her. Who would lose anything if Dorothea were stricken from its list? A couple of young men, perhaps; and they would be at liberty to make love to her outside of the ranks of society. The world has turned its back upon her: Hedwig tells me that she is positively shunned."

"And how does she accommodate herself to her destiny?" asks Erika.

"As poorly as possible. One would suppose that she would have left Berlin. For my part, I

never imagined that she cared so much for her social position; but she appears to be clutching it in a kind of panic."

"How unpleasant for--for the dead man's brother!" says Erika. Several months have passed since she has spoken Goswyn's name: it would seem as if her lips refused to utter it.

"For Goswyn!" her grandmother exclaims, in a tone of sincere distress. "Terrible! They say he is altered almost beyond recognition. I did not know he was so devoted to Otto. But, to be sure, the circumstances attendant upon his death were frightful. Goswyn always found fault with me, but, after all, since his mother's death I have stood nearest to him in this world. I know he would be glad to pour out his heart to me."

Erika draws a long breath; her large clear eyes flash. "Ah!" she exclaims, "this, then, is your reason for wishing to go to Berlin,--that you may console Herr Goswyn von Sydow? I always knew that he was dear to you: I learn now for the first time that he is dearer to you than I am!"

"Oh, Erika!--dearer than you!" The old lady rises and strokes the girl's arm tenderly. "I am often sorry that I cannot love you both together!" she adds, half timidly, in an undertone.

But this time Erika repulses almost angrily the caress usually so dear to her. "I cannot understand you!" she says: "it is a positive mania of yours. You are always reproaching me for not having married Goswyn, or hinting that I ought to marry him,--a man who has not wasted a thought upon me for years!"

"Oh, Erika! how can you talk so? Remember Bayreuth."

"What if I do remember Bayreuth? Yes, he still thought of me then; that is, he remembered the young girl with whom he had ridden in the Thiergarten, and he brought her memory with him to Bayreuth; but he discovered it did not fit with what he found there: that was the end of it all!" Erika silently paces the room to and fro once or twice, then, pausing before her grandmother, she continues: "It stings me whenever you speak of Goswyn and lose yourself in the contemplation of his measureless magnanimity. Magnanimity! Yes, but it is a cold, sterile, arrogant magnanimity! He is a thoroughly just man, but he is a man who never forgives a weakness, because none ever beset him,--none, at least, of which he is conscious. He---- Oh, yes----,"--the girl's voice grows hoarse, she catches her breath and goes on with increasing volubility,--"I have no doubt that he would spring into the water at any moment to save the life, at the risk of his own, of any worthless wretch, but as soon as he brought him to land he would turn his back upon him and march away with his head proudly erect, without even casting a look upon the man he had rescued, let alone giving him a kind word. Witness his behaviour towards me. I refer to it expressly that we may correct once for all your painful and humiliating misapprehension. He did, as you know, do me a service in Bayreuth which I could not have expected of any one else. Granted. But he has never forgiven me for being betrothed for six or eight weeks to Lord Langley. Good heavens! it was a mistake of mine, a stupidity, the result of vanity and ambition on my part. But it was nothing more; and yet it was enough to cause--to cause Herr von Sydow to banish me from grace forever. This is your wonderful Goswyn. It is a matter of perfect indifference to me: I take not the slightest interest in him, thank God! If I had been interested in him I might have fretted myself nearly to death; but, as it is, I am merely vexed that I should have overrated him,--that is all."

Her grandmother listened in amazement. She had never before seen Erika so excited, had never imagined that her voice was capable of such intonations. At times it was the voice of a stubborn, angry child, and anon that of a proud, passionate woman.

"Why, Erika!" she exclaimed when the girl paused, "this is all nonsense,--cleverly-invented nonsense, the worst of all kinds. There is not one word of truth in it. I know that he adores you just as he always did."

"You have a lively imagination," Erika said, sarcastically. "It is remarkable that Goswyn has had nothing to say about his adoration all this time."

"My dear child," replied her grandmother, "that is quite another thing. In certain respects Goswyn is petty: I have always told you so. His poverty and your wealth have always been of too much consequence in his eyes. It is a folly which may have cost him the happiness of his life. Say what you will, I am convinced that his poverty alone has prevented him from renewing his suit."

"Indeed!" said Erika, tossing her head disdainfully. "Well, his poverty is at an end!"

"Oh, Erika, with your wonderful sensibility you ought to understand that a man like Goswyn cannot bring himself all in a moment to profit by his brother's death,--a death, too, so terrible in its attendant circumstances."

Erika was silent for a minute; her lips quivered; then she said, in a low tone, "True, grandmother; it would be odious of him to renew his suit instantly; but, you see, if such a misfortune as has befallen him had happened to me, I should long to carry my pain to those who were nearest my heart. You are ready to return to Berlin for his sake. If all that you fancy were true, he would have come to Venice: he could easily have obtained a leave. And now we have done with this subject once for all. Fortunately, I do not care for him in the least,--not in the least.

I tell you all this only that you may not request me to ride posthaste with you to Berlin, that the world there, already so predisposed in my favour, may say, 'She is running after Goswyn von Sydow, now that he has inherited the family estates.'"

The grandmother laid her hands on Erika's shoulders, then drew the proud young head towards her, and kissed her on the forehead. At that moment Lüdecke, the indispensable, entered and presented a visiting-card.

"Paul von Lozoncyi," Countess Lenzdorff read from the card, and then dropped it upon the salver again. "Are you in the mood to receive strangers?"

"Yes. Why not?" asked Erika.

Shortly afterwards Lozoncyi entered Erika's pretty little boudoir, now illuminated by a couple of shaded lamps.

Erika received him most amiably. The old Countess, on the other hand, was at first rather formal in her manner towards him. She was not accustomed to have young men delay so long in taking advantage of an invitation extended by herself to visit her. But before Lozoncyi had been five minutes in the room her displeasure melted like snow in sunshine.

Without the slightest attempt to excuse his dilatoriness, the artist was at pains to impress his hostesses with his delight in having at last found the way to them. "How charming!" he said, looking around the room and rubbing his slender hands, after his characteristic fashion. "One never would dream that this was a hotel."

"This is my grand-daughter's sanctum," said the old Countess. "My own reception-room is several shades barer."

"Indeed? Ah, I know it does not become me, the first time I am permitted to enjoy this privilege, to stare about at your treasures like the private agent of some dealer in antiquities, but we artists delight in the pride of the eye. It is remarkable how well you have suited the frame to the picture. Look, your Excellency."

He drew the old lady's attention to the picture formed at that moment by her grand-daughter, who was sitting in a negligent attitude in a high-backed antique chair, the gilt leather covering of which made a charming background for her auburn hair.

"It is enchanting, the white figure against the golden gleam of the leather, and with that vase of jonquils beside it. If one could only perpetuate it!" He sighed.

"You will embarrass the child," the grandmother admonished him, although in her heart she was delighted. "Instead of turning the Countess Erika's head, tell us why you have been so long finding your way hither."

He raised his eyes, looked her full in the face, and then dropped them again, as he said, in a low tone, "Rather ask me why I have come at all."

"No, I ask you expressly why you did not come before," the old lady persisted, laughing.

"Why?" He hesitated a moment, and then replied, calmly, "Because I have no wish to be the last among the Countess Erika's adorers to drag her triumphal car. Now you know. Such plain questions provoke plain answers." He looked at the old lady as he spoke, to see if he had gone too far. No, he was one of those favoured individuals to whom thrice as much is forgiven as to other men. Something in the intonation of his gentle, cordial voice, his frank yet melancholy glance, and especially his smile, his charming insinuating smile, instantly prepossessed people in his favour. It was the same smile with which as a lad of seventeen he had beguiled little Erika's tender heart, the merry, careless smile which he must have inherited from an amiable, light-hearted mother.

The old lady only laughed at his confession, and then asked, mockingly, "And now you are content to be the very last, etc., etc.?"

He shook his head: "Now it has occurred to me that perhaps I can offer the Countess Erika a small pleasure which none other among her adorers can give her, and I come to ask if she will give me leave to do so."

Erika was silent. Countess Lenzdorff said, "Herr von Lozoncyi, you speak in riddles."

Lozoncyi turned from one to the other of the ladies with a look calculated to go directly to their hearts, and then, addressing the younger one, said, "You perhaps remember that I am in your debt, Countess Erika?"

"Yes; I once lent you five guilders."

"Five guilders," he repeated. "It seems a trifle; but then it was much for me. Without those five

guilders I should probably never have been able to reach my aunt Illona in Munich, and I might have starved in a ditch. You see that I owe you much; and in consideration of this fact I have come to ask if you will allow me to paint your portrait."

Erika gazed at him blankly.

"For five guilders?" exclaimed the old Countess, with comical emphasis. Every one knew how difficult it was to persuade Lozoncyi to paint a portrait, and what a fabulous price he asked when induced to do so.

"I entreat you not to refuse me, Countess Erika," he begged, with clasped hands.

"I advise you to accept the offer," said her grandmother: "it will hardly be made a second time."

"You shall not be subjected to the slightest inconvenience," he went on to Erika, "except that of being bored for a few hours. I know that you do not, as a rule, like my pictures, and therefore I promise you that I will burn this one if it does not please you, even though I should consider it a masterpiece. But should I succeed in pleasing you, the picture may serve to remind you sometimes of a poor fellow who----"

The sentence was cut short by the entrance of several visitors, and much talk and laughter ensued.

Lozoncyi stayed until all the rest had gone.

"When shall I have the first sitting?" he asked.

"Whenever you please," Erika made reply.

"To-morrow?"

"To-morrow? No; to-morrow will not do; but the day after to-morrow, in the forenoon, if you like."

His eyes sparkled. "About eleven?"

She assented.

"There goes another man whose head you have turned, Erika," remarked the old Countess, as the door closed behind the artist. She laughed as she said it. Good heavens! what did it matter?

At the appointed time Lüdecke carried down to the gondola the portmanteau containing the gown in which Lozoncyi had seen Erika at Frau von Neerwinden's, and in which he had wished to immortalize her. The two ladies were not accompanied even by a maid, Erika declaring that she needed no help in arranging her toilette for the portrait.

The sky was cloudless, the air warm but not oppressive. The gondoliers rowed merrily and quickly.

Lozoncyi's studio was back of the Rialto, on one of the narrower water-ways to the left of the Grand Canal. In about a quarter of an hour the gondola stopped before a light-green door with an iron lion's head in the centre of it. One of the gondoliers knocked with the ring depending from the lion's mouth.

Lozoncyi himself opened the door. He wore a faded linen blouse, and appeared greatly elated. "To the very last moment I was afraid of an excuse, and here you are, only a quarter of an hour late!" he cried, in a tone of cordial welcome; then, taking the portmanteau from the attendant gondolier, he called loudly, "Lucrezia! Lucrezia!" "You must excuse me, ladies," he said: "my house does not boast electric bells."

From a passage at the head of the stone staircase there appeared an old Venetian woman, with large earrings in her ears, and thick waving gray hair brushed back from her temples and coiled in a knot at the back of her head, the antique style of which suited admirably her regular classic features. She smiled a welcome to the ladies, thereby displaying a double row of dazzling white teeth, while Lozoncyi in fluent Italian ordered her to take the portmanteau to the dressing-room and unpack it.

Along the narrow passage leading directly through the house from the water, they walked into the garden, a tangle of luxuriant growth. The bushes were already clothed in tender green, and here and there through the young leaves could be seen a spray of white hawthorn.

"Oh, how charming!" exclaimed Erika.

"Is it not?" said the painter. "I came here for the sake of the garden. A spot of earth is so precious in this watery Venice."

"Do not forget your Lucrezia: her beauty exceeds that of your garden," the old Countess remarked.

"My old factotum? Yes, she has a fine face, magnificent features. I cannot endure anything ugly about me. But did you notice how short and stout she is?" He asked the question with so genuine an air of annoyance that the old Countess could not help laughing.

"What of that? Is it a crime in your eyes?"

"No," he said, thoughtfully, "but it makes her useless for artistic purposes. I tried to pose her the other day,--in vain. She might do for Juliet's nurse, or for a modern fortune-teller, but that is not my line. I find plenty of handsome faces among these Venetians, and fine shoulders, too, but nothing more. Their bodies are too long, their legs too short; there are no sweeping lines, no grace of movement. And when one finds a model whose limbs are long enough, she is like a stork. I have a deal of trouble in this respect. When I was painting 'Spring,'--the picture that Countess Erika does not like,--I was in despair because I could find no model for my female figure. Then one day on the Rialto I found a person, no longer young, rouged, but magnificently formed,--as tall as Countess Erika, only not----"

He broke off and grew very red. A moment afterwards, however, he had forgotten his embarrassment in a new inspiration. At the door of the studio Erika lifted her arm to pluck a spray of wistaria.

"Stay just as you are, for one instant, Countess!" he cried, and, rushing into his studio, he returned instantly with a sketch-book and a basket-chair. The latter he placed in the shade for the old Countess, and then began to sketch rapidly.

"Only look at that curve!" he exclaimed to the grandmother. "It is music! And the line of the hips!"

His manner of unceasingly dwelling upon the beauty or ugliness of the human body, the exact analysis which he was perpetually making of its structure, in connection with his profession, was at times offensive. But neither of the ladies took exception to it, Erika partly from inexperience and partly from flattered vanity, the old Countess because her sensitiveness in this respect had become dulled of late, and also because Lozoncyi expressed himself in so naïve a fashion that he seemed at the worst to be merely guilty of a breach of good taste. One had to know him very intimately to discover what a profound impression upon his inmost nature this perpetual study of the human figure had produced.

"How thoroughly you understand how to dress yourself!" he exclaimed, continuing to look fixedly at the girl, who wore a gown of some white woollen stuff, with a large straw hat trimmed with heavy old Venetian lace.

"I have half a mind to paint you thus, instead of in evening dress," he murmured. "But no; your portrait should be in full dress. Only, be generous; we will begin the portrait to-morrow, give me an hour for myself to-day: I want to make a water-colour sketch of you. Does it tire you too much to stretch your arm out so far?"

"A woman does not grow tired when she is conscious of being admired," the old Countess declared; "but the situation is less entertaining for me. Have you not some book to give me?"

Erika grew weary at last, in spite of the admiration lavished upon her by Lozoncyi while he sketched. The painter improvised a lunch for his guests beneath a mulberry-tree, upon a little rickety table. It was excellently prepared and delicately served, and he enjoyed seeing the ladies do ample justice to it. Lucrezia had just served the coffee, and was standing with a smiling face and arms akimbo, listening to the old Countess's praise of her skill in cookery, when there came a knock at the door.

"Confound it!" muttered Lozoncyi, "not a visitor, I trust."

It was no visitor, but a letter brought by Lozoncyi's gondolier, a handsome dark-skinned lad in a sailor dress, with a red scarf about his waist. Involuntarily Erika glanced at the letter. The address was in a feminine hand; the post-mark was Paris.

Lozoncyi gave an impatient shrug at sight of the handwriting; then, crushing the letter in his hand, he slipped it unopened into his pocket. "Will you not look into my workshop?" he asked the ladies.

"I was just about to ask you to show us your studio," replied the old Countess. "I am curious with regard to your 'Bad Dreams.'"

"Yes,"--he shivered,--"'bad dreams,'--that is the word!"

The atelier, which they entered from the garden by a glass door, was an unusually high and spacious apartment, but very plainly furnished, and in dusty confusion,--the workshop of a very

nervous artist, who can endure no 'clearing up,' who cannot do without the rubbish of his art. Erika's gaze was instantly attracted by a remarkable and horrible picture.

A single figure in a close, clinging garment of undecided hue, the head thrust forward, the arms stretched out, the whole form expressing yearning, torturing desire, was groping its way towards a swamp above which hovered a will-o'-the-wisp. Above in the dark heavens gleamed the pure light of the stars. It was all a marvel of tone and expression,--the sad harmony of colour, the star-lit sky, the dreary swamp, and above all the figure, its every feature, every fingertip, every fold even of its garment, expressing desire.

"What did you mean it to represent?" asked the old Countess.

"Can you not guess?"

No, she could not guess; but Erika instantly exclaimed, "Blind Love!"

He looked at her more curiously than he had done hitherto, and then asked, "How did you know?"

"I see how the figure is creeping towards the will-o'-the-wisp, not heeding the stars sparkling above it. Look how it is sinking into the swamp, grandmother. It is horrible!"

"Blind Love," her grandmother repeated, thoughtfully. The subject did not appeal to her.

"Yes," said Lozoncyi, "blind love,--the misery of debasing passion." With a bitter smile he added, "Well, the only comfort is that one can sometimes attain to the will-o'-the-wisp, though he can never reach the stars, however he may gaze up at them."

"No," Erika exclaimed, indignantly, "that is no comfort. Rather--a thousand times rather--reach up in vain for the stars, and expand and grow in longing for the unattainable, than stoop to a happiness to be found only in a swamp!"

He made an inclination towards her, and said, half aloud, "What you say is very beautiful; but you do not understand."

"Well, you certainly have turned that poor fellow's head," Countess Lenzdorff remarked, leaning back comfortably among the cushions of the gondola as she and Erika were being rowed home. "It will do him no harm: on the contrary, it is good for such young artists, too apt to be self-indulgent, to reach after the unattainable; it enlarges their minds." Then after a while she went on: "I wonder whom the letter that so provoked him was from. Perhaps from that blonde who was with him at Bayreuth."

Erika did not reply; she looked down at a spray of wistaria he had plucked for her as she took leave of him. Suddenly she started: a large black caterpillar crept out from among the fragrant blossoms. With a little cry of disgust she flung the spray into the water.

At the same time Lozoncyi was standing in his studio, looking at the water-colour sketch he had made of Erika.

"A glorious creature," he muttered to himself; "glorious! I do not remember ever to have seen anything more beautiful, and, with all her distinction, and that pallor too, thoroughly healthy, fully developed, nothing maimed or deformed about her. She must be at least twenty-four. How is it that she is not married? Some unhappy love-affair? Hardly. She seems entirely fancy free, as if she had never in her life cared for a lover. How proudly she carries her head! Her kind is entirely unknown to me. Well, there are always women enough to do the dirty work of life; some there must be to guard the Holy Grail." He turned to the door of the studio that led out into the garden. A light vapour was rising from the earth, enveloping the blossoms in mist. He smiled strangely and not very pleasantly. "The spring cares not a whit for the Holy Grail. It goes on its way; it goes on its way."

At first she had been repelled by him; then he had flattered her vanity; by and by he interested her, but from the very beginning he had excited her imagination as no other man had ever done. And this in spite of the fact that his views of life, which he scarcely concealed, aroused within her painful indignation. She was quite aware that there were dark recesses in his soul which she might not explore, and that, courteous and faultless as was his behaviour towards women like her grandmother and herself, he respected them as curious specimens of the sex, interesting, because not often encountered. Upon all this she pondered, sick at heart, as she turned her head to and fro upon her pillow, so many nights, seeking the refreshment of sleep.

The outcome of it was a strange, pathetic, foolishly ambitious project. She set herself the task of converting him to nobler views of life.

How many unfortunates have been ruined in their zeal for conversion!

That Erika should unconsciously play with fire was not astonishing, but that her grandmother should look on in smiling indifference while her grand-daughter was thus occupied was amazing.

There are learned fanatics who in their determination to establish some theory of their own lavish all their powers in an effort to elaborate it, shutting their eyes to any light which may steal in upon them, while thus engaged, from an opposite quarter.

At first the portrait progressed with great rapidity; but now weeks had gone by, and it seemed as if Lozoncyi were unable to finish it.

It was life-size, a three-fourths figure, and, in order not to fatigue Erika, she was taken sitting in an antique chair, her lap heaped with pale-lilac wistaria blossoms. There was no straining for effect, not a trace of conventionality.

"Take the position that you find most comfortable," he had instructed his beautiful model. "You can take none that will not be lovely."

The long spring days glided slowly by. When the two ladies first went to Lozoncyi's studio the gray stone of the garden wall was easily seen behind the vines and bushes; now the green alone showed everywhere,--the roses were in bloom, and the hawthorn had nearly faded.

The studio, too, was changed. When they first came, it had been absolutely bare of all decoration; now when they came, which was three or four times a week, it was filled with the loveliest flowers.

When they left he heaped up all of these that had not been touched by the heat in their gondola, which sometimes returned alone to the Hotel Britannia, laden with the flowers, while Lozoncyi escorted his guests to their home by some picturesque roundabout way.

It was a great pleasure to walk with him. No one knew as he did how to call attention to some artistic effect, some bit of colour that might have easily escaped one less sensitive to picturesque detail.

"Good heavens!" said the old Countess, "I have been through these alleys a hundred times, but you make me feel as if I never had been here before. You have a special gift for teaching one the beauty of life."

"Indeed? Have I?" he murmured. "It is a gift, then, for teaching what I cannot learn myself."

By degrees Erika came to see with his eyes, and sometimes more quickly than he was wont to do. She was especially pleased when she could first call his attention to some artistic effect that had escaped him, and he always exaggerated the value of these discoveries of hers, assuring her that he had never seen a woman with so keen a sense of the beautiful, and rallying her upon her artistic skill. Once when the old Countess asked what they were talking about, Lozoncyi replied, "The Countess Erika and I are teaching each other to find life beautiful." And once he turned to Erika and said, sadly, "It is a pity that it must all come to an end so soon."

All the sentences abruptly broken off which just touched the brink of a declaration of love, but were never really such, Erika naturally interpreted in one way: "He loves me, but dares not venture to hope for a return of his affection: he is convinced that I am too far above him."

At first she was proud of having inspired a man so rare, so gifted, so flattered, with so profound a sentiment; then----

"To what can this lead?"

For the hundredth time Lozoncyi asked himself this question.

"To what can this lead?"

He was standing in his studio before Erika's unfinished portrait--unfinished!

"It must be finished at the next sitting. For the last ten days I have simply put off its completion from one sitting to the next, and all because I cannot tell how I can endure seeing her no more. And, yet, to what can it all lead?"

He was very pale, and the moisture stood upon his forehead. He would have turned away from the portrait, but was drawn towards it as by a spell. "A glorious creature!" he murmured; "and not only beautiful, but absolutely unique. It raises a man's moral standard to be with such a creature. H'm! before I knew her I was not aware that I had a moral standard." He laughed

bitterly, and continued to gaze at the picture. "She is beautiful!" he muttered between his teeth. "It is folly for a being like her to be so beautiful,--a waste,--a contradiction of nature!" He stamped his foot, vexed that any but the purest thoughts should intrude upon his admiration of Erika. "A strange creature! What eyes!--so clear, so deep, so penetrating!" He could think of nothing save of her; his nerves thrilled with passion for her.

Strive as he might, his artist imagination could not force itself from the contemplation of her beauty.

He loved her; he had known that for some time. But hitherto his love for her had been a tender, noble sentiment, something of which he had not supposed himself capable, something that exalted him in his own estimation. He had been refreshed, revived, by her presence, by intercourse with her. But that was past.

"The charm of love is the dream that precedes it," he murmured. The dream was over: what now?

Then an insane idea occurred to him: "She is unlike all others: there is a magnanimous, exaggerated strain in her composition, which exalts her above all pettiness. If she loved me, could she ever have been induced to marry me?"

He shivered. "No! no! it is worse than folly to imagine it. In spite of all her enthusiasm, in spite of her immense power of compassion, she is too much the Countess to ever dream of such a possibility."

His lips were dry; an iron hand seemed clutching his throat. He turned his back to the picture and went out into the garden. The skies were covered with gray clouds: the flowers drooped; there was a distant mutter of thunder.

"Yet if it could be!" he murmured.

CHAPTER XXII.

Erika was sitting by the window in her boudoir. Although outside the night had not yet fallen upon the earth, it was too dark to read. Her window looked out upon the hotel-garden,--which at this season of the year was like one huge bed of roses intersected by a narrow gravel path. The sweet breath of the roses was wafted in at the window, but with it there mingled always the sickening odour of the lagoon.

A couple of distant clocks were striking the hour, and the water was lapping the feet of the old palaces.

Lost in thought the girl sat there. The mission in life for which she had so yearned was revealed to her in the noblest, most attractive form.

She could not doubt that Lozoncyi loved her. Mistrustful as she usually was concerning the sentiments she was wont to arouse, there could be no uncertainty in this case.

The future lay before her bright and alluring. How could she have despaired in this wonderful life of ours? She seemed to have always known that she was foreordained for some special service.

Why had he never yet made a direct confession of his sentiments? Her pride replied to this question, "He dare not venture."

It was for her to take one step to meet him. Reserved as she was, the mere thought of so doing sent the blood to her cheeks, but she took herself sternly to task, admonishing herself that cowardice on her part would be paltry in the extreme.

It would surely be possible to allow him to read her heart, without any indelicate frankness on her part.

Thus far her thoughts had led her, when Marianne brought her a card: "Herr von Lozoncyi."

"Did you tell him I was at home?"

"No; I said I would see. When her Excellency is away I never say anything decided," replied

the maid.

The old Countess had gone out a little while before, to pay a short visit in the neighbourhood; Lüdecke had accompanied her.

Erika hesitated a moment, then turned up the electric light and told Marianne to show in the visitor. Immediately afterwards he entered, and she arose to receive him. She was startled as she looked at his face, it was so pale and wan.

"Are you ill?" she exclaimed; "or have you come to tell us of some misfortune that has befallen you?" The sympathy expressed in her tone agitated him still further.

"Neither is the case," he replied, trying to assume an easy air. "I came only to----" There he paused. Why had he come? The thought that she might entertain a warmer sentiment for him--a thought that had occurred to him to-day for the first time--would not be banished. He had dragged the sweet, racking uncertainty about with him for an hour through the loneliest streets of Venice, without being able to rid himself of it. He would see her,--would have certainty; and then----

Ah, he could not gain that certainty: he could only long for her.

He had invented some explanation of his visit, but he could not remember it; instead he said, "You are very kind to receive me in Countess Lenzdorff's absence, and I will show my appreciation of your kindness by making my visit a short one."

"On the contrary," she rejoined, "I hope you will spend the evening with us. My grandmother will be here in a few minutes, and will be very glad to find you here."

How soft and sweet her voice was! Could it be--could it be----?

His agitation became almost intolerable. He knew that he ought not to stay, but he could not bring himself to leave.

The evening minstrels of Venice were beginning their rounds, and in the distance they sang "*Io son felice--t'attendo in ciel!*"

"Bring your present expression to the studio tomorrow!" Lozoncyi said, hoarsely: "I will transfer it to the canvas as well as I can, in memory of the noblest creature I have ever met. You are coming to-morrow?"

"Certainly. The portrait is almost finished, is it not?"

"Yes; I think to-morrow will be the last sitting; and then----"

"And then----?" she repeated.

"Then it will all be over!"

There was a pause. He turned his head aside. Suddenly a low sweet voice, that went directly to his heart, said, softly, "Then you will wish to know nothing more of me!"

He started as if from an electric shock; the room swam before his eyes, when----the door opened, the Countess Mühlberg appeared, and Lozoncyi arose to take leave, thanking Heaven for this unexpected interruption.

"Will you not wait until my grandmother returns?" Erika asked.

"Unfortunately, it is impossible."

"Adieu, then. To-morrow at eleven," she called after him. He made no reply.

It lightened and thundered all through the night, but scarcely a drop of rain fell; the air the next morning was as sultry as it had been on the previous day.

When Erika, with her grandmother, entered Lozoncyi's garden punctually at eleven o'clock, everything there looked withered and drooping. Lozoncyi himself was pale; his motions had lost their wonted elasticity, and his face was grave. When the old Countess asked him if he were ill, he ascribed his condition to the sirocco.

Erika noticed that there were no fresh flowers in the studio: he had taken no pains to decorate it for his guests, and she was conscious of a foreboding of misfortune.

"I must subject you to some fatigue to-day, I fear, that the picture may at last be finished," he said, speaking very quickly. "You must have patience this last time. I should not like to give you a picture that was not as good as I knew how to make it."

"You have already bestowed too much of your valuable time upon the Countess Erika," the old

Countess said, kindly.

"Indeed? do you think so?" he murmured, with a bitterness he had never displayed before. "Do you think we artists should not be allowed to devote so much time to enjoyment? 'Tis true," he added, in an undertone, "that we have to pay for it."

Erika looked at him in startled wonder: his words were perfectly incomprehensible to her, but the expression of his pale face was one of such anguish that her compassion, always too easily aroused, increased momentarily.

As usual, she repaired to the adjoining room to change her dress with Lucrezia's assistance. When she returned to the studio Lozoncyi was standing with his back to the chimney-piece, his hands in the pockets of his jacket, while her grandmother, sitting opposite him in her favourite chair, was asking him, "What is the matter with you, Lozoncyi? Have you lost money in the stock market?"

He shook his head. "No," he said, trying to answer the question in the same jesting tone as that in which it had been asked.

"Then what is wrong? Confide in me."

He cleared his throat. "In fact, I----" he began.

Then, perceiving Erika, "Ah, ready so soon?" he cried. "Let us go to work."

She could not find the pose immediately: he was obliged to move her right arm. His hand was as hot as if burning with fever, and he had scarcely touched the girl's arm with it when he withdrew it hastily.

He went to the easel, gazed long and with half-closed eyes at his model, then turned and began to paint.

Usually there was a constant flow of conversation between Erika and himself. To-day he spoke not a word; perfect silence reigned in the studio; the turning of the leaves of the novel which the old Countess was reading and the twittering of the birds in the garden outside, were audible; one could even hear now and then the sweep of the brush upon the canvas.

Thus an hour passed. Then, stepping back a few paces from the picture, he fixed his eyes upon Erika, added a few touches with his brush, and looked from her to the portrait.

"Look at it yourself," he said, with a hard emphasis on each syllable. "So far as I can finish it, it is done. I cannot improve it!"

Both ladies went and stood before it. "I do not know whether it is like," said Erika, "but it certainly is a masterpiece."

"It is magnificent!" exclaimed her grandmother. "You have flattered the child, and have done it most delicately,--*en homme d'esprit*."

"Flattered!" he cried. "Hardly! I have tried to produce the expression which not every one can see in the face. That is the only merit of my poor performance: otherwise it is a daub. I have never seemed to myself so poor a painter as when at work upon this picture." As he spoke he tossed the entire sheaf of brushes which he held in his hand into the chimney place.

"What are you about?" exclaimed the old Countess. "You are in a very odd mood to-day."

"Oh, the brushes were worn out," he replied. "I could not have painted another picture with them."

The blood mounted to Erika's cheek with gratification. She understood him. His agitation and sorrow did not disquiet her now, so convinced was she that it was in her power to dispel them by a single word.

"You must leave the picture with me for a time. When it is dry I will varnish it and send it to you: I must ask you, however, to what address?"

"I hope we shall still continue to see you," the old Countess replied. "I assure you that I entertain a sincere friendship for you. The visits to your studio, although my part in them has been a secondary one, have come to be a pleasant habit, which I shall find it hard to discontinue. We shall always be glad to welcome you wherever we are."

Erika, meanwhile, had approached the painter. "I do not know how to thank you," she said.

"I have done nothing for which thanks are due," he rejoined. "The thanks should come from me. All I ask of you is to bestow a thought now and then upon the poor painter who has enjoyed the sight of you for so long. No, there is one thing more. You will allow me to make a copy of the picture for myself?"

The grandmother interposed: "Go change your dress, Erika."

And Lozoncyi asked, "Will you take your portmanteau with you, or shall I send it to you?"

Erika went into the next room. Hurriedly, impatiently, she took off the white gown and put on her street dress. "Stuff everything into the portmanteau," she ordered Lucrezia, slipping a gold coin into the servant's hand.

She was in a strange mood: she felt her heart throb up in her throat. "Shall I have one moment in which to speak to him alone?" she asked herself.

"Ready? You have been quick," her grandmother said when she re-entered the studio. "Have you summoned our gondola, Lozoncyi?"

"Yes, Countess. I wonder it is not here. Meanwhile, I must cut the roses in my garden for you. I cannot tell for whom they will bloom when you come no longer."

He went out into the garden. For one moment Erika hesitated; then she followed him. The skies were one uniform gray; every branch and blossom drooped wearily. The roses which Lozoncyi tried to cut for Erika fell to pieces beneath his touch, strewing the earth with pink and white petals.

Lozoncyi did not look around, but cut unmercifully, with a large pair of garden scissors. Before he knew it, Erika stood beside him. "I may be overbold," she half whispered, lightly touching his arm, "but I cannot help feeling that I have a right to know your troubles. Is anything distressing you?"

He looked at her and tried to smile. "To say farewell distresses me, Countess, as you must be aware."

She was overpowered by timidity, but her compassion gave her courage. She collected herself: they must understand each other. "If to say farewell really distresses you, I--I cannot see why it should be said," she whispered. The tears stood in her eyes, and he----? He was ashy pale, and the roses dropped from his hands.

At this moment the bell rang loudly, and a woman's voice asked, in French with a strong Prussian accent, "Does the artist, Paul Lozoncyi, live here?"

Erika was startled. Where had she heard that voice before? Out into the drooping garden came a tall, well-formed woman, with regular features, fair, slightly rouged, every fold of her dress, every curl of her fair hair,--yes, even the perfume which breathed about her,--betraying her cult of physical perfection. A scarlet veil was drawn tightly about her face: otherwise her dress was simple and becoming.

Erika recognized her instantly, and guessed the truth. For a moment the garden swam before her eyes: she was afraid she should fall. Meanwhile, the new-comer laid a very shapely and well-gloved hand upon the artist's arm, and cried, "*Une surprise--hein, mon bébé! Tu ne t'y attendais pas--dis?*"

"No," he replied, sharply.

She frowned, and, challenging Erika with a look, she said, "Have the kindness to introduce me."

He cleared his throat, and then, sharp and hard as the blow of an axe, the words fell from his lips, "My wife."

Erika had recovered her self-possession. She had advanced sufficiently in knowledge of the world since Bayreuth to know that no one, not even Frau Lozoncyi, could expect her to be cordial. She contented herself with acknowledging Lozoncyi's introduction by a slight inclination.

Meanwhile, the old Countess appeared from the studio to see what was going on. She took no pains to conceal her astonishment, and when Lozoncyi presented his wife her inclination was, if possible, colder and haughtier than Erika's had been, as she scanned the stranger through her eye-glass. Lozoncyi's servant announced the gondola.

Erika offered her hand to Lozoncyi and had the courage to smile.

The old lady also held out her hand to him, but did not smile. Her manner was very cool as she said, "Thank you for all the kindness you have shown us. I had hoped you would dine with us to-night; but you will not wish this first day to leave--to leave Frau von Lozoncyi."

The gondola pushed off. The water gurgled beneath the first stroke of the oar, and the wood creaked slightly. For an instant the artist stood upon his threshold, looking after Erika; then he went into the house, and the light-green door which she knew so well closed behind him.

How did she feel? She had no time to think of that. All her strength was expended in concealing her agitation. She arranged her dress, and remarked that the water was unusually

muddy. In fact, it had an opaque greenish hue. The old Countess did not notice it.

"I never suspected that he was married!" she exclaimed. "He should have told us. A man has no right to conceal such a fact."

And Erika replied, with an air of easy indifference that surprised even herself, "I suppose, grandmother, he did not imagine that the circumstance could possess the slightest interest for us."

CHAPTER XXIII.

In addition to many trying and strange characteristics possessed by Erika, Providence had bestowed upon her one which at this time stood her in stead. Upon any severe agitating experience a few hours of cool, hard self-consciousness were sure to ensue,--hours in which she was perfectly able to appear in the world with dry eyes, and not even the keenest observer could perceive any change in her, save that her laugh was perhaps more frequent and more silvery.

This condition of mind was far from being an agreeable one: moreover, the reaction afterwards was terrible: nevertheless, thanks to this moral paralysis, Erika was able in critical moments to preserve appearances.

The day on which, as she supposed, her happiness, her faith, the entire purpose of her life, lay in ruins about her, was occupied with social duties of every description. She performed them all,--an afternoon tea, with lawn-tennis, a dinner, and at last a supper with music at the Austrian Consul's.

And even when the old Countess on their way home from the Consul's proposed that they should look in at Frau von Neerwinden's, upon whom they had not called since the memorable evening when Minona read, Erika declared herself quite willing to do so. Perhaps this was because she had a secret hope of meeting Lozoncyi there; for she longed to see him, to show him how entirely he had been mistaken if he had supposed----

Ah! what pretexts we invent to deceive ourselves as to the cowardly impulses of our desires!

But he was not at Frau von Neerwinden's, where the old Countess found herself so well entertained, however, that she passed an hour, discussing the latest Venetian scandal, in which Erika took no interest. She strolled away from the group of elderly guests and through the open glass doors leading out upon a balcony above the water, where she seemed quite forgotten by those within the apartment.

Beneath her on the dark surface of the lagoon the gondolas were crowding from all quarters around a bark whence came music and song. They glided past over the black water, a broad stream of humanity attracted as by a magnetic needle, lured by a voice. Nearer and nearer came the song, until it swept past beneath Erika's balcony:

"Ninon, Ninon, que fais-tu de la vie,
Toi, qui n'as pas d'amour?"

And above her glimmered the stars, myriads of worlds, sparkling, and shining down disdainfully upon wretched humanity writhing and striving in its efforts to attain paltry ends, so vastly important in its own estimation.

Erika lay awake all night long, oppressed by a terrible burden,--not grief for a happiness of which she had dreamed and which had proved to be impossible, but something infinitely harder to be borne by a person of her temperament, the sense of disgrace.

So long as she had been firmly convinced that he loved her, far from resenting the unconventional expression of his admiration, she had taken pleasure in it. But now the whole matter bore another aspect in her eyes. She remembered with painful distinctness the superficial, frivolous theories of life which he had advanced upon their first acquaintance. Love! yes, he might perhaps have experienced what he designated thus, but at the thought her cheeks burned. She had pleased him, as hundreds before her had done, and in the full consciousness of the ties of marriage by which he was bound he had allowed himself to make love to her as he

would have done to any common flirt. When at last, in entire faith in the sincerity--yes, in the sacredness--of his feeling for her, she had generously laid bare her heart before him, he had been simply terrified by the revelation.

"He is probably laughing at me now," she said to herself, trembling in every limb. Then, with infinite bitterness, she added, "No; he is probably reproaching himself, and wondering at my folly."

It was enough to drive her insane. She buried her burning face in her pillow, and groaned aloud.

She shed not a tear throughout the night, and she appeared punctually as usual at the breakfast-table, but in the midst of the pleasant little meal, which was always taken in her grandmother's boudoir, she was overcome by an intense weariness; she longed to flee to some dark corner where no one could find her and there let the tears flow freely.

The meal was, however, unusually prolonged. The old Countess, who had quite forgotten her vexation at Lozoncyi's concealment of his marriage, and who had been vastly entertained the previous evening at Frau von Neerwinden's, was in an excellent humour, and was full of conversation, in which she showed herself both amusing and witty.

Erika forced herself to laugh and to seem gay, when, just as she felt unable to endure the situation for another moment, Lüdecke appeared with a note for her. It had come, he informed her, the day before, shortly after the ladies had gone out to dinner, and he begged to be forgiven for having forgotten to deliver it.

"Old donkey!" the Countess Lenzdorff murmured. Erika opened the note with trembling hands. It came from Fräulein Horst, the poor music-teacher. She wrote that she had been worse for a couple of days, and had made up her mind to go home. With pathetic gratitude and sincere admiration she desired to take leave of Erika thus in writing, since her weak condition would not allow her to call upon her.

Really distressed, and a little ashamed of having of late somewhat neglected the poor creature, Erika had a gondola called, and went immediately to the Pension Weber. When she asked in the hall of the establishment for Fräulein Horst, the dismay painted on every face at once revealed to her the truth: the poor music-teacher had passed away.

She asked to be taken to the room where the dead woman lay; and as Attilio, the hotel waiter, conducted her thither, he told how there had been for a long time no hope of the invalid's recovery; the day before yesterday the last symptom had appeared,--a restless longing for change,--for travel; her departure had been fixed for this evening; they had all hoped so that she would get off; but she had died here: they had found her dead in bed this very morning, her candle burnt down into the socket, and her open book on her bed. Oh, yes, it was very sad to die so, away from home, and it was very unpleasant for the establishment. Eccellenza had no idea of the injury it was to the Pension! The Signor Baron in the first story had declared that he would not spend another night there.

As Attilio finished, he unlocked the room where the body lay, and ushered in Erika. She motioned to him to leave her alone.

The room was darkened. Erika drew aside the curtains a little. There was a crucifix among the medicine-bottles on the table beside the bed, and a book, open apparently at the place where the dead woman had been last reading. It was a German translation of 'Romeo and Juliet:' it was open at the balcony scene, 'It is the nightingale, and not the lark----'

Erika kneeled down at the bedside, buried her face in the coverlet, and wept bitterly. When Attilio came to remind her gently not to stay long, she arose and followed him with bowed head from the room.

As she was going down the stairs, she heard a harsh grating voice with a slight Polish accent call, "Sophy, Sophy, are you ready?" and then from the end of the corridor two figures appeared, one a short, thick-set woman heavily laden with a bundle of shawls, a travelling-bag, and several umbrellas, and looking up at a man who walked beside her, his hands in the pockets of his plaid jacket, his eye-glass in his eye, allowing himself with much condescension to be adored. They were Strachinsky and his second wife.

"II signore Barone," murmured Attilio.

Strachinsky glanced towards Erika: he frowned and looked away. She was glad that he did so, for in her dejected condition she could hardly have brought herself to speak to the couple. Her whole soul was filled with a desire to creep away to some quiet spot where she might find relief in tears.

She sent away her gondola, and hurried through the narrow streets to the Piazza San Zacharie. There she took refuge in the church of the same name.

It was empty: not even a tourist was present to gaze upon the beauty of the famous

Gianbellini.

She crouched down in the darkest corner upon the hard stones, and there, leaning her head upon the rush seat of a church chair, she wept more uncontrollably than she had done beside the corpse of the poor music-teacher. All at once she felt that she was no longer alone. She looked up. Beside her stood Lozoncyi.

She arose, doing what she could to summon her pride to her aid. "What strange chance brings you here?" she asked him.

"No chance whatever," he replied. "I saw you enter the church, and I followed you."

"Ah!" By a supreme effort she forced herself to assume an indifferent tone. "I have just been to the Pension Weber to take leave of my poor music-teacher. I found her dead. You may imagine----"

He shook his head: "And you would have me believe that the tears you have just shed are for that poor creature? It is hardly worth the trouble. Countess Erika, I have followed you to speak with you undisturbed for the last time, to thank you, and to entreat your forgiveness. Be frank with me, as I shall be with you. Let us have the consolation of knowing that, when we parted, the heart of each was laid bare to the other: it will be but poor comfort, after all."

He uttered the words with so decided a casting aside of all disguise that Erika's pride availed her nothing. In vain did she seek for words in which to reply. She looked in his face, and was startled to see it so wan and haggard.

"You see," he said, perceiving her dismay, "that in this case your wounded pride may be entirely satisfied; you can easily dispense with it. Compared with the torture I have endured since the day before yesterday evening, your pain is mere child's play. Oh, I pray you,"--he spoke in somewhat of his old impatient tone, the tone of a man whose wishes are usually complied with gladly,--"sit down for a moment: this is our last opportunity for speaking with each other. I owe you an explanation. You have a right to ask me how I came to conceal from you that I was married. To that I can only reply that I never speak of my marriage. I am not proud of my wife; I never take her into society with me; few of the friends whom I have here are aware that I am married, although I do not intentionally make a secret of it. I frequently travel alone, and last autumn the relations between my wife and myself, from causes unnecessary to relate, became of so strained a nature that we agreed to separate for a time. I avoided, when I could, even the thought of her. In spite of all this, I ought not to have refrained from acquainting you with my circumstances; nor should I have done so if I had dreamed---- You shrink, but we have agreed that for once in our lives, entirely casting aside pretence, we will tell each other the truth. In this case there is nothing in it that can offend your pride. I had conceived an enthusiasm for you when you were a very little girl. Shall I say that I loved you from the first moment that I saw you? No! you excited my curiosity, my wonder; I could not help thinking of you. A veritable angel with wings would not have been more wonderful to me than such a being as yourself. I did not wish to believe in you. At times I called you too high-strung, at times I said to myself that yours was simply a cold nature. You know how I avoided you,--avoided you when I could not take my eyes off you; and then--then--you have no idea of how my heart beat when I went to you to beg to be allowed to paint your portrait. From that time all speculation with regard to you was at an end: I blissfully and gratefully accepted the miracle revealed to me; nay, I ceased to regard you as a miracle; you were for me the key to a pure, noble life, of which I had hitherto never dreamed. And I began to long for this life: the disgust I had hitherto felt for the whole world I now felt for myself; and then all was over with me. I had no longer any thought save of you; my whole soul was filled with eager anticipation of the short time I could pass with you; when you were gone I used to sit for hours in my studio, recalling in memory your every look and word. The budding freshness of your being, which needed only a little sunshine to blossom forth gloriously, your profound capacity for enthusiasm, the wealth of affection concealed beneath a coldness of manner, and withal the proud, unsullied purity of your heart, mind, and soul--oh, God! how lovely it all was! But you were so far removed from me; a universe separated us. Never, no, never for one moment did I dream of your bestowing one thought of love upon me. Then, when, conscious that the joy which had come to be my life was so soon to end, I went to you in most melancholy mood, the day before yesterday evening, your look, the tone of your voice, set my brain on fire. I left you and wandered about the streets like one possessed. When at last I went home, I shut myself up in the studio and began to dream. I pictured what my life might have been had I been free to clasp in my arms the bliss that might have been mine. I seemed to feel your presence, so pure, so holy, and yet so tender and loving. The life at which I had always sneered--a home-life--seemed to me the only one worth living, if lived with you. I dreamed it in every detail; I thought how my art could be ennobled and purified through you,--my art, which until now had been little more than the cry of a tortured soul. My former life lay far behind me, like some foul swamp from which you had rescued me. How I adored you! how tenderly and truly I reverenced you! Then on a sudden I awoke to the consciousness of how impossible it all was. I crept out into the garden, where in the early dawn all looked pale and fading like my dying dream. I forced myself to think: it pained me so to think!--but I forced myself to do so, to draw conclusions. Whichever way my thoughts turned, they led to despair,--to separation from you. I could not resist the conviction that it was my duty to end all intercourse with you as quickly as possible. What next occurred you know yourself. But you never can dream of what I endured from the time when you entered my studio yesterday morning until the moment when you followed me into the garden and there

among the roses held out your hands to me, your eyes filled with light, everything about you so chaste, so grave, so tender; no, that agony you never can imagine! Not to be able to fall at your feet, to take you in my arms and say, 'My heaven, my queen, my every thought, my life, my art, shall all be one prayer of gratitude to you!' To live a joyless life when joy is all unknown is nothing,--a matter of course. But when an angel opens wide the gates of Paradise for one, and one must say, 'No, I dare not!' it is horrible! one cannot believe it possible to survive it!" He ceased.

Erika had listened to him with bowed head. Every word that he had uttered had been balm to her wounded pride, and at the same time had excited that which was most easily stirred within her, the tenderest, warmest emotion of her heart,--her compassion. She had, it is true, a vague consciousness that it was not right that she should listen to such words from a married man, but she stifled it with the excuse that it was their last interview.

His eyes sought hers: apparently he expected her to speak; but her lips refused to frame a sentence, although there was a question which she longed to ask.

He leaned towards her. "There is something you would fain ask," he whispered. "Tell me what it is."

"I--I"--at last she managed to say,--"I cannot comprehend what induced you to marry that woman."

He shrugged his shoulders: "No, nor can I, now, myself. How can I make you understand that in the world in' which I lived there were no women who inspired me with respect? it was made up of my fellow-students, and of women in no wise superior to the one of whom we are speaking. I was convinced that all her sex were either like her, or were harsh old maids, like my aunt Illona. Ten years older than I, she controlled my thoughts and my actions; I could not do without her, and at last I married her for fear lest some one of my fellow-students should take her from me." He paused.

Erika drew her breath painfully.

"Shortly afterwards came fame," he began anew, "suddenly,--over-night, as it were,--and all doors were flung wide for me. I do not want to represent myself to you as a better man than I am: I do not deny that all went smoothly in the beginning. I did not suffer from the burden with which I had laden my life. Dozens of my fellows lived just as I did. She relieved me of every petty care, she removed every obstacle from my path, she undertook all my transactions with the picture-dealers, she was everything that I was not,--practical, cautious, energetic. I went into society without her,--she was content that it should be so,--and I enjoyed in intercourse with other women that charm which was lacking in my home. I felt no disgust then at my own want of all true perception. The fashionable circles which I frequented were in no wise in advance, so far as a lofty standard of morality was concerned, of those in which I had lived hitherto. Whence does a young artist nowadays derive his knowledge of so-called refined society? From a few exaggerated women who befriend him half the time because they are wearying for a new toy. We poor fellows have but little opportunity to sound the depths of a true, pure womanly nature, least of all in the beginning of our career. It never occurred to me to think what my life might have been under other influences, until---- Oh, Erika, Erika, why did you so transform me? Why did you drag me from the mire which was my element, to leave me to perish?"

She put both hands to her temples. "What can I do?" she murmured, hoarsely. "What can I do?"

There she stood, pale and still, trembling with sympathy and compassion, needing help and helpless, more beautiful than ever, with cheeks flushed and eyes bright with fever.

On a sudden the cannon from San Giorgio announced the hour of noon, and instantly all the bells in Venice began to swing their brazen tongues. Erika awaked as from a dream. "I must go," she said. "My grandmother is expecting me."

"This is farewell forever," he murmured.

He bowed his head and turned away. She could not endure the sight of his agony. Approaching him, and laying her hand upon his arm, she began, "Do you really believe that you owe no duty to your wife?"

"None!" He could not understand why she should ask the question.

"Then--then----" she stammered, "why not obtain a divorce?"

He gazed at her for an instant. "And you could then consent to be my wife? You, the beautiful, idolized Countess Erika Lenzdorff, the wife of a poor, divorced artist?"

"Yes," she replied, firmly. Then, offering him her hand, and once more lifting to his her clear, pure eyes, she left the church. In an inspired frenzy of self-sacrifice, as it were, she crossed the Piazza, where the grass grew between the uneven stones of the pavement, and above which the gray clouds were floating.

She was as if borne aloft by an inspiration that elevated her whole being. Suddenly she became aware of a discord in her sensations. On her ear there fell, sung to the tinkling accompaniment of a guitar,--the words,--

"Tu m'hai bagnato il seno mio di lagrime,
T'amo d'immenso amor."

Looking up, she perceived the same repulsive musicians that had so shocked her awhile ago on the Piazza San Stefano.

She hastened her steps; but the sound long pursued her, 'T'amo d'immenso amor!' until it died away with a last 'amor.'

She frowned. She was indignant, that the wondrous, sacred word should be thus profaned.

There was no brightness in the future to which Erika looked forward. Of this she was fully aware. They must go forth into the world, he and she, with none to wish them God-speed, none to bless them. And yet the melancholy which shrouded their love made it doubly dear to her. The craving for suffering which for some time past had thrilled her excited nerves now stirred within her. Had she not been seeking it lately everywhere,--in poetry, in music, in art?

She passed the day in this state of enthusiastic exaltation. At night she slept better than she had for long, but shortly after she awaked she was assailed by a distracting, feverish agitation. No arrangement had been made as to how she should get the intelligence from Lozoncyi with regard to his wife's consent to a divorce. Would he bring the information himself? would he send her a note? Ten o'clock struck,--half-past ten,--eleven,--and no message came. Her hands, her lips, her brow, burned with fever; she drew her breath with difficulty.

About eleven o'clock the old Countess went to take her forenoon walk. She had been gone but a short time when Lüdecke announced Herr von Lozoncyi.

Erika had him shown up, and the first glance which she cast at his face told her that for him there was no possibility of a release.

Without a word she held out her hand to him. His hand was icy cold and trembled in her clasp; he looked pale and wretched,--the picture of misery.

Possessed absolutely by the pity that had filled her soul, she saw in his face only torturing despair at not being able to rid his life of what so degraded it. What could she do for him now? What sacrifice could she make?

"Sit down," she said, awkwardly, after a pause.

"It is not worth while," he rejoined, in the dull tone of a man crushed to the earth beneath a heavy burden. "I have been waiting for an hour to see you alone, that I might tell you that which must be told. I have spoken with--my wife. She will not consent to a divorce, and without her consent no divorce is possible. She has never given me any legal cause for a separation,--no, never, strange as it may seem in a woman of her class. Yesterday evening I spoke to her, and there was a terrible scene; and now,"--his voice grew fainter,--"now all is over." He laid his hand upon the back of a chair, as if to support himself, and paused for a moment, then resumed: "I ought to have written to you,--it would have been far better,--far,--but I could not deny myself one more sight of you. Farewell. Now all is over."

She stood as if rooted to the spot, pale, mute, searching feverishly for some consolation for him. What more could she offer him? There was a gulf as of death between them. She sought some path that would lead across it,--in vain. She felt faint and giddy.

"Farewell," he murmured. "Thanks--thanks for all--the joy--for all the sorrow---- Good God! how dear it has been!" His voice broke; he turned away, holding out to her, for the last time, a slender, trembling hand.

Why at sight of that hand did memory recall so vividly the half-starved artist lad after whom as a tiny girl she had run to relieve his misery? And now she could do nothing for him,--nothing! Really nothing? Suddenly it flashed upon her.

She had but to hold out her arms, to forget herself, and his anguish would be transformed to bliss. Compassion grew within her and took possession of her like insanity; her soul was shaken as by an earthquake; what had been above was now beneath, and from the chaos one thought emerged, at first formless as a dream, then waxing clearer, until it took shape as a command, gradually obtaining absolute mastership of her.

She raised her head, proud, resolved. "Have you the courage to break with all your present life, and to begin a new one with me?" she asked.

"A new life?" he murmured, and, vaguely, uncertainly, as if unable to trust his senses and fearing to lend words to what was monstrous and impossible, he added, "With you?"

"Yes."

He recoiled a step, and looked her full in the face, speechless, breathless.

A burning blush rose to her cheeks. "You have not the courage," she said, sternly. "Well, then----" With an imperious gesture she turned away.

But he detained her. "Not the courage?" he cried, seizing her hand and carrying it to his lips. "Offer a cup of pure water to a man perishing of thirst, and ask him if he has the courage to drink! The question is not of me, but of you. Have you the faintest idea of the meaning of what you have said?"

She shook her head: "I have learned to look life in the face; I know what I am doing. I know what the consequences of my act will be; I know that I resign all intercourse with my fellow-beings, saving only with yourself; that my only refuge on earth will be at your side; I know that I shall be a lost creature in the eyes of the world; and yet, if I may cherish the conviction that thereby I can redeem your shattered existence, that I can purify and ennoble your life, I am ready."

Her voice, always soft and full of that quality which goes straight to the heart, was veiled and vibrating; her hands were clasped upon her breast, her head was proudly erect, and her eyes seemed larger than usual from the ecstasy that shone in them. She was supernaturally lovely, and never had the chaste purity peculiar to her beauty been more distinctly stamped upon her face than at this moment when she--she, Erika Lenzdorff--was voluntarily proposing to follow a married man through the world as his mistress.

"Erika!" There was boundless exultation in his voice; he took one step towards her to clasp her in his arms and to press the first kiss upon her lips. But she repulsed him, overcome, it seemed, by sudden distress and dread, and when he repeated, in a tone of dismay and reproach, "Erika!" she passed her hand across her brow, and murmured, "My entire life belongs to you. Do not grudge me a few hours of reflection and preparation."

He smiled at her reserve, and contented himself with pressing his lips tenderly again and again upon her hand, as he said, caressingly, "Preparation? Oh, my darling, my darling! Meet me to-night at the railway-station at ten, and we will start for Florence. Leave all the rest to me."

"To-night it would be impossible," she said: "it is our reception evening. I could not leave without giving rise to a search for me."

"Then to-morrow?" he persisted, speaking very quickly in his beguiling, irresistible voice. Everything about him betrayed the feverish insistence of a man who suddenly gives free rein to a passion which he has hitherto with difficulty held in check.

"To-morrow," she repeated, anxiously,--"to-morrow----"

"Do not delay, Erika, if you are really resolved."

"To-morrow be it, then!" The words came syllable by syllable from her lips in a kind of dull staccato.

"Erika!" His eyes shone, his whole being seemed transfigured.

"Yes," she went on, "Constance Mühlberg has arranged an excursion to Chioggia to-morrow in a steamer she has chartered. My grandmother is to chaperon the party. At the last moment I will refuse to accompany her, and I shall then be free. When shall I come?"

They decided upon taking the train leaving between eight and nine in the evening for Vienna. Then other necessary details were arranged, a process unutterably distasteful to Erika, to whom it seemed like making the business arrangements for a funeral. She suffered intensely in thus descending to blank, prosaic reality from the visionary heights to which she had soared.

At last everything had been discussed: there was nothing more to be said. A great dread then stole over her: she grew very silent.

"I cannot believe in my bliss," he murmured. "You stand there in your white robes so chaste and grave, with that holy light in your eyes, more like a martyr awaiting death than a loving woman ready to break through all barriers to----"

There was something in this description of the situation that offended her,--offended her so deeply that with what was almost harshness she interrupted him, saying, "And now, I pray you, go!"

He looked at her in some dismay. She cast down her eyes, and with flaming cheeks stammered, "My grandmother will return in a few moments: I should not like to see you in her presence."

"You are right," he said, changing colour. "Your grandmother has always been so kind to me, and now----"

"Ah, go!"

"May I not come to see you at some time during the day to-morrow?"

"No."

"In the evening, then,--at eight?"

She looked him full in the face, stern resolve in her eyes. "I shall be punctual," she said.

"To-morrow at eight," he whispered.

"To-morrow at eight," she repeated.

A minute afterwards he stood alone in the sunlit space behind the hotel.

He rubbed his eyes, seeming to waken slowly from a lovely and most improbable dream.

At first he felt only exhilaration, the joy of a near approach to a long-desired but unhoped-for goal.

"To-morrow at eight," he whispered to himself several times. Then on a sudden the keen edge of his delight was blunted; his joy seemed to slip through his fingers; he could not retain it.

He recalled the entire scene through which he had just passed. He saw the girl's expression of face, he heard the sound of her voice. It was all lovely, exquisitely lovely, but, after all, there was something inharmonious, unnatural in it. This very girl who had of her own free impulse proposed to fly with him had never, during their long consultation, been impelled to utter one word of affection for him, and he himself was conscious that he could not have demanded it of her. She had been gentle, enthusiastic, self-sacrificing,--yes, self-sacrificing even to fanaticism. Self-sacrificing! he repeated the word to himself in an undertone: it had seized hold of his imagination as portraying precisely her attitude and bearing. Self-sacrificing,--yes, but not the slightest evidence had she given him of warm, passionate affection. He frowned, as he walked on thoughtfully.

"How does she picture to herself the future, I wonder?" Distinctly in his memory rang her words, "I know that I resign all intercourse with my fellow-beings, saving with yourself; that my only refuge on earth will be at your side; I know that I shall be a lost creature in the eyes of the world; and yet, if I can only cherish the conviction that I can thereby redeem your shattered existence, that I can purify and ennoble your life, I am ready."

How ravishing she had been whilst uttering these words! and beautiful, pathetic words they were; but----

He shivered, in spite of the Venetian May sunshine. Some chord of overwrought feeling suddenly snapped; a stifling sensation of ungrateful and almost angry rebellion against an undeserved happiness assailed him. How could this be? He was paralyzed by a cowardly dread.

He was ashamed of this revulsion of feeling, and struggled against it with angry self-contempt, but he could not shake it off. He had a vague consciousness that he must always be thus shamed in Erika's presence. To avoid being so he should have to incite himself to a degree of high-souled enthusiasm which was unnatural and inconvenient. "Purify and ennoble his life!" What did that mean? "Purify? ennoble?"

CHAPTER XXIV.

When by a long and roundabout way he at last reached his home on foot, and walked through the stone-paved, whitewashed corridor, looking absently before him, he perceived sitting beneath a mulberry-tree, the lower boughs of which were covered with the blossoms of a climbing rose, an attractive female figure, whose golden hair gleamed in the sunlight. She was sitting in a basket chair, and was engaged upon a piece of delicate crochet-work. She wore a gown of some white woollen stuff, very simply made, and confined at the waist by a belt of russet leather; the

sleeves, which were rather short, left exposed not only the wrists, but part of a plump arm, white and smooth as polished marble, and the finely-formed throat rose as white and polished from the turn-down sailor collar, beneath which a dark-blue cravat was loosely knotted. How deft and skilful, as she worked, was every movement of her rather large but faultlessly-shaped hands!

She was somewhat stout, but there was a certain charm in that. The broad full shoulders gave an impression of vigour that nothing could subdue. Lozoncyi could not but admire them. He was amazed. Yesterday there had been shrieks and screams, torn clothes and broken furniture, while to-day, after a scene that would have made any other woman ill, there was not a trace of fatigue, no dark shade beneath the steel-blue eyes, not a wrinkle about the rather large mouth. What a fund of inexhaustible vitality the woman possessed! what triumphant, healthy vigour! Not a sign of nervousness, of useless agitation; no breath of exaggeration.

Ah, she had her good side,--there was no denying it. He sighed, and, hearing himself sigh, was startled by the turn his thoughts were taking. Was it possible that after a forced companionship of scarcely two days--a companionship of which, when he could not avoid it, he had taken advantage to hurl in the woman's face his hatred and contempt for her--old habits were asserting their rights?

She went on crocheting. The sunlight crept down from among the climbing roses and glittered upon her crochet-needle. At last it shone in her eyes: she moved her chair to avoid the dazzling glare, and, looking up, saw him. Instead of the dark looks she had given him yesterday, she smiled slowly, blinking her strange cat-like eyes in the sunshine, and by her smile disclosing a row of pearly teeth. He passed her sullenly, as if she had taken an unjustifiable liberty with him, and went into the studio, wishing to persuade himself that he had a horror of her, that she repelled him. He hoped to feel that disgust for her with which the thought of her had inspired him since love for Erika had filled his heart; but he did not feel the disgust.

He lingered for less time than usual before Erika's portrait, which occupied a large easel in the most conspicuous place in the studio, and went to his writing-table. Several business letters awaited him there; he opened them with an impatient sigh. They were for the most part requests for answers to letters received by him weeks previously. Since he had been in Venice his business correspondence--in fact, his business affairs generally--had fallen into terrible disorder.

He opened the latest letter: it contained columns of figures. It was the account from his picture-dealer. He snapped his fingers, and, sitting down, tried to comprehend it. In vain! The figures danced before his eyes. Involuntarily he looked up. Through the glass door of the studio a pair of greenish eyes were gazing at him with an expression of good-humoured raillery. His heart began to beat fast. Formerly she had conducted his entire correspondence for him,--with what perfect regularity and skill! Before she had taken up the trade of model in consequence of a love-affair with an artist, she had been a *dame de comptoir*; she was as skilled in accounts as a bank-clerk. He needed but to speak the word, and she would reduce all these provoking affairs to perfect order; but he would ask no favour of her. Then she opened the studio door, and, entering softly, laid a warm strong hand upon his shoulder. He tried to persuade himself that he disliked the touch of this hand. But he did not dislike it: it had a soothing effect upon his excited nerves. Nevertheless he forced himself to shake it off.

The woman laughed, a low, gentle laugh,--the laugh of a cynic. She lighted a cigarette and handed it to him, saying, "*Pauvre bébé*, try to rest instead of settling those accounts: I will do it all for you in the twinkling of an eye, while it would take you until next week."

This time she did not lay her hand upon his shoulder, but stroked his head gently. "*Voyons, Séraphine!*" he said, crossly, shaking her off.

She laughed again, good-humouredly, carelessly, with unconscious cynicism. Before three minutes had passed, she was seated in his stead at the writing-table, and he, with the cigarette which she had offered him between his lips, was standing lost in thought before Erika's portrait.

How long he had been standing thus he could not have told, when he heard a deep voice beside him say, "*C'est rudement fort, tu sais. Sapristi!* Shall you exhibit it?"

"I have not made up my mind," he replied, absently, and then he was vexed with himself for answering her.

"She is pretty, there's no denying it," Seraphine confessed. "I am really sorry to have interfered with your amusement, but nothing could have come of it. If I am not mistaken, you had gone as far as was possible. She is one of those who give nothing for nothing, and who never invest their capital except in good securities. I am sorry I cannot resign these securities to her; *je suis bon garçon, moi*, but, *mon Dieu, lorsqu'il y a un homme dans la question--sapristi, chaque femme pour elle!*"

Here Lucrezia opened the door, and announced that lunch was served in the garden. Lozoncyi had firmly resolved never again to sit down to a meal with this woman. But, before he could say so, she began, "It would be well if you could give them something to talk of again in Paris. When did you leave in the autumn? In October? You have no idea what a relief your departure was to

the artists there. You ought to see the crazy carnival of colour held in this year's Salon! Bouchard exhibited a nymph with a faun, quite in your style, only yours is flesh and his is putty,--a poor thing; but the critics exalted it, and gave it a *médaille d'honneur*. You had begun to make the artists very uncomfortable: they are praising up mere daubers, to belittle you, doing what they can to knock away the floor from under you. But you need only show yourself to recover your ground. Becard told me lately that he had got hold of quite a new way of looking at things: his picture in the Salon----"

Talking thus, she had gone slowly towards the door; now she was outside. Unconsciously he had followed her.

"What has Becard in the Salon?"

"A woman on a balcony, after dinner, between two different lights,--on one side candle-light, and on the other moonlight; half of her is sulphur-yellow, the other half sea-green; *c'est d'un dróle!*"

"I saw the sketch for that monstrosity in his atelier," cried Lozoncyi, excited. "Did they accept it?"

She had taken her seat at the tempting table, upon which smoked a golden omelette; she did not answer instantly.

"Did they accept it?" Lozoncyi repeated.

"Accept it----! Why, my dear, they laud him to the skies: they hail him as *le Messie*!"

Lozoncyi had now seated himself opposite her. He brought his fist down upon the table. "Confound it!" he muttered between his teeth.

"You are wrong to be vexed," she said: "he is a good fellow, and your friend. He told me awhile ago with reference to his success, 'It is envy of Lozoncyi that is now standing me in stead.' Let me give you some omelette: it is growing cold."

He allowed her to fill his plate.

Two hours later he was pacing his atelier to and fro in gloomy mood.

He had enjoyed his breakfast, and had been entertained by his wife's chatter. With infinite skill she lured his fancy back to the old, careless, good-humoured Bohemian life in Paris. He questioned her with increasing curiosity as to the works of his fellows there, and she told him stories,--highly spiced but very amusing stories; she peeled his orange for him, and when the sun began to shine full upon the table at which they were sitting they drank their coffee in the studio. A sensation of intense comfort stole over him; but in the midst of it he was conscious of physical uneasiness. She looked at him, and disappeared with a laugh, returning with a pair of easy slippers. It was warm; his boots were tight; he took them off and slipped his feet into the easy shoes she had brought him. He felt as if relieved for the first time for a long while of a certain restraint. He yawned and stretched himself. Suddenly he shivered.

The question suggested itself, Could he ever allow himself such license in Erika's presence?

He started up. The momentarily-restored harmony between himself and his wife was interrupted. In the sudden change of mood to which in the course of years she had become accustomed, he repulsed her,--actually turned her out of the room, rudely, angrily.

Again his every pulse throbbed. He felt as if he should go mad. His revulsion of feeling with regard to Erika clothed itself in a new dress. It was odious, unprincipled, criminal, to take advantage of the enthusiasm of this inexperienced young creature, to drag her down to probable--nay, to certain--misery. He went to his writing-table; he would write to her that for her sake he withdrew from their agreement. But scarcely had he written the first word when a wave of passion swept over his soul, benumbing his energies: he knew that he was as powerless to renounce her as he was to carry out any other resolve. What did he really want? He sprang up, crushed in his hand the sheet of paper which his pen had scarcely touched, and threw it away. Once again he stood before the portrait.

At last, with bowed head, he went into the next room. Erika had left there by accident one or two articles belonging to her,--a lace handkerchief, a glove. He pressed them to his lips.

CHAPTER XXV.

"Erika! Erika!" old Countess Lenzdorff calls in a joyful voice across the garden of the Hôtel Britannia. "Erika!"

The old lady is sitting by the breast-work bordering on the Canal Grande. Erika is coming out of a side-door of the hotel. Her grandmother had sent her upstairs for her parasol. How strange the girl looks, with cheeks so white and lips so feverishly red! But that is a secondary matter: what must strike every one who looks at her to-day is the transfigured light in her eyes,--a light shining as through tears.

"Come quickly!" her grandmother calls. "I have a surprise for you." But Erika does not come quickly: she walks slowly through the blooming garden to her grandmother, who has an open letter in her hand.

The little garden is basking in the sunshine; the heavens are cloudless; the lagoon looks as if it were sprinkled with diamonds, as the black gondolas glide past, the sinewy brown throats of the gondoliers shining like bronze. In the fragrant garden can be heard, now loud, now faint, the sound of gay voices on the water mingled with the constant lapping of the waves and the jangle of church-bells.

"From whom does this letter come?" her grandmother asks Erika, with a smile.

"I--I cannot imagine," the girl murmurs. Her pale cheeks grow paler, and a fixed look comes into her shining eyes.

"Indeed? From whom should a letter come which I am so glad to receive?"

Erika starts.

"From Goswyn!" says her grandmother. "But what a face is that!"

"Am I to be as glad as you are because Goswyn at last condescends to take some notice of the kind sympathy you have shown him?" says Erika. But the old hard intonation of her voice is gone: it sounds weary and dull.

"Never mind!" her grandmother rejoins, triumphantly. "First read the letter, and then tell me if you still have the faintest disposition to be vexed with him. Whether you have any regard for him or not, the letter will please you. He asks, among other things, whether we shall be in Venice next week, and if he may come to us here."

Erika holds the letter in her hands, but when she fixes her eyes upon it the bold distinct characters swim before them. She looks away into the dazzling sunlight above the lagoon.

Among the black gondolas with white lanterns she now perceives Prince Helmy in his yellow cutter, which usually lies at anchor in front of the Hôtel Britannia. Espying the two ladies, the Prince clambers up to them over one or two gondolas, and asks, "Can you ladies not be induced to intrust yourselves to me? It would be far pleasanter to go to Chioggia in my cutter than in the steamer."

"It certainly would," the old Countess replies, with more amiability than she is wont to display towards Prince Helmy. "But," she adds, "unfortunately I cannot have that pleasure. I have promised to act as chaperon to Constance Mühlberg's party, and I cannot disappoint her."

"I'm sorry."

At this moment a merry old voice cries, "Your obedient servant, ladies!" It is Count Treurenberg, dressed in a light summer suit, all ready for the excursion to Chioggia. "You are going to Chioggia too?"

"We are."

"'Tis a pity you cannot go with us."

"I have just been telling them," observes Prince Helmy.

"Do you know whether Lozoncyi is to be of the party?" asks Treurenberg.

"I have no idea," Countess Lenzdorff replies, rather coldly.

"What do you think of the wife who has made her appearance so suddenly? Something of a surprise, eh?"

"A surprise which does not interest me much," the Countess replies, haughtily.

"Of course not. But there are some of our Venetian beauties who could hardly say as much.

'Tis odd that the fellow should have been so close-mouthed concerning his 'indissoluble tie.' I saw him once in Paris with the individual in question, but I never dreamed that that yellow-haired dame had any legitimate claim upon him. Probably a youthful folly."

"A millstone that he has hung about his neck," Prince Helmy says, feelingly,--"a burden that will weigh him down to the earth. I am very sorry for him."

"H'm!" Count Treurenberg drawls, "my pity is not so easily excited. Such women make an artist's life very comfortable; and she certainly has interfered but little with him hitherto." He rubs his hands with a significant glance.

"Are you ready, Count?" Prince Helmy asks, after the pause that follows Treurenberg's words.

The Count is ready, and takes leave of the ladies. Shortly afterwards they see him in the cutter with the Prince, who is helping his two sailors to hoist the tiny sail. The gentlemen wave a respectful farewell to the Lenzdorffs; the cutter glides off, at first slowly from among the gondolas, then more and more swiftly, skimming the water like a bird in the direction of the line of foam which marks the boundary of the open sea.

It is a trifle which has made the weight upon Erika's heart heavier in the last minute. She has said to herself that never again after to-morrow will a man accord her the respectful courtesy just shown her by the two gentlemen in the cutter.

Her attack of cowardice is a short one, however. Immediately afterwards she feels the joy of a fanatic who delights in suffering one pang more for his convictions.

"I cannot see why we have not been called to lunch," Countess Lenzdorff remarks, consulting her watch; then, observing Erika, she is startled by the girl's looks. "What is the matter with you?" she asks, and when the girl's only answer is a rapid change of colour, the thought occurs to her for the first time, "Is it possible that she cares for Lozoncyi?--my proud Erika?" She observes her grand-daughter narrowly, and an ugly suspicion invades her heart. "What reply shall I make to Goswyn?" she thinks. "Good heavens! I had no idea! Perhaps it is only fancy. But if---- It would be my fault. And people call me shrewd! Poor child!"

Meanwhile, Fritz announces that lunch is served.

"My child, you are eating nothing," the old Countess says anxiously to her grand-daughter, who is doing her best to swallow a morsel of food.

"I am not very well," Erika replies, in a faint, weary voice. How often those tones will ring through the old Countess's soul! "I have a slight headache," and she puts her hand to her head; "I feel as if a storm were coming; but there is not a cloud in the sky."

"So, there is not a cloud to be seen. The sunshine is so powerful in the dining-hall that the shades have to be drawn down, thus diffusing a gray twilight through the room.

"Let us go to our rooms," says the old Countess, with a sigh of discouragement. They go, and Erika seems to be making ready for the proposed expedition. But when her grandmother, fully arrayed, enters the girl's room half an hour afterwards, she finds her in a long white dressing-gown with loosened hair, leaning back in an easy-chair.

"My child, my child! what is the matter with you?" the old lady exclaims, in terror.

"Nothing," the girl replies, without lifting her downcast eyes. "A headache. You can see I meant to go, but I cannot: you must go without me. Give all kinds of affectionate messages to Constance, and tell her how sorry I am."

"My dear child, I cannot go with those people if you are not well," the old lady says, beginning to take off her gloves. "No human being could expect me to do that."

Erika is trembling violently. "But, grandmother," she replies, "it is only a headache. You can do me no good by staying at home, and you know I cannot bear to make a disturbance."

"Yes, yes," says the grandmother. "But lie down, at least, my darling."

"You could not disappoint Constance Mühlberg: you know she depends upon you, she needs your support," Erika goes on, persuasively.

"Yes, that is true," the Countess admits.

She notices that Erika has hastily brushed away tears from her eyes, and the suspicion which had assailed her below in the garden is strengthened. Perhaps it would be better to leave the girl in peace for a while, she says to herself.

Meanwhile, Marianne appears, to say that the Countess Mühlberg is awaiting the ladies below in her gondola.

"Go, grandmother dear," Erika says, faintly; "go!"

"Yes, I will go; but first let me see you lie down, my child." She conducts Erika to the bed. "How you tremble! You can hardly stand." She arranges her long dressing-gown, strokes the girl's cheek, and kisses her forehead. She has reached the door, when she hears a low voice behind her say, "Grandmother!"

She turns. Erika is half sitting up in bed, looking after her. "What is it, my child?"

"Nothing, only I was thinking just now that I have not treated you as I ought, sometimes lately. Forgive me, grandmother!"

The old lady clasps the trembling girl in her arms. "Little goose!" she says. "As if that were of any consequence, my darling! Only go quietly to sleep, that I may find you well when I return. Where is my pocket-handkerchief? Oh, there is Goswyn's letter: when you are a little better you can read it. You need not be afraid that I shall try to persuade you; that time has gone by; but I think the letter ought to please you. At all events, it is something to have inspired so thoroughly excellent a man with so deep and true an affection; and you will see, too, that you have been unjust to him. Good-bye, my darling, good-bye."

For the last time Erika presses the delicate old hand to her lips. The Countess has gone. Erika is alone. She has locked her door, and is sitting on her bed with Goswyn's letter open on her lap. Her tears are falling thick and fast upon it. It reads as follows:

"My very dear old Friend,--

"Shall you be in Venice next week, and may I come to you there? I do not want you to tell me if I have any chance: I shall come at all events, unless Countess Erika is actually betrothed. This is plain speaking, is it not?

"Have you known, or have you not known, that through all these years since my rejection by the Countess Erika not a day has passed for me that has not been filled with thoughts of her? In any case my conduct must have seemed inexplicable to you: probably you have thought me ridiculously sensitive. It is true, ridiculous sensitiveness, as I now see, has been the true cause of my foolish, unjustifiable behaviour, but it has not been the sensitiveness of a rejected suitor. God forbid!

"I should never have been provoked by the Countess Erika's rejection of me,--no, never,--even if it had not been conveyed in so bewitching a way that one ought to have kneeled down and adored her for it. There was another reason for my sensitiveness. A certain person, whose name there is no need to mention, hinted that I was in pursuit of Countess Erika's money. From that moment my peace of mind was at an end. I could not go near her again, because, to speak plainly, I was conscious that I was not a suitable match for her.

"You think this petty. I think it is petty myself,--so petty that I despise myself, and simply ask, am I any more worthy of so glorious a creature, now that I have a few more marks a year to spend?

"I dread being punished for my obstinate stupidity. Perhaps there was no possibility of my winning her heart, but it was worth a trial, and she has a right to reproach me for never in all these years making that trial. Inconceivable as my long delay must appear to you, I am sure you can understand why I have not thus appealed to you lately, so soon after the terrible misfortune that has befallen me.

"It was too horrible!

"In addition to my sincere sorrow for my brother's death, I am tormented by the sensation that I never sufficiently prized the nobility of character which his last moments revealed. To turn so terrible a catastrophe to my advantage would have been to me impossible. I could not have done it, even although I had not been so crushed by the manner of his death that all desire, all love of life, has for some weeks seemed dead within me.

"Yesterday I met Frau von Norbin, who has lately returned from her Italian tour. She informed me that Prince Nimbsch is paying devoted attention to Countess Erika, although at present with small encouragement.

"Jealousy has roused me from my lethargy. And now I ask you once more, may I come to Venice? Unless something unforeseen should occur, I could obtain a leave without much trouble. Again I repeat, I do not ask you what chance I have,--I know that I have none at present,--but I only ask you, may I come?

"Impatiently awaiting your answer, I am faithfully yours,

"G. v. Sydow."

She read the letter to the last word, her tears flowing faster and faster. Then she threw herself on the bed, and buried her face among the pillows. A yearning desire assailed her heart, and thrilled through her every nerve, calling aloud, "Turn back! turn back!" But it was too late; she would not turn back. She was entirely possessed by the illusion that she was about to do something grand and elevating.

A low knock at the door recalled her to herself. It was Marianne, who, instructed by the old Countess, came to see if she would not have a cup of tea.

"By and by, Marianne," she called, without opening the door. "I want nothing at present. I am better."

Marianne left, and Erika looked at her watch. Four o'clock! It was time to begin her final preparations.

She gathered together all her trinkets,--an unusually large and valuable collection for a girl. She had been fond of jewelry, and her grandmother had denied her nothing. Without one longing thought of them, she selected all that were of special value, running through her fingers five strings of beautiful pearls, and calculating as she did so their probable worth. These she added to the heap, and then wrapped all together in a package, upon which she wrote "For the Poor." Then she sat down at her writing-table and explained her last wishes, arranging everything as one would who contemplated suicide. Not one of her numerous *protégées* did she forget, commending them all to her grandmother's care.

After everything in this respect that was necessary, or at least that she considered necessary, was arranged, she reflected that she must write a farewell to her grandmother.

It was a terribly hard task, but after she had begun her letter there seemed to be no end to it. She covered three sheets, and there were yet many loving things to say. Now first she comprehended all that her grandmother had been to her of late years. She forgot how often the old Countess's philosophy had grated upon her, how often she had rebelled against it. How hard it was to leave her! But retreat was not to be thought of.

And she wrote on.

At last she concluded with, "Every one else will point the finger of scorn at me; you will bewail my course, but you will not call it evil, only foolish. Poor, dear grandmother! And you will mourn over the misery which I have voluntarily brought upon myself. It is terrible that I cannot fulfil the mission in life which lies so clearly before me without giving you pain. But I cannot help it! One thing consoles me. I know how large-minded you are: you will have to choose between the world and me, and you will be strong enough to resign the world and to turn to me, and then nothing will be wanting to me in my new life, let people slander me as they will!"

Three times did Erika fold up the letter, and three times did she open it again to add something to it.

At last it was finished. She put with it into the envelope the draft of her wishes as to the disposal of the effects she left behind her, and then asked herself where she should put the letter so that her grandmother might find it instantly upon her return. At first she took it to the Countess's room, but then, reflecting that the old lady would come at once to her bedside to see how she was, she laid it, with eyes streaming with tears, upon the table beside her bed. "Poor grandmother!" She kissed the letter tenderly as she left it.

Now everything was finished: she had only to dress herself. But she was not content. Once more she sat down at her writing-table and wrote. This time the words came slowly and with difficulty from her pen, as if each one were torn singly from her bleeding heart.

"My dear, faithful Friend,"--she began,--"Do not come to Venice. When this letter reaches you I shall have vanished from the world in which you live. I could not endure to have you hear from strangers of the step I am about to take, and so I write to you myself. Yes, when you read this letter I shall have broken with all that has constituted my life hitherto, and shall have fled with--with a married man. How grieved you will be when you read this! My whole soul cries out with pain as I think of it.

"You will not understand it. 'Erika Lenzdorff fled with a married man!' It sounds incredible, does it not?

"You know that I am not light-minded, nor corrupt, and so you will believe me when I tell you that the reasons which have induced me to take so terrible a step are unanswerable in my mind.

"I can redeem the life of a noble and gifted man. His moral nature is deteriorating, he suffers frightfully, and I cannot avoid the conviction that without me he must go to destruction.

"He hoped to be able to procure a divorce from his wife. It was impossible. Without hesitation I resolved of my own accord to follow him. In the midst of the agony which it has cost me to break

with all my former associations, I am sustained by a sense of right.

"It is grand and beautiful to suffer for a noble and highly-gifted fellow-being,--beautiful to be able to say, 'Providence has chosen me to shed light into his darkened soul.' I do not waste a thought upon what I resign in thus fulfilling my mission, but the consciousness of the pain I shall cause my dear grandmother and you weighs me to the earth. She will forgive me, and you, my poor friend, you will forget me. I would gladly find consolation in this conviction; but no, it does not comfort me. Of all that I must give up with my old life, your friendship is what I shall lack most painfully.

"Goswyn! for God's sake do not judge me falsely and harshly! What I do, I do in the absolute conviction that it is right. If this conviction should ever fail me, then---- But I cannot harbour that idea!--it would be too terrible. I cannot be mistaken!

"I have a fearful attack of cowardice as I write to you, and a sudden dread takes possession of me. Am I equal to the task I have undertaken? Will he always be content to live apart from the world with me alone?

"I am prepared for that also. If his feeling for me should wane, my task will be done, he will need me no longer. Then I will vanish from his life, and from life itself, like a poor taper that is extinguished when the sun rises. I shall have the courage to extinguish it; it will be a trifle in comparison with what I am now doing. Oh, God! how hard it is! Goswyn, adieu! One thing more, and this I tell you because this is my farewell to you. Whether it will console you, or add one more pang to your sorrow, I cannot tell, but I am constrained to lay bare my heart before you: these are as it were the words of a dying woman. If last autumn you had said one kind word to me, I should now have been your wife, and you should not have repented it! All that is over. Fate had another destiny in store for me.

"Once more, farewell!

"Forgive me for causing you pain, and sometimes think of your poor friend,

"Erika Lenzdorff."

Now all was done. She put on her travelling-dress, a plain dark suit in which she was wont to pay visits to the poor.

She looked at the clock--seven! One half-hour more, and she must go; and she could not go without something to lend her physical strength. She rang for a cup of tea, swallowed it hastily, and for the last time walked through the four rooms occupied by her grandmother and herself. Then she took her travelling-bag, which she had packed with a few necessaries, put on her straw hat, and went.

It was half-past seven: the servants were at their evening meal. No one noticed her departure at so unusual an hour. How often she had been seen leaving the hotel in the same dress to visit her poor people!

She walked for some distance, and dropped her letter to Goswyn into the nearest post-box, feeling as she did so that she was casting her whole life thus far into a dark gulf whence it could never be recovered. Then she hired a gondola, an open one,--she could find no other,--and it pushed off with her.

She was very weary; with her eyes fixed on vacancy, she leaned back among the black cushions.

The tragic wretchedness of the situation no longer impressed her. She only felt that she was about to undertake a journey. If it were but over! Sssh--sssh--the strokes of the oars sounded monotonously in her ears: the gondola glided rapidly over the water.

The garish daylight had faded; the spring twilight, with its incomparably poetic charm, was casting its transparent veil over Venice. The gondola glided on.

Erika's battle was fought. She leaned back, pale and still, with gleaming eyes. The sound of the church-bells droned in her ears. Dulled to all that lay behind her, she was conscious of nothing save of the enthusiasm of a young hero ready to brave death for a sacred cause.

Around her was the breath of the waning spring, and beneath her was the sobbing of the waves.

It was later by about an hour and a half. The old Countess, who had felt it her duty to be present at the fête, had not thought herself obliged to remain until its close. She was very uneasy about Erika, and had gratefully accepted Prince Nimbsch's offer to take her home in his cutter, leaving Constance Mühlberg and her guests, with the Hungarian band that had been telegraphed for from Vienna for their amusement, to return to Venice in the steamer.

With the velocity of a skimming swallow the little vessel shot through the water. Prince Nimbsch, leaving the management of the sail entirely to his sailors, leaned back beside the old lady among his very new velvet cushions, and made good-humoured, although futile, efforts to entertain her. She was absent: her thoughts were occupied with Erika's altered appearance.

"Poor child!" she thought, "I was foolish. It was my fault; but how could I suspect it? She seemed so strong, so unsusceptible. It is the same folly, the same disease that attacks us all once in a lifetime. I had it myself: I can hardly remember it now. It hurts,--it hurts very much. But she has a strong character and a clear head. I am very sorry; I might have prevented it, if I had only known. My poor, proud Erika! What shall I write to Goswyn? Of course that he must come. I think she will be glad to see him: this cannot go very deep; but I am very sorry."

Venice lay before them, gray and shadowy, a reflection of the pale summer sky, whence the sun had long disappeared, and where the stars were not yet visible.

They reached the hotel, and the old Countess looked up at Erika's windows. "She is not in her boudoir," she said to herself. "Perhaps she is asleep."

"Tell Countess Erika how stupid the *fête* was, thanks to her absence," the young Austrian said as he took his leave, "and how we all anathematized that headache for depriving us of her society. I shall call to-morrow, and hope to find her quite well again."

He kissed the old lady's hand, and she hurried upstairs to her rooms. She softly entered Erika's apartments. The boudoir was dark, as she had seen from below. She gently opened the door of the bedroom; that was dark also. Had the poor child gone to bed? She approached the bed very softly, not to disturb her, and stooped above it. There was no one there.

A foreboding of something terrible instantly took possession of her. For a moment she lost her head: she grew dizzy, and would have screamed and alarmed the house, but her voice died in her throat. Suddenly something fluttered down from the table upon which she leaned to support herself. She stooped to pick it up: it was a letter. She turned on the electric light and read it through. After the first few lines, half blind with grief, she would have tossed it aside,--what could it contain that she did not now know?--but at last she read it through, read every word to the very end, feeding her pain with each tender, loving expression of the unhappy, mistaken girl.

Not for one moment did she blame Erika for what had happened: she blamed herself alone. She accused herself of plunging Erika into wretchedness, as years before she had done with her daughter-in-law. She had required of both of them that they should accede to her materialistic views. She had never allowed them to entertain any idealistic conception of life. She had never understood that such idealism was a necessity of their existence, and that if deprived of it in one shape they would take refuge in some exaggeration which might shield them from a life of coldly-calculating egotism. Her daughter-in-law's unhappiness had not affected her much; her grand-daughter's misery would blot the sun from her sky.

She was so clear-sighted: ah, why was she so, when she could see nothing but what agonized her?

For a creature like Erika it was as impossible to disregard the dictates of morality as it would be to breathe in the moon with lungs constructed for the atmosphere of the earth.

There were women capable of braving the opinions of the world and of quietly going on their way, women for whom the pillory was converted into a pedestal as soon as they stood in it. But Erika was not one of these. Before the stars in their courses had twice appeared in the heavens she would writhe in misery. She had none of that self-exalting quality which must veil the moral lack of which she would surely be made conscious. Yes, she would then find no other name for the sacrifice she had made to the wretch who had been willing to receive it at her hands than the one which the world has given to it for centuries when it has been made to men by worthless women, inspired by no lofty desire. In her own eyes she would be a fallen woman.

The moisture stood upon the old Countess's forehead. "My Erika! my proud, glorious Erika!" she murmured. She knew that the peril of a woman's fall must be measured by the moral height from which she falls. And Erika had fallen from a very lofty height. Her life was ruined.

Once more she opened Erika's letter and read the line, "You will have to choose between the world and me." Choose! As if there could be any question of choice. Of course she was ready to open her arms to her and do for her what she alone could; but what could she do?

Suddenly a picture arose in her memory,--a terrible picture.

In the waiting-room of a railway-station she had once seen among some emigrants a poor woman with a child, a boy about six or seven years old. His face was frightfully disfigured by scars. All the passers-by stared at him, and some nudged one another and whispered together. The child first grew scarlet, then very restless, and finally burst into a passion of tears; whereupon the mother sat down upon a bench and hid the poor face in her lap.

A quarter of an hour later, when the Countess passed the same spot the woman was still there with the child's face in her lap. She sat stiffly erect, glaring at the unfeeling crowd whose cruel

curiosity had so hurt the boy, and with her rough hand she gently stroked his short light hair. The sight had made a profound impression upon the Countess. "She cannot sit there always, concealing in her lap her child's deformity," she said to herself: "sooner or later she must again expose the poor creature to the gaze of the crowd."

What now recalled this poor, powerless mother to her mind?

She could do no more for Erika than hide her head in her lap from the contemptuous curiosity of the world. So entirely did this thought take possession of her imagination that she seemed to feel the warm weight of the poor humiliated head upon her knee; she raised her hand to stroke it, when with a start she awoke to consciousness. "Ah, even that will be denied me," she thought. "As soon as Erika comes to herself, she will cast away her life. Yes, all is over,--all,--all!"

Marianne came into the room. She waved her away without a word. She never thought of inventing a reason to the maid for Erika's absence. She sat there mute and motionless, looking into the future. A vast misfortune seemed to have engulfed the world, and she alone was left to suffer, she alone was to blame.

CHAPTER XXVI.

Lozoncyi had gone to the station. He had delayed until the latest minute, intimidated by the difficulties of his undertaking, swayed by intense agitation. At last, passion for Erika had gained the mastery, although it had shrunk to very small dimensions. All the poetry had faded out of it. The lofty conception of life and its duties which had lately raised him above himself had vanished like a fit of intoxication of which nothing is left save a torturing thirst. Will she come? he had asked himself, with quivering nerves, as he sprang from the gondola, and, after purchasing the tickets, looked around him anxiously.

He had in fact expected that she would be there before him: he was disappointed at not finding her. He went out upon the steps leading from the railway-station to the Canal, and looked abroad over the shining green water. As each gondola approached he said to himself, "Here she comes." But no; she did not come.

The first bell rang. He went on the platform, his pulses throbbing feverishly. While he had been sure that she would come he had been comparatively calm; now his longing for her knew no bounds. He eagerly scanned every woman whom he saw in the distance.

Fortunately, he saw no one whom he knew: the train was not very full.

The second bell rang; the passengers hurried into their several compartments, porters ran to and fro with travelling-bags and trunks, farewells were waved from the windows of the train. The third bell rang, and the train steamed noisily out of the station. She had not come.

His disappointment was largely mingled with anger, and was so intense that it amounted to physical nervous pain. "At the last moment her courage has failed her," he told himself. But then her pale beautiful face, lit up with enthusiasm, arose before his mind's eye, and in the midst of his frenzy of passion he was conscious of the yearning tenderness which had been a chief element in his feeling for her. "No," he said to himself, "even if her courage has failed her, she is not one to break her word. She must have been prevented at the last moment."

A burning desire for certainty in the matter mastered him. He went to the Hôtel Britannia, under the pretext of calling upon the Lenzdorffs. He was told that her Excellency had gone out early in the afternoon and had not yet returned. He hesitated for a moment, and then, in a tone the indifference of which surprised himself, he asked if he could see the Countess Erika, as he had a message for her. The porter, a presuming fellow who meddled in everybody's affairs, informed him that the young Countess had just gone out, but would probably return shortly.

"Why do you think so?" asked Lozoncyi.

"Because she was not in evening dress. She went out in a street suit, and carried a leather bag in her hand: that always means 'charity' with the young Countess. I know the bag: I have often carried it for her to the gondola. This time she walked, and carried it herself. She is a little----" he touched his forehead with his forefinger, "but a good lady: she is always giving."

Lozoncyi stayed no longer. He got into his gondola again, uncertain what to do. What could have kept her? After some reflection, he went again to the railway-station. "She has been detained by some acquaintance; she will be here for the next train," he thought. He waited until

the next train left,--in vain. Then a fierce anger against her arose within him and transcended all bounds. He forgot that he himself had delayed for a moment. He could not find words bitter enough to express his contempt for her. He never should have taken such a step of his own accord: he had simply acquiesced in the inevitable. She had carried him away by her enthusiasm, which had levelled all barriers between them, and now--now her cowardice had left him in the lurch. It was hardly worth while to devise so fine a drama, when it was never to be played out! How stupid he had been ever to believe that it could possibly be played out! he ought to have known that at the last moment the censor would prohibit it. In the midst of his anger he experienced a sensation of dull indifference. What did anything matter? everything of importance in his life was at an end: what became of the rest he did not care. He had been lured on by a Fata Morgana; he laughed at the thought that he had taken it for reality,--a dull, joyless laugh,--and then--he could not spend the night at the station--he resolved to go home.

It was about ten o'clock when he passed through the green door of his house and along the narrow corridor into the garden. The moon was high in the sky, and the trees and bushes cast pitchy shadows upon the bluish light lying upon the grass and gravel paths. The air was warm; rose-leaves lay scattered everywhere; Spring was laying aside her garments, and there was a dull weariness in the atmosphere.

Lozoncyi, with bowed head, walked towards the atelier, where was the portrait. On a sudden he heard a light foot-fall behind him. He turned, and stood as if rooted to the earth.

"Erika!"

She came towards him lovely as an angel. Her head was bare, and her golden hair gleamed in the moonlight.

"Erika!" he exclaimed, hoarsely, without advancing a step towards her. He took her for an illusion conjured up by his fancy. But as she drew near he felt the reality of her young life beside him. "Then it is really you?" he murmured. "I thought it a phantom to deceive me. Why are you here?"

"No wonder you ask," she said, and her voice expressed unutterable compassion. "I come to bid you farewell."

"Farewell!" he gasped. "Then I was right to doubt you. And yet how bitterly I have reproached myself because----"

"Because----?" she asked, sadly.

"Because I ventured to suppose you had lost courage. What could I think? I waited for you at the station from one train to the next: you did not come. Then I told myself that you had simply treated me to a farce. But I cannot believe that now: as I look into your dear face I can find there no cowardice, nothing paltry. You have been detained against your will, and you are here yourself to tell me so. It is noble of you, Erika! my Erika!"

He drew closer to her, and extended his arms towards her: she evaded them.

"All is over between us," she said, wearily. "It cannot be."

She saw him turn ashy pale in the moonlight.

"Over? It cannot be? Erika! What does this mean? Have you robbed me of all self-control only to desert me thus at the last moment? I cannot believe it of you, Erika!" There was passionate entreaty in his voice. Again he stretched out his arms towards her: gently, but firmly, she repulsed him.

"Do not touch me," she begged. "I can scarcely stand. Something horrible has happened; I must tell you of it as quickly as possible, but I cannot stand upright." She grasped the bough of the mulberry-tree around which the climbing roses were wreathed, and as she did so the bough shook, and a cloud of white rose-leaves fluttered to the ground. All about her was fading! How sultry the night was!

She sat down on the bench beneath the mulberry, above her the moonlit sky with its hosts of stars, at her feet the fading garment of the spring.

Then she began her story: "I was on my way to the station. I should have been punctual: perhaps I should have been there before you. I was convinced that I was doing right, and so long as that was so I could not delay. The way to the station leads past this house. My gondola had not yet reached the bridge that spans this canal when I heard a loud splash in the water. A woman had thrown herself from the bridge. You can imagine my horror. In an instant the suspicion darted into my mind that it might be your wife. I implored my gondolier to save her, and he plunged into the water just in time. It was indeed your wife, whom I could not but feel I had thus hunted to death. She lay in the bottom of the gondola, covered with sea-weed and slime--oh, horrible! I brought her home. We carried her up-stairs, with Lucrezia's help, and then recalled her to life. That was comparatively easy; but scarcely had she opened her eyes when she was seized with frightful spasms of the chest, and I feared she would die."

Lozoncyi had listened breathlessly; now he nodded slowly. "I know she suffers from such attacks frequently," he said, bitterly, "but they are not dangerous: they are usually the result of a fit of fury."

"That I did not know," Erika murmured, in the same weary, self-accusing voice,--the voice of a criminal arraigning herself. "Her condition made a terrible impression upon me. We put her to bed, and I stayed with her while Lucrezia went for a physician. She returned without him, but the unfortunate woman seemed better and calmer, and I was about to leave her, when I heard your step in the corridor. I came hither to take leave of you. Forgive me, and farewell!" She had risen from the bench, and held out her hand to him; her eyes were full of tears.

He did not take her hand. "And for this you would desert me?" he exclaimed, angrily. "You have given me no reason,--not the slightest. That devil up-stairs has simply played you a trick,--nothing more. Can you not see it? She knew what we were about to do, and watched for you: she had not the least idea of taking her own life."

"I do not know," replied Erika, passing her hand across her brow: "it may be that she meant only to prevent me from arriving in time at the station. But it was frightful: the canal is very deep there; she would surely have been drowned; and how could I have lived after witnessing her death? No! as I sat beside her bed a veil seemed to fall from my eyes,--a veil which had blinded me to what I was doing. I saw that, with the best will in the world, I could do only harm. I was ready to give my life for you,--I am always ready for that,--but I must not sacrifice the lives of others who stand in close relation to you and to me; I cannot!--I cannot! I ought not to have robbed you of your peace, to have taken from you the power of self-renunciation; I acknowledge it. If you could but know how bitterly I reproach myself, how fearful it is for me to see you suffer! My poor friend, I entreat your forgiveness from my very soul!" She took his hand and humbly touched it with her lips.

The night grew more sultry and oppressive. A bewildering fragrance exhaled from the earth, from the plants, from the faded blossoms on the ground, and from the fresh buds opening to life. The moonlight fell full upon the statue of a dancing faun beneath an acacia-tree, and upon the scattered rose-leaves around it.

Hitherto Lozoncyi had stood still, with bowed head. But at the touch of her lips upon his hand he looked up. His veins ran fire.

"Farewell!" she murmured, gently.

He repeated "Farewell!" and then suddenly added, "Will you not take one more look at the studio before you go?"

She found nothing unusual in this request. He led the way; she followed him, her whole being filled with compassion: she would have been nailed to the cross to relieve his pain,--the pain for which she was to blame.

The moonlight flooded the studio, lending an unreal appearance to the room, and in the magic light stood forth the figure of 'Blind Love,' athirst to reach its goal, staggering in the mire.

From the garden breathed a benumbing odour, and from the far distance floated towards the pair, like a yearning sigh, the song of the Venetian night-minstrels.

Erika looked about her sadly. "It was fair!" she murmured. "I thank you for it all. Adieu!"

She held out both her hands to him; she had wellnigh offered him her lips, in the desperation of her compassion.

He took her hands in his and bent over them. "It is, perhaps, better so," he said, and his voice had never been so tremulous and yet so tenderly beguiling. "The sacrifice you would have made for me was too great: I ought not to have accepted it at your hands. And you are right, we must spare those who are near to us; it must be. But for God's sake do not desert me quite! do not consign me to utter misery!"

She looked at him with eyes of wonder. She could not comprehend. What was there left for her to do for him?--what?

He kissed her hands alternately: she did not notice how he drew her towards him until she felt his hot breath upon her cheek. Then he said, softly, very softly, "You must return to your grandmother tonight, I know; you cannot devote your life to me; but--oh, Erika! our existence is made up of moments--grant me a moment's bliss now and then! you will not be the poorer, and I--I shall be richer than a king! The world shall never know; no shadow shall fall upon you, be sure----"

At last she understood. She tore her hands from his grasp; a hoarse sobbing cry escaped her lips, and without a word she turned and fled past the faun gleaming in the moonlight, past the fading blossoms, across the garden, through the long cold corridor, without once taking breath until the green door with the lion's head had closed behind her. A despairing cry pursued her: "Erika! Erika!" It was the voice of the man who had been suddenly aroused to the consciousness

of what he had done.

But she never heeded it: she had a horror of him.

For a moment she stood uncertain on the border of the canal. Her gondolier had departed, having judged it best to be rid as soon as possible of his wet clothes. It was late, and she was alone.

Around her was the ghostly moonlight, before her the dark lapping water. She was not afraid: what was there to fear? But, with the world in ruins as it were about her, what should she do? What, except return to the Hôtel Britannia?

She threaded her way through the zigzag narrow streets, across bridges and along the shores of the canals, her eyes bent on the ground. It never occurred to her that any one whom she knew could meet her wandering thus late at night with uncovered head; for she had left her hat in the sick woman's room. All through these last terrible hours she had had no thought for her reputation. She walked on and on. Suddenly there fell upon her ear,--

"Ninon, Ninon, que fais-tu de la vie, Toi, qui n'as pas d'amour? Comment vis-tu----"

As she crossed a narrow canal by a small bridge, the singers' gondola came directly towards her. She saw it close at hand. The soprano was a faded, hollow-cheeked woman, the men were quite ragged.

Was that the phantom that had lured her on all through the spring?

The guttering candles in the gondola were burned almost into the sockets. One of the paper lanterns took fire. The boat glided beneath the bridge. When it emerged on the other side the lights were extinguished, the singers silent. The gondola floated drearily on, a black formless spot in the moonlight.

Shortly afterwards Erika found a gondola in which she reached the hotel.

In consequence of the arrival of a large number of fresh guests, the hotel was brilliantly lighted, all the doors were open, and Erika went up the staircase to her room without attracting special notice.

"Perhaps," she thought, "my grandmother has not yet returned: I may be able to recover my letter before she has read it." She went instantly to her bedroom. Light issued from the chink of the door: she was too late. She opened the door. There, beside her bed, sat her grandmother in an arm-chair, erect and stiff, her eyes looking unnaturally large in her ashy-pale face, where the last few hours had graven deeper furrows than had been made by all the other experiences of her seventy years.

A strange cry escaped the old Countess's lips when she perceived the wan, sad apparition in the door-way. Half rising from her seat, her hands grasping the arms of the chair, she gazed at the girl as if she had been a corpse newly risen from the tomb. Trembling in every limb, "Erika!" she stammered. She tried to walk towards her grandchild, and could not. Erika's strength barely sufficed to carry her to the bedside, where she sank at her grandmother's feet and laid her head in her lap.

Neither could speak for a while. The old lady only stroked the girl's hair with her delicate hand, which grew warmer every minute. The girl sobbed. After some minutes the grandmother bent over her and murmured, "Erika, tell me how you have been rescued at the eleventh hour. Where have you been?"

Erika lifted her head, and in a faint voice told all that had occurred until the moment when she had gone down into the garden to take leave of Lozoncyi. There she hesitated.

Her grandmother listened breathlessly, and in an instant the girl began afresh: "I had forgotten myself. I would have done more for him than was ever done for man before; I would have borne him aloft to the stars. And he--the way was too hard; he had no heart for it; he would have dragged me down into the mire from which I would fain have rescued him. And when at last I understood, I fled----" A fit of convulsive sobbing interrupted her: she could not go on.

Her grandmother understood it all. She said not a word, only gently stroked the poor head in her lap. After a while she persuaded Erika to lie down, helped her to undress, and smoothed the pillow in which the poor child hid her tear-stained face.

She sat at the bedside until the dull weariness sure to follow upon intense nervous agitation produced its effect and the girl slept. The grandmother still sat there, motionless, until far into the morning.

About nine o'clock Marianne softly opened the door of the room. Erika awoke. She had

forgotten everything,--when her glance fell upon a small black travelling-bag in the maid's hand.

"Please, your Excellency, a gondolier has just brought this bag," Marianne explained. "He says the Countess Erika left it in the gondola yesterday after the accident,--after the fright, I mean: he told me all about it. Poor Countess Erika! what a terrible thing for her! But it was fortunate, too, because she was able to save the poor woman. The gondolier has come for the hundred lire which the Countess promised him for getting the woman out of the water."

The old Countess drew a deep breath. Everything was turning out more favourably for Erika than she had dared to hope. The adventure, which would of course be discussed freely by all the hotel servants, would explain Erika's long absence and strange return.

"Is the Countess Erika ill?" asked the faithful Marianne, with an anxious glance at the young girl, whose cheeks were flushed with fever.

"Only suffering from the effects of agitation," said Countess Lenzdorff, who had meanwhile brought the money and given it to the maid.

"No wonder! Poor Countess Erika!" the servant murmured as she withdrew.

Weary and wretched, Erika again closed her eyes. When she opened them she saw her grandmother at the writing-table, her head resting on her hand, and a blank sheet of paper before her.

"To whom are you writing, grandmother?"

"I want to write to Goswyn," the old Countess replied, in a low tone. "I must answer his letter; and--I am not sure----" She hesitated.

Upon Erika's mind flashed the remembrance of the letter she had written the previous day to Goswyn. She had forgotten it.

"Of course I must tell him not to come," said her grandmother.

Erika sighed. Must she give her grandmother that pain too? At last she managed to say, in a voice that was scarce audible, "He will not come: he----"

Startled by a terrible suspicion, her grandmother looked at her in dismay. Erika's face was turned away from her.

"Well?" asked the old Countess.

"I wrote to him yesterday," poor Erika stammered, "telling him what I was about to do. I thought he must hear of it sooner or later, and I wished that he should hear it in a way that would give him least pain."

"Oh, Erika! Erika!"

But Erika lay still, her head turned away from her grandmother. After a while she said, almost in a whisper, "Grandmother, please write to him that"--she buried her face in the pillow--"that---- Oh, grandmother, tell him--that--he need not despise me!"

Her grandmother made no reply. For a while absolute silence reigned in the room. Then Erika suddenly heard a low sob. She looked round. The Countess had covered her face with her hands, and was weeping.

It was the first time since Erika had known her that she had seen her shed tears.

CHAPTER XXVII.

No trace of spring can be seen. The garden of the Hôtel Britannia is a sunburned desert, where the rose-bushes show withered leaves and not a single bud. The breath of the yellowish-gray lagoons is stifling. All is limp and faded,--both vegetation and human beings. The hotels are emptying: the season here is over, and the season for the watering-places not yet begun. Moreover, there is in Venice an epidemic of typhus fever.

Scarcely half a dozen people assemble every evening at the *table-d'hôte* of the Hôtel Britannia, and the small table appropriated to the Lenzdorffs in the far corner of the dining-hall is deserted.

Nevertheless the Lenzdorffs have not left the hotel; but Erika is ill, stricken down by malarial fever, and the old Countess does not leave her bedside.

The attack was sudden,--sudden so far as could be seen by those in daily intercourse with her, but pronounced very gradual by the physician, who maintained that the disease had long been latent in the girl's system.

In the afternoon of the day after that upon which Erika had, as by a miracle, escaped the most terrible peril of her life, she had, by her grandmother's desire, donned a charming gown and had gone with the old Countess to pay a round of farewell visits. She had gone patiently in the gondola from one palazzo to another, and with a pale, calm face had answered question after question as to the terrible catastrophe which her timely presence had been the means of preventing.

There were various versions concerning the reasons for Frau Lozoncyi's attempt at suicide: thanks to the jealousy of Lozoncyi's numerous feminine adorers, none of these versions approached even distantly the truth, for none of his adorers would have admitted that the artist had ever bestowed a serious thought upon Erika.

In the evening she had dressed for dinner, and then, overcome by fatigue, she had lain down upon her bed to rest for a quarter of an hour. She did not rise from it for weeks.

Now the disease has left her. The physician has not only allowed but advised her to leave her bed. Every forenoon at eleven o'clock Marianne and the old Countess dress her,--ah, how tenderly and carefully!--and then, leaning heavily upon her grandmother's arm, she walks slowly about the room.

It is nearly six o'clock. The intense heat has somewhat abated, and Erika is sitting in the most comfortable arm-chair to be had in the hotel, her head resting upon a pillow, her hands in her lap. And what hands they are!--so slender, so white and helpless! To please her grandmother, she has swallowed a few spoonfuls of soup,--without the slightest desire to eat,--as if it had been medicine.

"Are you comfortable, my darling? Shall I not get you another pillow?" her grandmother asks. The old Countess is hardly to be recognized, her treatment of her grand-daughter is so humbly tender, so pathetically anxious. Her force and rigour have vanished: she can only pet and spoil Erika; she cannot incite her to any interest in life.

"Ah, grandmother dear, everything is most comfortable," Erika replies. As if a pillow more or less could procure her ease!

"Shall I read aloud to you, my child?"

"If you will be so kind."

Her grandmother makes choice of a new novel of Norris's. As she reads, she looks across the book at Erika: the girl is not listening. The old Countess stops, and drops the book in her lap. Erika is not aware that she has ceased to read.

After a while she looks up. "Grandmother," she asks, gently, "did no letters come while I was ill?"

"Of course," her grandmother replies. "I had letters every day from various friends and acquaintances, asking how you were. Hedwig Norbin is with her married daughter in Via Reggia, and I had to send her bulletins reporting your condition three times a week."

Erika's thin cheeks flush slightly. "And--did no letters come from Berlin?" she asks, with averted face.

Her grandmother hesitates for a moment, and then says, "I do not correspond with any one in Berlin. I have written as few letters as possible during your illness."

Erika's head droops. "How ashamed my grandmother must be for me, if she has not even told Goswyn that I am ill!" she thinks.

For a while there is silence; then Erika whispers, "Grandmother, I am very tired. I should like to lie down."

Her grandmother leads her to a lounge, where she lies down, with her face turned to the wall. She is very quiet. Is she sleeping?

The old Countess softly leaves the room.

In Erika's boudoir she walks to and fro a couple of times, then sits down and takes up a book, but it soon drops in her lap unread. For weeks she has felt no interest in the comfortless philosophy of the books which were formerly her favourites. The book slips to the floor; she does not stoop to pick it up; with hands clasped in her lap she ponders upon many things that had not been wont to occupy her thoughts. She never notices a bustle in the hotel most unusual at this,

the dull season, until Lüdecke opens the door and announces, "Your Excellency, Herr von Sydow wishes to know if he may come up, or if your Excellency----"

She starts. "Herr von Sydow!" she repeats. "Show him up,--very softly, of course: Countess Erika is asleep."

A moment afterwards he enters the room.

At first she hardly recognizes him. His features are sharper; the hair about his temples is gray.

"My dear child, you here?" she says, cordially, rising and advancing a few steps to meet him.

He kisses her hand. "I learned only three days ago that she is ill. How is she?"

"Erika?"

"Who else could it be?" he replies, impatiently.

"The disease is cured; but she does not get well. She gains no strength. She has not improved in the last ten days; she has no appetite, takes no interest in anything. She is always weary."

"What does her physician say?" Goswyn is sitting beside his old friend, leaning forward and listening eagerly to every word that falls from her lips. Both speak very softly.

"The physician begins to be anxious; there is not much to say. Entire relaxation of the nervous system,--want of vitality,--no love of life----"

"No love of life! Nonsense!" exclaims Goswyn. "Life must be made dear again for her."

Suddenly they hear a low rustle. The door leading into Erika's bedroom opens; on the threshold stands a slender figure in a long white dressing-gown, her hair loosely knotted at the back of her head.

What is there in the poor thin face, in the large melancholy eyes, that suddenly reminds Goswyn of the unformed, timid child whom he met on the staircase in Bellevue Street on the evening of Erika's arrival in Berlin?

"Goswyn," she stammers, gazing at him, "you here? What are you doing here?"

He goes to her and takes her hand. "I heard that you were ill, and I came to help your grandmother to carry you back to your home."

Her pale lips quiver, and her weak slender form sways uncertainly, and then--before he is conscious of it himself--he does what he ought to have done years before: he takes her in his arms and kisses her forehead.

A wondrous sensation of perfect content, of blissful freedom from all desire, overcomes her; she clasps her emaciated arms about his neck, and murmurs, "Goswyn, do you really want me now,--now, after all the pain I have given you?"

He only clasps her closer to his heart. He, who for years has been dallying with opportunity because his courage failed him in view of little obstacles which would never have daunted another man, now leaps at a bound over the first real obstacle in his way. "What!" he cries, "do you suppose I blame you for that folly, Erika? No; for me your illness began weeks before it did for the physicians."

Meanwhile, he has tenderly conducted her to a lounge, upon which, exhausted as she is, she sinks down.

"I must make one confession to you, Erika," he whispers. "I was almost out of my senses in that terrible twenty-four hours after I received your letter and before I received your grandmother's; my gray temples bear witness to that; but then--then I took delight in your letter,--yes, in that terrible letter. For I learned from it what I had never ventured to hope,--that you cared for me a little, Erika."

"Ah, Goswyn, you always were, of all men in this world, the most indispensable one to me!"

How fair life can be! For a while the lovers, hand clasped in hand, talk blissfully; then Erika looks round for her grandmother. But the old Countess has vanished: they do not need her at this moment. She is sitting in her own room, delighting in her two young people, recalling her far-distant past, as she says to herself that under certain circumstances love may be a beautiful thing, and when it is beautiful----

THE END.

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