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GLORIA VICTIS!

A ROMANCE

BY

OSSIP SCHUBIN

Author of "Our Own Set."

"Alas! poor human nature!"

Chesterfield.

From the German by MARY MAXWELL

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GLORIA VICTIS!

CHAPTER I.

"There is no help for it, I must do it to-day," the Baroness Melkweyser murmured with a sigh breathed into the depths of the toilet-glass, before which, she was sitting while her maid dressed her hair. "It is now just a week," she went on to herself, after having uttered the above words

aloud, "quite one week since Capriani entrusted the affair to me. I have met him three times, and each time was obliged to tell him that there had been no favourable opportunity as yet. He is beginning to take my delay ill. Come, then, *courage!*.... *en avant!*.... Truyn certainly ought to be glad to marry his daughter as soon as possible, and I cannot see why Gabrielle should make any objection to becoming the sister-in-law of the Duke of Larothiére. To be sure, most Austrians have such antediluvian ideas! *Nons verrons!* I will, as Capriani desires, see how the land lies."

She shrugged her shoulders as though shifting off all responsibility and turning to her maid exclaimed: "*mais dépêchez vous donc*, Euphrosine, will you never remember how much I always have to do!" Whereupon the impatient lady, snatched from her maid the head-dress which she was arranging, and, quite in the style of Napoleon I., crowned herself.

The scene lies in Paris. The short after-season which, like an echo of the carnival, is wont to follow Lent, that holy intermezzo crowded with charity-bazaars, musical soirées and other elegant penitential observances, is rather duller than usual this year. Easter came too late and although *Figaro* continues its daily record of balls and routs, Paris takes very little heed. All genuine enthusiasm for such entertainments is lacking. Paris thinks of nothing now save the races, the last auction at the Hôtel Drouôt, the latest change of ministry, and the newest thing in stocks.

It is the beginning of May. Two weeks ago, rather later than usual, spring made its appearance--like a young king full of eager benevolence, and generous promises, with green banner held aloft and crowned with sunshine--thus it swept above the earth which sullenly and reluctantly opened its weary eyes. "Awake, awake, I bring with me joy!" called spring in sweet siren tones sometimes low and wooing and anon loud and imperious. And a mysterious whisper thrilled and stirred the land, the trees stretched their black branches, the buds burst. Men felt a pleasant languor, while their hearts beat louder.

The spring advanced quickly, working its lovely miracles--loading the trees with blossoms and filling human hearts with joy--and upon those for whom its lavish hand had left nothing else, it bestowed a smile, or it granted them a dream.

There are, indeed, some unfortunates for whom its brilliant splendour never does aught save reveal the scars of old wounds, which in its careless gayety it formerly inflicted; and while others flock abroad to admire its beauty, these hide away their misery. But when daylight's haughty glare has faded, and spring has modestly shrouded its loveliness in a veil of grey, these wretches inhaling its fragrance in their seclusion come forth from their concealment, into the soothing twilight, among the dewy blossoms, and once more give utterance to the yearning that has so long been mute, rejoicing with tears in their old anguish, crying: "Oh Spring, oh youth--even thy falsehood was lovely--" thus doing it homage by their grief, for spring has no enemies.

Somewhat apart from the aggressive brilliancy of the Avenue l'Imperatrice wind a couple of quiet streets like detached fragments of the Faubourg St. Germain. Everything here breathes that charming and genuine elegance which is almost an instinct, and rules mankind despotically. It is not a grimace artificially assumed for show.

One of the prettiest of the small hotels standing between its court-yard and garden, in the Avenue ----, formerly it was called the Avenue Labédoyère, tomorrow it may perhaps be the Avenue Paul de Cassagnac, and the day after the Avenue Montmorency--was occupied by Count Truyn with his young wife and his daughter.

This evening the family had assembled in a pleasant drawing-room on the rez-de-chaussée, and one after another each expressed delight in the repose and relief of such an hour after the social exertions of the day. The husband and wife as they sat opposite each other near the fireplace--he with his *Figaro*, and she busy with the restoration of some antique embroidery--were evidently people who had attained the goal of existence and were content. It was plain that their thoughts did not range beyond the present.

Not so with Gabrielle. Twice during the last quarter of an hour she has changed her seat and three times she has consulted the clock upon the chimney-piece.

At last she goes to a mirror and arranges her breast-knot of violets.

"Our Ella is beginning to be pretty," said Truyn opening his eyes after a doze behind the *Figaro*.

"Have you just discovered that?" Zinka asked smiling.

"Do you think my gown is becoming, Zini?" Gabrielle asked as gravely as if the matter were the Eastern question.

"Very becoming," her step-mother kindly assured her.

"Oho!" said Truyn banteringly, "our Ella is beginning to be vain."

Whereupon Gabrielle blushed deeply and to hide her confusion went to the piano and began to strum "Annette and Lubin." She did not play well but her hands looked very pretty running over the keys.

"I am surprised that Ossi does not make his appearance," said Truyn, laying aside his *Figaro*. Like all Austrians residing in Paris he had a special preference for that frivolous journal. "I met him this afternoon on the Boulevard, and he asked me expressly whether we were to be at home this evening."

Gabrielle looked, as her father observed with surprise, rather embarrassed. He had spoken thoughtlessly, and in masculine ignorance of the state of affairs. He was just beginning to teaze the girl about her behaviour when the footman announced the Baroness Melkweyser.

Her head-dress of red feathers sat somewhat askew upon the old-fashioned puffs of hair that framed her sallow face. She wore a gown of flowered brocade, the surpassing ugliness of which showed it to have been purchased at a bargain at some great bazaar as a "*fin de saison*." She squinted slightly, winked constantly, was entirely out of breath, and sank exhausted into an arm-chair, before uttering a word of greeting.

"Ah, if you only knew all I have done this blessed day!" she exclaimed.

The Truyn trio looked at her in smiling silence.

"Confessed and received the sacrament very early," the baroness began the list of her achievements, "always on the second of every month--I never can manage it on the first--then at the Pierson sale I bought six things marked with Louis Philippe's cipher, then I went to see Ada de Thienne's trousseau,--then to a breakfast at the new minister's--too comical--his wife made herself perfectly ridiculous, in a bare neck at two o'clock in the daytime!"

"That is the inevitable consequence of a change of ministers," Zinka remarked. Her manner of speech, quiet, and rather inclined to irony, was that of those who, with rigid self-control have for years endured with dignity some great grief.

The baroness, meanwhile, rattled on, unheeding. "Then I went my round of charities, then looked for a wedding-present for my niece Stefanie...."

"Heavens, Zoë!" Truyn groaned.

"Yes, I lead a most fatiguing existence," the baroness wailed. "Just as I sat down to supper,--I missed my dinner--it occurred to me that it really would be better not to let to-day pass without making you a very important communication--that is--hm--discussing--a most important matter with you--and--here I am. Pray, Zinka, let me have a sandwich, for I am dying of hunger."

"Ring the bell, Erich," Zinka said with a smile.

"And now to business," said the baroness, "*je tiens une occasion*--it really is the most advantageous opportunity!"

"You shall have your sandwich, Zoë," said Truyn, quietly stretching out his hand to the bell handle, "but pray spare me your advantageous opportunities. If I had availed myself of all your boasted 'opportunities,' I should now be the proud possessor of fourteen rattle-trap Bühl pianos and at least twenty-five tumble-down country houses. As it is I have bought for love of you three holy-water pots of Mme. Maintenon's, an inkstand of the Pompadour's, and I can't tell how many nightcaps of Louis XVI., warranted genuine."

"And an excellent bargain you had of them," the baroness declared. "Louis Sixteenth's nightcaps have latterly been going up in price. But this time there is no question of purchase," she went on to say, "and that is the best of it."

"That certainly is very fine," muttered Truyn.

"The question is,--I suppose I ought to ask Gabrielle to leave the room, that used to be the way, girls never were allowed to be present while their parents disposed of their future, but I .... *j'aime à attaquer les choses franchement*. The question is, in fact, with regard to--Gabrielle's marriage."

Zinka with a smile took the hand of the young girl standing beside her in her own, and tenderly laid it against her cheek.

"Gabrielle's beauty produced a sensation at the last ball at the Spanish embassy's," the baroness continued.

"I must entreat you not to make such a fatal assault upon my daughter's modesty," exclaimed Zinka.

"Bah!" the baroness shrugged her shoulders, "stop up your ears, Gabrielle. Produced a sensation is the correct phrase. It is remarkable--the *succés* that the Austrian women always have in Paris. I have a suitor for Gabrielle--the most brilliant *parti* in Paris."

"Stop, stop, Zoë, I beg you," said Truyn, provoked, "you make me nervous! You always forget how your French way of arranging marriages goes against the grain with us and our old-fashioned Austrian ideas. You say I have a rich husband for your daughter in just the same tone in which you say I have a purchaser for your house! And I seriously entreat you to consider that a jewel like my dear comrade yonder, may be bestowed, upon one deemed worthy of such a possession, but can never be sold."

"Ah, here is my sandwich!" exclaimed the baroness, paying no attention to his words in her satisfaction over the tea-tray. Whilst Gabrielle was occupied with making tea the visitor applied herself to the refreshments, whispering meanwhile confidentially and mysteriously to Truyn. "I thought that your new domestic relations might make you desirous to have Gabrielle mar ...."

An angry flash in Truyn's blue eyes, usually so kindly, warned her that she was on the wrong track; she lost countenance and consequently proceeded rather too precipitately in her investigations as to 'how the land lay.'

"At least my proposition is worth being taken into serious consideration," she said hastily. "Count Capriani commissioned me to ask you whether there was any prospect of his obtaining Gabrielle's hand for his only--remember, his only son."

"Count Capriani, I do not know who he is," Truyn said coldly.

"Well then, Conte Capriani," Zoë explained impatiently.

"Ah, indeed, Conte Capriani," Truyn said significantly,--"the railroad Capriani!"

"Yes."

"And he dares to ask my daughter's hand for his son?"

Perfect silence reigned for a moment. Gabrielle's little nose expressed intense disdain.

"Zoë, you are insane," Truyn said at last, very contemptuously. "This is not, I believe, the first of April."

"I cannot understand your irritation," the baroness rejoined, with the bravado that is the result of great embarrassment. "You are always proclaiming yourself a Liberal with no prejudices!"

Truyn coloured slightly. He had grown more decided than he had been a few years before, and his shirt collars were perhaps a little higher and stiffer. His whole bearing expressed the dignified content that distinguishes the man of conservative views of life. He gently twitched his high collar as he began: "I am a Liberal--at least I fancy that I am. If my daughter had set her heart upon marrying a man her inferior as regards birth and family, I should certainly consent to her doing so, provided the man were one whose character and attainments atoned for his low origin."

Zinka smiled sceptically with a scarcely perceptible shrug. Truyn's colour deepened. "I do not deny," he admitted, "that it would be very hard for me, but all the same I should consent and should do all that I could to assist such a son-in-law to attain a position worthy of my daughter--that is suitable to her mode of life."

"Do not be afraid, papa. I have not the slightest desire to fall in love with a deputy on the extreme Left," Gabrielle observed.

"In young Capriani's case there would be no need for you to trouble yourself about your son-in-law's position," said the baroness loftily. "*Sa position est toute faite*. All Paris was at the ball the night before last in the Capriani Hôtel--all the *rois en exil* appeared there, and even some Siberian magnates, and all--that is very many--of the Austrians at present in Paris."

"You know just as well as I do why all these magnates appeared at Capriani's," Truyn rejoined angrily. "But indeed I care nothing for this speculator's position--the man himself is odious--a common parvenu with a boor of a son."

"Have it your own way," said the baroness. "Perhaps you know that a daughter of Capriani's is married to the Duke of Larothière?"

"Yes, I know it."

"And that the Conte's property is estimated at a hundred million?"

"It may be a hundred billion for all I care."

"He is incontestably one of the most influential financiers in Europe."

"Unfortunately, and one of the most corrupt and corrupting," Truyn rejoined with emphasis.

"You have not, however, asked Gabrielle's opinion," persisted the baroness.

Gabrielle tossed her head, but her answer was unuttered, for just at this moment the servant flung open the door, and the interesting conversation was interrupted by the announcement of fresh visitors.

CHAPTER II.

Two young men entered--two Counts Lodrin. They bore the same name; they were the sons of brothers--and as unlike each other as possible.

With regard to Oswald--the "Ossi" of whom Truyn made mention a while before.--Gabrielle was convinced that no sculptured classic god, none of Raphael's cherubim could compare with him in beauty and distinction. She was perhaps alone in this view, although it must be confessed that few mortal men surpassed him in these two respects. About six and twenty, tall, slender--very dark--a gay, good-humoured smile on his handsome, aristocratic face--with an eager, ardent manner--and with what might be called the gypsy-like distinction that characterizes an entire class of the Austrian aristocracy he was the embodiment of chivalric youth. With all the attractiveness of his face, his eyes struck you at once--it would be hard to say what was wrong about them, whether they were too large, or too dark.

They certainly were very beautiful, but they produced the impression of not suiting the face--of having been placed there by accident. But the incongruous impression made by those large, dark eyes upon almost every one who saw the young man for the first time was extremely fleeting, and passed away as soon as Oswald began to talk--as soon as his look became animated.

His cousin Georges was at least a dozen years his elder, and nearly a head shorter than he. Many persons declared that he looked like a jockey; they were wrong. He looked like what he was, a prodigal son, very well-born. Spare in figure, his face smoothly shaven, except for a long sandy moustache, his hair quite gray, and brushed up from the temples after a vanished fashion, his features keen and mobile, his eyes round as a bird's, his carriage rather stooping and with motions characterized by a certain negligence, he produced the impression of a man who had seen a great deal of the world, and who now took a philosophic view of his life and of his position.

Oswald is the heir, Georges is the next to inherit.

Scarcely were the usual formal greetings over when Oswald made an attempt to join his pretty cousin Gabrielle, with the laudable purpose of helping her to pour out tea. His design was cruelly frustrated, however, by Count Truyn, who instantly engaged him in a brisk discussion of the latest anti-Catholic measures on the part of the Republic. Oswald sat beside his uncle restlessly drumming on the brim of his opera-hat, the image of politely-concealed youthful impatience, now and then adding an "abominable!" or a "disgusting," to the indignant expressions of the elder man, and all the while glancing towards Gabrielle. Certain personal matters interested him far more just now than the deplorable excesses of the French government. He had not read the article in the *Temps* to which his uncle alluded, he did not take the French Republic at all in earnest, he considered it in fact no Republic at all, but only a monarchy gone mad; French politics interested him from an ethnographical point of view only, all which he calmly confessed to his uncle, by whom he was scolded as "unpardonably indifferent," and "culpably blind." The elder man's conservative philippics grew more eager, and the younger one's courteous admissions more vague, until at last Zinka succeeded in releasing the latter by asking Gabrielle to sing something. Gabrielle, of course, declared that she was hoarse, but Oswald who was, by the way, about as much interested in her singing from a musical point of view as in the trumpet-solos of the emperor of Russia, smiled away her objections and rising, with a sigh of relief, went to open the grand piano.

No one seemed to have any idea of according a strict silence to the young girl's music, and whilst Gabrielle warbled in a sweet, but rather thin voice, some majestic air of Handel's, and Oswald leaning against the cover of the instrument looked down at her with ardent intentness, Georges, his hands upon his knees, his body inclined towards the Baroness Melkweyser who, still busied with her refreshments, was disposing of sandwich after sandwich, said: "You are wearing yourself out in the service of mankind. Have you allowed yourself one half-hour's repose to-day?--No, not one--as any one may see who looks at you. *A propos*, who was the Japanese woman dressed in yellow at whose side I saw you to-day sitting in a fainting condition in a landau--in front of Gouache's was it?--on the Boulevard de la Madeleine?"

"Adeline Capriani."

"*Ah tiens!* That was why I seemed to have seen her before."

"A very queer figure was she not?"

"She is not ugly," said Georges. "It is a pity that she dresses so ridiculously."

"Her dress costs her a fortune every year--the first artists in Paris design her gowns," Madame Zoë declared.

"Indeed----? Now I understand why she always looks as if she had been stolen from a bric-a-brac shop," said Georges. "Explain to me, however, why this wealthy young lady is still unmarried. Perhaps the Conte thinks another son-in-law too expensive an article ... Did you know that Larothière lost 300,000 francs again yesterday at baccarat at the Jockey Club?"

"That is of no consequence," Zoë said loftily. "Gaston loves his wife--it is all that Capriani requires of his sons-in-law."

"*Sapperment!*" Georges exclaimed, "that's the right kind of a father-in-law; what if you should negotiate a marriage, Baroness, between me and Mademoiselle Capriani?"

"Do not indulge in such sorry jests," Truyn interposed disapprovingly.

"I am in solemn earnest; the financial ground beneath my feet is very shaky at present, and having one's debts paid by such a good fellow as Ossi palls upon one in time. I am undecided whether to turn Hospitaller or to marry an heiress."

"Ah, if Oswald heard you!" Zinka said with her quiet smile.

"Ossi at this moment, if I am not greatly mistaken, is listening to the songs of angels in Heaven, and takes precious little heed of us ordinary mortals," replied Georges, glancing with a certain dreaminess in his eyes towards the youthful pair who had left the piano and were standing in the deep recess of an open balconied window.

"Happy youth," murmured Georges.

Yes, happy youth! They were standing there, he very pale, she blushing slightly, mute, confused, the sparkling eyes of each seeking, avoiding the other's. He has led her to the recess to show her the moon, to lay his heart at her feet, but he has forgotten the moon, and he has not yet dared to pour out his heart to her.

The fragrant breath of the spring night was wafted towards them, fanning their youthful faces caressingly.

All nature was thrilling beneath the first gentle May shower. The large white panicles of the elder in the little garden in front of the house gleamed brightly through the gray twilight. The small fountain murmured monotonously, its slender jet of water sparkling in the light from the drawing-room windows. They were dancing in the house opposite; like colourless phantoms the different couples glided across the lowered shades of the windows. The "Ecstasy" waltz played by a piano and a violin mingled its frivolous sobs and laughter with the modest song of the fountain and the whispers of the elder-bushes. All else was quiet in the Avenue-Labédoyère, but from the distance the restless roar of the huge city invaded the silence of night--mysterious, confused, as the demoniac restlessness of Hell may sometimes invade the divine peace of Heaven.

"Gabrielle!" Oswald began at last with hesitation and very gently, "I have come very often of late to the Avenue-Labédoyère. Can you guess why?"

"Why?" The blush on Gabrielle's cheek deepens. "Why?--since you were in Paris for three weeks without coming near your relatives you ought to make up for lost time," she murmured.

"True, Gabrielle--but--do you really not know for whose sake I have come so often, so very often?"

She was silent.

His breath came more quickly, the colour rose to his cheek. Surely he must have divined Gabrielle's innocent secret from the young girl's tell-tale shyness, but yet at this decisive moment the words died in his throat as they must for every genuine, honest lover who would fain ask the momentous question of her whom he loves.

"Gabrielle," he murmured hastily and somewhat indistinctly, "will you take the full heart I offer you--can you accept it, or...." he hesitated and looked inquiringly into her lovely face. "Ella, all my happiness lies in your hands!"

Her heart beat loudly, the lace ruffles on her bosom trembled, as she slowly lifted her eyes to his.--How handsome he was, how well the tender humility in his face became him! His happiness lies in her hands! Her eyes filled with tears. "I do not know ... I ... Oswald ... Ossi!" she murmured disconnectedly, and then she placed her slender hand in the strong one held out to her.

Truyn with his back to the window, noticed nothing, but the baroness who had been observing this romantic intermezzo through her eyeglass with cold-blooded curiosity, said drily to herself:

"*J'en suis pour mes frais*;" then turning for the last time to Truyn, she said, "I have communicated to you Capriani's proposal."

"And you are at liberty to tell him how I received it," Truyn replied stiffly.

"*J'arrangerai un peu*," the baroness said as she rose, "do not disturb the young people, I will slip out on tiptoe. Adieu." And with a courteous glance around, she hurried away.

"Well, what do you think?" exclaimed Truyn, as he returned to the drawing-room, after escorting her to the hall. "What do you think, Georges?" and sitting down beside the young man he tapped him on the knee. "Capriani sends that goose Zoë in all seriousness to ask for my daughter's hand for his son. What do you say to that?"

"Audacious enough," said Georges shrugging his shoulders, "but what would you have--'tis a sign of the times!"

This dry way of judging of the matter did not please Truyn at all. "Ossi!" he called.

"What, uncle?" The young people advanced together into the room.

"I have an interesting piece of news for you. A secret agent of the *Maison Foy* has made a proposal to-day for Ella's hand for Capriani, jr! What do you say to that?"

"Ella's hand for the son of that railway Capriani!" exclaimed Oswald angrily. "Impossible! The secret agent deserves .... and he made an expressive motion with his hand. His indignation became him extremely well, and Truyn's glance rested with evident admiration upon the young fellow's athletic figure as he stood with head slightly thrown back, and eyes flashing scornfully.

"Unfortunately it was a lady--Zoë Melkweyser," the elder man explained.

"Then she deserves at least six months of Charenton," said Oswald, "'tis incredible!" and he clinched his hand. "Your daughter, uncle, and the son of the Conte--I suppose he is a Conte--or a Marchese perhaps--Capriani! You know that little orang-outang, Georges?"

"Of course, one meets him everywhere. He addressed me by my first name yesterday," Georges replied calmly. "Ah, my dear friends, you entirely misconceive this extraordinary proposal. For my part, I see in it no personal insult to the Countess Gabrielle, but simply a symptom of an approaching social earthquake. The triumph of the tradesman is manifest everywhere. Zola in his most prominent work has celebrated the apotheosis of the bag-man and the shop-girl; Chapu has designed the façade of the latest millinery establishment; Paris will yet see the Bourse hold its sessions in *La Madeleine*, and the *Bon Marché* will set up a branch of its trade in *Notre Dame*."

"Likely enough," said Truyn with a troubled sigh, "I am only surprised that Capriani has not tried to be President of the French Republic."

"He has not thought the position at present a favourable one for his speculations," said Georges, "but what is not, may be."

"Ah, I am proud of my Austria," said Truyn, suddenly becoming stiff and wooden of aspect. "Such adventurers have at least no position there."

"Do not be too proud of your Austria," rejoined Georges, "I heard something at the embassy to-day that will hardly please you. *Id est*, Capriani has bought Schneeburg and will be your nearest neighbour in Bohemia."

Truyn started to his feet. "Capriani .... Schneeburg .... impossible! How could Malzin bring himself to such a sacrifice!"

"It must have gone hard with the poor fellow, God rest his soul! The night after the contract had been signed he died of apoplexy."

"Good Heavens!" murmured Truyn, pacing restlessly to and fro. "Good Heavens!"

"And there is another interesting piece of news," Georges went on.

"Well?"

"Fritz--do you remember him?"

"Certainly. The only Malzin now left, a very amiable lad who unfortunately made an impossible marriage."

"Yes, he married an actress, and just at the time when every one else was tired of ...."

"Georges!" exclaimed Oswald frowning and glancing towards Gabrielle. He was evidently of the opinion that such things should not be mentioned in the presence of young girls.

"Hm--hm," muttered Georges, "and he has accepted the post of Capriani's private secretary."

"Frightful!" exclaimed Oswald.

"He must have become morally corrupt to some degree, before he could make up his mind to submit to such a humiliation," interposed Truyn indignantly.

"Poor devil!" said Oswald.

"What would you have?" the philosophic Georges remarked and hummed ironically the air of '*Garde la reine*.' "*Ce n'est pas toujours les mêmes qui ont l'assiette au beurre*. I tell you it is all up with us."

All preserved a melancholy silence for a while, then Truyn favoured the party with a few grand political aphorisms, and Oswald at last said to himself perfectly calmly, and as if impromptu, "Gabrielle and Capriani's son!"

The melancholy mood vanished and they talked and laughed so that there was a sound as of merry bells through the silence of the night.

CHAPTER III.

Zoë Melkweyser was an Austrian and a distant relative of Truyn's. Very well-born, but in very narrow pecuniary circumstances, she had grown up on her widowed father's heavily-mortgaged estate, condemned through want of means to a continued residence there, restless as was the temperament with which nature had endowed her. As a school-girl she had no greater pleasure than imaginary journeys from place to place upon the map, and one day she confided to her governess, Mrs. Sidney, under the seal of secrecy, that she would consent to marry any man, even were he a negro, who would promise to indulge her restlessness and allow her to travel to her heart's content.

It was no negro, however, but a banker from Brussels, who finally fulfilled her requirements. She met him at a watering-place, whither she had gone under the chaperonage of a wealthy and compassionate relative. In spite of her thirst for travel she could hardly have made up her mind to marry an Austrian banker, but a Belgian Crœ sus was quite a different affair in her opinion.

All the objections and remonstrances of her aristocratic connections in Austria upon her return thither betrothed, she cut short with, "What would you have? Of course I never should have met him here, but he was received at court in Brussels."

And in fact Baron Alfred Melkweyser was not only received at court in Brussels, but what was still more extraordinary, by the Princess L----, being admitted to the most exclusive Belgian circles, 'among the people whom everyone knows.'

It would have been difficult to find any fault with him except for his brand-new patent of nobility, and Zoë never had any cause to repent her marriage. His manners were perfectly correct, he rode well, had a laudable passion for antiquities, ordered his clothes at Poole's, always used *vous* in talking with his wife, paid all her bills without even a wry face, patiently travelled with her all over the world, and at her desire removed with her to Paris.

After ten years of childless marriage he died suddenly, of his first and unfortunately unsuccessful attempt to drive four-in-hand. As this, his first ambitious folly, was also his last, society forbore to ridicule it, and even after his death he enjoyed the reputation of an '*homme parfaitement bien*.'

His widow bewailed his loss sincerely, and purchased all her mourning of *Cyprès* at reduced prices. Bargains had always been a passion with her, and scarcely had her year of mourning passed, before, thanks to her expensive taste for cheap, useless articles, she had disposed of half the source of her income. Among other things she purchased at low prices various stocks which turned out badly. She owed her familiarity with financial affairs entirely to her speculative vein, and not at all, as her aristocratic relatives and country-folk erroneously imagined, to her deceased husband, who had, in fact, held himself persistently aloof from former financial acquaintances.

It was not acquisitiveness that spurred Zoë on to her various undertakings, but the restlessness of her temperament. She delighted in everything novel and fatiguing, whether it were a pilgrimage to *Lourdes*, a bargain day at the *Bon Marché*, or a first representation at the *Français*, to which, by persistent wire-pulling and constant appeals to one and another person of

influence, she was able to obtain tickets of admission not only for herself but for all her most intimate friends. She had one means, however, far more entertaining than all others, of procuring the excitement needed by her temperament, and this was the introduction to 'the world,' of American or European financial magnates. She extorted for them invitations to the most distinguished routs, she designed the balls which these wealthy people were to give to dazzle Paris withal, and she expended an incredible amount of cunning and energy in inducing the aristocratic world to appear at these entertainments. Her tactics were those of genius; instead of contenting herself after the fashion of less skilful mortals with inviting the poorer and more modest members of Paris society, she bent all her efforts to securing the presence of some legitimist duchess at the ball, if only for an hour. She succeeded in doing this in most cases by placing at the duchess' disposal a large sum of money for charitable purposes. When she had gained over two or three of these fixed stars, the planets of Parisian society began to appear at these balls.

Planets, in their social relations, are notably much more fastidious than fixed stars, as is but natural; they are forced to reflect a light not their own.

The entire scheme was usually most successful; the balls were beautiful and everything went excellently well. Sometimes, indeed, not one of the assembled guests had the civility to invite the mistress of the mansion to dance, and many of those present affected to mistake the host for a footman, but none the less was everyone content and pleased when the ball was over. Zoë Melkweyser was glad that she had enjoyed so brilliant an opportunity of getting out of breath; the givers of the ball were pleased to read the long list of their distinguished guests in *Figaro*; and *le monde* rejoiced in having something to laugh at, and spent three days in ridiculing the extravagance of the Cotillon favours.

The latest and most brilliant of Zoë's protégés was Conte Capriani.

Who was he? What was he? 'A poisonous fungus that the sultry storm-laden atmosphere had bred upon heaven only knows what muck-heap.'

A clever statesman had made use of this phrase not long before to define the innate characteristics of this Crœ sus. The phrase had been laughingly caught up and repeated, and no one had troubled themselves further about Capriani's antecedents. In a smaller city they would soon have been investigated, but Paris never busies itself long with the solution of such commonplace mysteries; on the contrary it takes care not to pry into the past of an adventurer whom it finds of very great use. Thus the antecedents of this financial Jove remained, like those of most deities, shrouded in myth.

Among the many legends that had at first been circulated concerning him, was one that he had formerly been a lady's physician and that he had been most successful with his aristocratic patients.

Whether this were or were not true, certain it was that his air and manner suggested that adulatory, fawning servility which characterizes those physicians whose professional efforts are, for lack of other occupation, chiefly directed to soothing the nerves of hysteric women. His exterior was that of a man who has once been handsome, *cidevant-beau*, spoiled only by the piercing glance of his large black eyes, and the cynical droop of his loose under-lip. He carried his head well forward, as if listening, and around his mouth and eyes there were strange lines and wrinkles in the yellow skin which had of late grown flabby,--lines suggesting that some of the figures with which he played the despot had flown angrily into his face and embedded themselves there.

That he had begun life with nothing he himself was wont to declare, whenever he gave way to the fit of rage that seized him upon any offence offered to his vanity; but how he had gained his immense fortune he never told. He made profit out of every thing that afforded gain, most of all out of the credulity of indolent inexperienced avarice. His success as a 'bear' was famous, and notorious; it sometimes seemed as if ill-luck existed only for his advantage, and it was well known that he had emerged from great financial crises which ruined thousands, not only unharmed, but with an increase of wealth.

There were various whispers afloat concerning his speculations, but no one had been able to attach any direct blame to him. Once only, in connection with his construction of a Spanish railway he had laid himself open to a couple of disgraceful charges. The times were unpropitious; the public, exasperated by various huge swindles, demanded a victim; but whilst several lesser individuals, were brought to trial and subjected to a public investigation, all legal proceedings against Capriani were suddenly quashed. Why?.... No one knew or at least no one told aloud what was known.

He was a '*personnage tare*,' but the stain upon his name was of so peculiar a nature that prudence required of many well-known and eminent men that they should not see it. Poor devils who stood outside the demoniac spell of his financial magic art called him an unprincipled swindler: people who had penetrated within the conjuror's circle called him a financial genius, flattered him almost servilely in their longing to share in his colossal enterprises, and if they did so procured for him in return a slight social recognition. And it was curious to observe how much at heart the magnate had this same social recognition, how he sued for the favour of every lofty

dignitary, of every capital letter in the social alphabet. He persisted unweariedly in hurling his golden bomb-shells into the stronghold of Parisian society, and at last the fortress capitulated. He was received, as an enemy to be sure, with closed shutters and in silence, but he was received everywhere, at all the embassies, throughout the entire official representative world, and even in some drawing-rooms of the Faubourg. Everywhere he met those who, while he smiled at them in the most friendly way, looked over his shoulder without seeing him, but this he endured serenely. The hour for revenge will come, he said to himself, and almost always it did come!

Thanks to an ostentatious benevolence backed by millions, he had of late contrived to improve perceptibly his social standing; at his last ball, several crowned heads had been present. Zoë was right; he was undoubtedly one of the most influential financiers in Europe; she might almost have described him as one of the most influential men.

In Paris he was one of the celebrities that are shown to strangers. When he walked past, or rather drove past, for he was physically indolent and avoided all bodily exertion, he was pointed out as Monsieur Grévy or Mdlle. Bernhardt is pointed out. He occupied a vast hotel that he had built after the model of the castle of Chenonceau, but two stories higher, in the neighbourhood of the Park Monceau; in a quarter of an hour after leaving the Avenue Labédoyère the Baroness Zoë's *fiacre* drew up before this mimicry of vanished feudalism erected by a modern Crœ sus.

"Gabrielle's betrothal will make everything smooth," she said to herself. "I am glad to be well rid of the affair!"

A Maître d'Hôtel, who, it was said, had formerly been chamberlain to the Duc de Morny, and one of whose duties it was to instruct his present master in the laws of aristocratic etiquette, conducted the baroness with dignified solemnity to the 'small drawing-room' where the Contessa Capriani was wont to receive on quiet evenings.

The 'small drawing-room' was a very large, and very brilliantly-furnished apartment, which, in spite of landscapes by Corot, in spite of gold-woven Japanese hangings, old inlaid cabinets and a thousand articles of value, produced a dreary in-harmonious impression. It was evident that nothing here was devised for the pleasure and comfort of the inmates of the house, but that everything was arranged with a view of impressing visitors. It almost seemed as if millions run mad had tossed all these splendours together aimlessly, insanely shouting, "something more costly, something more costly still!"

Here sat the Contessa busied with some fancy work. She appeared well-bred, but shy, and embarrassed by her wealth, as she advanced a few steps to welcome the baroness, made a few conventional remarks, and then begged with a sigh to be excused for going on with her work, which work consisted in cutting all sorts of flowers and birds out of a piece of cretonne in order to sew them on a piece of satin. She devoted several hours a day to this occupation, and since her own rooms, as well as those of her acquaintances, were far too splendidly furnished to have any place in them for this sort of work, the result of her diligence was bestowed every year upon some charity-bazaar.

Zoë Melkweyser thought the Contessa unusually depressed. Excited voices were heard in the next room, and every time that there was a particularly loud explosion the mistress of the mansion winced.

"Can the 300,000 francs which the Duke of Larothière lost last night be a bitter pill for even King Midas?" Zoë asked herself.

This supposition proved, however to be erroneous. Madame Capriani moved her chair rather nearer to Zoë, and whispered, "My husband is terribly agitated,--my poor son--that article in *Figaro*,--you saw it of course ...."

"I? I have not seen *Figaro* to-day," Zoë reassured her. It was true, she had not seen *Figaro* but she had heard of the article to which the countess alluded; the excitement in the *casa* Capriani was quite intelligible to her now. No, Capriani never even pulled a wry face at the sums lost at play by his son-in-law; he enjoyed smiling away such losses; everything was allowable in the duke. For the comparatively petty extravagances of his own son he had much less forbearance, in fact he showed very little tenderness for this scion of his, whose name was Arthur, and who was far from satisfactory to his father. The Croesus could forgive his son's noble scorn of everything relating to business, for positively refusing to have a desk in his father's counting-room and for devoting his entire existence to sport,--but it drove him frantic to have Arthur held up to ridicule by the sporting world.

Hitherto Arthur's grandest achievements in the sporting world had culminated in a couple of broken collar-bones and a quantity of lost wagers,--today their number had been increased by a trifling *fiasco*.

A very trifling *fiasco*, but of a highly delicate nature. Two Austrians, an attaché and one of his friends at present in Paris, both belonging to extremely aristocratic families, had lately out of wild caprice, and amid much laughter, undertaken to run a foot-race backwards.

Several French journals had taken immediate occasion to write articles on this eccentric wager, describing backward races as a traditional and very favourite sport among the youthful

aristocrats of Austria. These journalistic rhapsodies had incited Arthur Capriani to arrange a similar race with brilliant accessories, music, torchlight, and a large assemblage of young dandies, and ladies of every description. He lost the race, got a severe contusion on his head, and the next day appeared the article in *Figaro* which so exasperated the Conte.

"If you were only capable of something in the world beside making yourself ridiculous!" Zoë distinctly heard the father's excited voice say, "but you can do nothing else, nothing! And to think of my toiling for you,--making money for you!"

"*Mon Dieu!* you make money because you delight in nothing else," retorted young Capriani.

"And for you--for *you*, I am contemplating one of the most brilliant matches in Austria," the Conte fairly shouted, "'tis ridiculous!"

"I fancy that Count Truyn agrees with you there," was Arthur's repartee.

"Ah, you would, would you?--you dare to sneer at your father?" Capriani burst forth, after the illogical fashion of angry men, "the father to whom you owe everything! I should like to see you begin life as I did, bare-footed, with only one gulden in your pocket!"

"What's the use of these recriminations?" drawled the son, "your antecedents mortify me enough without them, and ...."

There was a incoherent cry, a savage word ....!

The Contessa, very pale, put down her scissors; she trembled violently.

"I think it would be better to separate them," Zoë remarked very calmly.

"I will try to," gasped Madame Capriani, and opening the door into the next room, she called, "*Mon-ami*, the Baroness Melkweyser is here--I believe she brings you some news ...."

"*Il s'agit de votre fameuse affaire, mon cher comte*," Zoë called coaxingly.

Her words produced a magical effect; both men made their appearance, the father with a honeyed smile, the son, a short thick-set fellow with handsome features but a rude ill-tempered air, frowning and sullen.

"*Bon soir baronne*."

"*Bon soir*."

"*Eh bien?*" and settling himself in an arm-chair, his legs outstretched, and toying with his double eyeglass in the triumphant attitude with which he was wont to contemplate the favourable development of some particularly clever business transaction, Capriani began, "So you have at last found a favourable opportunity."

"No,--no, not at all!" said Zoë, "but I thought best not to leave you in uncertainty any longer, and so I came to you this evening."

"You know I gave you no authority to make a direct proposal," said the Conte.

"How can you suppose me capable of such want of tact!" Zoë rejoined hypocritically, "unfortunately I have not been able even to find out how the land lies. If you had commissioned me a little sooner--just a little sooner,--but there is nothing to be done now, for Gabrielle Truyn is already betrothed!"

"*Nom d'un chien!*" muttered Arthur; he had been no less impressed by Gabrielle's beauty than by her lofty descent--"*nom d'un chien!*"

"Indeed, already betrothed," his father said coldly, slowly putting his eyeglass upon his nose and scanning the baroness mistrustfully as he asked, "betrothed to whom?"

"To her cousin, Oswald Lodrin."

"To Oswald Lodrin," he repeated quickly. "You cannot, indeed, enter the lists against him, my poor Arthur!"

"Perhaps not as far as arrogance is concerned," growled the Vicomte, "he is the haughtiest human being I ever came across."

"That may be, but--" the Conte smiled oddly, "he is also one of the handsomest and most distinguished of Austrians, and he is renowned as such."

Whilst Arthur continued to mutter unintelligibly, but in evident ill-humor, Capriani senior left his arm-chair and taking a low seat beside Zoë, said, "To-morrow the X---- railway stock is to be issued. The shares will be in great demand; shall I save you a couple of hundred?"

CHAPTER IV.

The fragrance of the elder blossoms floated sweet and strong upon the air in the dim warm stillness of the Avenue Labédoyère. The poetry that breathes in the odour of flowers no words can reproduce, music alone can sometimes translate it; it ascended from the full white panicles in the little garden before the Hôtel Truyn and breathed through the open window into Gabrielle's chamber like an exultant yearning, like a song filled with love's delicious pain.

Zinka sat on the edge of the little white bed where the young girl was lying, her golden hair rippling about her brow and temples, while upon her pale face lay the melancholy of illimitable joy; her eyes were moist.

"And you are not surprised, Zini ... not at all?" she whispered.

"No, my child," replied Zinka tenderly, "not in the least; I knew you were destined for each other from the first moment that I saw you together."

"Ah," Gabrielle sighed, "I cannot comprehend it yet. It all seems to me like a delicious dream from which I must waken, but even if I must, even if the dear God takes from me all that He has given me, I shall thank Him on my knees as long as I live for this one lovely dream."

"Calm yourself, my darling," Zinka whispered, lovingly stroking the young girl's cheeks, "how your cheeks burn!" And she poured a few drops of essence of orange flowers into a glass of water, "drink this, you little enthusiast."

"It will do no good, dear little mother," said Gabrielle, obediently lifting the composing draught to her burning lips. "Ah, you cannot imagine how I feel, it seems as if--as if my heart would break with happiness!"

Zinka kissed her, made the sign of the cross upon her forehead, drew the coverlet over her shoulders, once more admonished her to be calm, and left her.

Thunder rumbled without; Zinka started and as a second clap resounded she turned back. "Are you afraid of the storm, Ella, shall I stay with you?" she asked gently.

"Ah no, dear little mother," Gabrielle replied in the intoxication of her happiness, "I hardly hear the thunder."

And Zinka departed. "I do not know why I cannot rejoice in this as I ought," she said to herself, "it seems to me as if we had forgotten to invite some one of the twelve fairies to this betrothal."

And whilst the thunder crashed above the Champs Elysées she suddenly recalled an old fairy story that a fever-stricken peasant from the Trastevere had once told her in Rome.

It was a gloomy story, one of those legends in which the popular imagination, boldly overleaping all chronological and historical obstacles, bestows upon Pagan gods the wings of Christian angels, and arms God the Father with the lightnings of angry Jove. It ran somewhat thus:

"There was once a beautiful maiden who was good as an angel, so good that it gave her unutterable pain to see any one sad and not to be able to help; and once when she had cried herself to sleep over the woes of mankind she had a wonderful vision. A dark form with a veiled face approached her and said, 'If you have the courage to cut your heart out of your breast and plant it deep in the earth, there will spring from it a flower so glorious, so wonderful, that whoever inhales its fragrance will feel a bliss so intense that he would gladly purchase it with all the torture of our mortal existence.'

"And the maiden cut her heart out of her breast and planted it deep in the brown earth, and watered it with her tears, and there sprang from it a magically-beautiful flower, with luxuriant green leaves, and large white blossoms with blood-red calyxes, and whoever inhaled the breath of these blossoms felt an intoxicating delight course through his veins, so that in his wild ecstasy he forgot all earthly care and trouble. The flowers unfolded to more and more enchanting loveliness, and through the thick foliage sighed the sweetest music.

"Now when the angels in Heaven heard of this strange plant they entreated the Almighty Father to allow them to go get it and to plant it in Paradise.

"The Lord granted their request. Then they fluttered down from Heaven, but when they approached the wondrous plant a voice spoke from it, saying, 'Let me alone, I blossom for the

consolation of the earth, I could not live in Paradise; the soil in which I flourish must be watered with heart's blood and tears!'

"But the angels did not heed these words, and, beguiled by the delicious fragrance, they tried to tear away the roots from the lap of earth; their efforts were vain, they had to return with their purpose unfulfilled.

"When mankind saw this it exulted in its blissful possession. Happy mortals laughed at the angels' futile envy. Then the angels prostrated themselves anew at the feet of the Almighty, and implored Him to revenge them upon the blasphemers. And the Almighty gave ear to their prayer; He hurled a thunderbolt at the plant, and it was swept from off the face of the earth.

"But its roots still slumber underground, and sometimes when in mild spring nights a mysterious fragrance steals upon the air, a fragrance wafted from no visible blossom, these roots are stirring to life, and green leaves shoot upward into the spring. But the sweet perfume still moves the angels to anger, and it scarcely rises aloft before the thunder rolls over the earth and the lightning blasts the green leaves. The flower will never blossom again."

CHAPTER V.

Oswald and his cousin Georges were sitting at breakfast in their pleasant room in the Hotel Bristol by a window that looked out upon the Place Vendôme, and down the brilliant Rue de la Paix, the perspective of which was lost in a hurly-burly of omnibuses, orange carts, flower wagons, advertising vehicles painted fiery red, fiacres, sun-illumined dust, and human beings rushing madly hither and thither. Whilst Georges was drinking his tea in sober comfort with a brief remark as to the incomparable excellence of the Paris butter, Oswald, who although endowed by nature with an excellent appetite had paid but scant attention to his meals of late, recounted for the tenth time to his cousin the extraordinary combination of circumstances which had brought together Gabrielle and himself. He was a victim of the lovers' delusion that sees in the most ordinary occurrences the finger of the Deity, and that regards their happiness as a special marvel wrought by Providence for their benefit.

It was, so Oswald narrated, in April, on the second day of the Auteuil races, the first faint tinge of green was perceptible on the landscape. He was on horseback, riding a magnificent Arabian steed which one of his friends had lent him, and which he was handling with the excessive care which an Austrian always bestows upon a horse that is not his own. Suddenly he saw walking across the race-course a young lady in a dark green dress; a ray of sunlight that turned her hair to gold attracted his attention to her. She walked quickly past with an elderly gentleman and Oswald turned to look after her. His horse was a little restless, his rider's spurs were rather too sharp; with the sudden movement he scratched the animal's silken skin, and instantly exclaimed, "*Ah, pardon!*" a piece of courtesy for which his companions ridiculed him loudly. In the meantime the young lady with the gray-haired gentleman had vanished.

"Who is that exquisitely beautiful girl?" he asked, and Wips Siegburg, secretary of the Austrian Legation, replied laughing, "Do you not know her, she is your cousin!"

"Gabrielle Truyn!" exclaimed Oswald; and Siegburg said sagely, "this comes of enjoying one's self too busily in Paris, and consequently finding no time to visit one's nearest relatives."

Oswald peered in every direction but he could not discover her again. After the race, under the leafless trees of the Champs Elysées rolled crowds of carriages, victorias, all sorts of coaches, four-in-hands, lumbering roomy omnibuses,--all veiled in the whirling, sunlit dust as in golden gauze, while everywhere, alike in the omnibuses and in the more elegant vehicles, reigned a uniform air of dull fatigue.

Paris had lost another battle with ennui.

In the motley throng Oswald was almost forced to walk his horse, pondering as he went upon the best way of excusing his discourtesy to his uncle. He had now been four entire weeks in Paris, and had not yet presented himself in the Avenue Labédoyère. Fortunately he had gone so little into society that he had not yet met the Truyns; Paris is so huge, perhaps they had not yet heard that he was there. Yes, Paris is huge, but 'society' everywhere is small. No, he could hardly venture to appear at his uncle's yet.

He was growing quite melancholy over these reflections, when he suddenly observed that his horse had coolly poked his nose over the hood, which had been thrown back, of a low carriage in

front, and was nibbling at a bouquet of white roses that he found there. Oswald shortened his bridle, and just then a lady sitting in the carriage turned round; it was Gabrielle Truyn. With no attempt to conceal her displeasure she observed what had been done, and when Oswald, hat in hand, humbly stammered his excuses, she bestowed upon him the haughty stare which an insolent intruder would have merited, and turned away. She knew perfectly well who he was, as he afterwards learned, and that he had been four weeks in Paris. The gentleman beside her now turned round, his eyes met Oswald's; he smiled, and said with good-humoured sarcasm ... "Ossi!--what an unexpected pleasure!"

"Uncle--I--I have long been intending to pay you my respects...." Oswald stammered.

"Apparently your resolutions require time to ripen," said Truyn drily.

"Ah uncle!--I--may I come to see you now?"

"You do us too much honour," said Truyn provokingly, "we will kill the fatted calf and celebrate the Prodigal's return." Then taking pity upon his nephew's embarrassment he added. "Don't be afraid, we shall not turn you out of doors, we have some consideration for young gentlemen who are in Paris for the first time; we know that they have other things to do besides looking up tiresome relatives, what say you, Ella?"

"My cousin has forgotten me," the young man murmured, "have the kindness to present me to her."

"It is your cousin, Oswald Lodrin, an old playmate of yours."

At her father's words Gabrielle merely turned her exquisite profile towards her cousin and acknowledged his low bow by a slight inclination of her head. Then she stretched out her hand for her bouquet, murmuring, "My poor roses! they are entirely ruined." And she suddenly tossed them away into the road. There was an opening in the blockade of carriages before them; Gabrielle's golden hair gleamed before Oswald's eyes for a flash, then all around grew gray; the twilight had absorbed the last glimmer of sunshine.

That same evening Oswald ordered at a large flower shop, on the Madeleine Boulevard, the most exquisite bouquet of gardenias, orchids and white roses that Paris could produce and sent it to his cousin to replace her ruined roses.

All this he retailed. His first visit, too, in the Avenue Labédoyère, the visit when he did not find Truyn at home, and when Gabrielle did not make her appearance, but Zinka, whom he had not known before, received him. There had been much discussion in Austria over this second marriage of his uncle, and Oswald had brought to Paris a violent antipathy to Zinka. But it soon vanished, or rather was transformed into a very affectionate esteem.

And then the first little dinner, a very little dinner (just to make them acquainted, Truyn said) strictly *en famille*--no strangers, only Oswald and Siegburg. The brightly-lit table with its flowers, glass, and sparkling silver, in the middle of the dim brown dining-room, the delicate fair heads of the two ladies in their light dresses standing out so charmingly against the background of the old leather hangings, Truyn's paternal cordiality, and Zinka's kindly raillery,--he thought he had never had so delightful a dinner.

Gabrielle, to be sure, held herself rather aloof. She evidently resented his tardy appearance in the Avenue Labédoyère; she hardly noticed his beautiful flowers. She talked exclusively to Siegburg who was odiously entertaining, and who glanced across the table now and then, his eyes sparkling with merry malice, at Oswald. Then as they were serving the asparagus, he took it into his head to ask Gabrielle, "Do you know who is the most courteous man in Paris, Countess Gabrielle?"

"No, how should I?"

"Your charming cousin there," rejoined the young diplomat.

"Indeed!" Gabrielle said with incredulous emphasis, bending her head a little on one side as is the fashion with pretty women when they undertake the inconvenient task of eating asparagus.

"Yes, verily, he says '*pardon*' even to his horse, when he scratches it with his spurs."

"Ah! Apparently he lavishes all his courtesy upon horses," Gabrielle said pointedly.

"In the case to which I allude, he really did owe some consideration to his horse, for the poor animal could not possibly know why he was made to feel the spur. The fact was that at the races the other day Lodrin saw a lady the sight of whom so electrified him that he turned positively all round on his horse, and in doing so scratched the poor beast with his spur."

"Ah, and who, if one may ask, was this remarkable lady?" asked Gabrielle.

"Ella, since when have you become conscience keeper for young gentlemen?" asked Truyn.

She blushed to the roots of her hair, but Oswald said with perfect composure, looking her

directly in the face: "Certainly--it was Countess Gabrielle Truyn."

She bit her lip angrily.

"It serves you right," said Truyn smiling, "why do you ask about matters that do not concern you? The jest, however, is a little stale, Ossi."'

"I should not venture to jest; I simply told the truth," rejoined Oswald. In view of the young girl's evident agitation he had regained entire calm.

"One is not always justified in telling the truth," Gabrielle observed with the pettish frankness in which even the best-bred young ladies will indulge, when irritated by the accelerated beating of their hearts.

"Indeed? Not even in reply to a question?" Oswald said very quietly, and Truyn frowned after the fashion of affectionate papas, whose daughters' behaviour does not exactly gratify their paternal ambition. Zinka interrupted the fencing of the young people by an inquiry as to the new vaudeville which Gabrielle wished to see, but of which Zinka was not quite sure she should approve.

Oswald took no further notice of Gabrielle that evening, but devoted himself to Zinka. He sat beside her for nearly an hour, and enjoyed it extremely; she had a charming way of listening, assenting to his observations by a silent smile, and inciting him to all kinds of small confidences, without asking any direct questions.

When he afterwards reflected upon what had been the interesting subject of their conversation, he discovered that she had led him to speak only of himself, that he had told her everything about his life that a young man can tell to a young woman whom he has seen but twice.

She listened attentively, and when he took his leave she had grown almost cordial.

"Now that you have broken the ice, I hope we shall see you frequently. *A propos*, to-morrrow is our night at the opera; if you have nothing more agreeable in prospect and have not heard '*La Juive*' too often...."

And then the charming, uncertain, hoping, exulting, despairing time that ensued! Gabrielle's pique slowly vanished; then without any reasonable cause returned; her behaviour towards her cousin vacillated strangely between naive cordiality and proud reserve; some days she seemed to misconstrue everything that was said, and then all at once a single cordial word would mollify her.

And the dances, the cotillon at the Countess Crecy's ball in the pretty little Hôtel, Rue St. Dominique,--the cotillon in which all had paid homage to Gabrielle as to a young queen, and in which when, of all the favours that she had to bestow only one remained, she suddenly became confused, looking from the favour to her cousin, and seeming more and more undecided until at last he advanced a step towards her and whispered, "Well, Gabrielle, am I to have the Golden Fleece or not?"

That was two days before the betrothal. To the day of his death he should wear that favour and no other on his heart. It should be buried with him!

Although not given to writing much he had kept a diary in Paris. Long since he had torn out the first pages; its contents now extended exactly from the first meeting to the first kiss. After his marriage the book was to be sealed up, to be given to his eldest son upon his twenty-first birthday.

Whilst Oswald, borne upon a lover's wings that knew no boundary line between heaven and earth, between the future and the past, at one time eulogized his betrothed, and at another made arrangements for his own burial, and his eldest son's twenty-first birthday, Georges, who had gradually finished his breakfast, leaned back in his chair watching the fantastic wreaths of smoke ascending from the bowl of his tschibouk. When at last Oswald paused and fell into a reverie he took occasion to utter the following profundity. "Living is very dear in Paris!" Twice was he obliged to repeat this brilliant aphorism, before Oswald seemed to hear it. Then glancing at his cousin reproachfully, the young fellow put his hand in his pocket, "would you like the key, Georges?" he said offering it to him.

"No," replied Georges, taking Oswald's hand, key and all in his own, and pressing it down upon the table. "No, my dear fellow, many thanks. Do you remember what Montaigne says about *le désir qui s'accroist par la malaysance*."

"Montaigne?--I am not very intimate with the old gentleman," Oswald replied with a laugh, "how came you pray to make his acquaintance?"

"Why you see, Oswald, there have been times when my means were not sufficient to provide me with amusements befitting my station in life, and I was obliged to have recourse, *faute de*

mieux, to reading. But to recur to *plaisirs de la malaysance*, Montaigne proves as clearly as that two and two make four that if there were no locks there would be no thieves! Now,--hm--one thing is certain; since your strong box has been open to me I no longer have the smallest desire to possess myself of its contents. Do you know, Ossi, that I have grown very fond of you in these few weeks? Do not overturn the pepper cruet," he admonished his cousin, who suddenly extended his hand to him with somewhat awkward shyness. "Yes, very fond, you have effected a radical change in me; I should really like to go back with you to Bohemia, perhaps you could find me something to do there. Will you take me with you to Bohemia?"

"With the greatest pleasure, Georges."

"Reflect a little. What would your mother say to your introducing an unbidden guest into her household?"

"My dear Georges, my mother, if I were to take home Karl Marx--or--" he did not conclude for at that moment his servant brought in a small salver upon which lay his newspapers and letters.

CHAPTER VI.

A couple of cards of invitation were after a fleeting examination stuck into the frame of the mirror, then came two Austrian newspapers, then three letters from Austria; one addressed in a firm, bold hand he opened instantly with a smile of pleasure and the exclamation "from my mother! at last! I am very curious to know what she says to my betrothal--I began to be anxious--she has taken so long to write."

But the light in his eyes faded, he frowned, angrily crushed the letter together, and propping his elbows on the table leaned his head upon his hands. "I could not have thought this possible," he murmured.

"Is not your mother satisfied?" Georges asked.

"Satisfied--?" growled Oswald, "satisfied--? she couldn't be dissatisfied if she tried ever so hard, but she does not rejoice with me. There, read that. 'Dear child, I agree to everything that will make you happy, and pray for every blessing upon yourself and your betrothed, whom, moreover, I remember as a charming little girl ....'"

"Well, what more can you ask?" said Georges, elevating his eyebrows.

"What more can I ask?" Oswald very nearly shouted, "what more can I ask? why, I am not used to having such conventional phrases served up to me by my mother!"

"Do you and your mother live upon perfectly good terms with each other?" asked Georges, mechanically brushing away a few crumbs on the table-cloth, and without looking at his cousin.

Oswald opened his eyes wide. "My mother and I? Why, yes, what can you be thinking of?"

Georges made no reply, he remembered perfectly well that years previously, before he had left home the Countess Lodrin had been anything but tender to her charming little son, nay, that she had been the downright fine-lady mother who figures in romances, but who fortunately is found but seldom in real life.

He thought it unnecessary, however, to remind his cousin of this.

In the meanwhile Oswald had somewhat cooled down. "My poor unreasonable mother!" he said half-aloud to himself, "it is so hard for her to give me up, in all her life she has had me only. Well, I shall soon bring her round. Ah, Georges, Georges, it seems but a poor arrangement in this life that we must so often take from one person to give to another! I only hope that my mother's letter to my betrothed is more cordial. Ah, here are two more epistles," and in no cheerful mood he opened one after the other of the two very business-like envelopes, read their contents, compared them with each other, threw both upon the table and, quite pale, with very red lips and flashing eyes, began to pace to and fro, from time to time passing his hand angrily across his forehead. "Everything disagreeable is sure to happen all at once!" he exclaimed.

Georges knowing his cousin's impetuousity watched his excitement with smiling composure. "Is Vesuvius again in a state of eruption," he said kindly, "or what is the matter, man alive?"

"Siegl is an ass!"

"Ah?--and your man of business besides?"

"Yes."

"Then this present affair is a matter of business?"

"No!" Oswald said gloomily, "an affair of honour. The matter is that I am forced to break my word--*voilà tont!* But I cannot understand Siegl, he ought to know ...." Suddenly he went to his secretary, opened it, rummaged nervously among a chaos of letters, at last finding a closely-written sheet, which he read through carefully, then grew very quiet, and seating himself opposite Georges at the uncleared breakfast-table, said "I am wrong, it is my fault."

"Pray explain yourself," said Georges, "my counsel, and my experience are at your service."

"The matter is simple enough. Before I came away from home I gave Siegl a power of attorney to conclude an unfinished sale, the sale of a couple of insignificant building lots in W----. In practical business matters I can thoroughly rely upon him. Well, the other day I had this letter from him asking whether I would agree to the winding up of the affair under certain conditions, and at the end of the letter he asked me in this case to telegraph him. His handwriting is execrable and his style most tedious,--and--and I hurried off to the Avenue Labédoyère. I was going to ride in the Bois with Gabrielle,--in short I skimmed over the letter, never noticing that he asked about another far more important sale, and telegraphed, 'I agree to everything; do as you think best.'"

"*Eh bien!*"

Oswald cleared his throat. "You remember Dr. Schmitt? He was our family physician, a true man if ever there was one, my father valued him highly. Well, he leased an estate from us, Kanitz, it lies in one corner of the Schneeburg grounds; after the old man's death his son held the lease, he is a very good fellow, we served together in the same regiment in our volunteer year. He married, and set great store by the lease, which would run out in three years. Before his marriage he came to me to know whether he might depend upon an extension of the lease; of course I promised it to him, thereby relieving him of immense anxiety. And now Siegl has sold the property at a high price to Capriani, and is very proud of the transaction, and it is all because of my thoughtlessness, because I thought it too tedious to read through his roundabout epistle and .... and young Schmitt, poor devil, is quite beside himself, and writes me this letter! I cannot understand Siegl, he might have asked me again, he knows me perfectly well, he ought to have known that I could never have contemplated anything of the kind ....! But it's just the way with all my people! If they can make a few gulden for me, no matter how, they pride themselves upon it hugely; no one seems to understand that I care precious little for the augmentation of my income; what I want is, to alleviate as far as lies in my power the existence of as many men as possible!"

"How old are you, Ossi?" Georges asked with an oddly-scrutinizing glance at his cousin.

"Twenty-six. What makes you ask?"

"Your transcendental views of life, my child. Men and ants are born with wings, but both rub them off in the struggle for existence,--men usually do so before they are twenty-four."

"That goal is passed," rejoined Oswald, "and the winged ants do not lose their wings, they only die young," and he became again absorbed in study of the two letters. "I cannot blame Siegl this time, try as hard as I can, it is *my* fault; 'tis enough to drive one mad!"

"I can understand how it goes against the grain, but--well, you must indemnify Schmitt with another property."

"That of course, but it does not help the matter," Oswald grumbled, "he has a special love for Kanitz--he was born there, his parents are buried there in a pretty little churchyard on the edge of the woods by the Holtitzer brook. He takes care of their graves himself--they are perfect beds of flowers. And his wife!--I paid her a visit last Autumn,--she is a dear little shy thing, and she looked at me out of her large eyes as if I were Omnipotence itself. There is such an old-fashioned loyalty, so poetic a content about those people; upon whom shall we depend if we heedlessly destroy the devotion of such as they? Schmitt must keep Kanitz, even although I buy it back at double the price paid for it!"

"My dear fellow you can do nothing with money where Capriani is concerned," Georges observed calmly, "but I am convinced that he is very desirous of standing well with all of you. If you make a personal request of him he certainly will not object to annul his purchase. If the matter is really important to you go and call upon Capriani, and...."

Oswald tossed his head angrily. "What? ask me to have any personal intercourse with that man--no--in an extreme case indeed----but there must be some legal way out of the difficulty, it is a matter for our agents--*Ça!* A quarter of twelve and I breakfast at Truyn's."

"You must make haste. Can I do anything for you?"

Oswald went to the writing-table and in large bold characters wrote a couple of lines on a

sheet of paper. "Pray see that this telegraph to Schmitt goes off immediately, and then one thing more--if it does not bore you too much--please leave a card for me at the places on this list. Do not take any trouble, but if you should be passing.... Good-bye old fellow--remember we are to go home together."

"Hotspur!" murmured Georges as the door closed after his cousin. "Well, after all, I do not grudge him his position; he becomes it well."

CHAPTER VII.

If Oswald Lodrin might be regarded as the chivalric embodiment of the old-time '*noblesse oblige*,' his cousin Georges was on the contrary the personification of the modern axiom '*noblesse permet*.'

He had made use of the credit of the Lodrins, the accumulation of centuries, to screen his maddest pranks. True, he had never overdrawn this credit, he had never by any of his numberless eccentricities raised any barrier between himself and his equals in rank. He had grown to manhood discontentedly convinced that Count Hugo Lodrin, his father's elder brother, had done him great wrong, and this wrong was his marriage late in life with the beautiful Princess Wjera Zinsenburg.

Georges was barely eight years old at the time, but he remembered as long as he lived how angrily his father, after a life of careless extravagance led in the certainty of inheriting the Lodrin estates, had received the announcement of the betrothal, and how hardly he had spoken of Wjera Zinsenburg.

The boy grew up, his heart filled with a hatred none the less vehement because it was childish, first for his aunt, and afterward for his cousin.

His hatred for his aunt grew with his growth, but as for his hatred for his cousin?... It was difficult to cherish resentment against his loving, helpless little cousin with his big black eyes and pretty rosy mouth. And in the summer holidays, which he spent every year in Tornow with his father, he struck up a friendship with the little fellow.

It was a lasting friendship. One day after his father's death when he had for several years been an officer of hussars, and always in pecuniary difficulties, Georges received a letter, which upon very slanting lines evidently ruled in pencil by Ossi, himself, and in very sprawling clumsy characters, ran thus:

"Dear Georges,

"Papa says you need money, I don't need any, so I send you my pocket money, and when I'm big you shall have more. The donkeys are given away. Papa got angry with Jack because he bit me. Now, for a punishment, he has to carry sand for the gardeners. I have a pair of ponies now; they are very pretty and I ride every day. I can ride quite well and I am not afraid, but I stroke Jack whenever I see him, and I think he is ashamed of himself.

"Your Ossi."

Yes, he needed money--a great deal of money; his father had left him next to nothing, and the small allowance which his uncle made him, always seasoning it with good advice, did not nearly suffice him.

His uncle paid his debts upon condition that he should exchange from the hussars into the dragoons, then held in rather high estimation as heavy cavalry. Georges needed money quite as much as a dragoon, however, as when a hussar. Then came feminine influences--a quarrel with his colonel--a duel. He resigned his commission with honour and to the regret of the entire staff. Once more, and, as he was solemnly informed, for the last time, his uncle paid his debts, and wishing to have no further concern in his nephew's money matters he also paid out a handsome sum as a release from all further demands.

Georges manifested his repentance after this settlement by an immediate excursion to Paris with a pert little French concert-saloon singer. This was the finishing stroke in the eyes of his

strictly moral, nay, even bigotted uncle. From that time onward the young man's letters to the old count were returned to him unopened. Georges vanished from the scene. The rumour ran that after he had tried his luck and failed in the California gold diggings, he had been a rider in a circus; there was also a report that he had served mahogany-coloured Spaniards and jet-black negroes as waiter at Rio Janeiro, that he had been an omnibus driver in New York--this last fact was vouched for. Still, he contrived to impress the stamp of spontaneous eccentricity upon every one of the expedients to which he resorted in his pecuniary embarrassments.

One day after Oswald had attained his majority he received a letter in which his cousin, after appealing to the old boyish friendship, described his present condition. Oswald, who was kindheartedness itself, and, moreover, enthusiastically eager to discharge his duties as head of the family, did not delay an hour in arranging his cousin's affairs and in settling upon him an income suitable to his rank.

Thus Georges returned to his old sphere of life and to his former habits, smiling calmly, but testifying no special delight, and not the slightest surprise at the change in his circumstances. The honest friendship which he felt for the cousin whom as a child he had petted, quite destroyed his old grudge against his fate.

CHAPTER VIII.

Picture a sleepy little market-town lying, at a respectful distance, near a very large castle, where the clock in the tower has not gone for twenty years; a ruggedly uneven market-place, thickly paved with sharp stones and no sidewalk, queer old-fashioned houses with high-gabled roofs and small windows, and here and there a faded-out image of the Virgin above an arched gateway, a tradesman's shop serving as post-office as well as for the sale of tobacco, and adorned over the doorway with a wreath of wooden lemons and pomegranates, and the imperial double-eagle, a corner where stands a piled-up carrier's van covered with black oilskin, a smithy sending forth from its dark interior a shower of crimson sparks, while from the low passage-way of the opposite inn, 'The Golden Lion,' a waiter with a dirty apron, and bare feet thrust into old red slippers, is gazing over at the smithy where a crowd of dripping street boys are collected about two thoroughbreds and a groom liveried in the English fashion--picture all this and you see Rautschin,--Rautschin on a dark afternoon in May in a pouring rain with an accompaniment of thunder and lightning.

Somewhat apart from the gaping urchins a young man is walking to and fro in front of the row of houses; his quick impatient step testifies to his having been detained by some untoward mishap and also to his being quite unused to such delay.

The rain descends from heaven in fine, regular, grey sheets. The young man's cigar has gone out, he is cold, and thoroughly annoyed he passes the unattractive waiter and enters the inn.

The room in which he takes refuge is low and spacious with bright blue walls, and a well-smoked ceiling. Limp, soiled muslin curtains reminding one of the train of an old ball-dress, hang before the windows where are glass hanging-lamps, and flower-pots of painted porcelain filled with mignonette, cactuses, and catnip. The furniture consists of two chromos representing the Emperor and his consort, of a number of yellow chairs, of several green tables, and of an array of spittoons.

At one of the tables sit three guests evidently much at home; one of them is tuning a zither, while the other two are smoking very malodorous cigars, and drinking beer out of tankards of greenish glass. Engaged in eager conversation none of them observed the entrance of the stranger who, to avoid attracting attention, seated himself in a dark corner with his back to the group.

"A couple more truck-loads of all sorts of fine furniture have arrived at Schneeburg," remarked one of the trio, a young man with red hair, and unusual length of limb. He is a surveyor's clerk, his name is Wenzl Wostraschil, but he is familiarly known as 'the Daily News' from the amount of sensational intelligence which he disperses. "Count Capriani ...."

"I know of no Count Capriani," interrupted an old gentleman with white hair and a red face; he is Doctor Swoboda, by profession district physician, in politics just as strictly conservative as Count Truyn became as soon as he had proclaimed his socialism by taking to himself a bourgeoise bride--"I know of no Count Capriani, you probably mean Conte!"

"It is the same thing," observed the zither player, Herr Cibulka.

"In the dictionary, perhaps," the old doctor rejoined sarcastically.

"The two titles are synonymous in my opinion," said Herr Cibulka as he laid aside his tuning-key and began to play 'The Tyrolean and his child,' while with closed lips he half-hummed, half-murmured the air to himself, his big fat hands groping to and fro on the instrument as if trying to aid his memory.

Herr Cibulka--this sonorous Slavonic name signifies *onion* in Bohemian--Eugène Alexander Cibulka--he is wont to sign his name with a very tiny Cibulka at the end of a very big Eugene Alexander--assistant district-attorney, transcendentalist, and Lovelace, is the pioneer of culture in the sleepy droning little town. He is a tall young fellow inclining to corpulence, with an uncommonly luxuriant growth of hair on both his head and face, and with the flabby oily skin of a man who has all his life long been fed upon dainties.

Evidently much occupied with his outer man he dresses himself as he says, 'simply but tastefully;' he pulls his cuffs well over his knuckles, and delights in a snuff-coloured velvet coat with metal buttons. He fancies that he looks like the Flying Dutchman, or at least like the brigand, Jaromir. In reality he looks like an advertisement for 'the only genuine onion ointment for the beard.' He is considered by the Rautschin ladies as quite irresistible and fabulously cultured. He criticises everything--music, literature and politics, being especially great in the domain of politics, and he discourses at length whenever an opportunity presents itself, combating with admirable energy perils that have long ceased to terrify any one. It is not clear as to what party he belongs, but since he berates the clergy, hates the nobility, and despises the lower-classes, consequently pursuing the straight and narrow path of his subjective vanities and social aspirations, he probably considers himself a Liberal. His uncle is in the ministerial department and *he* dreams of a portfolio.

Meanwhile the red-haired man with an air of indifference has taken up his tankard. "Count or Conte, as you please," he said, giving the disputed point the go-by, and continuing as he put his beer glass down on an uninviting little brown table, "at all events he must be accustomed to live in fine style, for he declared that it was impossible for a man used to modern conveniences to live in Schneeburg in the condition in which Count Malzin had occupied it. So the house has been entirely newly furnished. Immense! the doings of these money-giants--the world belongs to them!"

"Unfortunately, and our poor nobles must go to the wall," sighed the old doctor, whose platonic love for the nobility keeps pace with the red-haired man's equally platonic affection for money. "Except a couple of owners of entailed estates here and there none of them will be able to compete with these great financiers."

"The law of entail cannot be allowed to exist much longer, it is a stumbling block in the path of national progress .... My uncle in the ministerial department ...." Eugene Alexander began in a deep bass voice, which suggested a sentimentally guttural rendering of 'The Evening Star' at æsthetic tea-parties.

"Spare me the remarks of your uncle in the ministerial department," interrupted Dr. Swoboda angrily.

"The law of entail must be abolished," Herr Cibulka said, as another man might say, "that new street must be opened."

"Have you got your liberal seven-league boots on again?" Swoboda rejoined. "How you stride off into the future! You evidently suppose that if the law of entail were abolished to-day or to-morrow, this 'stumbling-block in the path of national progress' being removed, various districts of Tornow and Rautschin would find their way into the pockets of yourself and of your hypothetical children? You are mistaken, my dear fellow, hugely mistaken. Heaven forbid! Trade would monopolize the real estate, and that is all you would get by it, nothing more. The supremacy of money would be confirmed."

"I should prefer, it is true, the supremacy of mind!" Eugène Alexander said didactically.

"Ah! you think you would come in for a share there," growled the old doctor under his breath.

Without noticing the irony, Eugene Alexander went on, "The supremacy of money, of individual merit, is certainly more to be desired than the supremacy of fossilized prejudice."

"Indeed?... now tell us honestly," said the doctor, "do you really believe that the masses, whose sufferings are real and not imaginary, would gain anything thereby?"

"There certainly would be a fresh impetus given to culture,--a freer circulation of capital," began Cibulka.

"Listen to me a moment," broke in the doctor. "Circulation of capital? A financier's capital circulates inside his pockets, not outside of them except on certain occasions on 'Change. The art of spending money does not go hand-in-hand with the art of making it,--few things in this world delight me more than the spectacle of a millionaire who, having ostentatiously retired from business, contemplates his money-bags in positive despair, not knowing what to do with them

and bored to death because the only occupation in which he takes any delight, money-getting, is debarred him by his position."

"No one can say of Conte Capriani that he does not know how to spend his money," the red-headed 'Daily News' affirmed, "everything is being arranged in the most expensive style, the rooms hung with silk shot with silver, the carpets as thick as your fist, and the paintings and artistic objects,--why they are coming by car-loads. I am intimate with the castellan, and he shows me everything; the outlay is princely."

The doctor shrugged his shoulders. "The extravagance of a financier is always for show, it is never a natural expenditure. There's no free swing to it, and I am not at all impressed by your Conte; one day he may take it into his head to paper his room with thousand-gulden bank-notes, and the next he will haggle like the veriest skinflint; just ask the Malzin servants; he discharged them at a moment's notice without a penny."

"They were a worthless old lot," Eugène Alexander rejoined, "and besides it was Count Malzin's duty to provide for his people."

"Poor Count Malzin!" exclaimed the doctor, "he pleaded for his servants, as I know positively; but provide for them--how could he provide for them when he could not provide for his own son! When I think of our poor Count Fritz! A handsomer, sweeter-tempered, kindlier gentleman never lived in the world! And when I reflect that Schneeburg is now in the hands of strangers, that Count Fritz cannot live there....!"

"Oh, I beg your pardon," the red-head insisted, wriggling on his chair like an eel, "he is going to live there, in the little Swiss cottage in the park where the young people used to be with their tutor and drawing-master in the hunting season, away from the bustle in the castle."

"Frightful!" murmured the doctor. "This whole Schneeburg business is too--too sad. The old bailiff is ill of typhus fever brought on by sheer grief and anxiety, and his whole family would go to destruction were it not for the generous support of the Countess Lodrin."

"Don't tell us of the generosity of the Countess Lodrin," sneered Cibulka, or of the generosity of any of the Lodrins. "You need only look at their estates; the peasants are huddled there in pens like swine."

The stranger, who had until now remained motionless in his dim corner, apparently paying no heed to the talk, here turned his head to listen.

"That seems very improbable," Dr. Swoboda replied to the last assertion, "The young count treats all his dependants with a kindly consideration that it would be difficult to match. If his people suffer from any injustice it certainly is without his knowledge; Count Oswald is one of the old school. Hats off to so true a gentleman!"

"You are, and always will be a truckler to princes," said Eugène Alexander, offended. "I must say that a man like Capriani who has won for himself a position in society among the greatest by his personal merit, by the work of his hands, seems to me more worthy of consideration than a petty Count, who has had everything showered upon him from his cradle."

"What trash you are talking about personal merit," thundered the doctor. "Capriani has grown rich on swindling--swindling, on 'Change--swindling in women's boudoirs. He was formerly a physician, and as such insinuated himself into distinguished houses, and wormed out political secrets which he made use of in his speculations. Finally he married a rich banker's daughter; they say his wife is a good woman. I never saw him but once, but I cannot understand how a woman with a modicum of taste could ever consent...."

"Oh they say that in his time he has enjoyed the favour of all kinds of ladies, very great ladies...." the red-head interposed with an air of importance. "I know from the widow of the late Count Lodrin's valet--there was a game carried on down there in Italy between the Countess Wjera...."

He had no time to conclude. The stranger sprang up and like a flash of lightning struck the speaker twice across the face with his riding-whip; then without a word he left the room.

"Who was that?" asked Cibulka pale with terror, while the red-headed man, bewildered, rubbed his cheek.

"Count Oswald Lodrin," said the doctor. "It serves you right for your insolence!"

"I shall not submit to such brutality--I will appeal to the courts," snarled red-head.

"And what can you say?" said the old doctor. "'I have wantonly repeated low, scandalous gossip--I have slandered a lady who is blessed and worshipped by all the country round, I have spit in the face of a saint'--this is what you can say. Let me advise you not to stir, my worthy Wostraschil."

This 'my worthy Wostraschil' was uttered by the simple old doctor in a tone which he must

have caught unconsciously and involuntarily from some aristocratic patient.

He arose and stood at the window, looking with a smile of satisfaction after Oswald, who with head held haughtily erect, face pale, and eyes flashing angrily, was striding directly across the square to the smithy.

"A splendid fellow--a true gentleman," the old man murmured. He was proud of this Austrian, product, and would gladly have paid a tax for the maintenance of this national article of luxury.

CHAPTER IX.

Arrived in Tornow only that morning, Oswald hardly finished his breakfast before he rode over to Kanitz, where, after his good-humoured despotic fashion he adjusted the whole affair with a smile, and soothed the anxious young tenant.

On the way back his horse lost a shoe, and his groom was well scolded by his impetuous young master for the carelessness resulting in such an accident. The riders had been forced to abate their speed and to take a roundabout way through Rautschin, that the nervous, high-bred animal might be relieved as soon as possible.

On the way they were overtaken by the storm. Perhaps Oswald would not have endured the very smoky atmosphere of the inn room so long, had he not been unconsciously interested in the talk of its three guests.

By no means indifferent to Doctor Swoboda's enthusiastic appreciation of his merits, he had enjoyed playing the part of the Emperor Joseph in the popular song and was meditating some pleasantly-devised way of surprising the old man with his thanks for his loyalty, when the vile insinuation made by the red-head drove everything else out of his mind.

The horse was shod; he flung himself into the saddle and galloped out of the town.

The rain had ceased, the clouds were broken. Steaming with moisture, its outlines glimmering in the light of the setting sun, Rautschin was left behind. Long streaks of violet cloud with golden edges, lay just above the horizon, and where the sun was setting, the sky glowed dully red. The storm had torn the bridal wreath from the head of spring; on the surface of the water lying in the ruts and hollows of the roads glinted snowy, fallen blossoms, and the apple-trees and pear-trees trembled softly in their tattered white array, like young people awakened from a dream. By the roadside stretched a sheet of water, its shores bristling with rushes, its surface bluish-gray and gloomy, like a large pool into which the sky had fallen and been drowned. A couple of ravens were flapping heavily above it.

The golden edges of the clouds grew narrower, the glow of the sunset was consumed in its own fire, the colours faded, and profound melancholy brooded over all the plain.

Oswald's blood was still in a ferment. "Rascally dog!" he muttered between his teeth ...."and to have to drop the matter for my mother's sake, not to be able to thrash him within an inch of his life, and drive him from the country! No human being is safe from such envious liars, they would drag down everything above them, even the Lord God Himself! Bah, *cela ne devrait pas monter jusque à la hauteur de mon dèdain*. But,"--he shook himself,--"it takes more than one's will to calm the blood."

Twilight had set in when he reached Tornow Castle.

It was a spacious, clumsy structure with several court-yards, one portion with pointed Gothic archways was ancient, irregular and picturesque, another part was of a later rococo style with conventional decoration. In front, fringed by tall alders lay a romantic little lake, the park stretched far to the rear of the castle. The iron gate with its quaint scroll work, above which was suspended the Lodrin escutcheon, between two time-stained sandstone urns, turned upon its rusty hinges, and Oswald rode up to the castle and dismounted. Two lackeys, who seemed to have little to do save to wear their blue liveries and striped waistcoats with due dignity, and self-complacency, were standing in the gateway, peering into the gathering darkness. The young Count ran hastily up the broad, flat hall-steps.

The last pale ray of daylight penetrated into the hall, through the tiny panes of the huge windows; here and there the metallic lustre of some old weapon on the wall gleamed among the dusky shadows.

"Ossi, is that you?" called a voice almost masculine in its deep tone, but musical withal and in evident anxiety, as a tall female figure advanced to meet him.

"Yes, mother," he replied gently.

"How late you are! We have been waiting dinner an hour for you."

"Forgive me, mother,"--he carried her hand with reverent affection to his lips,--"it really was not my fault."

"Fault--fault! I am not reproaching you, Ossi! No, but my child, I was half dead with anxiety. You are always so punctual, and one quarter of an hour after another passed and you did not come.--And then the storm. The lightning struck near here in several places, and your John Bull is skittish,--you do not think so,--but I know the beast well. If it had gone on for one more quarter of an hour .... but what detained you, my child?"

Oswald smiled tenderly and considerately, as tall chivalric sons are wont to smile at the exaggerated anxieties of their mothers. "Give me only five minutes to change my dress and I will tell you all," he said, and once more kissing her hand he hurried away.

Oswald's was one of those impetuous temperaments which are always stirred to the depths morally and physically by a violent outburst of anger; even when its cause is forgotten every pulse and vein will still thrill.

Although he joined his mother in the drawing-room some minutes later in a perfectly cheerful mood, she instantly saw from his face that something must have provoked him excessively.

"Anything disagreeable?" she asked drawing him down beside her upon a sofa, "did you have a distressing scene with Schmitt? did he reproach you? or ...."

"Heaven forbid, mamma!" broke in Oswald. "Schmitt and reproach?--he is the most devoted soul--humiliatingly devoted and faithful! Poor Schmitt! No, no, my horse cast a shoe. I was terribly vexed, I had to ride slowly, and take the roundabout way through Rautschin." He spoke quickly and with forced gayety.

"You are concealing something, lest it should annoy me," the countess said decidedly. "When will you learn that nothing in the world annoys me as much as your considerate reticence! I lie awake half the night when I see that you have some vexation to bear which you will not share with me. You ought to have no secrets from me."

"In a certain way every honourable man must have secrets from her whom he respects as I respect you," Oswald said half-annoyed, half-tenderly, while he puzzled his brains to discover a way of pacifying his mother without telling either a falsehood or the whole truth. A brilliant idea then occurred to him. "In fact the matter is a very stupid affair. In the inn where I stopped during the storm I suddenly heard one of three men who were in the room speak with contempt of the Lodrin generosity; the fellow asserted that on the Lodrin estates the labourers lived in pens like pigs, and,--er--my temperament is not exactly stoical, and I,--in short I got angry. It is hard to hear such things when one honestly tries to treat his people well! And there may be some truth in it; I will make inquiries to-morrow, no, I will find out for myself. I can learn nothing from my bailiffs, they only cajole me. Last year there was typhus fever in Morowitz, the people died like flies, and I knew nothing of it; when at last I did learn about it I went there immediately, but the epidemic was well nigh at an end. *A propos*, mamma, I cannot but forgive you if it be so, but was it not all concealed from me at your request? You knew that I should go over there at once, and you were afraid of contagion."

"No, my dear child," the countess said gravely, "foolishly anxious as I am about you upon trifling occasions,--and I have just shown how foolishly anxious I can be,--I never would lift a finger to seclude you from a peril if such peril lay in the path of duty. I would rather die of anxiety than hamper you or exert a detracting influence upon you in your line of conduct. I would be broken on the wheel to save your life, but----" she shuddered and moved closer to him,--"I would rather see you dead, than anything else save what you are--my pride, and a blessing to all around you!" She looked him full in the face, the mother's large, earnest eyes gleaming with exultant enthusiasm. "If you only knew how I suffered during that stupid storm! I am so glad to have you again, my boy, my fine, noble boy!" And drawing his head down to her she kissed him on the brow.

The rustle of a newspaper attracted Oswald's attention, and for the first time he observed Georges, who, buried in the depths of a luxurious arm-chair, had been watching from behind his newspaper the little scene between mother and son.

A servant appeared at the door--dinner was announced.

CHAPTER X.

"Very remarkable!" Georges said a few hours later as, smoking a cigar, he entered his cousin's bedroom, where Oswald was already in bed.

"What is very remarkable?" Oswald asked drowsily as he lay on his back, his hands clasped under his head.

"The change in your mother," said Georges, sitting down on the edge of the bed, "I should hardly have known her again."

"I can't understand that," Oswald rejoined. "Her hair has grown gray--it grew gray when she was quite young,--but her features are the same. I think her very beautiful still."

"I think her more beautiful than ever," Georges said gravely, "but...." he thoughtfully blew the smoke from his cigar upwards to the ceiling--"how old is your mother?"

"Fifty-six."

"Only fifty-six--and yet she seems an old woman."

"An old woman....! What are you thinking of? My mother can do nearly as much as I can, she can ride for five hours at a time, and can take long walks and never...."

"My dear fellow," interrupted Georges impatiently. "I did not mean to say that your respected mamma seemed at all decrepit, but only that her features, her whole bearing, wear the stamp of that calm, kindly cheerfulness that belongs to those who have done with life. She asks nothing more--she bestows. And that, Ossi, is not a characteristic of youth--no, not of even, the most generous youth."

"There you are right," Oswald rejoined thoughtfully. "Many a woman of her age would still go into society and enjoy its distractions, she, since my father's death, has had no thought of anything except my education and the management of my property. It is wonderful, the knowledge she has of business. You would laugh if I should tell you of what large sums she saved up for me during my minority. Such strict economy was not to my taste, and I put a stop to it, but it must be forgiven in a mother."

"And the gentleness and kindness of her manner!" Georges continued, "her unreasoning maternal nervousness! I assure you it was no easy task, the hour spent in trying to allay her anxiety. Her feeling for you is positive idolatry."

"Try to be patient with this weakness of hers."

"My dear boy, he would be a worthless fellow who did not respect this weakness. It only surprises me in your mother; I had not expected anything of the kind. Before I left home she kept you at such a distance. I could not then understand why she always treated you so coldly and harshly, and, to tell the truth, I took such, lack of affection on her part, very ill."

Oswald leaned upon his elbow among the pillows. "That was while my father was alive," he said softly, "yes, I have often thought of that, and have thought also that I could explain her conduct. You see my father's foolish fondness for me irritated her, and she suppressed the manifestation of her own affection. Between ourselves, Georges, my mother was wretched in her marriage; her poor heart was always upon the rack, it could no more beat freely and naturally than a man with a rope tight about his neck can sing. I respected my father immensely, but ... well, Georges, look there...." he pointed to a large painting above his bed, the portrait of the countess in the proud splendour of her youthful beauty, "and then, look there...." and he pointed to a white plaster death-mask framed in black velvet hanging on the wall opposite. "As far back as I can remember, my father looked just like that; they were never congenial. And now let me go to sleep, old fellow, good-night!"

CHAPTER XI.

No, 'congenial' they never had been and never could have been.

Although the painting was far from portraying the charm of the Countess Lodrin's beauty in the bloom of youth, the repulsive death-mask opposite did full justice to the deceased count. The face that it represented was almost horse-like in its length; smoothly shaven as that of a monk, with a sharp-pointed nose, little round eyes, a mouth like the slit in a child's money-jug, and seamed with innumerable wrinkles, it resembled one of those bloodless aged heads which abound in pictures by Memmling or Van Eyck.

It would be an error to suppose that illness and the final agony had distorted the face before it had been perpetuated in the plaster cast. Count Lodrin had never looked otherwise, he had always looked like a corpse, and Pistasch Kamenz boldly maintained that 'the old gentleman looked his best in his coffin.'

Not only Count Pistasch, but everybody else ridiculed Count Lodrin; few men have ever lived who have been more ridiculed. One fact, however, no ridicule could affect--Count Lodrin was a gentleman through and through.

That he possessed a tender heart and a sense of duty, which, in spite of the vacillations of a timid temperament, always triumphed in important crises, no one had ever denied who had seen him in any grave emergency,--and that this sense of duty, with a mild admixture of pride of rank, belonged to him more as a gentleman than as a human being, did not detract from his merit.

Given over in his youth to the ghostly influence of priestly tutors, he had led a melancholy, misanthropic existence. His delicate constitution made impossible any participation in the manly sports of his equals in rank. Therefore there was developed in him, as in many another recluse, an intense devotion to art; he was indefatigable in sifting and enlarging his collections.

People of his rank usually marry young. It was not so with him. As with several historic characters, the timidity of his temperament culminated in an aversion to women, which rendered futile all the bold schemes of ambitious mammas. In his solitude he had come to be forty-five years old; it was an article of faith in Austrian society that he never would marry, when suddenly his betrothal to Wjera Zinsenburg was announced.

His brother's creditors made wry faces; society laughed. Two months afterwards the strange couple were united in the chapel of the palace of the Zinsenburgs. Among those present at the ceremony there were some who envied the bridegroom, many who ridiculed him, and a few who pitied him.

As the pair stood beside each other before the altar they presented a strange contrast.

The face of the bride, nobly chiselled, and with an indignant curve of the full, red lips, recalled to the minds of all who had been in Rome a beautiful but unpleasing memory,--the profile of the Medusa in the Villa Ludovisi, that wondrous relievo in which the pride of a demon seems contending with the suffering of an angel.

The bridegroom looked as he did fifteen years afterward on his bier, only more unhappy, for upon the bier his face wore the expression of a man who had just been relieved of an old burden; at the altar his expression was that of one who bends beneath the weight of a burden just assumed.

It was shortly manifest that no late-awakened passion had decided him to contract this alliance. A weaker will had been forced to bow before a stronger.

CHAPTER XII.

But what had induced the exquisitely-beautiful girl to choose such a husband as this, every one asked; and no one answered. The question had to be dismissed with a shrug, and, 'She is a riddle!'

The same thing had been said four years previously, when with an air of proud indifference, and with cold, 'level-fronting eyelids,' she had appeared in Vienna society. There was about her an exotic air always irresistible to the genuine Austrian temperament. Her father was a diplomatist, her mother a Russian. Wjera's Russian blood betrayed itself in everything about her, in her deep, almost harsh voice, which was, nevertheless, capable of exquisite modulations, in the hybrid combination of Oriental nonchalance and northern energy that characterized her whole bearing, her gestures, her figure.

When she reclined upon a divan or leaned back in an arm-chair there was a suggestion of the odalisque in her attitude; but in her walk there was a short, sharp rhythm; it was firm and despotic like that of a race-horse, and yet light as the fluttering of a bird. She was tall and not too slender--the beauty of her shoulders and bust was so great that it had become famous--her head was small and faultlessly poised upon her neck--her features were not perfectly regular, but how charming was her face! pale, with ripe red lips, and brown hair with a shimmer of gold about the temples and the back of the neck. The cheek-bones were rather too high, the face not quite oval enough; the brow was low; the profile haughty, and delicately modelled.

The most remarkable feature of Wjera's face was her eyes. Long in their openings, but usually half-closed and shaded by dark eyelashes, they were as changing in colour as in expression, and there was in them something uncanny--mysterious--no one dared to look full into their depths.

Of course she created a sensation in Vienna, and yet she had almost no suitors--they were afraid of her and--she had a history, neither disgraceful nor dishonourable, but yet a history.

In St. Petersburg, where she had been with her father, she had been distinguished by the homage of a prince of the blood, and was finally betrothed to him. For a year the betrothal was kept up, and then the tie was suddenly snapped. The world discovered the reason in the fact that Wjera could not consent to a morganatic marriage; her ambition had been defeated. The true significance of the breach the world at large did not divine. Only very few suspected that Wjera had loved the man--so much her inferior in all save rank and birth--with all the fervour and poetic purity that are found in Russian girls alone. She did not see him as he really was, handsome, with a superficial air of distinction, but mentally coarse--alternating between brutish excesses and superstitious penances--at once cynical as a roué and sentimental as a school-miss,--no, she endowed him nobly in her imagination.

Of all poets in the world the hearts of young girls are the most highly gifted. There are women whose illusions are so tough that they carry them to their graves undamaged; there are others who voluntarily patch up the rents, made by their understanding in their illusions, in order that an ideal--of which they would perhaps be ashamed if it stood unveiled before them, and to break with which they yet have neither the desire nor the force--may not be without a decent garment to cover it.

It was not so with Wjera; when doubt had once sown discord between her head and her heart, she fought out the battle unflinchingly, inexorably, in strict honesty, and when the conflict was over her dream had vanished. In this wondrously lovely illusion she had exhausted all the ideality of her nature. Her reason gained the upperhand at last, and ever after she analyzed her fellow-mortals with sharp precision; judging them with harsh justice, and speaking of the affections with an unaffected, contemptuous coolness very rare in a girl so young.

Time passed by. She came to be twenty-six years old. She was the eldest and the handsomest of five daughters, and her distaste for marriage increased the difficulty of providing for the other sisters, and excited unpleasant remark among her family circle. Chance introduced Count Lodrin to her acquaintance, and perhaps because he seemed to her a respectable nullity, she selected him for her husband.

No one could remember ever having seen so ill-matched a pair. She, aglow with life, delighting in physical exercises, a reckless and indefatigable horsewoman--to whom a steeple-chase was no more than is a waltz to other women,--and he, paying with an attack of illness for every unusual physical effort, not even daring to take a long drive without an extra cushion at his back.

Whilst his thoughts moved slowly in a traditional roundabout way, 'her woman's wit flew straight and did exactly hit,' before the Count had cleared his throat for his first 'consequently.'

Her quick wit bewildered him; her outspoken acuteness of discernment offended him. There was a world-wide dissimilarity between her views and his. The Count was a strict Catholic; the Countess was inclined to scepticism; although cast in a loftier mould, in her daring mockery and her graceful eccentricity she recalled the fine ladies of the eighteenth century--of that time when social and mental freedom, made fashionable by philosophers, had not yet been degraded to vulgarity by demagogues. His wife's wicked wit shocked poor Count Lodrin. Much ridicule was cast upon the couple, but every one was none the less glad to belong to the brilliant circle which the Countess drew around her, and daily the wonder grew that calumny could not touch the beautiful wife of this dead-and-alive dotard.

Three years passed; now and then women hinted innuendoes about Wjera Lodrin, but the other sex continued to speak of her with that mixture of admiration and irritation which bears the truest testimony to the blamelessness of a very beautiful woman. At last society was content to shrug its shoulders and to repeat, 'She is a riddle.'

The Countess was unutterably bored. The only occupation that she pursued with inexhaustible interest, though at the same time with reckless intrepidity, was riding.

"She has no sphere of activity; hers is the grand, fiery nature of a gifted man beating against the petty barriers of feminine existence. What is to come of it?" a sagacious student of human

nature once said, in speaking of her.

All at once there was a decided change for the worse in Count Lodrin's health, and the physicians prescribed a sojourn in the South. Reluctantly enough the Countess consented to accompany her husband.

They set out, and the world maliciously compared Wjera to Juana of Castile, because she travelled with a corpse, and a father-confessor.

The Count found Nice quite too gay, and therefore took refuge in a secluded villa in the Riviera.

The Countess nearly died of ennui in the gray, sultry, sirocco-like monotony of an autumn heavy with the fragrance of roses, and in the tedium of an Italian winter. In spring the pair returned to Bohemia, the Count in somewhat better health, the Countess as cold and hard as ever, but irritable to a degree until now quite foreign to her.

In the August after their return Oswald was born. The old Count could not contain himself for joy; the Countess cared but very little for the child.

This was the woman whom Georges had known fifteen years before, and now,--he could hardly believe his senses!

Before he went to bed on the first night of his return to Tornow, he stood for a long while at the window of his room looking thoughtfully out into the night. The moon was high in the heavens; everything was still, save for a low rustle now and then in the huge lindens growing on the border of the pond in front of the castle. The ancient trees seemed to stir and stretch themselves in their sleep. His gaze wandered over the compact angular architecture of the high, black-gabled roofs, the rows of houses with tiny windows, in the little town,--all bathed in bluish moonlight. It was hardly changed since he had last seen it,--in the castle everything was changed. What had become of the social distractions in which the Countess Lodrin had been wont to delight?--Vanished, as by magic. The entire castle impressed him as having recovered from a restless fever.

Had the Countess's former cold, harsh demeanour been but the mask for the intense hunger of a strangely dowered nature that could find no fit nourishment? And had love for her child filled up at last the fearful rift made in her inmost life by an early disappointment?

Georges asked himself these questions. Once more his glance wandered to the pond in whose waters the moon was mirrored. "Strange!" he murmured,--"today it was but a dark pool, and now in the moonlight it gleams a silver disk! Hm! Extraordinary, how true maternal love will hallow every woman's heart! Strange exceedingly! what must she not have suffered in her life ...!"

CHAPTER XIII.

The bright spring sunshine streamed through the open bow-window of the Countess's boudoir and stretched a broad band of light at her feet. She was sitting in an arm-chair knitting with very thick wooden needles and coarse brown worsted, something evidently destined for a charitable purpose.

The boudoir, an irregular square room and with a picturesque bow-window, was furnished with no regard to uniformity of style, and therefore had the charm which characterizes rooms which have been as it were gradually evolved from the habits and tastes of a cultured occupant, until they are the frame or setting of an individuality. A delightful confusion of comfort and feminine taste reigned here, and the two or three trifling articles that offended all artistic sense, struck the eye only as piquant beauty spots. The cabinets, filled with rare old porcelain, threw into strong relief the ugly inkstand and candlesticks of modern dark-blue Sèvres upon a writing-table. They were a memento,--a marriage gift from a Russian cousin and youthful playmate who fell in the Crimean war. Among some old pictures, an Andrea del Sarto, a Franz Hals, and two Wateaus, hung in triumphant self-complacency a portrait by Lawrence--a man's head and bust,--a crimson-lined cloak was thrown around the shoulders, the shirt collar was open, black hair fell low on the brow, the eyes were large and wild, the frankly smiling mouth was exquisitely chiselled. It hung just over the writing-table, lord of all, and was the portrait of Oswald Zinsenburg, an uncle of the Countess, a gifted fellow, who, when Secretary of Legation in England, had been intimate with Lord Byron, and in all the romantic ardour of a young aristocrat fighting for freedom, had died of brain fever at Missolonghi at the age of twenty-seven, shortly

after Lord Byron's death.

This portrait the Countess Wjera loves, principally because it is so like her son, and upon it her gaze rested as she dropped the long wooden-needles in her lap, and fell into a revery.

The air of the room was penetrated with the delicious fragrance of the roses, and lilies of the valley that filled the various vases. Everything was quiet,--the birds were taking their siesta, the faint pattering of the horse-chestnut blossoms could be heard as they fell upon the gravel path, before the castle.

The drowsy midday stillness was suddenly broken by a softly whistled Russian gipsy melody and an elastic young footstep. The Countess turned her head. She knew the air well--how often she had sung it! The whistling came nearer, then ceased, and the door of the boudoir opened. "May we come in?" a cheery voice asked.

"Always welcome!" replied the Countess, and Oswald, followed by a large shaggy Newfoundland, entered, his curls wet and clinging to his forehead, a bunch of waterlilies in his hand, and looking more than ever like the portrait by Lawrence.

"Good morning, mamma; how are you? Make your bow, Darling--so, old fellow--so!" And as the Newfoundland gravely lowered his fine head, a performance for which he was duly caressed by his master, Oswald sank into a low seat beside his mother.

"You have been bathing," she observed, stroking back his wet hair.

"Yes, I have been swimming in the lake at Wolnitz, and I have brought you these waterlilies," he replied, laying the flowers in her lap, "they are the first I have seen this year, and they are your favourite flowers, are they not? How fair and melancholy they are! Strange that these pure white things should spring from such slimy mud! May I?" taking out his cigar-case.

"Of course, my child. What have you been about to-day? I have not seen you before."

"I went out very early. I had sent for the forester to come to me at seven, and I went with him to the new plantations. The young firs are as straight as soldiers. And then I dawdled about in the woods--it was so lovely there!--'tis the earth's honeymoon, and when I see everything blossoming out in the sunshine, I think of all that lies in the near future for me, and I feel like shouting for joy! Apropos, mamma, I have found a site for the Widow's Asylum that you want to found. I have been puzzling over the best situation for it, and I have decided to put the old Elizabeth monastery at the disposal of your benevolence. Is this what you would like?"

She held out her hand to him with a smile. "Have you found time to think of that too? I thought you had forgotten my scheme long ago."

"Ah yes, I am in the habit of forgetting your wishes!" he said gaily.

"No, Heaven knows you are not," the Countess murmured, "you have always been loving and considerate to me."

"And what else could I be, mamma?" he said affectionately. "Ah, on a glorious spring day like this, when the world is so beautiful, and my blood goes coursing in my veins with delight, I am tempted to kneel down before you and thank you for the dear life you have bestowed upon me--what is the matter, mamma, you have suddenly grown so pale?"

"It is nothing--only a slight pain in my heart--it has gone already," the Countess whispered, turning aside her head.

"Quite gone?--is it my cigar smoke?"

"Not at all, dear child!"--

In spite of this assertion he tossed his cigar out of the window. "You used to smoke yourself," he observed.

"Yes," she said, looking down at her knitting, "but since I have learned to employ my hands, I have given up smoking."

"You knit instead--It seems odd to me to see *you* knitting. Georges thinks you very much altered."

"I have grown old, *voilà!*"

"And he thinks too that you spoil me tremendously, that no mother in all Austria spoils her son as you do me."

"No other mother has such a son," the Countess said proudly.

"Oh, oh!" he laughed and took his seat beside her again.

"Nevertheless, I am not blind to your faults," she continued, "I know them all."

"And love every one of them."

"Because they are the faults of a noble nature--men of lower tendencies are obliged to show more self-control."

"Indeed! God bless your aristocratic prejudices! and now for a piece of news. The Truyns reach Rautschin to-morrow by the four o'clock train. Will you drive with me to meet them?"

"Certainly, if you wish me to."

"If I wish you to--if I wish you to!"--he softly snapped his fingers, "and you look all the while as if I had asked you to attend an execution with me. I cannot quite understand you, mamma, you used to take delight in every little pleasure that chance threw in my way, and now will you not rejoice in my great happiness? As soon as there is any allusion made to my betrothal, your whole manner changes; you grow so distant and reserved, that I hardly like to mention my betrothed."

"I really did not know, Ossi ..." began the Countess with constraint.

"Oh, yes, mother, I felt in Paris that you were not pleased with my betrothal, and I have racked my brain to discover what there can be about it that you do not like, and I can not imagine what it is. There can be no objection to make to Gabrielle." Then suddenly smiling in the midst of his irritation, and curbing the impetuous flow of his words, he asked in a lower tone and more calmly, "Ah, *ça*, mamma, perhaps you dislike the connection with my darling's stepmother? I assure you that ...."

"Nonsense!" replied the Countess, growing still more disturbed, "from what you and Georges both tell me of the young woman, she seems to adapt herself very well to her position. A residence abroad and foreign associations are much better means of training than ...."

"Yes, mamma," interrupted Oswald in some surprise, having followed out his own train of thought, "but if you are so kindly disposed towards Zinka, I cannot possibly conceive what exception you can take to my betrothal. There never was a purer, more noble creature than my little Gabrielle. Highly as I rank you, mother, she is every way worthy of you."

The Countess changed colour, "I do not understand what you wish," she exclaimed, "do not distress me, I have no objection to the girl!...."

"Well then,--you could not possibly expect me to remain unmarried."

The Countess cast down her eyes and was silent.

Oswald sprang up, called his dog and left the room, his face very pale, his eyes very dark.

Impetuous and hasty as he was with others, he had always controlled himself in his mother's presence. Leaving the room was the extreme point to which he allowed his displeasure to manifest itself when with her. If he wished to vent his anger, he did it in seclusion, he never had spoken an angry word--scarcely a loud one to her. And his disagreeable mood never lasted long.

"I am myself again, mamma!" with these words, in which he was wont to announce his return to a better frame of mind, he presented himself half an hour afterward in his mother's boudoir. She was sitting just as he had left her, the waterlilies in her lap, very pale, very erect, with the set features that veil distress of mind.

Pushing his chair close up to her he laid his hand upon her shoulder, and said with the winning tenderness of all impetuous men after bursts of anger: "Forgive me, mamma, I was very wrong again!" She smiled faintly and murmured some half inaudible words of affection--"I was odiously egotistical," he went on, "I had quite forgotten what a change my marriage will make in your life, what a trial it must be to you, you poor, foolish, jealous little mother! But whatever change there may be outwardly in our relations, we must always be the same in heart; and if I must deprive you of something," he added gaily, "my children shall requite you. It had to come sooner or later, mamma; or could you really wish me to renounce the fairest share of existence?"

She trembled in every limb, and suddenly taking his hand, before he could prevent it, she carried it to her lips, "No, you shall renounce no joy, my child, my noble child!" she exclaimed,--"but--leave me now for a while, for only a little while--I am tired!"

CHAPTER XIV.

Truyn had insisted that the betrothal of his daughter to Oswald Lodrin should be celebrated in Bohemia. Zinka had yielded with great reluctance and sorrow, and had at last resolved to bid farewell to her dear foreign home.

"Why," she persisted in asking him, "cannot the ceremony take place, as in our own case, at the Austrian Embassy?"

But Truyn would not hear of it. "Dear heart," he replied, "it would go against the grain. The betrothals of all my sisters and of my aunts were celebrated at Rautschin, why should I depart from the traditions of my family?"

"As if you had not already departed from them, and in the most vital regard," said Zinka, with arch tenderness.

"That is a very different thing,--if there were any good reason, then--then--!"

"Ah, dear friend, you have grown insufferably conservative, you would have shouted on the first day of the creation of the world: '*Conserves le chaos, seigneur Dieu, conservez le chaos!*'"

Whereupon Truyn, kissing her hand, made reply. "That comes of living in France, dear child."

And so the pretty house in the Avenue Labédoyère was deserted. The shutters were closed, the carpets rolled up, the bric-à-brac stowed away; only in some roundabout fashion did a bluish beam of light slip into the vault-like obscurity, and the restless motes pursue their fantastic dance among the shrouded shapes of the furniture.

The Truyn family were rapidly approaching their home. Nearly thirty hours had passed since Paris had faded from their eyes in the misty blue distance--since the last gigantic announcement of the '*Belle Jardinière*,' and of the '*Pauvre diable*' had flitted past them. The Bavarian boundary, with its stupid Custom House formalities lay behind them. Truyn was reading a Vienna newspaper with great interest, Gabrielle was gazing abstractedly at the crimson coupé cushions opposite, with the far-away look in her eyes of young lovers. Zinka was leaning back in her corner, her veil half drawn aside, her hands folded in her lap, the latest impressions of her Paris life hovering kaleidiscopically before her mental vision, her heart oppressed by a strange melancholy.

"Ah, this defamed, delightful Paris! how it captivates the heart with its good-for-nothing beauty, and its corrupt, sickly sentiment!"

She was still mentally rehearsing the last days before her departure, the going to and fro from shop to shop, the interesting consultations with Monsieur Worth, the affected face with which that eminent artist put his finger to his lip, while attending the ladies to their carriage, and continued to 'compose' Gabrielle's wedding dress, murmuring to himself with his English accent: "*Oui, oui, une orginalité distahnguée c'est ce qu'il fant*," while sleek young clerks, and young girls faultless in figure, displayed to the best advantage the richest costumes, trailing about silks and satins of fabulous elegance.

"*Ce n'est pas cela, qui ferait votre affaire, Madame la Comtesse je le sais bien*," said Mons. Worth pointing to certain monstrosities devised for American parvenus, "ah, Madame la Comtesse cannot imagine, how hard it is for an artist to have to work for people of no taste! *Ah oui, une originalité distahnguée!*"

The man-milliner's, monotonous refrain kept sounding on in Zinka's ears. Then she thought of the farewell visits, the daily heap of cards filling the great copper salver in the vestibule, the wearisome farewell entertainments, and of her husband's toast--the toast which he proposed at the magnificent banquet, given in his honour, by the Austrian Hungarians in Paris. Unutterably distasteful as it always is to men of his stamp, to be conspicuous, he at last made up his mind to propose this toast; he worked at it for an entire week, and subjected it to the criticism, not only of his wife and of his daughter, but of every one whose judgment he respected in Paris. It was a masterpiece of a toast, a toast designed to unite in brotherly affection all the Austrians in Paris, and which ultimately, with its well-meant, many-sided compliments gave occasion for dissatisfaction to every member of the Austrian-Hungarian colony, whether conservative or liberal. Zinka laughed to herself as she recalled that poor misunderstood toast. She laughed outright, started, and--awoke--rubbed her eyes and looked out.

Yes, Paris lay far behind her, very far. She was in Austria, beautiful, dreamingly-drowsy Austria, and, in spite of the reluctance with which she returned to her fatherland, it affected her.

A low blue chain of hills lay on the western horizon like a vanishing storm-cloud. The landscape around was level and extended. Large, quiet pools, surrounded by tall rushes, and covered with a network of fragrant waterlilies, gleamed here and there among the emerald meadows.

The sun was near its setting. The shadows of the telegraph poles stretched out indefinitely. Little towns contentedly sleeping away their dull lives among green lindens, showed their old-

fashioned silhouettes, black against the sunlit evening clouds.

Truyn laid aside his newspaper, and his face grew eager and animated, every knotted gnarled willow, every half-ruinous garden wall here interested him.

A forest of firs, their trunks glowing red in the last rays of the sun, bordered the railway. "There, just by that stunted fir, I shot my first deer," Truyn exclaimed, and in his eyes sparkled the memory of a happy boyhood; then, drawing Zinka to him, he whispered tenderly: "You are at home, Zini; we are travelling upon our own soil."

"Ah," replied Zinka, nestling close to him, timid as a child afraid of ghosts.

"How nervous you are!" he said, gently stroking her cheek--"you silly little goose you!"

"It is not for myself," she whispered, "so long as you love me, you and Ella, I can bear anything. But I know you--it would grieve you to the very heart, if ...."

"Tickets, if you please!"

A breathless panting--a shrill whistle.

"Rautschin--five minutes stay!"

"Aunt Wjera!" Gabrielle exclaimed, joyously hurrying out of the coupé.

There was something like defiance in Zinka's heart, but when she saw the woman, who in all her exquisite beauty, all the distinguished grace of manner inspired by kindness and cordiality, advanced to meet them, her defiant mood vanished in admiration, and with a feeling of almost childlike reverence, she bowed to the superiority of the elder lady, who greeted her most cordially.

After the first excitement of meeting was over, Countess Wjera's attention was naturally concentrated upon her son's betrothed.

"I can but congratulate you from my heart, Ossi," she said earnestly, looking full into the young girl's eyes--eyes that shone like two blue violets under the clearest skies--violets that had suffered nothing from late frosts or too ardent sunshine. "You are a favourite of fortune, my child."

Gabrielle blushed, and buried her face in the bunch of white roses, which Oswald had brought her; and Oswald was touched, and smiled his thanks to his mother, as he whispered a tender word to his betrothed.

"Do you know who came in the same train with us?" Truyn suddenly asked, interrupting the happy moment.

"Capriani, father and son, I saw them," said Oswald, "look at him, mamma, there is my rival, the enterprising young spark, who sued for Gabrielle's hand. A mad idea, was it not? Gabrielle, and a son of Capriani!--we shouted with laughter, when the Melkweyser announced the proposal."

The flurry of the arrival had subsided, and the Countess leisurely inspected through her eyeglass the sallow young man who was talking with Georges Lodrin. Gabrielle said something about his dark blue travelling-suit, shot with gold; Zinka made inquiries, all in a breath, of her husband, and of the two lady's-maids, whether this or that article of luggage had not been left in Paris or in the railway coupé.

When at last all her anxieties on this point had been relieved, and they had passed through the station to the carriages, they observed a magnificent four-in-hand, the harness decorated with a coronet.

"By Jove!" Truyn exclaimed with delight, "superb, Ossi, superb! I have rarely seen four such beauties together!"

"Nor have I," said Oswald, examining the horses critically, "unfortunately they are not mine--they belong to Capriani."

"Impossible!" Truyn said disdainfully, "speculator that he is, he may bore through the isthmus of Panama, for all I care, but he cannot get together such a four-in-hand as that."

"Fritz Malzin selected and arranged it for him," Oswald explained. "Poor Fritz!"

"I cannot understand him," Truyn said in an undertone, and hastily changing the subject, he asked: "Have you come to terms with Capriani, about the Kanitz affair, Ossi? Could not the sale be revoked?"

"The matter would have been very difficult to adjust, I am told--of course I understand nothing of such things,--" replied Oswald, "but Capriani--what will you say to this, uncle?--yielded the

point, 'out of special regard' for me, as his lawyer informed Dr. Schindler. Between ourselves, it was--what word shall I use?--audacious, for I have never spoken to him in my life, and yet I had to accept his uncalled-for courtesy, for Schmitt's sake."

"Remarkable, very!" said Truyn, "We usually have to pay dear for the courtesies of a Capriani and his kind!"

"Have you everything, Ella?" asked Zinka, "shall we start?"

"I should like to have my hand-bag, Hortense has left it with the large luggage."

Meanwhile, with an unpleasant smile and hat in hand, a sallow-faced, grey-haired, elderly man, with the look of a bird of prey, approached the Countess Wjera, and held out his right hand. "I am immensely gratified, your Excellency, after so long a time ....!"

The Countess, her eyes half closed, measured him haughtily. "With whom have I the pleasure ...?"

"Conte Capriani."

The Countess silently shrugged her shoulders, and turning half away, called in an irritated tone, "Are we ready to go at last, Ossi?...."

A whirling cloud of dust was soon the only trace left of the bustle of the arrival.

The short drive was spent by Truyn in reminiscences, by the betrothed pair in sentiment.

At the tea, which was awaiting the travellers, and of which the Lodrin's stayed to partake, there was much laughter over the *chic* of the Caprianis, over their wealth, and--their obtrusiveness. Oswald suddenly grew thoughtful.

"Did you ever before meet these people, mamma?" he asked.

"I never knew any Conte Capriani in my life,--who are these Caprianis?" asked the Countess.

"Nobody knows," said Oswald. "Some say he is a Greek, some that he comes from Marseilles, and others that he is a Turk."

"They are all wrong," Georges said drily, "he comes originally from Bohemia; he was formerly a physician, and his name was Stein."

BOOK SECOND.

CHAPTER I.

Rautschin, still Rautschin!--the tiny town lying at the feet of the huge castle on the tower of which the clock has stopped for twenty years--but no longer in pouring rain with thunder and lightning, but Rautschin beneath skies of sapphire blue, upon a hot July afternoon.

The sun was still high in the heavens. The crooked little row of houses on one side of the Market Square, cast short, black shadows, the national red kerchiefs, with broad borders of gay flowers hanging at the door of the principal shop, fluttered gently in the summer breeze. A melancholy hubbub of discords, struggling in vain for a solution, was heard through the open window of one of the newest and ugliest houses. Eugéne Alexander Cibulka, and the wife of the district commissioner, were playing Wagner's 'Walküre,' arranged for four hands, and each had again 'lost the place.' They regularly lose the place every time a leaf is turned, and so the one who gets first to the bottom of the page, very kindly waits for the other.

Rautschin Castle stands proudly superior to every structure about it, ensconced behind all kinds of farm-buildings and additions, at the extreme end of the Market Square, to which it turns its shoulder, as it were. Except for its imposing dimensions, it is in no wise remarkable.

Standing at the entrance of a very extensive park, it dates from the time of Maria Theresa, when the present clumsy edifice, its prim façade defaced by grass-green shutters, was built upon the remains of a feudal fortress. The court-yard is not perfectly square, and the arches of the arcade rest upon granite pillars. Its interior is quite in accordance with its exterior; it is anything but splendid, and has an air of empty, dignified distinction.

Before the western side of the Castle, Count Truyn with his young wife was sitting beneath the shade of a red and gray striped marquee; behind them in a garden-room, the glass doors of which were wide open, Oswald, standing on a step-ladder, was busy hanging on the wall a piece of gold-embroidered Oriental stuff, and Gabrielle was handing him the nails.

"Well Zini, are you beginning to like our home?" said Truyn, propping his elbows upon the white garden table, between himself and his wife. He looked so contented, so proud of his possessions, so triumphant, that Zinka could not refrain from teasing him a little.

"Taken all in all, yes," she said indifferently, "but then taken all in all, I should like Siberia, with you and Ella."

"Zinka! I must confess,"--Truyn's face assumed a disturbed and almost offended expression, "I must say that I cannot understand how any one can compare Rautschin to a place of exile!"

"I did not mean to do so, rest assured," Zinka said, "I think your Rautschin very delightful, I should only like to alter a few details."

"I cannot abide improvements," growled Truyn, "it is only the Caprianis and Company, who must always be beautifying everything old--that is destroying it. I think an old place should be left as it is, with all its characteristic defects--to try to improve them, seems to me like trying to correct the drawing of a Giotto or a Cimabue."

"I can understand a respect for the old mis-drawings," Zinka rejoined quietly, "but does one owe the same respect to modern retouching, to the vandalism that has made clumsy additions to an old picture?"

"Hm!" Truyn gazed thoughtfully around him--"no, in fact. It is remarkable that you are always right, you little witch. Now be frank Zini; what exactly would you like to have different? So far as my veneration and my finances permit, you shall have your will."

Zinka pointed to the lawn that lay before them, terribly disfigured by bright red and yellow arabesques. "I think that confectioner's ornamentation there almost as ugly as the carpet-gardening at the Villa Albani," she said, "don't you?"

Truyn ran his hands through his hair, "Well, yes,"--he meekly admitted after a pause, "but I cannot possibly alter that. Old Kraus, to surprise me, has taken infinite pains to portray our crest on the lawn--I had to praise him for his brilliant idea, however hideous I thought the thing, don't you see, Zini?"

"That alters the case entirely," Zinka admitted. "I would not hurt faithful old Kraus for the world. But"--she pointed to the basin of a fountain, the shape of which was particularly ugly--"old Kraus could not have designed that basin--that might be cleared away!"

Truyn looked thoroughly discomfited. "The basin is a horror," he confessed, "but I cannot help saying a good word for it. It is endeared to me by youthful associations--if only because when I was a boy of twelve, I was very nearly drowned in it."

"Oh then indeed ...." Zinka shrugged her shoulders, with a humourous air of resignation. "I now hardly dare to object to the green shutters," she went on, "for if, as in view of their colour is highly probable, they gave you opthalmia, some thirty years ago--it would ...."

"No, no, no, I give up the shutters," exclaimed Truyn laughing, "let them go. And now I have something to tell you that you will not relish--no need to change colour, the matter is an inconvenience, not a trial. While I have been away--for the last ten years in fact--the park has been open to the public. The little town has no other public garden. I have, indeed, in view of this, placed an extensive tract of land at the disposal of the town Council, but it is not yet laid out, and until it is, I should not like entirely to deprive the public of the freedom of the Park. Therefore I should like to have you point out as soon as possible what part you would prefer to have reserved entirely for yourself, that it may be portioned off. Indeed I cannot help it, Zini."

"You will be as condescending at last as a crowned head," Zinka said laughing. "You have already relinquished a corner of the park, because the new road, laid out for the convenience of the public, must run directly beneath your windows--and ..."

"I know--I know," Truyn interrupted her impatiently, "but one owes something to the people. Of course you think 'my husband is a perfect simpleton, he'll put up with anything'--but ...."

"Have you really no better idea of what I think of my husband, than that?" Zinka asked in a low tone, looking at him with tender raillery in her eyes.

"Oh you sweet-natured little woman!" he said, attempting to chuck her under the chin.

"What are you about?" she exclaimed, thrusting his hand away, "this wall here on the street is so low, that every little ragamuffin can see us. And let me tell you that this wall has seemed more odious than anything else to-day. Between ourselves--move your chair a little nearer, Erich--I have been all this while tormented by a desire to throw myself into your arms--you dear, good, whimsical fellow--but the wall!"

"Confound the wall!" Truyn exclaimed, angrily clinching his fist.

"Tell me," Zinka asked caressingly, "is the lowness of the wall also a question of humanity? Do you find it impossible to deny the townsfolk the satisfaction of conveniently observing the castle-folk?"

"Pshaw! I was vexed about the height of the wall ten years ago--that is when the road was laid out, but--well, I cannot myself say why it is--but unless we have a rage for building, nothing is done. We complain for ten years about the same evil, and ..."

"And to part with an evil about which one has complained for ten long years," interrupted Zinka laughing, "would be almost as distressing as to clear away the basin of a fountain, in which one had been nearly drowned, thirty years before, eh, Erich?"

The broad July sunshine lay upon the red and yellow splendour of the Truyn escutcheon, shimmered brilliantly about the foremost of the mighty trees, whose dark foliage contrasted with the emerald of the lawn where they stood, beyond the open, flower-decked portion of the park, and penetrated boldly into their thick shades, limning fanciful arabesques of light upon the darker green.

From the garden-room floated Gabrielle's sweet, childlike voice, "*Io so una giardiniera*," she sang. Oswald had finished his upholstering, and was bending over the piano. He combined a sincere enjoyment of music with a deplorable preference for sentimental popular ballads.

The creaking of wheels intruded upon the dreamy monotony of the hour. Truyn leaned forward and started to his feet. "Ah, old Swoboda, the doctor who attended Ella with the measles," he exclaimed joyfully, recognising Dr. Swoboda, in his comical little vehicle drawn by a white horse spotted with brown. "Is he still alive? I must call him in. Holla! Doctor, how are you?"

The doctor started, looked round, and took off his hat with a smile of delight, "your servant, Count Truyn."

"Come in and have a chat," said Truyn, "it was hardly fair not to have been to see us before."

"But, my dear Count, how could I suppose ..."

A few minutes later, the old doctor was seated opposite to Truyn, underneath the marquee, imparting to the Count exact information as to the weal and woe of a multitude of people belonging to the town, and to the country round, whom the proprietor of Rautschin remembered with wonderful distinctness.

Some had died, one or two were insane--a couple were bankrupt.

"Infernal swindling speculations! is my dear old Rautschin beginning to be carried away by them?" said Truyn, "certain epidemics cannot be arrested. Sad--very sad! And now the *phylloxera* has taken up its abode in Schneeburg."

"Is there much illness about here?" Zinka asked the doctor, in hopes perhaps of staving off a conservative outburst from her husband.

"None of any consequence. My business is at a low ebb, your Excellency."

"Where have you just been, doctor?" Truyn asked.

"I have just come from Schneeburg."

"Ah? anything seriously amiss in the Capriani household?--I could not shed a tear for King Midas."

"The Herr Count cannot suppose that those magnificoes would call in a poor country doctor, like myself."

"My dear Swoboda, we all have the greatest confidence in you!" Truyn said kindly.

"I thank you heartily, Herr Count, but this confidence is an old custom, and the Caprianis consider old customs as mere prejudices, and propose to do away with them. I have just come from our poor Count Fritz."

"Indeed? are the children ill?"

"No, not ill, but ailing; there is something or other the matter with them all the time--they are city children;--however, I am not really anxious about them, they'll come all right. But I am sick at heart for poor Count Fritz, he is far from well."

"Ah, indeed? what is the matter with him?" Truyn asked in a tone of evident irritation.

"His unfortunate circumstances are killing him," the doctor replied gloomily.

"Ah--hm,--I must confess to you--er--my dear doctor, that--er--I take it very ill of Fritz, that he, er--accepted a position,--er--with--that,--er--adventurer."

The old doctor looked the irritated gentleman full in the eyes. "When one is homesick and sees his children, who cannot bear the city air, hungering for bread, one will do many things, which could not be contemplated for an instant, under even slightly improved circumstances."

"Ossi always told you ...." began Zinka.

"Oh pshaw! Ossi is an enthusiast, whose heart is always drowning out his head."

The old doctor sighed. "Well, I will intrude no longer," he said. He had often enough seen his noble patients yawn, as the door was closing upon him after a prolonged visit.

"Not at all,--not at all--wait a moment; I must call the children; Gabrielle! Ossi!"

The young people appeared from the garden-room.

"Ah--it is the friend who saved my life," Gabrielle exclaimed, cordially extending her hand.

Oswald too greeted him kindly, but suddenly he, as well as the old physician became slightly embarrassed--each remembered the unpleasant scene in the inn.--The conversation did not flow very freely.

"Now, I really must go," the doctor insisted in some confusion.

"Come soon again," said Truyn, shaking hands with him, "give my remembrance to Fritz, and--er--tell him to come and see me soon." He walked towards the court-yard with the old man, and when he returned he observed that Oswald, as he was silently rolling up a cigarette, was frowning furiously, evidently angry.

"Where does the shoe pinch, Ossi?" he asked.

"I cannot understand, uncle, how you can be so hard upon Fritz!" exclaimed Oswald throwing away his cigarette. "You are wont to be the softest-hearted of men, but to that poor devil ...."

"Don't excite yourself so terribly," Truyn said kindly, but in some surprise at the young man's violence. How could he divine the disturbance of mind that was at the root of his indignation? "You are so irritable ...."

"I am perfectly calm," Oswald boldly asserted, "only .... how could you send messages to Fritz by the doctor, and ask him to come to you? Have you no idea of his miserably sore state of mind?--and physically too he is so wretched that he cannot last six months longer; I have begged you to go and see him."

"Papa! If Ossi begs you!" Gabrielle whispered, looking up at her father with the large pleading eyes of a child.

"Ah, you can't understand how any one can possibly refuse Ossi anything," Truyn said, smiling in the midst of his annoyance.

She blushed and cast down her eyes.

"What can you find to like in this fellow, Ella?" her father rallied her. "A man ready to take fire, and clinch his fist upon the smallest provocation. What would you say if I should put my veto upon this foolish betrothal with a young savage who is only half-responsible?"

Gabrielle's blush grew deeper, she looked alternately at her father and at her lover, and finally deciding in favour of the latter gently laid her hand upon his arm.

"You see, uncle!.... completely routed," exclaimed Oswald, his anger entirely dispelled by this little intermezzo. His voice rang with exultant happiness as he added, "nothing can part us now, Ella--not even a father's veto!"

And Ella clung silently to his arm and looked blissfully content.

"Poor little comrade!" said Truyn tenderly. Mingled with his emotion there was something of the pity which men of ripe years and experience always feel at the sight of the perfect happiness of young lovers.

"Poor little comrade!--well, to win back some share of your favour I will e'en put a good face upon it and comply with the wishes of your tyrant."

CHAPTER II.

"How can a respectable household put up with such a servant!" thought Truyn, as he waited in the hall of the little Swiss cottage which stood between the park at Schneeburg and the vegetable garden, and had been appropriated to the son of the late owner of the soil. A slatternly woman with a loose linen wrapper hanging about her stout figure had come towards him, and after an affirmative reply to his inquiry if the Count were at home, screamed shrilly: "Malzin! Some one to see you!" and vanished in the interior of the house.

An unpleasant suspicion assailed Truyn. "Can that be...." The next moment all else was forgotten in distress at the changed appearance of a fair, pale young man who rushed up to him exclaiming: "Erich!--you here!"

"Fritz, Fritz!" said Truyn in a broken voice, fairly clasping his unfortunate cousin in his arms.

Of all mortals he who has voluntarily resigned the position in which he was born is the most embarrassing to deal with. He has by degrees broken with his fellows, and, almost like an outcast, seems scarcely to know how to comport himself when accident throws him among his former associates; when he meets one of 'his people' he usually alternates between intrusive familiarity and embittered reserve.

There was nothing of all this, however, about Fritz. He was so simple and cordial, that Truyn felt ashamed of having avoided a meeting.

Fair, with delicate, slightly pinched features, and large melancholy gray eyes, exquisitely neat and exact in his apparel, he looked from head to foot like a cavalry officer in citizen's dress, and in poor circumstances, that is like a man who knew how to invest with a certain distinction even the shabbiness to which fate condemned him.

"You cannot imagine what pleasure your visit gives me! When I see one of you it really seems almost as if one of my dear ones had descended from heaven to press my hand," he said with emotion and Truyn replied:

"I should have come before, but I expected certainly that you .... that ...."

"That I ...." Fritz smiled significantly, "no, Erich, you could hardly ...."

"Well, well, and how are you? How are you?" said Truyn quickly.

"I still live," Fritz replied, and looked away.

Just then a voice was heard outside inquiring for "Count Malzin."

"I am not at home, Lotti, do you hear, not at home to any body," Malzin called into the next room. "Come, Erich!" and he conducted his guest out of what answered as a drawing-room into a very shabbily-furnished apartment which he called his 'den,' and where Truyn at once felt quite at home.

"That was young Capriani," Fritz explained hurriedly, "he probably came to talk with me about the burial vault. Perhaps you know that my late father had the vault reserved for us in the contract for the sale of Schneeburg. Capriani, whom usually nothing escapes, oddly enough overlooked the fact that the vault is in the park, and now he wants me to sell it to him. Let him try it--the vault he shall not have--it is the last spot of home that is left to me. I choose at least to lie in the grave with my people! But let us talk of something pleasanter. You are all well, are you not?--but there is no need to ask, I can see it by looking at you. And I know all about your domestic affairs from Ossi."

"He comes to see you often?"

"Yes," said Fritz, "and every time with a fresh scheme for my complete relief from all difficulties, which he always unfolds with the same fervid enthusiasm. The schemes are impracticable, but never mind! Existence always seems more tolerable to me while I am talking with him, and when he has gone, it is as if a soft spring shower had just passed over, purifying and freshening the air. There really is something very remarkable about the fellow. With all his

fiery energy, he is so unutterably tender; ordinarily when a man situated as I am comes in contact with such a favorite of fortune, he inevitably feels annoyed--it is like a glare of light for weak eyes. But there is nothing of the kind with him--he warms without dazzling,--he understands how to stoop to misery, without condescending to it."

"Yes, yes, he has his good qualities," Truyn grumbled, "very good qualities. But he has stolen from me my little comrade's heart, and I cannot say I am greatly pleased."

"You do not expect me to pity you on the score of your future son-in-law?" said Fritz, laughing.

"Not exactly--if I must have one, then ...."

"Then thank God that just these young people have come together," Fritz said in that tone of admonition, which even young men, when forsaken of fortune, sometimes adopt towards their happier seniors. "Do you know what he has done for me--among other things--just a trifle?"

"How should I? He certainly would never tell me."

"Of course not! We had not seen each other for years, but he came to see me as soon as he knew that I was at Schneeburg, and asked me if he could do anything for me. I thought it kind, but did not take his words seriously and so thanked him and assured him he could do nothing. He came again, bringing presents for the children with kind messages from his mother, and asked me to dinner. When we retired to the smoking-room after that dinner he said to me with the embarrassed manner of a generous man, about to confer a benefit: 'Fritz, tell me frankly; does no old debt annoy you?' Of course, at first I did not want to confess, but at last I admitted that a couple of unliquidated accounts did trouble me. An unstained name is a luxury that is the hardest of all to forego. He arranged everything, and now I am perfectly free from debt. He has such a charming way of giving, as if it were the merest pastime. I once asked him how a man as happy as he, found so much time to think for others? He answered that happiness was like a rose-bush, the more blossoms one gives away, the more it flourishes!"

"Yes, yes, he certainly is a fine fellow.--We quarrel sometimes, but he is a very fine fellow!" said Truyn, "he suits the child--you must know her. And what about your children? Ossi says they are very pretty--you have three, have you not?"

"No, only two," Fritz replied, and his voice trembled as he took a little photograph from the wall--"only two; my eldest died. Look at him--" handing the picture to Truyn, "he was a pretty child, was he not?--my poor little Siegi--but too lovely, too good for the life that had fallen to his lot. He is better dead--better!" he uttered in the hard tone in which the reason asserts what the heart denies.

From the park the vague, dreamy fragrance of the fading white rocket was wafted into the room. The light flickered dimly through the leafy screen of the apricot tree before the open window that looked out upon the vegetable garden. On Fritz's writing-table the old Empire clock, wheezing in its struggle for breath, struck five times. Truyn knew the old timepiece well, but formerly it used to swing its pendulum as merrily on into eternity as if it expected a fresh delight every hour. It seemed as if by this time it had almost lost its voice from grief, so asthmatic was the sob with which it counted the seconds. And not only with the clock, with everything around him Truyn was familiar. The entire shabby apartment betrayed a fanatical worship of the past. The chairs were the same monstrosities with lyre-shaped backs and crooked legs, which had been wont to endure the angry kicks of the little Malzins, when their tutor kept them too long at their lessons. Even the pattern of the wall-paper, with its apocryphal birds and butterflies among impossible wreaths of flowers, was the same which a travelling house-painter had pasted up there thirty years before.

But what most struck Truyn, was the decoration on one of the low doors in the thick wall--it was marked all over with lines in pencil and scribbled names. Upon that door the young Malzins used to record their growth from year to year.

"Pipsi, 14," he read, "and something over," "Erich,"--he smiled involuntarily, and read on,--"Oscar 12," and then far below in uncertain characters looking as if an elder sister had guided the hand of a very little child, "Fritzl."

And through Truyn's memory there sounded the crumpling of copy-book leaves--of childrens' voices, of Cramer's Exercises, and of sleepily recited Latin verbs. Yes, even the peculiar fragrance of lavender and fresh linen, formerly exhaled from the light chintz gown of his pretty cousin, came wafting to him over the past.

"This is your old school-room!" he exclaimed.

"Of course it is," said Fritz, "can you guess whom I have to thank for keeping it intact?"

"The avarice of your principal?"

"No, the delicacy of his wife. Before I moved in here she said to me, 'my husband wished to have the house put in order for you, Herr Count, but I thought that perhaps you liked old associations, and I therefore beg you to make only what changes you think best.'"

"A good woman!" Truyn murmured.

Just then an extraordinary figure entered the room,--the same female that Truyn had encountered in the hall, but splendidly transformed, tightly laced, with cheeks covered thick with pink powder--Fritz Malzin's wife!

"Very good of you," she began after Fritz had presented Truyn to her. Her voice had the forced sweetness of stage training. "Very good to honour our humble dwelling with a visit. May I take the liberty of offering you a cup of coffee, that is, Herr Count," as Truyn evidently hesitated, "if you can put up with our simple fare; in the country, you know, when one is not prepared ...."

Fritz pulled his moustache nervously.

Although he had reached the age of gastronomic fastidiousness, and especially abhorred spoiling the appetite between meals, Truyn good-naturedly accepted this pretentiously humble invitation.

CHAPTER III.

The dining-room, a long narrow apartment with three windows, smelled of fresh varnish and fly-poison; the walls were decorated with dusty laurel wreaths wound about with ribbons covered with gilt inscriptions, and with several photographs of the hostess in tights. The long table was loaded with viands. Malzin's children, a girl and a boy, respectively five and three years old, shared the meal. They were pale, and sickly, but extremely pretty with a wonderfully sympathetic expression about the mouth and eyes, reminding one of their father. It was easy to see from the shy gentleness of their demeanour that Fritz had taken great pains with their training. He exchanged little tender jests with his small daughter, but he evidently made a special pet of the boy who sat beside him in a high chair, and to whose wants he himself ministered.

There was nothing about Fritz of the amusing awkwardness of aristocratic fathers, who now and then in an amiable dilettante fashion interest themselves in the care of their offspring. On the contrary it was easy to see from the way in which he set the child straight at the table, tied on the bib, and put the mug of milk into the little hand, that the care of the child was a real occupation of his life.

Truyn sat beside his hostess murmuring threadbare compliments, touching his lips to his coffee-cup, and crumbling a piece of biscuit on his plate.

"You do our fare but little honour," the actress said more than once, "try a piece of this cake, Herr Count. Count Capriani who has a French cook, and is accustomed to the very best, always commends it."

Fritz blushed. "Try this cherry cake," he said hastily. "Lotti makes it herself. She used always to feast me upon it when we were betrothed--eh, Lotti?"

This cheery reference to her housewifely skill, offended the actress, and before Truyn could make some courteous rejoinder she exclaimed, flushed with anger, "You know, Herr Count, that where the means are so limited the mistress of the house must lend a hand."

Truyn stammered something and Fritz smiled patiently as he stroked his little son's fair curls.

It was a painfully uncomfortable hour.

Truyn looked from the photographs to the glass fly-traps beneath which innumerable flies were lying on their backs, convulsively twitching out their lives, and his glance finally rested upon his hostess. She was strongly perfumed with musk, and was painted around the eyes. Her stout arms were squeezed into sleeves far too tight, and her bust almost met her chin. After this keen scrutiny, however, Truyn discovered that she was certainly handsome, that her face although disfigured by too full lips, was strikingly like that of the capitoline Venus.

The intrusive humility of her manner, seasoned as it was with vulgar raillery, was insufferable.

"For this woman!" he repeated to himself again and again. "For this woman!" His eye fell upon a photograph portraying the Countess as '*la belle Héléne*,' in a costume that displayed her magnificent physique to great advantage, and he suddenly remembered that he had seen her in that rôle; that her acting was bad; but that she produced a dazzling impression on the stage.

"Did you recognize that picture, Herr Count?" she asked suddenly.

"Instantly," he assured her.

"Did you ever see me play?"

"I once had that pleasure."

"Ah!" A remarkable transformation was immediately manifest, her languid air grew animated, thirst for the triumphs of the past glittered in her eyes. She moved her chair a little closer to Truyn and coquettishly leaning her head upon her hand whispered, "Were you one of my adorers?"

Fritz frowned and glanced angrily towards her, twisting his napkin nervously.

His attention was suddenly distracted however, by the noise of the blows of an axe resounding slowly and monotonously through the heavy summer air. Fritz changed colour, sprang up and hurried to the window.

"What is the matter?" the actress asked him negligently.

"They are cutting down the old beech," he said slowly, turning not to her, but to Truyn.--"The Friedrichs-beech; planted by one of our ancestors, Joachim Malzin, with his own hands after the liberation of Vienna; we children all cut our names upon it. Don't you remember how Madame Lenoir scolded us for it, and declared that it was not *comme il faut*, but a pastime befitting prentice boys only? Good Heavens--how long ago that is!--and now they are cutting it down. Capriani insists that it interferes with his view."

CHAPTER IV.

"If one could only help him!--but there is nothing to be done--absolutely nothing!"

Thus Truyn reflected, as distressed and compassionate, he rode home on his sleek cob, followed by his trim English groom.

There are many varieties of compassion not at all painful, which, when well-seasoned with a charming consciousness of virtue, may serve sensitive souls as a tolerable amusement. There is, for example, an artistically contemplative compassion that, with hands thrust comfortably in pockets, looks on at some melancholy affair as at the fifth act of a tragedy, without experiencing the faintest call to recognize its existence except by heaving sundry sentimental sighs. Then there is a self-contemplative compassion which, quite as inactive as the artistically contemplative, culminates in the satisfactory consciousness of the comparative comfort of one's own condition; then a decorative compassion, which is displayed merely as a mental adornment upon solemn occasions when the man marches forth clad in full-dress moral uniform.

But there is one compassion which is among the most painful sensations that can assail a delicate-minded human being--a compassion, always united to the most earnest desire to aid, to console, and yet which knows itself powerless in presence of the suffering; that longs for nothing in the world more ardently than to aid that which it cannot aid! And this it was that oppressed Truyn, as he rode home from Schneeburg,--this vain compassion lying like a cold, hard stone upon his warm, kind heart!

"If one could only help him, could but make life at least tolerable for him,--poor Fritz, poor fellow!" he muttered again and again.

The tall poplars, standing like a long row of gigantic exclamation points on the side of the road, cast strips of dark shade upon the light, dusty soil. The crickets were chirping in the hedges; in the wheat-fields to the right and left the ears nodded gently and gravely; red poppies and blue cornflowers--useless, picturesque gipsy-folk, amidst the ripening harvest--laughed at their feet. The clover-fields had passed their prime,--they were brown and a faint odour of faded flowers floated aloft from them. The transparent veil of early twilight obscured the light and dimmed the shadows.

How thoroughly Truyn knew the road! The inmates of Schneeburg and Rautschin had formerly been good neighbours.

A throng of laughing, beckoning phantoms glided through his mind. Out of the blue mist of the

morning of his life, now so far behind him, there emerged a slender, girlish figure with long, black braids, and a downy, peach-like face--dark-eyed Pipsi, for whom Erich, then an enthusiast of sixteen, copied poems--and a second phantom came with her, merry-hearted Tilda, who with the pert insolence of her thirteen years used to laugh so mercilessly at the sentimental pair of lovers; and Hugo, a rather awkward boy, always at odds with his tutor and his Greek grammar.

Where were they all? Hugo went into the army, and was killed in a duel; dark-eyed Pepsi married in Hungary, and died at the birth of her first child; Tilda married a Spanish diplomatist--Truyn had heard nothing of her for years;--not one of the Malzins was left in their native land, save Fritz, who at the time of Truyn's lyric enthusiasm was a curly-headed, babbling baby, before whose dimples the entire family were on their knees, and who of his bounty dispensed kisses among them.

Truyn's thoughts wandered on--he recalled Fritz as an dashing officer of Hussars. He was one of the handsomest men in the army, fair, with a sunny smile and the proverbial Malzin conscientiousness in his earnest eyes, very fastidious in his pleasures, almost dandified in his dress; spoiled by women of fashion.

"Who would have thought it!" Truyn repeated to himself, as he gazed reflectively between his horse's ears. Suddenly he became aware of a cloud of dust,--and of a delightful sensation warming his heart. He perceived Zinka and Gabrielle sitting in a low pony-wagon, and behind them in the footman's seat was Oswald. Zinka was driving, being the butt of much laughing criticism from the other two. How pleased Truyn was with the picture, and how often was he destined to recall it, the fair, lovely heads of the two women, the dark, handsome young fellow, who understood so well how to combine a merry familiarity with the most delicate courtesy! How happy they all looked!

"You are late, papa!" Gabrielle called out.

"Have I offended you again, comrade?"

"But papa--!"

"I was beginning to be a little anxious," said Zinka, "Ossi laughed at me, and said I was like his mother, who if he is half an hour late in returning home from a ride always imagines that he has been thrown and killed on the road, and that the only reason the groom does not make his appearance, is because he has not the courage to tell the sad tidings."

Oswald laughed. "Yes, my mother's fancy runs riot in such images, sometimes," he admitted, stretching out his hand for the reins, that he might help Zinka to turn round. "And how is poor Fritz?"

"Wretched--such misery is enough to break one's heart--and no getting rid of it."

"And you are no longer angry with him?" Oswald asked with a touch of good-humoured triumph.

"Heaven forbid! but--," Truyn rubbed his forehead--"Oh, that stock-jobber--that phylloxera!"

Just then there appeared in the road an aged man, spare of habit and somewhat bent, but walking briskly; his features were sharp but not unpleasant, his arms were long, and his old-fashioned coat fluttered about his legs.

"Good-day, Herr Stern," Oswald called out to him in response to his bow.

Truyn doffed his hat and bowed low on his horse's neck.

"Who is it whom you hold worthy of so profound a bow, papa?" Gabrielle asked.

"Rabbi von Selz," Truyn made answer, "in times like these such people should be treated with special respect, if only for the sake of the lower classes who always regulate their conduct somewhat by ours."

"Oho, uncle, your bow was a political demonstration, then," Oswald remarked.

"To a certain degree," Truyn replied, "but Stern is, moreover, a very distinguished man."

"He is indeed," Oswald affirmed, "he is a particular friend of mine--if any one among the people about here maltreats him, he always applies to me. Poor devil! The Jews are a very strange folk. I always divide them into two families, one related directly to Christ, the other to Judas Iscariot. Poesy, the Seer, has produced two immortal types of these families, Nathan and Shylock."

"Aha, Ella, I hope you are duly impressed by your lover, he really talks like a book," Truyn rallied his daughter who, her fair head slightly bent backward, was looking over her shoulder at Oswald, with rapt admiration in her large eyes. "I invited Fritz to dine with you, comrade, the day after to-morrow. He is almost as madly enthusiastic about your betrothed as you are yourself, and you can sing your Laudamus together."

CHAPTER V.

"There is nothing to be done with the fellow.--I never encountered such weakness of mind," exclaimed Capriani to his wife.

The hour was three, and just before dinner; in accordance with Austrian custom, or rather with the national bad habit, they dined at Schneeburg at half-past three, although the whole family, especially those of the second generation, accustomed to late foreign hours, found this earlier hour very inconvenient.

"Of whom are you talking?" Madame Capriani asked in her depressed tone; she was sitting erect upon a small gilt chair, she wore a gray, silk-muslin gown, rather over-trimmed, *gants de Suéde*, and an air of constraint.

"Of whom are you talking?" she asked a second time, smoothing her gloves.

"Of whom?--of that blockhead, Malzin," growled Capriani.

"I told you from the first that he would never be able to fill that position," his wife rejoined.

"Fill--!" Capriani shrugged his shoulders contemptuously, "fill--! it takes him two hours to write a business-letter. But I was prepared for that. His office is a sinecure; the salary that I pay him is an alms,--but Alfred Capriani can do as he pleases there,--and at least the fellow understands something about horses. What outrages me is to see how he squanders my money, the money that I give him. He ransacks the country round to buy back from the peasants relics of his parents. First an old clock, that struck twelve just as he was born, then an old piano, upon which his sisters used to strum the scales. 'Tis enough to drive one mad!"

Frau von Capriani looked distressed. "That is a matter of sentiment," she suggested.

"A matter of sentiment--a matter of sentiment," Capriani repeated sarcastically. "It would be a matter of sentiment and conscience to think of saving up something for his children."

"You are right, you are right," the Countess rejoined, in her emphatic yet not unmelodious Russian-German, "but this time you are in some measure to blame for his folly. I begged you a hundred times to ask him what he would like to keep for himself of the furniture which was entirely useless to us. Instead, you had it all put up at auction."

"And the proceeds of the sale are to be devoted to the building of a new school, to be entirely independent of ecclesiastical influence," said Capriani, "the old rubbish shall aid, willy-nilly, in the spread of modern liberal ideas. It is my aim to root out prejudices not to foster them. Would you have me minister directly to Malzin's folly? It would be nonsense. It makes me shudder to see this man, who owns nothing, positively nothing, except what I give him out of sheer kindness, and who ought to look ahead, keeping his eyes fixed upon the past, and sentimentally collecting empty bon-bon boxes, the contents of which his forefathers have devoured to the last crumb. He is the personification of the invincible narrowness of his class."

"He is a good honest man," the Contessa said gently.

"Honest,--honest!" Capriani repeated impatiently, "a man whose desires have been anticipated from his childhood, upon whose plate the pheasants have always fallen ready trussed and roasted, would naturally not contemplate picking pockets. To be sure, he might be tempted to try it, but he can't do it--he is too unpractical to be dishonest. There is nothing praiseworthy in that, for all the honesty that you ascribe to him he is a thorough selfish egotist; without the smallest scruple he robs his own children of thousands."

"Malzin!" Frau von Capriani exclaimed, "why he would let his ears be cut off for his children, and if he refused to lose his hands too, it would only be because he needed them to work for his family."

"To work!" rejoined Capriani ironically. "If he would only sacrifice for their sakes his miserable pride of rank he could do far more for them than by his work! He--and work! Do you know what reply he made to my splendid offer for his family vault? 'The vault is not for sale, it is the only spot of home that is left me. I will at least lie among my people when I am dead!' Can you conceive of greater insolence?"

"Insolence--poor Malzin--he is as modest....!"

"Modest!" sneered Capriani, interrupting her, "he is fairly bristling with arrogance. A starving pauper, living on my bounty, and all the while thinking himself superior to all of us. Intercourse with us is not at all to his taste."

"He is always exquisitely courteous to me. I like him very much," Frau von Capriani declared. Her husband's constant attacks upon Malzin were beyond measure painful to her.

"Men of his stamp are always gracious to ladies," snarled Capriani.

Meanwhile his two children had entered the room, Arthur and Ad'lin, both in faultless toilettes, and both out of humour. The self-same weariness weighs upon both, the weariness of idlers who do not know how to squander time gracefully. Perhaps Georges Lodrin is not far wrong when he maintains that to idle away life gracefully is an art most difficult to acquire, and rarely learned in a single generation.

Both asked fretfully whether the post had come, and then each sank into an arm-chair and fumed. One by one the various guests then staying in the castle appeared. Paul Angelico Orchis, a conceited little versifier, (lauded in the Blanktown Gazette as 'the first lyric poet of modern times') and the possessor of a dyspepsia acquired at the expense of others. A farce by him had been produced in Blanktown, and for ten years he had been promising the public a tragedy. Meanwhile his latest effort was the invention of a picturesque waterproof cloak. Frank, the famous tailor carried out his idea in dark brown tweed, in which the poet draped himself upon every conceivable occasion. After him followed two men of the kind which Georges Lodrin describes as 'gentlemen at reduced prices,' stunted specimens of the aristocracy, who played a very insignificant part in their own circles, and from time to time fled to their inferiors in rank to enjoy a little admiration. One, Baron Kilary, is a sportsman, insolent in bearing, lewd in talk; the other, Count Fermor, is a dilettante composer and pianist, affected and sentimental.

Malzin and his wife also entered; while he bowed silently, and then respectfully kissed the hand of the hostess, Charlotte congratulated the two ladies upon the splendour of their attire, and lavished exaggerated admiration upon a couple of costly pieces of furniture which she had often seen before.

Last of all appeared our old acquaintance, the Baroness Melkweyser, who had been at Schneeburg for a week. What was she doing there? The Caprianis looked to her for their admission into Austrian society, she looked to King Midas for the augmentation of her diminished income,--and something too might be gained from country air and regular meals for her worn and weary digestion.

CHAPTER VI.

It is really melancholy for people who have been accustomed in Paris to entertain crowned heads, to be obliged in Austria to put up with a few sickly sprigs of nobility.

The Menu was very elaborate; the clumsy table service came from *Froment-Munice* and the china was Sèvres of the latest pattern, white, with a coronet and cipher in gilt; the butler looked like a cabinet minister, and the silk stockings of the flunkies were faultless. Nevertheless the entire dinner produced a sham, masquerading effect, reminding one more or less of a stage banquet when all the viands are of papier-maché.

The hostess, with Baron Kilary on her right, and Fritz Malzin on her left, devoted herself almost exclusively to the latter, asking him kindly questions about his children.

The host, seated between the Baroness Melkweyser, and the Countess Malzin, contented himself with seeing that the actress's plate was kept well supplied, and with exchanging jests with her which were merely silly during soup, but which grew more objectionable at dessert.

The Baroness Melkweyser studied the Menu, Paul Angelico Orchis complained of his dyspepsia and asked advice of his neighbour, Ad'lin Capriani, as to his diet. Moreover he testified his gratitude for Capriani's hospitality by praising everything enthusiastically. He remarked that he had visited Schneeburg formerly, but that he should hardly have recognised the castle again, absolutely hardly have recognised it, it was so wonderfully improved, he could not see how Count Capriani could have effected so much in so short a time.

Whereupon the master of the mansion replied with aristocratic nonchalance: "The place had to be made habitable, but there's not much that can be done with it, it is nothing but an old

barracks, an inconvenient old barracks." He then held forth at length upon the improvements which he still contemplated, concluding with, "But I have no room--the Schneeburg domain is so contracted, so insignificant! Unfortunately all the estates which would serve my purpose are owned by people unwilling to sell."

Madame Capriani tried several times unsuccessfully to check her husband, and Fritz looked gloomily down into his empty plate.

He had always been so proud of his Schneeburg, and that it should not be good enough for this swindler, forsooth!----

Fermor looked discontented, and talked to Adeline about his compositions, betraying at every word the sentimental arrogance of a narrow-minded, lackadaisical, provincial aristocrat, greedy for adulation, and salving his conscience for his new associations, by making himself as disagreeable as possible to the people whose bread he eats.

Malzin, albeit in a subordinate position, manifested from habit the instinctive reserve of a true gentleman, fearful of wounding the susceptibilities of his inferiors. The conduct of his fellows was in striking contrast to his own. Fermor ignored him. Kilary on the contrary continually tried to draw him into familiar talk upon subjects of which none of the others knew anything, a course evidently irritating to the host.

Malzin was, moreover, the only one at table towards whom Kilary conducted himself courteously. To the poet he was especially insolent. At dessert he read aloud with sentimental emphasis a couple of bonbon-mottoes, and then asked, "My dear Orchis, are these immortal lines your own?" at which the poet vainly tried to smile. The rumour ran that when his finances were at a low ebb he did sometimes place his genius at the disposal of a Vienna confectioner.

After dinner the gentlemen retired to the smoking-room to smoke, the ladies to the drawing-room to yawn.

"I cannot cease looking at you, this evening, Comtesse," Charlotte Malzin exclaimed, seating herself on a sofa beside the daughter of the house, "your gown is enchanting."

"Very much too picturesque for this part of the world, they can't appreciate these contrasts of colour in this barbarous country," Ad'lin said crossly, as she was wont to receive the actress's advances. "They are far behind the age in Austria! *Dieu, qui l'Autriche m'ennuie!*"

The actress fell silent, in some confusion.

"What had the poet to say to you, Ad'lin?" asked the Baroness Melkweyser, after she had inspected through her eye-glass each piece of furniture in turn in the drawing-room.

"That he could not digest truffles, and that he means to dedicate his next work to me."

"Ah! the first item is highly interesting, and the last uncommonly flattering," the Melkweyser rejoined.

"Yes, it means that I must order at least fifty copies of the interesting effusion," Ad'lin said fretfully, adding with a half smile, "People in our position have to encourage literature--*noblesse oblige*!"

The Baroness bit her lip and resumed her voyage of discovery, turning to a cabinet filled with antique porcelain.

"You really cannot think," Ad'lin began, leaving her sofa to join her friend, "how I have longed for you! You are the only link here in Austria between ourselves and civilization. I depend upon your forming an agreeable circle for us here."

It was noteworthy that since Zoë's return to her native land, Adeline's familiarity had seemed far less acceptable to her than it had been in Paris. "An agreeable circle!" she exclaimed, "that is easily said, but you make it very hard for me. You do not want to know our financiers …."

"The Austrian financiers have no position; even the Rothschilds are not received at Court."

"And the Austrian aristocracy is excessively exclusive on its own soil--!" said Zoë.

"Ah that exclusiveness is a *fable convenue*," Ad'lin insisted, "I am convinced that if Austrian society knew us …."

Instead of replying, the Melkweyser directed her eye-glass towards the porcelain on the shelves of the cabinet. "That is the Malzin old-Vienna tea-service."

"Yes, but it cannot be used--it is not complete."

"I know it, Wjera Zinsenburg has the other half."

"If it would give the Countess the slightest pleasure to complete the set, I should be perfectly

ready to place this half at her disposal!" Capriani's voice was heard to say.

The gentlemen had left their cigars and had come to the drawing-room for their coffee. Fermor who was too nervous to allow himself the indulgence of a cup of Mocha, sat down at the piano, and began to prelude in an affected manner.

Leaning in a languishing attitude against the raised cover of the piano, Ad'lin murmured, "No one but you invents such modulations. You ought to indulge me with a grand composition, Count; have you never completed one?"

"I am busy now with a work of some scope for a grand orchestra," Fermor lisped, dabbing his limp, bloodless hands upon the keyboard like a nervous kangaroo.

"Ah! A sonata?--An opera?"

"No, a requiem; that is a kind of requiem--more correctly a morning impromptu, the last thoughts of a dying poacher."

"Oh how interesting! Pray let me hear it."

"It is a rather complicated piece of music, Fräulein Capriani," Fermor always ignores the Capriani patent of nobility--"if you are not especially fond of our German classic masters ...."

"I adore Wagner and Beethoven."

"Then, indeed, I will .... but the harmony is very complicated!"

Whereupon he began, with closed eyes, after the fashion of pretentious dilettanti, to deliver himself of a piece of music, the beginning of which reminded one of a piano-tuner, and the intermediate portion of the triumphal march of an operetta, and which, after it had lasted half an hour, and the audience had given up all hope of relief, suddenly, and without any apparent reason stopped short, a common termination where there has been no reason for beginning.

"*C'est divin!*" Ad'lin exclaimed. "Your composition, Count, reminds me of the intermezzo of the Fifth symphony."

"You are mistaken, Fräulein Capriani, my composition recalls no other music!" Fermor said, greatly irritated.

With his eyes glowing, his full red underlip trembling, and his manner insolently obtrusive, Capriani threw himself down beside Charlotte Malzin upon the sofa and stretched his arm along the back of it behind her shoulders.

"Come and help me with my work, Count Malzin," Frau von Capriani called kindly from her pile of cretonne. "You have so steady a hand."

And while Fritz took his place beside her, and began to cut a bird of Paradise out of the stuff with great precision, Kilary took Arthur by the buttonhole and said, "You ought to know all about it young man, how must one begin who wants to grow rich?"

"You must ask my father," Arthur replied insolently. "All that I understand of financial matters is, how to make debts."

A servant brought in the letters and papers upon a silver salver.

Whilst Arthur opened a dozen begging letters, and tossed them aside, ironically remarking, "Three impoverished Countesses--two Barons--a captain ..." and whilst Ad'lin hailed with enthusiasm two letters from a couple of French duchesses whom she counted among her friends, the Conte hurriedly ran his eye over an unpretending epistle which he had instantly opened. His hands trembled, a strange greed shone in his eyes, and quivered about his lips. Quite pale, as one is apt to be in a moment of victory he paced the room to and fro once or twice and then stepping directly up to Malzin he exclaimed, "What do you think--coal--! Schneeburg is a coal-bed. Extraordinary! Your father tried after madder, and I--have found coal!"

Malzin shuddered slightly, but merely said, "I congratulate you!"

"Malzin would never have forgiven himself if your bargain had turned out a poor one," sneered Kilary.

There was something in his irony that irritated Capriani, a rebellion of caste against the autocracy of money, which he chose to punish. As he was powerless with Kilary he turned to Malzin and said in a tone of insolent authority, "Malzin, get me the map of Bohemia that lies on my writing-table." At a moment like this the thin varnish of refinement which contact with the world had imparted was rubbed off entirely, he showed himself in all his coarseness, and this not through any recklessness, but intentionally, in the consciousness that he, Alfred Capriani might do as he chose. At a moment like this he delighted in treading beneath his feet all who did not prostrate themselves before his millions.

Malzin had attained a height where such insults did not reach him. But the blood mounted to the cheek of the mistress of the mansion. "Arthur, go and get the map!" she said gently.

Fritz languidly prevented him. "You do not know where the thing is," he said good-humouredly and left the room.

Capriani went on pacing the spacious apartment in long strides. "They are all alike, these blockheads," he muttered, "when they take it into their heads to work they are more stupid than ever. Old Malzin tried everything; he ruined himself in artificial madder-red, in lager beer, in sugar and in stocks,--and it never occurred to him that millions were lying in the ground beneath his feet."

Malzin returned with the map and as every table was overcrowded with bibelots and jardinières, it was spread out upon the piano. Capriani eagerly travelled over it with his pudgy forefinger. "The track of the new railway must go here, between the iron works and Schneeburg."

"Then it must go a very long round," Arthur remarked, "can you obtain the permit?"

Capriani stuck a thumb in an arm-hole of his waistcoat and smiled.

"Malzin, you know the estates around here; to whom does that belong?" pointing to a spot upon the map.

"That belongs to Kamenz," said Malzin bending forward, and fitting his eye-glass in his eye.

"And that?"

"To Lodrin."

"Then it comes to whether the interests of these gentlemen jump with your own," Arthur observed. "If they should work against you, you never can obtain the permit."

"Pshaw! I understand tolerably well how to deal with these gentlemen."

"Kamenz will give you no trouble, he is up to his neck in embarrassments, and would be glad to dispose advantageously of a piece of his land," drawled Kilary, looking at the map and giving his opinion with lazy assurance.

"Lodrin's affairs cannot be in a very brilliant condition," Arthur remarked; "ever since his majority he has been making no end of improvements, and he is hard up financially."

"With such an enormous property as the Lodrin estate there can be none save temporary embarrassments," Kilary said drily, "and in no case would Lodrin allow himself to be influenced by personal considerations. If you cannot demonstrate to him that the new railway will conduce to the universal benefit of the whole country he never will agree to it, and unless he does you can do nothing with the present ministry. A comical fellow Lodrin--a perfect pedant in some ways."

"No," said Malzin, "not the least of a pedant, but a hot head with a heart of gold, and when duty is concerned, he is just like his father."

"The old idiot," Capriani muttered below his breath, slowly as, with an air that was almost tender he stroked his long whiskers, while an odd smile played about his lips. "In fact you are right, Malzin,--a charming fellow, Ossi--a superb creature; not one of your Austrian nobility can hold a candle to him. But I--you'll see, Malzin,--I'll twist Ossi Lodrin around my thumb."

Half an hour afterwards the guests separated. Frau von Capriani, more depressed than usual, retired to her room.

The gentlemen went to the garden, and shot at a target; Conte Capriani, who never could bring down a pheasant on the wing, proved more successful than any of the others in hitting the bull's-eye.

When the Melkweyser, who had been indulging in a short nap, entered the library half an hour afterwards to look for a 'sanitary novel' she found Ad'lin deep in the study of a small thick volume.

Zoë looked over her shoulder; the book was the 'Gotha Almanach,' the Bradshaw of the Austrian aristocracy.

"What are you looking for?" the Baroness asked.

"For the Fermors--I want to know who the Count's mother was. She is not in this year's list. She was a Princess Brack, was she not?"

"No, his mother was a Fräulein Schmitt, the daughter of a rich tavern-keeper."

"Ah!"

CHAPTER VII.

The Malzins walked home through the park. Fritz looked perturbed. His wife held her head high, and in no agreeable mood chewed at the stalk of a rose which the Conte had cut for her.

"Lotti," Fritz began after a while, "I know that you act without reflection; you were a little imprudent to-day; it would be of no consequence with a man of breeding, but from a man like Capriani a lady must not allow the least familiarity."

"You always find something to lecture me about," she replied sharply. "I have long known that I am not good enough for you. But I must confess that I have never observed that the ladies of your circle are more reserved than those of mine."

"You know none of them," Fritz rejoined with incautious haste.

"You certainly have afforded me no opportunity of knowing them," Charlotte retorted, reddening with anger, "although you probably would have done so, had you not been ashamed of me from the first. Count Truyn has managed to give his wife a position,--but you--you would rather have died than have stirred a finger for me."

This was not literally true, for Fritz had once knocked off the hat of an acquaintance who had forgotten to remove it in Charlotte's presence; on one occasion he had fought a duel on her account, and on another had horsewhipped a slandering editor, but it was substantially true that he had made not the smallest effort to introduce her to his world. He made no reply now to her reproaches, hung his head, and pulled at his moustache. She went on with angry volubility. "You were ashamed to walk in the street with me, and when you took me to the theatre you always hid yourself in the back of the box, and every day you had some fault to find with my ways. I have watched your aristocratic ladies at the races, at the theatre, and at artist's festivals--and their manners are as free--and it must out--as ill-bred ...."

"The ill-breeding of a lady of rank," Fritz interrupted her impatiently "extends usually only as far as the good-breeding of the man with whom she chances to be."

"I don't know what you mean," the opera-bouffe singer replied.

"Our ladies know that the men whom they honour with their gay talk recognise their little whims, and merry extravagances as tokens of confidence which they would never dream of abusing. We never allow ourselves to step beyond the line which the lady herself draws. Familiarities like those which Capriani allowed himself toward you to-day are impossible among people of refinement. Of course from him nothing better can be expected; low fellow that he is!"

"And you are his hired servant," said Charlotte.

"Yes!" he replied, "I am his servant; it is my duty to select his horses and to write his letters, but I am not obliged to dine with him; that is not in the contract. And from this time I shall accept no more of his invitations. I will not expose myself a second time to the annoyance to which you and he subjected me to-day."

Charlotte began to cry. "You are cruel to me--and rough," she sobbed. "I have put up with poverty for your sake, sacrificed a brilliant career to my love for you----"

"Yes--yes, I know--I know--I am very sorry for you--but what can I do?" said Fritz.

"The only pleasure I can enjoy, you want to deprive me of, when I look forward to it from Sunday to Sunday."

"You enjoy it?--What, for Heaven's sake do you enjoy about it?" asked Fritz, to whom everything at these Sunday dinners was an offence, except the gentle eyes and soft voice of the hostess.

"I enjoy mingling at last in fine society," she said stubbornly, and as he only stared at her in silence, she went on, "I know that you despise modern fine folk. But my views are broader and freer, and I have no feeling for aristocratic chimeras!"

She had indeed no feeling for chimeras with or without the adjective, no feeling for moral and social subtleties, no feeling for honourable traditional superstitions, for fine inherited weaknesses and illusions, no feeling for all that constitute the moral supports of a caste, although they cannot be expressed in words or grasped with the hand. How could this woman comprehend Fritz, Fritz

who had grown up with chimeras, who had made playmates of them in the nursery?

He shrugged his shoulders and was silent. Just then the wailing of a weak childish voice fell upon the warm evening air. Fritz hurried forward; in front of the small arbour, with his little son in her lap, sat an old woman; it was old Miller, his nurse in childhood, who had at last found an asylum in a corner of his house. "The little fellow is crying for his father," she said while the boy smiling through his tears stretched out his tiny arms. "The Herr Count ought not to spoil him so."

"Never mind that, Miller," Fritz said taking the child in his arms. "Oh, my pale darling, what should we do without each other, hey?"

Fifteen minutes afterwards Fritz was sitting on the edge of a small bed on which his boy was kneeling with folded hands, looking in his snowy night-gown, that fell in straight folds about him, like a veritable Luca della Robbia.

"Come, Franzi, have you forgotten your prayer?"

"In my small bed I lay me here,
I pray Thee dearest Lord be near,
About me clasp Thy loving arm,
And shelter me and keep me warm."

the child murmured sleepily, then offered his lips to his father and lay down.

It was a childish prayer--but Fritz learned it at his mother's knee from her dear lips--reason enough for teaching it to his son.

And until the little man fell asleep, his hand under his cheek, Fritz still sat on the edge of the bed and dreamed.

CHAPTER VIII.

Yes, of a truth, Fritz had grown up with chimeras; they had been his playmates, born and bred and domesticated in Schneeburg.

To them it was due that Fritz had married a second-rate actress; that Fritz, under all the most distressing circumstances, had still suffered from homesickness, and had taken refuge 'at home;' that he had always possessed a character not merely respectable, but thoroughly noble; never forfeiting the esteem of his equals although stricken from their visiting lists; and that, when in fulness of time he should make ready for the final journey, he might boldly face these very chimeras and say: "Often have I sinned against myself, and my own best happiness, but never, never against you; come therefore and help me to die."

His father was a gentleman, a philosopher, a freethinker,--a visionary, if you will. He raved about the new gospel of 1789, as one raves about an exotic flower, because of its unparalleled oddity, and from the conviction that it never can endure our climate. He had all kinds of bourgeois intimates and the "Contrat social" was his favourite book. But when his son, not from blind passion, but to satisfy conscientious scruples, married an actress, he was beside himself. When Fritz, not without a hint as to the circumstances that had led him to the fatal step, announced his marriage, his letter was sent by the old Count to his lawyer to answer. He himself refused any further intercourse with his son.

Had Fritz's mother been living, all might perhaps have been different. His wife would have been personally more distasteful to her than to his father, the fact of the connection would have seemed to her more miserable than to the old Count; but compassion for her child would have triumphed finally over every other consideration, her heart might have bled, but she would have taken home the distasteful daughter-in-law, and have tried to educate her for her position. At all events she would have known that when a man has trifled away 'the world,' his own home is his true place of refuge.

To all this the old Count gave never a thought, although he was kind-hearted, and Fritz had always been avowedly his favourite. He saw nothing but the misery and degradation of it all; his heart was benumbed by anger. All that was bestowed upon Fritz when he married, was his father's curse, the property which he inherited from his mother, and his share of what had belonged to an elder brother who had died. Although he had from the outset belonged among the

"*forçats du mariage*," he did not for some time feel the burden of his chain and of the enforced companionship. Of an intensely sanguine temperament he had a positive genius for looking on the bright side of life. What annoyed him most at first was being obliged, on account of his marriage, to quit the service. He was terribly bored by having to spend the entire day without his comrades or his horses. His yearly income at this time amounted to the modest sum of six thousand gulden. After he had made out a list of necessary expenses,--that is, added up certain figures upon a visiting card with a gold pencil, he came to the conclusion, with a shrug, that a married man could not possibly live upon six thousand gulden a year, and that therefore, under the circumstances, he might allow himself the privilege of contracting debts.

Of course he would have thought it niggardly to save up anything while in the army; yet he had never been extravagant, he had always at the end of the month had something left over with which to help out a comrade.

He hoped to be able to curtail his household expenses; but there were so many things that no respectable man 'could go without,' and still more, which his wife could not deny herself.--

When Fritz was quite a little boy, his father had often admonished him as to the serious nature of life, and had impressed him as a younger son with the necessity of restricting his needs as much as possible, and even of earning his own living. His narrow circumstances in the future, had occupied the boy's mind, and one day he opened his heart to his sister's governess, at that time his confidante. He said to her, "Madame! Papa yesterday told of a contractor who employed people for fifty kreutzers a day.--Is that fair?"

"Certainly, *mon bijou*. Why do you ask?"

The boy looked very important, and began to reckon on his small fingers, "Fifty kreutzers a day--hm--that makes five gulden for ten persons--if I marry, and my wife keeps a maid, and I a man--and if we have six children beside--five gulden a day--I can afford that at least."

At twenty-six years of age Fritz's ideas with regard to economy were not much more practical. A household with neither man-servant nor maid-servant did not come within his range of possibilities.

He spent a couple of weeks with his young wife at the Hotel Munsch; a hostelry now out of fashion, but having for generations enjoyed the patronage of the Malzin family, and after that he hired a pretty suite of second-story rooms in a retired street, and arranged it according to his taste, and as he honestly believed, as moderately as possible. He had none of the snobbishness of an impoverished parvenu, who is ashamed of being obliged suddenly to retrench, and hides his economies as a crime. On the contrary, he exulted boyishly when he had succeeded in procuring at a moderate price some pretty piece of furniture, an old oriental rug, or a carved chest, nor did he ever hesitate to lend a hand himself; he hammered and tacked with his slender fingers, as if he had been bred to such work all his life.

And it must be admitted that, with the exception of the drawing-room, which his wife in spite of his remonstrances persisted in disfiguring with green damask hangings, purchased at an auction with her savings, his little home was a masterpiece of tasteful comfort. His former comrades liked to drop in often for a game of cards with him. There was no high play, and the drinking was very moderate, but the supper, the style of the company, and the company itself, were always alike exquisite.

The only disturbing element at these unostentatious gatherings was the mistress of the household, who sat opposite her husband at supper, affected and peevish in manner, and really bored by the high-bred and respectful courtesy with which she was treated.

At first Fritz had indulged in ideal schemes of educating his wife, but they all came to grief. There was no trace in the wife of the docile devotion of the betrothed. A woman whose whole heart is her husband's never feels humiliated by his superiority. Her whole being aspires to him, her perceptions become all the more acute, and in a very short while she learns to divine, to avoid, whatever may offend him.

This was, however, by no means the case with Charlotte. Her love for Fritz was of a very humdrum kind, and comprehension of him she had none. She did not acknowledge his superiority. All his good-humoured little preachments upon manners, she listened to with stubborn irritability. She was characterized to an extreme degree by the obdurate narrow-mindedness which sneers conceitedly at everything unlike itself, and absolutely refuses to learn. Fine clothes and pedantic affectations awed her, but she had no appreciation for the simple good-breeding of a man whose manners are the natural outgrowth of the habits of his class. Genuine good-breeding is like a mother-tongue which is spoken from childhood unconsciously as to its source, and correctly, without a thought of conjugations and declensions.

This she neither knew nor understood; she was far better pleased with the artificial manners which are acquired when one is grown up, like a foreign tongue from the grammar, and which are continually seasoned with pretentious quotations, from modern dictionaries of etiquette. The difference between Count Fritz and a smugly-dressed bagman, lay in her eyes solely in the title.

Before long Fritz grew tired of trying to educate her, and confined himself merely to the most

necessary admonitions.

Time passed--and there was a cradle hung with green silk in the Countess's room, and within it lay a boy of rare beauty. Charlotte petted and caressed her child with the instinct of tenderness shown by the lower animals towards their young, an instinct which fades out gradually, as soon as the offspring can forego its mother's physical care. Fritz rejoiced over the little fellow and had him christened Siegfried after the old Count his father, to whom he announced the birth of his grandson, hoping that it might help to bring about a reconciliation with the angry parent.

But the Count took no notice of the announcement.

At first Fritz's paternal sentiments were by no means enthusiastic, and if at times he caressed the little man, it was more out of kindness towards the mother than out of real interest in the child.

On one occasion, however, he happened to enter the nursery just before going out, his hat on his head. The little one was in his bath, an expression of absolute physical comfort in his half-closed eyes, and on his plump little body, every dimple of which could be seen distinctly beneath the clear water.

Fritz stopped, and playfully sprinkled a few drops of water upon the pretty baby-face. The child opened wide his eyes, and when his father repeated the play, the little one chuckled so merrily that it sounded like the cooing of doves, while throwing back his head and clinching his rosy fists upon his breast.

A few days afterward Fritz went again to the nursery; this time the boy was just out of his bath and was being dried in the nurse's lap. He recognised his father and stretched out his plump arms to him. Fritz could not help tickling him a little, touching his dimples with a forefinger, and catching hold of the wee hands; a strange sensation crept over him at the touch of the pure warm baby-flesh.

From that time he went into the nursery every day, if only for a moment. The child grew more and more lovely. His little pearly teeth appeared, and soft, golden hair hung over his forehead. He soon began in his short frocks to creep on all-fours over the carpet, and even to rise to his feet, holding by some article of furniture; and once, as Fritz was watching him with a languid smile, the boy suddenly left the chair against which he was leaning, and proudly and laboriously putting one foot before the other, advanced four steps towards his father, upon whose knee he was placed triumphantly quite out of breath with the mighty effort.

When a little girl appeared as a claimant for the green-draped cradle, a pretty diminutive bedstead was placed in Fritz Malzin's room.

What good comrades they were, Papa, and Siegi! Fritz talked to the little fellow of all sorts of things that he never mentioned to any one else, of his loved ones, of his home! And Siegi would look at him out of his large eyes, as earnestly as if he understood every word. Long before he could put words together, the boy learned to say "grandpapa," and when his father, pointing to the photograph of an old castle, that hung framed in the smoking-room, asked "Siegi, what is that?" the little fellow would reply "Neeburg."

The child was his father's friend, his companion, and was loved with an idolatry such as only those fathers can know who are estranged from their wives, and have no other interest in life.

Of course the child had a French bonne, but her post was almost a sinecure. Fritz scarcely lost sight of the child for a moment.

Shortly after his removal to Wiplinger street he had become convinced by certain calculations, that, in view of the high price demanded by hack-drivers, it was a great economy to keep horses.

The result of these calculations was attained after the fashion of the clever man who demonstrated clearly that it is far cheaper to live in a first-class Hotel than in one of the second class.

When Siegi was barely three years old, Fritz used to put him on the seat beside him in his dog-cart, and drive with him in the Prater. For greater security the child was tied fast to the back of the seat with a broad, silken scarf.

Count Malzin's dog-cart was soon one of the best-known turn-outs in the Prater; the picturesque, lovely child beside the handsome, distinguished man could not fail to attract notice. Siegi was always dressed in good taste, and his soft curls lay like gold upon his shoulders. From time to time his little face was turned up eagerly to his father with some childish question. Then Fritz would bend over him with a smile, and sometimes put his arm around him.

It was a positive delight to see them thus together. Many a lady who since Fritz's marriage had returned his bow but coldly, now nodded to him kindly as they gazed after the child.

Once on a lovely day in April, Fritz alighted from his dog-cart with his little son and took him to walk, as was customary in Vienna, in the Prater. He was surrounded in a few minutes by a

group of ladies with whom he had formerly been acquainted. Siegi had a triumphant success, every one wanted a kiss or a pat from his little hand.

"Exquisite!" exclaimed one after another. "What a little angel! Malzin, you must bring the child to see us."

"Fritz, do bring him to see me to-morrow at five, my children take their dancing-lesson then. You will come, won't you? You know the way."

And Fritz, flattered, smiled and bowed.

Since his marriage he had not gone into society; but for his boy's sake he accepted these invitations; the little fellow must learn to associate with his equals. Fritz resolved that he himself should alone endure the consequences of his folly, his son should not suffer from it.

Although well-bred people of rank in their normal condition usually train their children to a conventional modesty of demeanour, Fritz, on the contrary, took pleasure in making his son almost haughty, he, whose own lack of all pretention had been a by-word!

When pride stands on the defensive, it always deteriorates somewhat.

In spite of the modest scale of his household expenses, Fritz found to his surprise that during the first year he had spent just double his income. "It is always so the first year," he consoled himself by thinking, but when the second year was no better but much worse, the matter began to annoy him.

At his card-parties, which were still kept up, although Charlotte but seldom appeared at them, (a relief usually purchased by Fritz with a box for her at the theatre,) one of the guests was a certain Baron Schneller, a good-natured, well-to-do fellow, who had no taste for earning money, and was in consequence rather in disgrace with his family, who showed great diligence in that direction. He squandered his income among antiquities and ballet-girls. His volunteer year he had served in Fritz's squadron.

In his embarrassment Fritz applied to Schneller, and asked whether he knew of any more profitable investment for money than Austrian government bonds? Whereupon the banker's indolent son replied that he himself always invested upon principle in mortgages, but if Fritz wanted to know, he would ask his brother, who was at the head of his father's banking-firm.

The next day he came, in his good-natured way, to see Fritz, bringing a list of 'safe stocks,' which were just then paying enormous dividends, and saying "My brother sends his regards, and begs you to consider him entirely at your service in any financial operation."

With characteristic carelessness, Fritz delivered over his property to the banker, and the banker protested that it was an honour to oblige the young gentleman.

After this Fritz felt free to spend three times as much as before. His property swelled and swelled without his comprehending the mysterious reasons for its increase. At last it began to assume the most unexpected dimensions. This lasted for some time.

One day the banker informed the young Count that he was a millionaire, and asked him at the same time if he did not wish to realize.

"Where is the use?" said Fritz, "there is no hurry,--er--I'll have a talk with you about it one of these days. I have no time just now."

He had promised the children to take them to the circus; of course he had no time for business.

He was dining with Schneller, when he suddenly heard a young government official, who did not belong exactly to financial circles, say. "A sorry prospect--the evening papers say that the Sternfeld-Lonsbergs are shaky."

Fritz was startled. Little as he troubled himself about business affairs, he knew that the greatest part of his property was invested in Sternfeld-Lonsbergs. He looked fixedly at his host, who, however, only shrugged his shoulders, and remarking, "merely an insignificant depression," scraped a piece of turbot from the half-denuded vertebrae of the fish which the servant was handing him.

Fritz continued to talk to his fair neighbour with the self-possession of a thoroughly well-bred man, while the Japanese dinner-service, with the cut glass, and flowers on the table danced wildly before his eyes.

After dinner, his eye-glass in his eye, and a pleasant smile on his lips, he took occasion to glance furtively at a paper, lying on a little table. His blood fairly ran cold; suddenly Baron Schneller stood beside him. "You are entirely wrong to be worried," he asserted, and Fritz laughed and shrugged his shoulders as if the affair in question were a mere bagatelle. But the

next day he wrote a note to the banker begging him to dispose of his stock for him. The banker dissuaded him from selling, the market was unfavourable; for the present he insisted the only thing to do was to wait.

Fritz complied; shortly afterwards the banker advised him to take part in a complicated transaction which Fritz took no pains to understand, but which Schneller assured him positively would result in enormous profits.

It was simply a reckless piece of stock-gambling.

Fritz agreed to everything--what did he know about it? His financial affairs began to inconvenience him more and more. He wanted to be rich.

Just at this time he had to pay a couple of large bills, which had not been presented for three years. He thought of his father. Good Heavens! The old Count could not be angry still. But, after years of alienation he could not in a financial difficulty make up his mind to appeal to him without further preface.

"No, no, that will not do," he said to his small confidant, Siegi. "We must first see whether grandpapa cares for us, and if he does then we will make our confession; if not--*vogue la galère*."

He never guessed the terrible misery that menaced him. Poverty was a phantom of which he had heard, without believing in it--it was as incomprehensible to him as death to a perfectly healthy man.

And so Siegi's bonne had to dress the boy in his newest sailor suit, and his father took him to be photographed.

The picture was excellent. Fritz took a boyish delight in it, and showed it to all his acquaintances. He thought it impossible that the grandfather could resist that cherub face. He wrote the old Count a letter, every word of which came warm from his heart, telling him how he longed to see him, and then he guided Siegi's hand--the boy had just begun to write the alphabet large between pencilled lines--to write upon the back of the photograph: "Dear grandpapa, love me a little--I send you a kiss and I am your little grandson. Siegi."

He awaited an answer in feverish but almost unwavering hope. The fourth day brought a letter from Schneeburg. Fritz recognised his father's handwriting and hurriedly tore open the envelope. It contained nothing save Siegi's photograph, which the old Count had returned without a word.

Fritz clinched his fist and stamped his foot. Then he lifted his little son in his arms, kissing and caressing him as if to atone to the boy for the insult cast on him.

It was impossible to ask any favour of one who could act thus, even were he his father.

This was at the end of September, and shortly afterwards came ruin, utter inevitable ruin! Not modest poverty which privately plucks our sleeve and whispers, "retrench--economize!" no, but downright brutal poverty, that seizes us by the collar with a dirty hand and wrenching us out of the warm soft nest of our daily habits, casts us out into the cold barren street with "Starve! vagabond! freeze!"

The million had disappeared, and when the banker, Schneller, announced to Fritz his ruin, he added, "of course you cannot be forced to meet your obligations, Herr Count. The matter lies partly in your own hands."

Fritz stared at him! The worst of it all was that his property was not sufficient to cover his indebtedness!

A multitude of petty creditors suddenly flocked around, saddlers, tailors, shoemakers, upholsterers, whose bills mounted to thousands. Fritz was beside himself. Small tradesmen must not lose by him. He broke up his entire household, and disposed of everything, from the oriental rugs in his smoking-room, to Siegi's black velvet suit and Venetian lace collar.

But with all that he could do he could not pay every one. Some of the lesser creditors were coarse and pressing, but most of them only meekly twirled their caps about in their hands, murmuring, "We can wait, Herr Count; we rely entirely upon the Herr Count."

He lived through each day dully, almost apathetically. The dreariness and emptiness of his house made no impression upon him. When the time came for him to part with his horses--a member of the *jeunesse dorée* of Vienna bought them at a high price--he took Siegi and went down into the stable, where he fed the beautiful creatures with bread and sugar, and stroked their heads and patted their necks; and when he turned and left them neighing and snorting with delight--it seemed to him that a piece of his heart were being torn from out his breast!....

Every day his wife asked him when he was going to appeal to his father, but he made no reply. After the insult that the old Count had offered to his darling, nothing should ever induce him to make another appeal. Nothing? So he thought then. "My father must have heard of my

unfortunate circumstances," he said to himself, "and if it does not occur to him to help me, there is nothing that I can do."

He determined to find a situation,--of course one befitting his name and station. If every ancient noble name to-day in Austria cannot lay claim, as in France in Louis the Fourteenth's time, to an office at court, or to a salary, there are at least a hundred kinds of sinecures that can afford the means of living suitably for their rank, to young scions of the nobility who have not sinned against the prejudices of their caste.

His fatal marriage aggravated the difficulties of Malzin's position. The horizon of his existence contracted and darkened more and more.

The dogged determination which, closing accounts with the past, resolutely clears away the débris of a ruined life from the path which is to lead to a new existence, Fritz did not possess. His was the passive endurance of pride, which calmly bows beneath the burden, and drags on with it to the end, simply because it scorns to complain or to appeal to compassion.

One feeling only was stronger within him than pride, and that was love for his children.

Were he alone concerned, he would rather have starved than prefer a second request after the first had been refused, but he could not bring himself to see his children slowly starve.

He applied to several individuals who had always been on terms of great intimacy with his family, but after some had refused to receive him, and others had ignored his request with a forced smile, he felt paralysed, and resigned himself for a while to melancholy, brooding inactivity. There must come a change sooner or later, he thought. In the meanwhile he lived upon--debt, and could not comprehend why professional usurers should need so much urging to induce them to lend him, the probable heir of Schneeburg, a paltry couple of hundred gulden.

Had he been more exactly informed of his father's circumstances, this would not have surprised him so much. But he had heard nothing of the old Count for years. A strange repugnance had prevented his speaking of him to strangers,--it would only expose his own unfortunate estrangement from his father to their indiscreet curiosity. Every day he had a secret hope, although he hardly admitted it to himself, that the old Count would take pity upon him, and suddenly appear providentially.

But his father did not appear, and thus it was that finally he, Fritz Malzin, with his wife and children occupied two dingy third-story rooms in Leopold street, rented from his mother-in-law, who kept a lodging-house for gentlemen.

Charlotte from morning until night bewailed her husband's unconscionable heedlessness, but in reality she was much happier than in Wipling street. To lounge about all the morning in a slatternly dishabille, to help prepare the breakfast for the lodgers, to gossip a little and flirt a little, and then in the evenings to array herself in the finery which she had contrived to smuggle into her present quarters, and to go to Ronacher's or some other beer-garden, where half a dozen second and third-rate coxcombs addressed her as 'Frau Countess,' and paid court to her,--such a life was bliss after the tedium of her former existence. She went out every evening, leaving Fritz at home with the children, revolving all kinds of improbable possibilities which might suddenly improve his condition, and devising schemes dependant upon lucky accidents that never happened.

Sometimes a little warm hand was thrust into his; and a soft voice whispered to him: "Papa, tell me a story!"

Then rousing himself from his sad reveries, he would try to make up some merry tale, but Siegi would shake his head, and nestling close to his father with his arms clinging about his neck and his head leaning against his father's cheek would beg, "Tell me about Schneeburg, Papa."

The winter with its long nights wore on in close rooms poisoned by coal-gas, and pervaded by the cramping sensation of wretched confinement. Spring came; Siegi had lost his rosy cheeks, and his merry laugh. Every afternoon towards sunset his father took him out to walk. The child coughed a little.

One warm day in April the clouds were hanging low, while ever and anon in the narrow street a swallow skimmed anxiously to and fro. Siegi was weary, and his little feet dragged one after the other, when suddenly he pulled his father's hand, joyously shouting: "Papa, papa--look--don't you see?--there is our Miesa!"

Fritz looked. It did not take an old 'cavalry man' an instant to recognize in an animal harnessed to a fiacre, one of his handsome horses of aforetime.

"Miesa! how are you, old girl?" he said caressingly.

The creature recognised him instantly, and whinnied her delight. Fritz patted her neck and lifted Siegi up that he might kiss the white star on the animal's forehead, as he used to do.

Then they resumed their walk. Without saying a word Fritz stroked his little son's cheek;--it

was wet with tears. The poor little fellow was crying silently, for fear of grieving his father!

Fritz felt a strange, choking sensation. He took the boy to a confectioner's, but the child could eat nothing.

That night Siegi was taken ill. The physician pronounced it inflammation of the lungs. Lying in his father's arms for three days and nights, the boy suffered fearfully, and then the crisis was over. At the end of three weeks the little fellow could leave his bed, but he was paler and weaker than ever.

During Siegi's illness Fritz borrowed a hundred gulden from a former friend. Shortly afterwards he saw this friend in the street and was advancing to meet him when he saw him cross over the way with the evident intention of avoiding him. Fritz's blood was stirred at this, and blind, reckless rage seized him. The paltry hundred should be repaid at any cost. He sold his winter overcoat, and the golden chronometer which his father had given to him on his sixteenth birthday, and which was to have been an heirloom for Siegi.

He paid the hundred gulden--but ah, how often he repented it!

CHAPTER IX.

Among the lodgers at the widow Schmitt's, as Charlotte's mother was called, was a sallow-faced old woman, whose room was a small, dark, comfortless hole, and who wore the same shabby, green gown, summer and winter, year in and year out. She was known as Frau Pick, and she was a professional beggar.

One day, on returning from some humiliating errand, Fritz heard one of his sisters-in-law call to his wife: "Pick is waiting."--"I am ready," was the reply, and Charlotte came out into the passage with a letter in her hand. Fritz sprang to meet her, snatched the letter from her, forced her back into the room and, entering, closed the door behind them.

The letter was addressed to the archbishop of Vienna.

"What does this letter contain?" he asked angrily, seizing her so rudely by the wrist, that she screamed and fell upon her knees before him; she did not answer his question, however.

"Is it a begging-letter?"

"Yes."

He thrust her from him indignantly. "Shame upon you!" he exclaimed.

"It is all your fault!" she replied scornfully, "if you won't work, I must beg."

"Ah!"--he staggered as if from a blow full in the face, snatched up his hat and went out.

Before night he had a situation in the office of a tramway company, at a hundred gulden a month.

The summer was more sultry than usual. The air in Vienna seemed fever-laden. The trees in Ring street no longer rustled dreamily as in Spring, there was a sound among their parched leaves as of a low cough. If a rose bloomed out in the public gardens in early morning, before evening it looked dry and withered, like a reveller returning from a masked ball; the blue Danube was as tawny as a canal, and Vienna reminded one more than ever of Manzanares.

The theatres were deserted, the tramways overcrowded, all who could went out into the country. Pedestrians hugged the wall on the shady side of the street; the skies were one monotone of blue. The glare of the house-fronts made the eyes ache.

The pestilent summer atmosphere of cities hung over Vienna, saturated with decay, and reeking with filth. A deadly epidemic broke out; in almost every block one met a sad litter, borne by silent sanitary officials.

Siegi grew weaker and more weary day by day; he coughed a little but never complained. Fritz consulted his old family physician who merely prescribed nourishing food and country air.

Fritz insisted upon knowing whether any danger was to be apprehended--the old man

remained silent, and of a sudden the father felt that freezing thrill that comes of touching a corpse. For the first time he recognized the possibility of the child's death.

All his pride broke down at the thought; he wrote immediately to his father, unfolding to him his own need and the child's condition, and imploring permission to bring the boy to Schneeburg.

Days passed into weeks; his letter was unanswered. He lived on mechanically with sufficient mental force to fulfil his duties at the office. He performed them slowly and with difficulty, but he was treated with consideration. Even had there been a way close at hand out of the misery he could hardly have found it now.

Every morning Siegi's weak little voice sounded weaker, as he said, when his father left him, "Come back soon!"

Why had he repaid that hundred gulden? There was no conceivable humiliation to which he would not gladly now have submitted could he but procure for Siegi the comforts that were needed! But to have to haggle over the price of an orange or of an ice!

There were moments, when he ground his teeth, and in his heart avowed that he was ready and willing to beg, to steal for Siegi. But not every one who will, can be a rogue. Once or twice he met a 'friend' who still lingered in Vienna. He advanced towards him--with words of begging on his lips--only to be seized with a fit of trembling--no, he could not--he could not--it was impossible!

And scarcely had his 'friend 'passed by before he cursed himself for his--cowardice. Weaker and weaker grew the child. Once Fritz took it to the Prater to amuse it. The gay music of the band, the carriages, all that the summer had left, in which the boy had once found such delight, now cut him to his little heart.

They sat together upon a bench, beneath the dusty trees. The child looked at the throng of vehicles with eyes wide and fixed--the father looked at his son. "Does it amuse you? Do you like it, Siegi?" he asked, bending tenderly over him; the boy smiled faintly and said, "Yes, Papa!" But, in a few moments he leaned his tired little head against the father's breast and lisped, "Let us go home."

Only a little while longer and Siegi could not leave his bed--and Fritz heard the dread word 'consumption!'

He knew that it could be only a question of weeks, and sometimes said to himself that it would be better for the child if death would come quickly. But he thrust the thought from him. No, no, he yearned to hear as long as possible the little voice, and to stroke the thin cheek. The rosy childish face was wan and pinched, the arms looked like little brown sticks, the delicate tracery of the blue veins about the temples grew daily more distinct, the brow grew more like marble....

Then came mornings when Fritz, going early to his office, feared that he should not find the child living upon his return in the evening. As he mounted the stairs when he came home his heart would seem to stand still--he would enter the room very softly. The little head would move on the pillow, a hoarse little voice would gasp: "Papa!" and the father's heart would leap for joy!

It came towards the end of August--in a heavy, stifling, sultry night. He was alone with his child.

Charlotte had retired; she could not look upon death. The heat was intolerable. The windows were wide open, but they looked out upon a court where the air was no cooler than in the sick-room. The fragrance of the roses and mignonette, which Fritz had brought home with him to perfume the air a little, floated sadly through the small room. It seemed as if the death struggle of the flowers mingled with the death struggle of the child. Siegi lay in his little bed, propped up with pillows. His breathing was so short and quick that it could hardly be counted. "Papa!" he gasped from time to time.

"What, my darling? Do you want anything?"

"No,--only--when are we going to Schneeburg?"

"Soon, my pet--very soon!"

The child became half unconscious, tossed from side to side, and plucked vehemently at the sheet with his emaciated little hands. Delirium set in, he laughed aloud, chirrupped to imaginary horses, and then with a thin, quavering little voice, began to sing an old French nursery song that his bonne had taught him:

"*Il était un petit navire*...."

Poor Fritz's blood ran cold, he took the child in his arms, and clasped him close. The cooler air of dawn breathed through the room--the light of the poor candle flickered strangely. Gray shadows danced on the wall like phantoms--the low chirp of a bird was heard in the distance.

Suddenly the flame of the candle leaped up and died out. Fritz started and gazed at the child--it was dead!

CHAPTER X.

The next morning Fritz received a letter from his father enclosing a draft for a thousand-gulden note, coupled with the old Count's cordial and anxious words. His son's last letter had reached him in the most complicated roundabout way; he had just returned from a voyage to Australia, and had known nothing of Fritz's unfortunate circumstances.

In reply Fritz merely wrote, "The child is dead."

It was the afternoon after the funeral, and Fritz was all alone in the house. Charlotte had taken the children for a little walk; there was a sharp ring at his door. He rose and opened it. A white-haired old gentleman of distinguished mien, asked, "Is Count Malzin----"

"Father!" stammered Fritz.

The old man advanced a step, eagerly scanned the face that had grown wan and haggard almost past recognition, then opened wide his arms and clasped his son to his heart. All anger, all bitterness on both sides was forgotten.

They sat down in the dim, sordid room in which Siegi had died, and Fritz laid bare his heart.

They sat close enough to read the deep sympathy in each other's eyes, and to hear each other's low tones, and in the midst of his inconsolable grief, Fritz rejoiced in being once more with some one who understood him, some one to whose loving compassion he could confide the wretchedness of his life.

He told his father everything; of his marriage, of his imprudence--of his misery. He soon perceived that the old Count had believed Charlotte to be worse than she was, and therefore had refused to acknowledge Siegi as his grandson.

But that was all past and gone! He made his son bring out all the likenesses of the dead boy, and was absorbed in every detail concerning him; he asked endless questions, and seemed as if he would thereby fain have assumed a share of his son's overwhelming grief, relieving Fritz of it to that extent at least.

At last steps were heard outside, and Charlotte entered with the children. Fritz winced.

"Father, this is my wife."

The grand old Count advanced to meet her as if she were a princess, called her "daughter" and kissed her forehead. He could not sufficiently caress and pet the children.

The next morning Fritz with the children paid him a visit at the Hotel Munsch, and they took leave of each other with affectionate cordiality.

"Of course you will come to Schneeburg with your family as soon as possible," the old Count said anxiously, as they parted. "You need your home, my poor boy."

And Fritz rejoiced--in the midst of all his grief,--at the thought of home.

They had already begun to get ready to leave Vienna, when a letter arrived from Schneeburg.

"Dear Fritz,

Hard as it is to write it, I must ask you not to give up your situation in Vienna for the present. My poor, dear boy, I can do nothing for you until my affairs are arranged. Only have patience and all will soon be well, etc...."

When the hoped-for arrangement was completed it was discovered that the old Count was penniless. In his costly expedients to raise money he had begun frittering away his property and then--it seemed incredible--he became infected with the general mania for finding millions on the highway, and had entangled himself in a colossal speculation in Australian gold mines. Conte Capriani, with whom he had become acquainted in Vichy, had convinced him of the certainty of gain in the affair. Capriani's name alone was sufficient warrant for the value of the stock. The old

Count was made president of the company; his name was used to inspire the public with confidence,--his noble old name which he had borne so honourably for sixty-five years! The first year the company paid enormous dividends--out of their capital. In the second year matters began to look suspicious. The Conte slowly withdrew from the scheme--he found that certain things were different from what he had supposed; he had been falsely informed.... He advised the Count, who went to Paris to consult him, to dispose of his stock slowly without exciting suspicion. But the Count would not listen to anything of the kind. He had pledged himself to the public, his easy confidence had induced hundreds of men to buy the stock, he had urged many of them to do so thinking it was for their advantage. Among them were poor people, impoverished relatives, nay even old servants, his children's former tutors who had invested all their savings in this unfortunate scheme, upon his recommendation. He was beside himself, bought up as much of the stock as he could, and went himself to Australia to investigate matters. He, who in his whole life from his school-days up had never known anything of figures beyond what enabled him to keep the reckoning at whist, now ciphered and calculated, bringing all his powers of mind to bear upon the possibilities of profit.

He found matters by no means as desperate as had been represented in Europe--the affair might have been made a success with prompt energetic management; what was needed was more capital. But the confidence of the stockholders was shaken; the Count upon his return to Europe tried in vain to issue fresh stock, he applied fruitlessly to the Conte Capriani, representing to him that as the originator of the entire speculation he was bound to help. The Conte maintained that he was powerless.

The stock fell lower and lower, fell with bewildering rapidity.

One day Fritz received a letter: "Schneeburg must be sold."

The poor fellow felt as if his sore heart had been struck with a hammer. His sad yearning for his home was turned to a burning thirst--a consuming desire. He was as homesick as a peasant, nay--as a Slav.

Men who live in cities and change their dwelling-place three or four times, never strike root anywhere, and consequently can have no conception of the homesickness that attacks a man who is separated from the soil upon which he and his ancestors for generations have been born and bred. A man thus bred has become acclimated like a plant, to this special air, this special soil, and however long the years of absence, wherever he may have lived meanwhile, he will always yearn for 'home.'

Fritz had caught a cold upon leaving Wipling street, at the same time that Siegi had been taken with the illness that ended in his death. Fritz recovered, but his health was shattered, his voice was husky, and h» had feverish nights which in spite of weariness were wakeful. For hours he would pace the wretched room where stood Siegi's empty little bed, which he had not brought himself to have removed, and would conjure up visions of Schneeburg.

Sell Schneeburg! In his pain at this fresh blow he forgot for a moment his grief for his child. Memories of 'home' thronged about him with a vividness that savoured of mental hallucination. He saw the morning sun glitter in the dewy moss that lay green on the thatched roofs of the village, he saw the very puddles before the houses wherein the swine wallowed, and a flock of fowls scratching on a muck-heap, and a group of shivering children cowering beneath the cross before the smithy.

He saw the pond in the middle of the village; the little dusky waves swelled and rippled beneath the nipping wind of autumn and a single rugged elm cast its long reflection across the broken surface. He saw the soft black soil on the edge of the pond stamped with countless impressions of webbed feet. He saw the geese themselves, hissing and flapping their wings while the sunlight played upon the rough pink surface of their plucked breasts. Thatched roofs, swine, and geese had certainly never interested him much--these detailed impressions had been made upon his mind all unconsciously--they belonged to the whole.

He saw long transparent wreaths of mist like ghostly shrouds, floating above the freshly-ploughed fields, and the crows flapping above the brown leafless trees, in gloomy processions, mourners for the dead summer,--a dun-coloured cow was standing between two gnarled apple-trees by the way-side, looking inquisitively out of her dark-blue glazed eyes.

The pictures grew confused, and again distinct. He saw the park with its broad emerald meadows where the venerable trees grew in large dense clumps. He knew the voice of every single tree, the rustle of the oak differed from the murmur of the copper-beech; he knew the very tree which would turn orange-coloured in autumn, which one only yellow, edged with black, and which one dark crimson. They stirred their grand old heads and broke into a chant; it sounded like a magnificent choral through the still autumn air, while single leaves, frosted with dew, as with delicate molten silver, loosed their hold and sank slowly fluttering down upon the grass.

And the kitchen garden, that Paradise of childhood, with its hoary apricot-trees, whose mellow fruit always dropped on the old-fashioned sage beds. Ah, what fruit it was, so big, and so yellow, and so juicy!

Then he laughed softly at something that had happened twenty years before, and--waking from his visions, and his reverie, passed his hand across his brow. Where was he? Sitting in the room of a miserable lodging-house, beside the empty little bed of his dead child.

He lay down very weary. The last thing that he saw distinctly before falling asleep was a large circle of red gravel in front of Schneeburg Castle, furrowed with delicate ruts. These ruts formed the figure of eight--the first figure of eight which he, a boy of fifteen, had drawn in the gravel with his father's four-in-hand--the delicate fragrance, not perceptible to every one, of wild strawberries floated past him, and then all faded. Sleep compassionately laid her hand upon his heart and brain. He slept the sleep of the dead for a couple of hours, and the next morning his torture began afresh.

He could have wandered barefoot like a beggar to Schneeburg, only to be able to fling himself down on that dear earth, and kiss the very soil of his home.

The sale was long in concluding,--purchasers chaffered as usual, when in treaty for an impoverished estate. There were fears that it would be brought to the hammer. But in the spring Capriani appeared and offered a price for Schneeburg which was at least sufficient to cover the Count's indebtedness. His lawyer urged the old man not to delay accepting this offer, but Siegfried Malzin still hesitated. For three days he wandered about Schneeburg like one distraught, then he began to yield conditionally, but all conditions vanished before Capriani's energy. Malzin lost his head, and made many injudicious concessions. He sold with the estate very many valuable articles that he ought to have kept for himself. He forgot everything--and as a man at a fire will finally rescue in triumph an old umbrella, and a child's toy, so he rescued from his property, in addition to the family vault, which from the first he insisted upon keeping, nothing, save--the stuffed charger which stood in the hall, and which a Malzin had bestridden on the occasion of the liberation of Vienna by Sobiesky.

The morning after the deed of sale had been signed, the former possessor of Schneeburg was found dead in his bed--heart-disease had delivered him from misery.

On one and the same day Fritz heard of the sale of Schneeburg and of his father's death;--he was crushed.

Capriani had a weakness for taking into his service impoverished men of rank. They worked but indifferently well, as he knew; but nevertheless he preferred to employ them. He paid them well, and treated them cruelly.

One day he offered Fritz the post of private secretary. To the astonishment, nay, to the horror, of all his friends, Fritz accepted the position.

On a cool evening in May he took possession with his wife and children of the little cottage on the borders of the park, close to the kitchen garden, and a sense of delight mingled with pain, thrilled through him, as he hurried along the paths of the dear old home that now belonged to another.

He had to warn his children not to run on the grass, not to pull the flowers, and upon his own land!--yes, his own by right--he never could appreciate that this land had ceased forever to be his.

He could not look upon Capriani except as a temporary usurper. He could not but believe in counter revolutions--what was to bring them about he could not tell.

Sometimes when he suddenly came upon old Miller, his former nurse who had found an asylum with him, he would say: "Miller, do you remember this--or that?" and upon her "yes, Count," he would smile languidly.

All the fire, all the impetuosity of his nature was extinct.

Sometimes he roused himself to feel that it was his bounden duty to do something to reinstate his son in his rights. But what?

Conte Capriani, to be sure, had begun life with a single gulden in his pocket, but that was quite a different thing. It was not for Fritz Malzin to enter the lists with the stock-jobber, who knew so well how to keep just within the letter of the law.

And so he continued to live, sadly resigned, dreaming of old times, hoping for wonderful strokes of fortune that never took shape. All the while he indulged in visions, and every evening, when he laid his cards for Patience he consulted them, always asking the self-same question--"Will Schneeburg ever revert to my children?"

BOOK THIRD.

CHAPTER I.

A jingling of bells, a clatter of hoofs from five spirited bays harnessed in Russian fashion, and hardly seeming to touch the earth as they fly along, a rattle of wheels, a whirling cloud of dust,--and Oswald Lodrin's five-in-hand came sweeping round a corner in one of the old-fashioned streets in Rautschin. People ran from everywhere to stare,--a housemaid cleaning a window, leaned out at the risk of her neck, to follow the gay equipage; two small boys going home from school, paused and vented their delight in waving their caps and cheering; Oswald nodded to them kindly. His eyes were aglow with happiness, he had a white rosebud in his button-hole. His future father-in-law sat beside him in the driver's seat, and Georges was on the seat behind.

It was the day before the election. Oswald had just come from Castle Rautschin, where, according to agreement, he was to pick up his uncle to drive with him to the railway station, and he had taken this opportunity to display his new five-in-hand to his betrothed. The five horses clattered along gaily, as if to the races, instead of to a railway station.

"We must hurry, there is the signal," said Georges half rising from his seat, to gaze in the direction of the station.

"Don't be afraid," rejoined Oswald, "it is an Express, to be sure, but if it sees us coming, it will wait!"

"True! I forgot we were in Austria," said Georges laughing.

The bays flew like birds along the avenue of ancient poplars. The sun shone on their trim, plain harness, upon their glossy hides; white and blue butterflies were fluttering above the earliest wayside-flowers. A few minutes later Oswald drew up before the station, built Austrian-wise, after the ugly fashion of a Swiss cottage.

"Sapristi! He too is going to the election," exclaimed Georges, as he observed Capriani's equipage.

"You may be very sure he will not hide his light under a bushel," grumbled Truyn.

"And I quite forgot to have a railway coupé reserved for us. Did you remember it, uncle?" asked Oswald.

Time passed. Oswald's servant hurried off to get the tickets, and when the gentlemen went to take their places, they found that there were but two first-class coupé's, one occupied by a lady with her invalid daughter, the other by the Caprianis, father and son. What was to be done? It was most vexatious; the three gentlemen, with their servants bearing portmanteaux and dust-coats, the station master and the conductor, all stood on the platform in consultation, while the train patiently waited.

The third signal whistled, Conte Capriani appeared at the door of his coupé with a smile of invitation.

Georges calmly shifted his cigar from one corner to the other of his mouth.

"Better open an empty second-class for us," said Truyn frowning.

"I have none quite empty," the conductor explained; "but this gentleman will get out at the third station."

"It is the cattle-dealer from Kamnitz," whispered Oswald with a little grimace, after glancing through the window of the coupé. But it made no difference to his uncle who immediately sprang in and took his seat, followed by the young men. What if the man were a cattle-dealer? Truyn remembered having seen him before, and at once entered into conversation with him upon the price of meat, a conversation in which Oswald, remarkably well up as he always was in all agricultural matters, took part. The cattle-dealer alighted at his destination, greatly impressed by the affability of the noblemen, and convinced that all he had heard of their arrogance was false.

"If the coupé only did not smell so insufferably of warm leather!" exclaimed Truyn after the dealer's departure, "and ugh! the man's cigar was positively--"

"It often happens now-a-days," interposed Georges, "that a gentleman is forced to travel second-class to avoid a stock-jobber. The question in my mind is, when will our civilization be so far advanced that the stock-jobber will travel second-class to avoid one of us."

"We shall never live to see that," said Oswald.

"The insolence of those people waxes gigantic," said Georges.

"It is our own fault; if we had not danced hand-in-hand with them before the golden calf, they would not now be so presuming," observed Truyn, "remember --73."

"Hm,--our worship of that idol showed simplicity, to say the least," remarked Georges, "the golden calf returned so much gratitude for our homage."

"So much gratitude," growled Truyn. "I did not share in the worship, but I do in the disgrace!--But enough of that! Can Capriani vote? He has not owned Schneeburg for a year yet."

"No, but has he not another estate in Northern Bohemia?" asked Georges.

"You are right, he has," said Truyn. "I suppose he will vote with the Liberals."

"In all probability!" replied Oswald. "*Tous les républicains ne sont pas canaille, mais toute la canaille est républicaine*."

"I do not think that Capriani openly ranks among the Liberals," remarked Georges, "I know of a certainty that not long ago he placed large sums of money for charitable purposes at the disposal of several ladies of the Faubourg St. Germain."

"That was when he was a candidate for the Jockey Club," rejoined Oswald. "I heard about that. Ever since he was black-balled there, he sings a different song. He is organizing Liberal schools at Schneeburg, and has a great deal to do with universal enlightenment."

"Confound universal enlightenment!" railed Truyn.

Oswald shrugged his shoulders, "I should not shed a tear for it," said he, "in the first ardour of my charitable schemes I took some interest in it, but I soon detected the wretched business, masked by that high-sounding phrase;--it means universal distribution of rancid scraps of learning sure to provoke an indigestion which as surely will develop into an enlargement of the spleen. That kind of knowledge never widens the horizon of the masses--it does nothing, except pick holes in their illusions."

"Widen the horizon--pretty stuff that!" said Truyn, the reactionary. "In my opinion a contracted horizon is the condition of happiness for the masses."

"My dear fellow, if you attempt to advocate such views ...." began Georges, half laughing, half indignant.

"My views, remember," interrupted Truyn, "are the result of years of experience; I have lived here all my life, and know the people better than any freshly imported Herr Capriani, blown hither, Heaven only knows whence. What we want is a contented, well-fed, warmly-clad people, that will play merrily with the children on Saturday evening, go piously to church on Sunday morning, and not discuss too much on Sunday afternoon."

"Yes, of course," assented Georges. "What you want, first and foremost, is a people that won't disturb your peaceful enjoyment of life. There's no denying that."

"I am perfectly open to conviction," asserted Truyn with dignity. "As soon as you prove to me that these disturbers of the public peace promote the happiness of the masses, I will ground arms before them."

"Happiness!--I don't believe that those people care as much as they pretend for the happiness of the masses," said Oswald, looking up from his note-book in which he had begun to scribble rapidly. "Happiness is conservative--they would gain nothing from that. As far as I can see, all they want is to rouse the discontent of the people by constant irritation," and he turned to his note-book again. His scribbling did not seem to run as smoothly as before.

"There you are right," agreed Truyn. "Their aim is to arouse the discontent of the people--the discontent of the masses is the tool of their entire party, and they will go on sharpening it until some fine day they'll cut their fingers off with it, and serve them right."

"Decry the degenerate portion of the species as much as you choose," replied Georges, "you cannot but acknowledge that modern democracy has been of immense service to mankind."

"*Verité de monsieur de La Palisse*," muttered Oswald, without looking up.

"Don't talk to me of your 'modern democracy,' I made its acquaintance in France--this 'modern democracy' of yours," thundered Truyn in a rage. He drew a deep, shuddering breath, lighted a cigar and gazed out of the coupé-window, apparently to allay his political anxiety by the sight of his dearly-loved fatherland.

He did not succeed, however, for before a minute had passed, he turned to Georges again and exclaimed angrily, "How delightful to contemplate the next generation; what a charming prospect! A people all ignorant atheists. I ask no severer punishment for the agitators who have wrought the mischief in this generation, than to be obliged to govern the next.

"I suppose they themselves would desire nothing better," said Oswald smiling.

"That's perfectly true; all they are struggling for, is power," muttered Truyn.

"Excuse me, my dear friend; but what are you struggling for?" asked Georges.

"What are *we* struggling for," repeated Truyn, looking at him compassionately, "what are we struggling for?--I will tell you;--for the Emperor and our fatherland, which means for order and justice, for the dignity of the throne, for the sanctity of home, for the fostering of beauty and nobility, for all the wealth of human achievement which we have inherited from the past, and ought to bequeath to the future--in a word, Georges,--we are protecting civilization."

"Bursts of applause from the Right--aha--congratulations to the orator from the Left!" said Georges laughing, then turning to Oswald who was still scribbling, he observed, "I rather think you have been taking short-hand notes of your uncle's speech. We will send them to Otto Ilsenbergh, he will be delighted."

"Nonsense!" said Oswald. "I am composing a telegram."

"In verse?" Georges asked innocently.

"Georges! As head of the family I desire to be treated with more respect," said Oswald, laughing.

"Oh, it occurred to me, only because you were making so many corrections," rejoined Georges.

"The thing is quite difficult--it must be so worded that Gabrielle shall understand it,--and the telegraph operators shall not; I cannot manage it."

"Suppose you refresh your powers with a glass of sherry," proposed Georges, taking down an appetizing lunch-basket from the rack above his head, and drawing forth a bottle and three wine-glasses.

The wine had a decidedly soporific effect upon the three travellers. Truyn's political excitement was soothed, and after drinking to a better future, all three leaned back in silence.

Truyn pondered upon the shy, timid confession that his wife had made to him that morning early, very early, as they were sauntering together in the park, while the sun's first slant rays were breaking through the shrubbery, and the morning-dew was still glittering on the meadows. "The whole earth seems bathed in tears of delicious joy," his young wife had whispered, and then through her own happy tears she had begged him to give her a 'really large sum' from her own money that she might make some of the poor people on the estate happy too.

Gradually his thoughts wandered, and grew vague; the sounds of railway bells, and the shrill whistle of the engine, the grating voices of conductors, and the monotonous whirr of wheels mingled, subsided, and died away; his latest impressions faded, and, instead of the green park of Rautschin, a dim Roman street rises upon his mental vision, with a procession of masked torch-bearers accompanying a coffin;--the picture changes, the Roman street is transformed to a lofty hall so tragically solemn that the sunbeams lose their smile as they enter the high windows and glide pale and wan through the twilight gloom to die at the feet of ancient statues. He looks about him, lost in surprise and wondering where is he?--in the tomb of the Medici?--or among the monuments of the melancholy gray church of Santa Croce? No, he suddenly recollects it is the Bargello, and yon white marble, that gleams through the dim religious light in such lifelike, or rather deathlike, beauty, revealing, as it lies outstretched, such clear-cut, nay, such sharp outlines, and the noble attenuation of youth, eager and fiery, is Michael Angelo's 'dead Adonis,' the ideal embodiment of the springtime of manhood crushed in its bloom. Anon vapour curls upward, and the crimson flicker of torches plays over the white statue, the masked torch-bearers stand around it, a wailing chant echoes through the hall--who is it lying there listlessly, with the ineffable charm of a fair young form, which death has suddenly snatched, before the poison of disease has wasted and deformed it?--

Truyn started, broad awake, every pulse throbbing.--Merciful God! how could he dream anything so horrible! Oswald sat opposite, with eyes half-closed, an extinguished cigarette in his hand. His face wore the expression of absolute content which is so often strangely seen on the face of the dead and which none except the dead ever wear, save the few, who, by God's grace, have been permitted to behold Heaven upon earth. Truyn could not away with a sensation of painful anxiety.

"For Heaven's sake, Ossi, open your eyes!" he exclaimed.

"What is the matter?" asked Oswald.

"Nothing," said Truyn, "only...." at that moment the train stopped.

"Pemik!" shouted the conductor, "ten minute's stop," and then opening the coupé door he politely informed the travellers that another coupé was now at their service.

CHAPTER II.

Pernik is the junction of several railway lines, trains coming from two separate watering-places connect here with trains from Prague, and set free the travellers who have tried the virtue of the various baths. Ladies with faded faces, and bouquets of faded flowers, were wandering about looking for hand-bags gone astray or for waiting-maids, men were busily munching, glad to forget over their first sandwich, the dietetic limitations to which they had been forced to submit while undergoing a course of the baths; locomotives were hissing and puffing like monsters out of breath after a race; the sunshine glittered on the flat roofs of the railway-carriages, the whole atmosphere reeked with coal-dust, and hot iron; there was the usual bustle of hand-cars piled with luggage pushed along the rails, of the shifting of cars on the tracks, and of vendors of fresh water and Pernik beer, with newspaper boys loudly extolling their various wares.

Escorted by the obsequious conductor, and followed by the servants, the three conservatives were making their way through the hurly-burly when they nearly ran against a young man, who, with his hands in the pockets of his rough coat, was striding through the crowd, never turning to the right or the left, in a line as straight as that of the railway between St. Petersburg and Moscow.

"Pistasch!" exclaimed Oswald.

"Ah, I thought I should meet you somewhere."

All began to talk at once, when suddenly Pistasch turned, and said, "Good-day!" to Conte Capriani, who was coming towards him with extended hand, and an air of great cordiality.

Oswald and Truyn held themselves very erect, looked straight before them, and, passing Pistasch and Capriani, entered their coupé.

"I do not understand Kamenz," said Truyn, after they had installed themselves comfortably, and Georges had called from the window for a glass of Pernik beer. Oswald, his elbows propped on the frame of his window, was taking a prolonged observation of the interview between Capriani and Pistasch Kamenz.

The third bell rang--the speculator and the nobleman shook hands and separated; then Pistasch approached the coupé where sat the three conservatives, and asked, "Any room in there for me?"

"Room enough, but we're not sure that we ought to let you come with us, you renegade!" said Oswald, unlatching the coupé door. "Are you too going to Prague for the election?"

"No," said Pistach lazily, "not if I know it, in this heat. I am going to the races--but I shall vote."

"Such indifference, nowadays, is culpable," said Truyn gravely. "This is a serious time."

"Bah! it is all one to me, who goes to the Reichsrath;--moreover, whoever he may be, he exists principally for the benefit of the newspapers," replied Pistasch apathetically.

Only a few years previously, Truyn himself had defined the Reichsrath, as a 'circus for political acrobats'--but his political views were now daily gaining in consistency.

An interest in politics is usually aroused in men of his stamp, when they are between forty and fifty years of age--at a time when the taste for champagne begins to yield to that for claret. Almost all men are thus aroused at two different periods of life; in early youth and in late middle age.

That which ten years before Truyn had ridiculed, was now invested for him with a sacred

earnestness.

"We must be true to our convictions for our country's sake!" he exclaimed.

"Has any one really any convictions,--political ones I mean?" asked Pistasch, "my conviction is that it is all up with us, but the country will last as long as I shall--after that I take no interest in it."

"And is this your latest creed?" asked Truyn indignantly.

"It is a very time-honoured creed, uncle," said Georges, "if I am not mistaken it was the fundamental article of faith of that lugubrious Solomon in a full-bottomed wig, who played such unholy pranks in France, under Voltaire's reign. '*Apres nous le déluge!*'"

"Louis Fifteenth, do you mean?" asked Truyn.

But Pistasch observed, "You have become fearfully erudite while you have been abroad, Georges. I fancy you are preparing to apply for a professorship of history, in the event of the social cataclysm that seems at hand."

All the while the train is rushing onwards, past pastures seamed by narrow ditches, past turnip-fields, past villages with ragged thatched roofs, and tumble-down picket fences upon which red and blue garments are hanging to dry, while lolling over them are sunflowers, with yellow haloes encircling their black velvet faces. Nowhere is there a trace of romantic exuberance, everything tells of sober, practical thrift.

A white, dusty road winds among slender plum-trees, and along it is jolting a small waggon, drawn by a pair of thirsty dogs, their tongues hanging from their mouths; a labourer, half through his swath in a clover-field, fascinated by the whizzing train, stops mowing and stares with open mouth and eyes.

Truyn has become absorbed in the contents of 'The Press' which he holds stretched wide in both hands. Oswald, Georges, and Pistasch have improvised a table out of a wrap laid across their knees, and are indulging in a game of cards.

"What's the news, uncle?" Oswald asked as he shuffled the cards.

"The authorities have forbidden the importation of rags at any Austrian port; and a Jew has been butchered somewhere in Russia," Pistasch replied incontinently. Truyn paid no heed to Oswald's question but all at once he dropped the newspaper.

"What is the matter?" asked the young men.

"Wips Seinsberg has died suddenly!" said Truyn.

"Poor devil!" said Oswald, with about as much sympathy as we feel for people not particularly congenial. "He was a good fellow, but somewhat vacillating! Ever since his marriage I have seen very little of him."

"Was he married?" asked Truyn, who, during his stay abroad, had lost sight of Wips Seinsberg.

"He married into trade," Oswald said curtly.

It is odd; elsewhere the daughters of tradesmen marry into the nobility;--in Austria the sons of the nobility marry into trade!

"Into trade?" Truyn repeated slowly, and interrogatively.

"What did he die of?" asked Pistasch.

"It does not say," replied Truyn re-reading the notice in the newspaper.

"Hm!--that looks suspicious," said Pistasch.

CHAPTER III.

The election is over. Pistasch has shaken hands with all the middle-class land-owners, and has done wonders with that haughty condescension of his wherewith he was wont to charm the

hearts of such people. Truyn has been enlightened by his political friends as to the state of Bohemian affairs, and Oswald has been cordially congratulated by every one. He is one of those universally popular men before whom even envy and malice lower their weapons. His career has been hitherto like the triumphal march of a young king--let him but appear, and lo! an illumination, and flowers strewed before him.

After the election Truyn went to dine at the chief restaurant in Prague with some friends whom he had met for the first time for years;--Georges, Pistasch, and Oswald with the indifference of youth took their lunch at 'The Black Horse,' whither they went from the station. Then Georges departed to revive old associations in various quarters of ancient Prague. Oswald's father had been wont to pass his winters in Vienna, but his younger, poorer brother had his winter quarters in the comparatively humble Moldavian town. Georges looked up the confectioner who had been his first creditor, wandered dreamily through the gray precincts of the public school where he had studied for two years, after his tutors could do nothing more for him, walked across the picturesque Carl's bridge to the Lesser-town, the hoary old Lesser-town, the home of the aristocracy of Prague, cowering in pious veneration at the feet of the Kaiserburg, like a grey-haired child who still believes in fairy stories. There, in one of the angular, irregular squares, just opposite two tall narrow church windows, stood the small palace where Georges passed his boyhood, and which his father finally sold to a wealthy vinegar manufacturer. He scarcely recognised it again. The old stucco ornamentation had been painted a staring red; and a dealer in hams and sausages had his shop in the lower story.

"*Tempera mutantur!*" muttered Georges.

In a spacious room, tolerably cool, the shades all drawn down, the furniture consisting of dim misty mirrors in shabby gilt frames, of cupboards with brass hinges, and of green velvet chairs and sofas, Oswald lay back, in an arm-chair, laughing heartily at Pistasch's account of a late adventure.

Pistasch went to one of the three windows, and drawing the shade half up looked out into the street.

The front of 'The Black Horse' looks out on the *Graben*, the *Corso* of Prague.

All whom cruel fate had compelled to remain in town during the intolerable heat of the season, were lounging about in the late afternoon upon the heated pavement of the square.

Students with the genuine High-German swagger, over-dressed misses, round-shouldered government clerks, a wretched poodle scratching at his muzzle, an officer with jingling sabre, hack drivers, dozing peacefully on their boxes while their horses, with forelegs wide apart and heads in their nose-bags, dreamed of the 'good old times' when they caracoled beneath the spurs of gay young cavalry officers,--those 'good old times' whose chief charm for hack horses as for mortals, may perhaps consist in the fact that they are irrevocably past.

The sultry heat beats down on all, debilitating, oppressive.

"How long have you known that Capriani," Oswald asked his light-hearted friend, after a pause.

"I really cannot tell you," was the reply, "he once did me a favour without knowing me, except by sight, and then--then he came to me one day with some trifling affairs that he desired I should arrange for him, and referred to the former kindness he had shown me."

"And ever since then you have been upon friendly terms with him?"

"Not quite all that," replied Pistasch, shrugging his shoulders, "but what would you have? He consults me about his horses--his ambition is to win at the Derby;--and I consult him about my investments, the purchase of stock, etc."

"And each overreaches the other?" said Oswald, smiling.

"Up to this time I have the advantage," affirmed Pistasch, "and I have a prospect too, of a sinecure as the President of the Grünwald-Leebach stock company."

"With which of course you will have nothing to do except to inspire the public with confidence, and rake in money," said Oswald.

"Incidentally," Pistasch rejoined calmly.

Oswald drummed upon the arms of his chair, sitting erect, and looking very grave.

"Take care, Pistasch; 'those who lie down with dogs, are sure to get up with fleas.'"

"You are a reactionary martinet," growled Pistasch. "Am I the first to associate with speculators? Barenfeld, Calmonsky, Hermsdorf--are all men very different from myself, but you see their names at the head of all kinds of banks and stock companies."

"Unfortunately;" said Oswald, "that charlatan of a Capriani has infected you all--you all want to learn from that gentleman the secret of manufacturing gold. But you will learn nothing, and will inevitably all burn your fingers. I should think you might take warning from poor old Count Malzin."

"Oh, Malzin was such an unpractical man, he looked at everything from an ideal point of view," replied Pistasch.

"So much the better!" exclaimed Oswald eagerly. "That was why throughout the whole business it was his property alone that was sacrificed. You cannot imagine the harm done by this dabbling in speculation. It undermines our whole social order. We are at best not much else than romantic ruins. So long as the ruins can succeed in inspiring the public with respect, just so long they may remain standing. But let them once lose their prestige, and they will be regarded as useless rubbish, and as such be cleared away as soon as possible. What preserves us is a strict sense of honour, and a contempt for ignoble methods of money getting. Pride without a chivalric back-ground is but a shabby characteristic, and if ...."

Some one knocked at the door, and the waiter entering handed Oswald a visiting-card.

"*Le comte* Alfred de Capriani," read Oswald, "it must be for you," he said contemptuously, without noticing the few words written under the name, as he tossed the card to Pistasch.

"No," said the latter, "it is for you--look there--read,--'begs Count Lodrin for a brief interview.'"

"Extraordinary presumption!" grumbled Oswald, and then, with a shrug, he told the waiter to show the Conte in.

"You consent to receive him?" asked Pistasch.

"Good Heavens, yes!" replied Oswald, smiling, "he has just done me a kindness, my dear Pistasch, and has come for his pay. There are people who play the usurer with their kindnesses as well as with their money. I will tell you the story by-and-by."

"Very well. Adieu, for the present; in half an hour I'll come and take you to the theatre;--she's not bad,--Giuletta as *Gretchen*."

And Pistasch departed; a minute afterward Capriani entered the room.

CHAPTER IV.

There are two ways of manifesting haughtiness,--that of Count Pistasch, and that of Oswald. If Pistasch had to receive an obnoxious visitor, he kept his cigar in his mouth, and his hands in his pockets;--Oswald, on the other hand, at such times observed the most marked and the most frigid politeness.

He received Capriani with a slight inclination of the head, and the conventional form of greeting, invited him to be seated, and took a chair opposite, naturally supposing that the Conte, with business-like promptitude, would immediately begin to speak of the purpose of his visit;--but no!--the Conte remained mute, only rivetting his large eyes upon the young man. Why should Oswald find those eyes so annoying? How came it that he seemed to have seen them before in some familiar face? There was nothing bad in them--on the contrary at that moment they expressed only intense admiration, an expression, however, by no means to Oswald's taste. There might be reasons why he should condescend to discuss business-matters with Conte Capriani, but he thought it entirely unnecessary to subject himself to the Conte's admiration. He therefore broke the silence.

"You have done me a great favour," he began drily, "I shall be glad to show my gratitude for it."

"Ah, such a trifle is not worth mentioning," said Capriani. "I was exceedingly delighted to have a chance to testify the cordial regard that I have always entertained for you."

"Quite insane," thought the young man. Then aloud. "I confess that this regard is rather incomprehensible to me,--moreover,--I believe you wished to speak with me upon business."

"Certainly!" replied Capriani, "but the business was merely a pretext,--imagine it,--a pretext for me,--a business-man *par excellence*--to obtain an opportunity of conveying my personal

sentiments ...."

"The obtrusiveness of these creatures passes all belief," thought Oswald. "I beg you," he said, "to take into consideration the fact that my time is,----unfortunately, not at my own disposal, and that consequently it would be well to come to the point. I think I can guess the purpose of your visit. Count Malzin informed me not long ago of your wishes. They are, so I understand, that I should give my support in an application to the government for a railway franchise, or rather that the plan of the railway, already projected, should be modified to meet your requirements--am I right?"

"A trifle,--a trifle," said Capriani taking a compendious map of Bohemia out of his pocket and spreading it out upon the table between Oswald and himself. "The projected track lies here--and here," he explained drawing his finger along the map.

With something of a frown Oswald attentively followed the course of that pudgy, sallow forefinger, saying in an undertone, "Pernik, Zwilnek, Minkau,--that track seems to me entirely to conform to the present pressing need of the country,--will you now show me the alterations that you desire."

Capriani's forefinger began to move again, "Tesin, Schneeburg, Barenfeld."

Oswald's face grew dark. "That track would be very disadvantageous for the X---- district," he observed.

"You have estates in X----" said Capriani hastily, and imprudently. Cautious and diplomatic as he was in business, his caution could go no further than his comprehension of human nature. The circle of his experience had hitherto comprised only those human weaknesses in manipulating which he had always shown such consummate skill. He had no faith in genuine disinterestedness; he held it to be hypocrisy, or, at best, only traditional habit,--aristocratic usage. He had no idea of how his words grated upon Oswald's sensitive ear. "You have estates in X----, Herr Count."

Oswald's lips curled indignantly. "That seems to me a secondary consideration," he rejoined sharply.

"Not at all," asserted Capriani, "I would not for the world run counter to your interests, I have them almost as near at heart as my own...."

"That really is...." Oswald began to mutter angrily between his teeth,--and then controlling his impatience by an effort, he said coldly, lightly tapping the map as he spoke. "A little while ago you did me a favour, and it would be a satisfaction to me to testify my appreciation of your courtesy as soon as possible, but I think your projected alteration of the railway very disadvantageous for the country. However, I am quite ready to consult an expert."

The blood of the Crœ sus tingled to his very finger ends. There was something profoundly humiliating in Oswald's pale proud face. He did not comprehend the young man's moral point of view, he perceived only the haughtiness that rang in his words, and it aroused his antagonism. Suddenly he remembered,--and there was a kind of bliss in the thought,--the pecuniary embarrassments in which Oswald was probably involved. This was the only ground upon which he could show superiority, and make the young man aware of it. "Consult an expert? an empty formality!" he said in a changed, harsh voice.

"Let us be frank--the interests of the country in this whole affair are of very little consequence--private interests are at stake--yours and mine; I grant that the X---- district will be damaged by the new track, but on the other hand Tornow wilt gain immensely. And such trifles are not to be despised even by a Count Lodrin,--the track passes principally over very unproductive land in your estates my dear Count. You have only to name your price for that land, and I am entirely at your service."

For a moment there was absolute silence. An angry gleam flashed from Oswald's eyes as he fixed them on the Conte.

The ticking of the two men's watches could almost be heard, the lounging steps of the passers-by in the street below were distinctly audible. At last Oswald said contemptuously and clearly: "The sale of my pastures is not of the slightest importance to me in comparison with public interests. Moreover, we, you and I, do not speak the same language, we might talk together a long time and fail to understand each other. Therefore it seems useless to prolong this conversation." With which he arose.

Capriani, however, did not stir, but calmly returned the young man's look. Something like triumphant scorn, something that was almost a menace shone in his eyes.

"You refuse then to speak a word to the ministry in favour of my scheme?" he asked slowly and with a sneer.

"Decidedly," replied Oswald.

With head slightly thrown back, twisting his watch chain around his forefinger, he looked

down at the Crœ sus. He was one of the few to whom haughtiness is becoming.

Was it possible that Capriani, the least imaginative, the most avaricious of men, could succumb to this personal charm?

The Conte suddenly arose, gathered up the map, crushed it together, and dashing it on the floor, stamped on it. "I could carry it out, and it is my favourite scheme," he cried, "but what of that, I give it up, Alfred Stein can do as he chooses. I throw away millions for your sake! For your sake, Count Oswald!"

His agitation was terrible and extreme, as he held out both hands to the young man.

Oswald angrily retreated a step. Had the man escaped from a lunatic asylum?

Just then the door opened.

"Well, Ossi?" Pistasch called.--"Ah!"--perceiving the Conte--"beg pardon for intruding."

"Not at all," said Oswald decisively, without looking at Capriani, "we have finished."

The Conte bowed and withdrew. But he turned in the doorway and said, "Might I beg you, Herr Count, to carry my remembrances to your honoured mother. For although she does not know Conte Capriani--she will surely be able to recall Doctor Alfred Stein." Whereupon he disappeared.

Oswald went to a marble table whereon stood a caraffe of water, and as he took it up he met his own glance in the mirror hanging above the table. A shudder crept icily over him. He poured out a glass of water, and drank it at a draught.

"What is the matter?" asked Pistasch.

"Nothing," Oswald replied slowly, and almost dreamily. "Talking with that--that scoundrel has agitated me. I feel as if I had just got rid of some loathsome reptile."

CHAPTER V.

"Is smoking allowed, I should like to know?"

Three times Pistasch made this impertinent little remark as he gazed about him in 'The Temple of National Art.' It was a temporary temple, neither unsuitable, nor wanting in taste, but built in the rapid, superficial manner of a circus, constructed over night as it were, and it was now filled to overflowing with Bohemian lovers of music.

The four gentlemen were sitting in a proscenium box; Truyn and Georges in front, Pistasch and Oswald behind them. The opera was Faust, the *mise en scène* was rather primitive, and the tenor had a cold; but the principal part was sung by an Italian prima donna who had not only a magnificent voice, but also a pair of uncommonly fine eyes.

It was during the third *entr'acte* after the cantatrice had been enthusiastically applauded that Pistasch allowed himself the foregoing impertinent observation.

"Do you want to be turned out?" asked Georges.

"I spoke quite innocently, and seriously," said Pistasch.

Immediately afterwards he recognised in the next box a young man as a certain Doctor of Law, with whom he had been associated a few years before on the committee of a charity ball. He extended his hand to him round the front of the box, asked respectfully after the health of a deaf aunt, and after a talented sister, and even made inquiries about a cross cat, a pet of the doctor's, all in faultless idiomatic Bohemian, thus establishing his reputation as a thoroughly genial and national nobleman.

Truyn looked extremely dignified, repeatedly expressed his great pleasure in the progress made by his beloved countrymen, in the course of the last fifteen years, as well as in the advancement of the national cause. Once during the conversation he attempted to make use of the Bohemian idiom, but he only excited the merriment of his auditors.

Oswald was pale and silent.

"What is the matter with you, my boy?" asked Truyn, observing with some anxiety, his weary air, and the dark rings round his eyes.

"I am not quite up to the mark," said Oswald.

"I hope you're not going to be ill," remarked Truyn.

"Bah! He hasn't yet recovered from his conversation with Capriani," said Pistasch. "For my part I cannot understand how you can be in the slightest degree affected by what such a man as that says or leaves unsaid."

"We are not all such philosophers as you," Georges observed, glancing anxiously at his cousin.

The door of the box opened--a slender, dark-complexioned man entered. "Good evening! How are you?"

"It was Sempaly, younger brother of Prince Sempaly, to attend whose marriage he had just returned from the East. He was much tanned and his sharp features wore an air of languid weariness. Prince Sempaly had a few days previously married Nini Gatinsky. The new-comer was warmly welcomed, and then, of course, inquiries were made concerning the bridal pair, Truyn declaring his pleasure in their marriage.

"It pleases me too, exceedingly," said Sempaly, with more warmth than he was wont to display. "They are both to be congratulated. Nini was always a dear creature, and she is prettier now than ever; and a nobler character than my brother's I have never known."

"One thing however surprises me," observed Pistasch, the indiscreet, looking inquisitively at Sempaly, "your brother has been a widower for five years; it cannot be that he has spent all that time in bewailing the loss of the Princess. Why did he not grasp his happiness before?"

"I cannot enlighten you on that point," replied Sempaly with a shrug.

But Truyn said, smiling, "Perhaps it did not depend altogether upon Oscar; Nini may possibly have had a voice in the matter."

"You too are going to have a wedding soon," said Sempaly, apparently desirous of changing the subject. "How these young people are growing up! If the resemblance to his mother were not so striking, I should hardly recognise your future son-in-law. Let me congratulate you," and he held out his hand to Oswald, "congratulate you most sincerely. And how are you at home?" he added, turning suddenly to Truyn.

"All well," Truyn replied a little stiffly.

"Pray, carry to your wife and daughter the regards of--one who shall be nameless," said Sempaly with bitterness.

A short pause ensued; then he began, "What do you think of Seinsberg's suicide?"

"Suicide?" exclaimed Truyn.

"Did you not know it?" asked Sempaly.

"I suspected something of the kind," said Pistasch.

"What was the cause of it?" asked Truyn.

"Too intimate an acquaintance with the Conte Capriani?" surmised Pistasch.

"You have about hit the nail on the head, Pistasch," said Sempaly, turning his back to the stage and speaking towards the interior of the box. "It is terrible to think how many of us have fallen victims in quick succession to the rage for speculation."

"It is all over with us!" said Pistasch.

"Do have done with that eternal refrain of yours,"' said Truyn indignantly.

"Well, Georges agrees with me, and even Ossi seems to be infected with our disheartening ideas," rejoined Pistasch, "he declared to-day that we were nothing but romantic ruins."

"Ah, the ruins in Austria stand firm;" rejoined Truyn, always the same reactionary idealist, "of course we must consider how to adapt the ancient structure to the needs of the age."

"Do you think so?" said Sempaly, twirling his moustache. "Would you turn the Coliseum into a gas-works? For my part I am not greatly in favour of the practical adaptation of historical monuments. Bah! leave us as we are! The ruins will remain standing for some time yet, and in virtue of their time-worn uselessness, will manage to overawe the practical modern architecture that is springing up all around them, until the next earthquake, and then--crash--" he made a quick, characteristic gesture--"and after the downfall those who carp at us the most now will perceive how large a share of poetry and civilisation lies beneath the wreck. It is all over with us,

but what is to come hereafter?"

"What is to come hereafter? That is easy enough to foretell;" said Georges quietly, "the universal dominion of the Caprianis!"

"You do Capriani by far too much honour," rejoined Truyn.

"Do not be too sure," said Sempaly, "he is more dangerous than you imagine. It makes me fairly shudder to see how he encroaches upon us, how he hates us, and how much mischief he can do us."

"I wish I knew how he contrived to scrape together so much money in so short a time," sighed Pistasch plaintively.

"I have heard that like Sulla, and various other great men, he owes his rapid success to the fostering protection of the other sex;--they say he has had immense good fortune in that direction, and in spheres where it was least to be expected," said Sempaly.

"What! such a low cad as he!" The elegant Pistasch shrugged his shoulders incredulously.

"Well--" Sempaly gazed into space in a characteristic way; then still twirling his moustache he said with a melancholy cynicism all his own: "There are certain clumsy night-moths who are strangely skilled in brushing the dew from weary flowers in sultry nights."

Oswald, who had been bestowing but a languid attention upon the conversation, now exclaimed angrily, "I detest such vague imputations,--no one has any right to sully the fame of a number of unknown women by a suspicion that--that--" Confused by Sempaly's surprised, searching glance, he stopped short.

"What is he thinking of?" asked Sempaly, looking round at the others.

"A betrothed lover cannot tolerate any aspersion cast upon the fair sex," said Georges.

"*Qu'a cela ne tienne*," rejoined Sempaly, "the betrothed of Gabrielle Truyn ought to be above such sensitiveness. Gabrielle comes from the corner of the earth, which Love Divine sheltered beneath angels' wings, when the devil showered his poison over all creation. Happy he who meets with such a girl!"

"You do not know her," said Truyn, whose eyes, nevertheless, sparkled with gratified paternal pride.

"I knew her as a child," said Sempaly slowly, "and I know who completed her education."

For a moment they were all silent, and then Truyn began, "I must tell you a delicious bit of gossip, Sempaly;--only fancy, in the spring, in Paris, Capriani, one fine day, sent that goose, Zoë Melkweyser, to sue for Gabrielle's hand! What do you think of that?"

"Incredible!" exclaimed Sempaly.

"Was it not?" said Truyn, who took special delight in recounting this tale, and turning to Oswald, he went on, "Our Gabrielle and a son of Capriani,--was there ever such a joke?"

But Oswald was silent.

"You seem inclined to take your rival extremely tragically," rallied Pistasch.

"This is the tenth time, at least, that I have heard the story," said Oswald angrily.

"You'll have an irritable son-in-law, Truyn, at all events," interposed Sempaly with a sneer.

At this moment Pistasch, whose rage for popularity was always on the alert, called out over the heads of Sempaly and Truyn, "Good evening," to a tall, red-haired young man who had slowly made his way to the front of the pit. With delight in his eyes and a succession of nods, the red-head acknowledged the greeting.

"Who is that?" asked Georges.

"The surveyor's clerk who assisted at the polls to-day--an old acquaintance of mine," said Pistasch.

Oswald's glance fell upon the red-head. He had recognised in the man at the polls the same whom he had struck in the face with his riding-whip, in the dingy little inn-parlour. The encounter in the morning had made no impression upon him, but now....

"Good Heavens, how ill you look!" exclaimed Truyn.

"I feel wretchedly," said Oswald in a forced voice, putting his hand to his head, "do not let me disturb you, I will go home."

"You make me anxious, my boy," said Truyn, "wait a moment, and I will go with you."

"No, no, pray uncle, it is really not worth the trouble, I can easily find a fiacre," remonstrated Oswald, in a strained unnatural voice. But Truyn, always anxious about those dear to him, could not be deterred and the two left the box together.

"What is the matter with Lodrin to-night?" asked Sempaly as he took Truyn's seat. "I could not understand him. Eight years ago, when I saw him last, in Vienna, he was such a bright, merry fellow...."

"Well--" and Pistasch drew a long breath, "he is just beginning to suffer from the Phylloxera."

Georges replied to Sempaly's further inquiries, for Pistasch had become absorbed in an endeavour by sundry little grimaces to put out of countenance the Siebel of the performance, who was skipping awkwardly about the stage in boots much too tight. In this interesting amusement Pistasch forgot all else beside.

CHAPTER VI.

"You really do not know what you wish," said Truyn in surprise when Oswald changed his mind for the third time about leaving Prague. After going with Truyn to the races on the first day succeeding the election, he would not hear of attending them with Georges and Pistasch on the second day. It was settled that he was to return home with Truyn; then he began to waver and fidget, and at last he telegraphed, countermanding the carriage that had been ordered to meet him, and got up a sudden interest in the horses of the Y---- stud which were to race for the first time. Before long, however, this interest subsided, and to Truyn's great surprise Oswald informed him at a moment's notice, that after all he was going home with him.

"You will send me over to Tornow, uncle--or shall I telegraph for the horses?" asked Oswald.

"Good Heavens, no! You can spend an hour with us, at Rautschin and take a cup of tea, and then I will send you home, you whimsical fellow, you," replied his uncle, and so they drove together through the quiet summer morning to the station.

The streets were deserted except by the street sweepers, with their watering-pots busily laying the dust. The wheels of the hack rumbled noisily over the uneven pavement past brilliant cafés and shop windows, finally by the fine new National Bohemian Theatre, until their sound was deadened by the wooden planks of the Suspension Bridge. As usual the bridge is undergoing repairs; and this delays the hack, which, in addition is impeded by a battalion of infantry and two lumbering ox carts; there is a strong smell of mouldy planks, and hot pitch, by no means adding to the fragrance of the morning air. But these trifling annoyances cannot provoke Truyn, or destroy his pleasure in gazing on his native town.

The Moldau, slaty grey in hue, with silvery reflections, flows among its green, feathery islands, and, parallel with the modern suspension monstrosity, the mediaeval Königsbridge, picturesque, and clumsy,--the statues on its broad balustrade black with age like the primitive illustrations in some old Chronicle,--spans the stream with its solemn arches.

The Kaiserburg, surrounded by haughty palaces with an unfinished gothic cathedral, looks down from the summit of the Hradschin, upon its image mirrored in the water in waving lines, and columns tinged with green. The morning sun glows on the five red glass stars before the green St. John on the Karlsbridge, and far away on the left and right, far into the receding distance, until all objects are mellowed and blent, stretch the banks of the river like a long drawn symphony of colour dying away in palest violet.

"After all, it is a fine, a magnificent city!" exclaimed Truyn with enthusiasm.

"Pistasch said yesterday that Prague was a dismal hole," was Oswald's reply, "you may both be right--it all depends upon how you look at it."

The phrase falls keen and chilling upon Truyn's enthusiasm, like ice into boiling water. Surprised, and well nigh irritated, he turned to his future son-in-law. As, however, he is far less sensitive than good-natured, a glance at Oswald converts irritation into eager compassion: "I wonder where you can have caught it?" he sighed, shaking his head.

"Good Heavens, what?" asked Oswald.

"I wish I knew," said Truyn, "either intermittent fever or a slight touch of jaundice,--for a man of your age and with your constitution there's no cause for alarm, but your mother will reproach me with your looking so ill!" Then Truyn leaned out of the window of the hack to admire the Hradschin once more, before subsiding into a corner with a sigh of content, and lighting a cigar.

Oswald's nature is certainly as poetic as Truyn's, and never before had he driven over the suspension bridge, on a summer's morning, without revelling in the beauty of the Bohemian capital. But to-day everything is metamorphosed, beauty is ugliness. For him the world within two days had undergone a transformation.

The human mind is like a mirror, upon the quality whereof depends the character of the reflection in its depths; in one mirror all things are reflected yellow, in another green, in a third every line is vague, shadowy and undecided; one shows objects lengthened, another broadened, and should the mirror be cracked, everything that it reflects will be distorted.

CHAPTER VII.

Zinka and Gabrielle were at the railway station to meet Truyn, both gay, cordial and surpassingly lovely. The sight of them, and their merry talk at first brightened Oswald's mood. But suddenly at tea, which on the travellers' account was a substantial meal, a wretched sense of discomfort attacked him anew.

As he had often laughingly boasted of his punctilious fulfilment of any commission from a lady, Gabrielle, before he left for Prague, had entrusted to him, to have repaired, a gold clasp of Hungarian workmanship set with rare, coloured stones.

When at the table she asked him, "How about my clasp--did you bring it with you, or is the jeweller to send it?" he started, saying, "Forgive me, I forgot all about it."

Gabrielle stared--"Forgot--my commission?"

"Good Heavens! I am not the only man who ever forgot anything!" exclaimed Oswald irritably.

It was the first unkind word he had ever uttered to his betrothed. Astonished and grieved she cast down her eyes. But Truyn, who, as long as Oswald was well and merry, was continually finding fault with him, being now seriously concerned about the young man's health took his part.

"Have a little patience with him, comrade," said he to his daughter, "he is not well,--look at him, a man who looks as he does must not be scolded. When he is himself again we will both scold him roundly."

"Forgive me, Ella," entreated Oswald humbly, holding out his hand to her. "I have an intolerable headache, uncle. Please have the carriage brought round, I must go home."

CHAPTER VIII.

The road from Rautschin castle to Tornow goes directly through the village, across the market-place, and past the inn, 'The Rose.'

Involuntarily Oswald glanced towards the unpretending front of the tavern. Conceited and bedizened, with a dirty coat, and with bare feet thrust into morocco slippers down at the heel, the same waiter is standing in the doorway, just as he stood there on that rainy afternoon in spring, when Oswald took refuge in the inn-parlour.

Was everything to be forever reminding him of that odious scene?--In Prague he had fancied that he should soon be able to shake off the hateful sensation produced by the interview with Capriani, just as we all overcome the nervous shudder, caused by some revolting spectacle. But

no! for three days it had lasted and he could not rid himself of it,--on the contrary this hateful sensation was growing more defined.

Of course he did not frame his suspicion in words, he was ashamed of it; he called it an *idée fixe*, resulting from nervous irritability still remaining from a slight sunstroke which he had had the year before, but for all that, he could not away with it. Countless memories of trifling events, dating from earliest childhood, crowded upon his mind, all pointing, with a sneer, one way. There was a lump in his throat, a weight as of lead upon his heart; the pain waxed more and more intolerable. He could have leaped out of the carriage and have flung himself down in the road with his face in the very dust, in an agony of shame and horror!

For the first time in his life he was reluctant to go home; he was afraid of meeting his mother. There was a kind of relief in the thought that she was not expecting him, and would not come to meet him. He clinched his hands tightly, and gazed abroad, striving by the sight of distinct, familiar objects, to exorcise the evil phantoms that possessed his soul. But everything that his eyes beheld was stamped with ugliness and dejection. The leaves on the trees were limp and dusty. The grain, lodged by the storms, lay on the ground, half rotted in its own luxuriance. The farmers could recall no former year so rich in promise, so poor in fulfilment.

When at length he reached the castle, he could hardly bring himself to ask after his mother, or to go and look for her. How could he, while his mind was filled with such vile abomination? He went up to his room, where the first object that met his eyes was the white death-mask upon the wall. He grew dizzy, a black, crimson-edged cloud seemed to rise before him; he flung open the window,--the air cooled by the sunset, and laden with the fragrance of flowers, played about him, and refreshed him,--he breathed more freely.

Just then a soft, gentle sound fell upon his ear--his mother's voice! He shivered nervously from head to foot. How sweet, how noble was that voice!

"So, so, old friend; fine, good Darling! Bravo, old dog, bravo!"

These words spoken with caressing tenderness, reached him through the silence. He leaned out of the window--there she sat in a large wicker garden-chair, playing with his Newfoundland, that, with huge forepaws upon her lap, was looking familiarly into her face. Her full, elegant figure, about which some soft, black material fell in graceful folds, stood out against the background of a clump of pale purple phlox in luxuriant bloom. Oswald watched her in silence; the beautiful placid expression of her features, the rich harmony of her voice, the tender grace of her movements, as she passed her hands lovingly over the dog's head and neck,--all appealed to him. He never could tire of watching those hands. So slender and delicate that a girl of eighteen might have coveted them, there was something more about them than mere physical beauty, something clinging, pathetic, which is never found in the hands of young girls or of childless women. They were true mother-hands,--hands with an innate genius for soothing caresses; Oswald recalled the time when he had been extremely ill, and those delicate, white hands had tended him day and night with untiring patience and unsurpassable skill;--he could even yet feel their touch upon his suffering, weary limbs.

And this saint,--his mother, his glorious, incomparable mother,--he had presumed to sully by such vile suspicions! He, her son!

Without another thought he hurried down into the park. He saw her at a distance. The dog was lying quiet at her feet; she sat with hands clasped in her lap, and in her half-closed eyes there lay the look of the visionary, dim or far-seeing, always beholding more, or less than the actual. The dog heard his master's step and began to wag his tail, then rose, barking with joy, and ran to meet Oswald.

"Ossi!" and the Countess opened her arms to him. Not even from his betrothed had he ever heard a tone of welcome so fervent, and as his mother clasped him close, and kissed him, he felt as if God Himself had laid His hand upon his sore heart and healed it. Gone were all his evil surmises, all fled, leaving only a sensation of angry self-reproach.

"You are a day sooner than you said," she exclaimed, kissing him affectionately. "Well, I shall not complain, I am a few hours richer than I thought."

"How so, mamma?"

"Do you not understand? Do you really not yet know that I am counting the thirty-three days before your marriage--the last days that I shall have you to myself--and that to each one as it goes, I bid a sad farewell? Let me look at you,--my poor child, how you have come back to me! you look as if you had had an illness."

"I have felt miserably, really wretchedly ever since I went away," he admitted, speaking slowly and without looking at her. "Uncle Erich diagnosed either the jaundice or intermittent fever, but it does not amount to anything, I am well again."

"You do not look so," said the Countess, shaking her head. "Take an arm-chair, that seat is very uncomfortable."

He had seated himself upon a low stool at her feet.

"No, no, mamma," he replied smiling, "this seat is all right, and now tell me of what you were thinking as I came towards you. Your thoughts must have been very pleasant!"

"Must you know everything," she replied gaily, "I had no thoughts,--my dreams...." she patted him lightly on the cheek and whispered--"were of my grandchildren."

"Indeed? Perfectly reconciled, then, to my marriage?"

"We must learn to acquiesce in the inevitable, and--and--it really would be delightful to have a chubby little Ossi, in miniature, to pet, and cosset."

He did not speak, but leaned a little forward and pressed the hem of her gown to his lips.

"You goose!" she remonstrated; but when he raised his head she perceived that his eyes were filled with tears. "What is the matter?"

"A momentary weakness, as you see," he said with forced gaiety; adding earnestly,--"I am not ashamed of it before you. Of the evil that is in us, we are more ashamed before those whom we love than before all the rest of the world; but of our weaknesses we are ashamed only before those to whom we are indifferent!"

Paler and paler grow the blossoms of the sweet rocket, sweeter and sweeter their fragrance rises aloft, like a mute prayer,--twilight hovers over the meadows and the leafy summits of the lindens grow black. The quiet air is stirred by the village bells ringing the Angelus. The Countess folded her hands,--of late years she has grown devout. Oswald is overcome by intense lassitude, the lassitude that follows the sudden relaxation of nervous tension in men upon whom severe physical exertion has no effect.--He lays his head upon his mother's knee, and recalls the time when, only twenty years old, and smarting under a severe disappointment, he had taken refuge there. Then he had lain his head upon her lap, and sleep, wooed in vain through feverish nights, had fallen on him.--He remembers how, regardless of her own discomfort, she had let him sleep there for hours, never moving, lest he should be disturbed. And how many other instances of her love and self-sacrifice fill his memory! She strokes his hair, and for a moment he wishes he might die, thus, now, and here,--yes, it would be far better, a hundredfold better to die thus at her feet, his heart filled with filial adoration, than to have to live down again the anguish of the last three days.

BOOK FOURTH.

CHAPTER I.

After all, what had induced Conte Capriani to spend his summer in Austria? His wife and his children were unutterably bored in their exile, and he--he was consumed with secret chagrin. He had intended to astound the earth whereon he had once run barefoot, but nothing had fulfilled his expectations, absolutely nothing. The Austrian climate did not agree with him, decidedly not. Instead of the intoxicating consciousness of triumph wherein he had hoped to revel, he was tormented, from morning until night, by a sensation of rasping humiliation. His arrogance sickened, shrivelled up; even his possessions suddenly seemed to him insignificant. His wealth was, to be sure, more easily convertible into cash, more available than that of the Austrian aristocrats. But what availed his airy, fleeting millions compared with these well-nigh indestructible possessions, rooted for centuries in native soil?

Many, many years before, on a muddy road the sides of which were spotted with patches of dirty snow fast melting in the early spring, little Alfred Stein had run behind a high old-fashioned

green coach hung on spiral springs, and had tried to steal a ride on the hind axle. The bearded coachman--a stout, patriarchal coachman with a broad fur collar--looked back, saw him, and snapped his whip at him, so sharply that the boy, frightened, let go the axle, and fell off into a puddle. A chubby child, at the carriage window, leaned far out to see him, and laughed, without any malice, loud and heartily, as all healthy children laugh at anything comical. But rage seized young Alfred, and when he could do it unobserved, he clenched his fist, and shook it at the carriage.

At that time his envy did not reach higher than to a green coach, with a stately fur-clad coachman who could cut at all barefoot boys who were clinging on behind. How many miles his envy had travelled since then, how many ragamuffins his coachman had since then whipped off from his carriages, and yet at times it seemed to him that in reality he had not gained a step since that warm damp day in spring, when he had fallen into the puddle, and had been laughed at by the saucy little boy.

The child of poor parents, his extraordinary beauty had attracted the notice of a Bohemian Countess, who oddly enough was the owner of that same green coach. He was the best scholar in the village school, and the Countess befriended him. He became the playmate of her proud, good-natured, indolent children. By-and-by he shared their lessons, and his progress was remarkable. He was patted on the shoulder, his diligence was commended, and at last, by dint of flattery and servility, he obtained the means to study in Vienna. The years of his student life were most wretched. He possessed neither the dullness nor the imagination that can make poverty tolerable, but his were the endurance and the cunning that overcome poverty. Averse to no secret infamy, he, nevertheless made a parade of morality, and was an adept in what a witty Frenchman calls *le charlatanisme du désintéressement*. Although a Sybarite by nature, and susceptible to all physical enjoyment, the instant that the attainment of his aims was at stake, he became a pattern of abstinence. He knew how to allow himself to be heaped with benefits, without acquiring the reputation of a parasite on the one hand or of a man who used his friends without any show of gratitude on the other.

From the outset of his career he owed his success, not alone to his personal beauty, but to his faculty for intuitively detecting the evil propensities of others, and for privately pandering to them, yet always preserving a show of indulgent charity withal. His medical practise opened to him the doors of certain social circles which would else probably have been forever closed to him. He practised medicine for a while at fashionable watering places, and he had many distinguished patients among the fair sex; at last, however, his marriage to a rich Russian girl relieved him from the necessity of pursuing his profession, and led his speculative mind into other paths.

His wife's fortune, however, was soon but a small part of that which he accumulated and added to it. Always restless, often unprincipled, he heaped up his millions, seeming fairly to conjure money out of other men's pockets. His greed of gain was no petty passion, there was in it something of the heroic. Wealth was not his end, but a means to his end, a weapon,--power.

In Paris this power had not failed him, but in Austria no one was dazzled by it except those towards whom he felt utterly indifferent. Day by day he grew more irritable, more bitter; what did his millions avail with these Austrian aristocrats who, had, with indolent elegance dragged after them for centuries, in spite of all levelling tendencies of any age, the burden of their ancient traditions--called by the Liberals prejudices--and who had grown weary at last of justifiable carping at their official and unofficial prerogatives, and had taken refuge upon an island as it were of determined exclusiveness, where, entrenched as behind the wall of China, they loftily ignored all the revolutionary hubbub around them.

He had succeeded in much, why should he not succeed in making a breach in this wall of China? This was the aim of all his efforts. He was one of those who would fain destroy what they cannot attain. By a thousand enticing temptations he had striven to arouse the avarice of the *Right Honourables*, as he called them, that the base, degrading greed of gain might bruise the strict sense of honour that was like a 'hoop of gold to bind in' Austrian exclusiveness. To brand an aristocrat as a swindler would be a keener joy than to make him a beggar.

He had hitherto had only a few petty triumphs in this direction, but he was too ambitious, too clear-sighted to be contented in the long run with these trifling victories.

One consciousness of terrible import to others had at times afforded Capriani some consolation, but of late even this consciousness had lost somewhat of its soothing charm.

When, after his return from Prague, Kilary had asked him, with a sneer, if he had really succeeded in twisting Oswald Lodrin around his finger the Conte had replied with some embarrassment, "We have not done with each other yet, but I rather think that what I said to him will have an effect."

And while he was making private marks with coloured pencils upon his business letters, or telegraphic despatches which arrived in large numbers for him every day, he repeated to himself, again and again: "It will have an effect!"

CHAPTER II.

It is evening in the drawing-room at Tornow, and the air breathes soft and fragrance-laden through the open window; the monotonous chirp of the crickets sounds loud and shrill as if to drown the sweet plaint of the nightingale. Beyond the circle of light cast by the lamps more than half of the spacious room is quite dark.

The Countess Lodrin is bending over an embroidery frame, busied in working the Zinsenburg crest upon a hassock; Oswald, Georges, and Pistasch, who, when the races were over had accepted an invitation to come to Tornow with Georges, are eagerly discussing a false start. Oswald, the quietest of the three, glances from time to time at his mother.

He has, to be sure, succeeded in shaking off his ugly *idée fixe*, and in regaining his former cheerfulness; but yet, by fits and starts, he is assailed by a paralysing sensation of dread. Then he takes refuge with his mother; by her side the odious fancies have no power. There are times when he is possessed by a wild impulse to deliver Capriani's message, to ask his mother whether she ever really knew Doctor Stein and to watch the effect; but at the critical moment his heart has always failed him, and he has been ashamed of yielding even thus much to his disgraceful weakness.

When they have exhausted the false start, Georges and Pistasch enter upon a discussion of the best method of shoeing horses. This interesting topic absorbs them so entirely that neither perceives that for several minutes the Countess has been searching for something which she has mislaid,--finally even stooping to look for it on the floor. It is Oswald who rises and asks, "What are you looking for, mamma?"

"A strand of scarlet silk."

The two gentlemen of course feel it their duty to offer their services, but too late; Oswald has already picked up the silk. This trifling diversion, however, puts a stop to the sporting talk.

"Mimi Dey came to see me this morning; I asked her to dine with us on Thursday."

"Is Elli Rhoeden coming too?" asked Oswald.

"If I am not mistaken she has gone to Kreuznach," observed Pistasch.

"Yes," said the Countess, "unfortunately we cannot depend upon her, but you will probably enjoy the society of Fräulein von Klette. Mimi will do her best to make her stay at home, but she cannot promise."

"Is she living still,--that Spanish fly?" asked Georges, surprised.

"Indeed she is, and with the same enormous appetite," Pistasch calmly declared, "I believe she is qualifying herself for the post of Minister of Finance; her talent for levying taxes is more brilliantly developed every year. Unfortunately her sphere of action is limited to the circle of her most intimate friends."

"It appears that she has just embarked in a novel and very interesting financial enterprise," remarked the Countess with a smile, "she is raffling a sofa cushion."

"Oh, that famous negro head," observed Pistasch, "she has been working at it for two years, and she issues a fresh batch of chances every three months."

"Before I forget it," said the Countess half to herself, "would you not like to write to Fritz to come to dinner day after to-morrow, Ossi? we shall be entirely by ourselves. He will feel at home, and I am always glad to entice him to forget his sorrows, if only for a few hours."

"I paid him a visit yesterday," said Georges, "he is going down hill very fast in health. He asked eagerly after you, Ossi, and mentioned that he had not seen you for a long while."

"Ossi avoids Schneeburg, for fear of an encounter with the *Phylloxera vastatrix* who, as he prophesies, is to be the ruin of us all," said Pistasch banteringly.

Oswald had risen to light a cigarette at the lamp; his hand trembled a little. "I will write to Fritz, mamma," he said, "I am afraid I have rather neglected him of late."

CHAPTER III.

"Our poor Count Fritz is going fast," said old Doctor Swoboda every time that he returned from Schneeburg to Rautschin and stopped at the inn to drink a glass of beer; this time he remarked it to Herr Alexander Cibulka, who always took a lively interest in Schneeburg.

"Ah, indeed? Well, he has not much to lose in this life," rejoined Eugène Alexander, "if I had to depend for my living upon alms, as he does, I'd put a bullet through my brains!" and Herr Cibulka ran his stubby fingers through his bushy hair. He was very proud of such unfeeling expressions, which he considered, Heaven only knows why, as particularly fashionable. "And how is the Conte Capriani?" he continued, "and the charming Ad'lin,--a superb creature, eh?" and Eugène Alexander affectedly wafted abroad a kiss from his finger tips.

"Don't know," growled the old doctor, "I don't associate with them."

"Ah, true," said Herr Cibulka compassionately, "I quite forgot, you do not associate with them."

Eugène Alexander Cibulka was the only man among the *haute volée* of the market-town who had enjoyed the honour of an invitation from Capriani. The invitation,--there was but one,--was to a *déjeûner*, and inspired him with not a little pride. He described it as a most memorable, 'brilliant episode,' in his monotonous existence, and he celebrated it in lyric phrases. What had so charmed him it would be hard to tell; Madame Capriani had found it impossible to understand him, although she had good-humouredly tried to do so,--his sentences were so interlarded with compliments,--and consequently she was obliged to confine herself to phrases of conventional courtesy; Adeline had spoken only in French, which of course excluded him from conversation with her, and when he picked up her handkerchief she thanked him as haughtily as if she resented his not presenting it on a salver; the Conte had urged him to partake of the various dishes, ringing the changes upon one invariable theme. "You had better take some--you don't get such a chance every day."

Modern culture had certainly treated him ill, but all the more was he convinced of its immense superiority. There was but one adjective that in his opinion, could in any wise fitly characterize the new household at Schneeburg, and that was, 'Sublime!'

Two years previously, in old Malzin times, he had also on some occasion or other dined at Schneeburg. The old Count had received him with distinguished, though formal, courtesy, had insisted upon his preceding him into the dining-hall, and had taken great pains to find subjects for conversation that should not exclude his guest. He had been very much better treated at Schneeburg then,--but no raptures came of it. On the contrary he had declared, with a shrug, that Count Malzin's style of living was very 'middle-class,'--that it was a pity too, that the Count spoke so low that it was difficult to understand him, and that really there had not been enough to eat.

In spite of the old Count's courtesy and of the simplicity of the dinner, Cibulka had somehow on that occasion been keenly sensible of the gulf between himself and the master of Schneeburg, and it seemed to him now that Capriani's millions had avenged him of the affront caused by the personal superiority of the former possessor of the Castle; this delighted him. It flattered his self-importance to hear Capriani--no one knew why,--call Castle Schneeburg a little hunting box, nothing but a hunting box, and then to hear him say: "Oh, Malzin, *apropos*, did you write to the saddler? You must make haste--indeed you are very dilatory!" And then, when Fritz had departed, to have the Crœ sus suddenly turn to him, to Cibulka, and remark confidentially, "that fellow, Malzin, is really an incumbrance, but what can one do?--he must be provided for."

Eugène Alexander, a despicable specimen of a despicable class, servilely rubbed his hands, and murmured, "The Herr Count is most generous, but indeed that is an easy matter for the Herr Count. Poor devil! I really am sorry for Malzin."

Poor devil indeed! The old doctor was right, Fritz was going fast. Every afternoon at the same hour he had a high fever,--he looked like a ghost. In speaking he had a habit of contracting his underlip, which gave to his face the hard, pain-begotten lines with which the pre-Raphalites portrayed the dying Christ. Ready at any minute to drop from fatigue, he was yet driven forth by constant restlessness to go dragging over forest and field, obliged at ever-lessening intervals to rest upon a stile, or upon the steps of some way-side cross. There he would sit gazing abroad and repeating to himself, with the exaggerated appreciation that men always cherish for that of which they are deprived, that Schneeburg was the finest estate in Bohemia. When he strode through the golden stubble fields, the reapers would gather about him and with many a merry, kindly word encircle his limbs, in accordance with an ancient Bohemian custom, with wreaths of straw. He would respond with some friendly jest, and purchase his release by a gratuity more in

accordance with his former means than with his present circumstances.

The people were still loyal to him, to the peasants and day labourers he was always "*Our* Herr Count." Whenever he appeared among them they ran to him, kissed his hands, and invoked countless blessings upon him. There had been a time when he protested impatiently against these rather obtrusive demonstrations, but now he took pleasure in them. He knew the people almost all by name, and frequently talked with them, when to be sure they never failed to make some complaint against their new master, under whom in point of fact they were very well off; but they none the less complained of him just to please their Herr Count.

But though the peasants and labourers were thus loyal to him, the new servants and superintendants showed no such respect. The Conte had not retained in Schneeburg a single one of the former servants; he had dismissed them all without pensions. The knowledge of this had added bitterness to the old Count's last moments. He had interceded for his people, and when he could obtain nothing save vague promises, he had intended to use his influence elsewhere for their protection, but death had intervened and put an end to his good intentions. Probably none of the dismissed were worth much--the housekeeping at the Castle had been slipshod and easy-going,--all things had been allowed to take their own course. No provision for the old servants had been included in the original contract when they were first hired, and the income from Schneeburg had not been large enough to warrant the reservation of a pension fund, but no one had ever been dismissed on account of increasing age, or of physical infirmity. Almost all of them had been born upon the estate, and had expected to die there. And now, suddenly, Schneeburg was 'swept clean' of them, as the Conte expressed it. Some of them were plunged into hopeless poverty; Fritz discovered this, and the misery of not being able to provide for *his* people was an added pang.

Meanwhile there was a horde of new servants at Schneeburg, all young people, with modern ideas, fresh from industrial schools, stocked with correct views of their multifarious duties, and with independent opinions in politics.

At first, whenever Fritz met them, he greeted them with the kindly affability with which he was wont to treat inferiors, but this condescension from one in his circumstances seemed to them ridiculous; they laughed among themselves at his courtesy. He did not observe this for some time, and when he did so he simply took no notice of the menials. They however continued to ridicule him, and to clear away, pull down, and alter ruthlessly.

Whilst Fritz sat wearied and worn in his gloomy room, among his shabby relics, teaching his little daughter French, or his boy the alphabet, he could hear the thud of the falling stones, as the time-honoured out-buildings were being demolished, and every sound struck a direct blow at his poor, sore, foolish heart.

The Conte's behaviour towards him daily grew more intolerable, especially ever since his return from the election. Every petty disappointment was wreaked upon Fritz. Of course! Fritz was the only member 'of the caste' upon whom the Conte could vent his anger. His brutalities Fritz could endure, but what outraged him beyond measure was to have the Conte assume an air of frankness, and behind the mask of friendly interest presume to ask all sorts of personal questions,--the bitterest of pills for Malzin!

"Oh Heavens, how long am I to be in gaining the summit of Calvary?" the poor fellow sometimes asked himself.

To-day he had been visited by a ray of light, emanating from the cordial, affectionate note, in which Oswald invited him to the family-dinner at Tornow. "Forgive me for not having seen you for so long," Oswald concluded, "only remember all that I have to do. The castle is turned upside down in anticipation of a certain coming event, but, nevertheless, we shall be heartily glad to keep you with us for a couple of days. But we will discuss this to-morrow."

Of course Fritz accepted the invitation. He knew that it would bring on a scene with his wife--but what, after all, did he care for that? He could not but anticipate the morrow with pleasure, and after he had dispatched his reply by the Tornow messenger, he walked out into the park.

It was early in August, and the floods of rain which had fallen in June and July had been followed by stifling sultriness. Fritz was both stimulated and wearied by the state of the atmosphere, without being conscious of any special degree of heat. His disease had made such progress that he was subject to chilly sensations, even when the thermometer stood very high. As usual, he sought out the most retired paths of the park, paths where he felt sure of meeting no one, and of being able to indulge unmolested in his customary day-dreams.

He reached a miniature lake, embosomed among proud, old firs, its surface glassy as a mirror held aloft by the nixies to the sky. Tall reeds with brown heads fringed its shores, and nodded to the white waterlilies reposing among their flat, green leaves. Perfect silence reigned; not only did the stately firs preserve their customary, dignified quiet, but even the leafy trees were too listless to-day to exhale their wonted 'murmur mixed with sighs.' Each leaf drooped wearily. No bird uttered a note, the stillness was as profound as in mid-winter. Nature lay motionless, no audible pulse throbbing, sunk, as it seemed, in a mysterious swoon.

Fritz sat down upon a bench rudely constructed of birch boughs, and gazed dreamily around. As always when alone, his thoughts reverted to the past, and now he smiled at a memory of langsyne. He recalled how as a child he had tried here to learn from the gardener's sons how to skip pebbles on the surface of the water. He had succeeded but ill; his pebbles all sunk directly to the bottom. He remembered too that very near this small lake there was once a little hut with a mossgrown, shingled roof, resting upon four fir-tree trunks. There the little Malzins had played Robinson Crusoe; the hut had been a fort besieged by savages. Perhaps it was no longer in existence; Capriani might have had it cleared away; Fritz arose to look for it.

It was still there; he could see the gilt crescent sparkling on the gable of the old, shingled roof. As he approached it he heard voices, and would have withdrawn, had he not recognized them as those of his wife and Capriani. In some irritation he drew nearer, but found nothing to justify any interference; Charlotte was sitting busy with some sewing, while the Conte was talking to her,--that was all.

When Fritz, with his pale face of disapproval appeared in the doorway of the summer-house, an ugly smile passed over the features of the Conte. "You come in the nick of time," Capriani said carelessly, and without the least embarrassment. "Sit down, we were just talking about you."

"Indeed? very kind," murmured Fritz, taking a seat, and glancing rather sternly at his wife.

"We were just speaking of your children. Hm, my dear Malzin,"--the Conte stroked his long whiskers,--"have you laid by anything for those youngsters?"

Fritz cast down his eyes. "How could I have done so?" he rejoined in a monotone.

"You certainly might lay by something from your present salary," the Conte said with emphasis.

"You seem entirely to forget that I have only had my present salary for two months," said Fritz bluntly.

The Conte bit his lip. "Oho!" he exclaimed, "have I offended you again? I assure you I mean well, very well by you. Tell me your views with regard to the future of your children."

Fritz shrugged his shoulders. "I really have none; the poor things will have to shift for themselves," and his voice trembled.

"Of course you mean then to give them a good education, to enable them to earn their own living," continued the Conte. "That is all right, but allow me to ask how you mean to do this?"

Fritz passed his hand--the white, transparent hand of consumption--wearily across his forehead. "I hope to send my little girl to Hernals," he began, "where she can be educated for a governess."

"Ah--!" the Conte looked disapproval--"a very unpractical scheme, it seems to me, very unpractical. She will become very pretentious in her ideas at Hernals, and will gain but little that can be of real service to her. Remember your circumstances, my dear fellow, remember your circumstances,--we will discuss them by-and-by. And what do you think of doing with your son?"

"Oh Franzi is still so little," said Fritz in hopes of cutting short the conversation, the Conte's arrogant, domineering tone was most irritating, it stung him like nettles.

"All the more reason for providing for his future," the Conte insisted, "in consideration of the chance of your being suddenly taken from him."

"True, true," sighed Fritz. "Well then, I hope to live long enough to place him in a government school for Cadets, after which through the influence of my relatives, he can obtain a commission."

The Conte laughed contemptuously. "Just like you!" he exclaimed, "the same haughty, aristocratic idler as ever! You'll learn sense after a while, my dear fellow. I have thought of something for Franzi; your wife is quite agreed to it." Charlotte who had seemed to be absorbed in her sewing, nodded.

"The Countess always takes a sensible view of affairs, she looks things in the face," continued the Conte; "begging your pardon, my dear fellow, there is more common-sense in her little finger than in your whole body. We will find Franzi a place in a dry-goods establishment. The business is neither unhealthy, nor confining, and if it goes against your grain to put him in such a situation here in Austria (to speak frankly I think any such objection very petty,--my views in this respect are more enlightened) why I will see that he gets one in Paris at the *Louvre* or at the *Printemps*; a clerk in one of those great houses often gets a yearly salary of from fifteen to twenty thousand francs!"

Fritz started to his feet and made several attempts to interrupt the Conte, but his voice failed. A singing was in his ears, his blood was coursing hotly, wildly through his veins. "My son!" he gasped hoarsely, "my son, clerk in a dry-goods shop! I'd rather kill him myself!"

He felt a terrible oppression in his chest, and then came sudden relief; in an instant he grew

deadly pale with bluish tints about his eyes and temples. He stretched out his hands aimlessly as if to ward off some catastrophe, not knowing why he did so,--then mechanically felt for his handkerchief, pressed it to his lips, and fell senseless on the floor.

CHAPTER IV.

The Lodrins dined early during the warm summer months; they wished to have the cooler hours of the late afternoon for riding, driving or walking. The dinner on Thursday at which Fritz was to have been present was at two o'clock, but at the last moment he sent an excuse without any special cause assigned.

Of course Fräulein von Klette had not been persuaded to stay at home. Erect as a grenadier, and with an enormous reticule to contain her sewing, her headdress, and any chance presents that she might receive, she made her appearance with Mimi Dey, who good-humouredly assured the Countess Lodrin, for the tenth time that Ossi and Gabrielle were incomparably the handsomest betrothed couple in Austria, and then greeted Zinka with perhaps rather exaggerated cordiality. Thanks to the imitative instinct that rules the world, all the ladies of the vicinity modelled their behaviour towards Zinka upon that of the Countess Lodrin. Mimi Dey had declared lately to several of her acquaintances who were asking about Erich Truyn's marriage, "Zinka is as much of a lady as I am," and this significant verdict had its share in establishing upon a firm basis Zinka's social position.

Pistasch watched Zinka curiously; with all his languid insolence, he was possessed of sufficient tact to perceive what she was and to comport himself towards her accordingly. As usual, when not in the bosom of her family, she was rather silent; her gentle voice was heard only occasionally; she looked very pretty, and seemed to be occupied with anything rather than her own beauty, with every one else rather than with herself.

The two topics of the hour were the upset that had befallen young Capriani and his four-in-hand the day before, and the murder of an old widow in a village near Schneeburg. The accident to the four-in-hand of course afforded all the gentlemen the liveliest satisfaction; they were unanimous in their surprise that the catastrophe had been delayed so long; the murder in Karlowitz opened for Truyn a wide field of moral and political considerations. As this murder was the first that had occurred within the memory of man in all the country round, he did not hesitate for a moment to ascribe it to the demoralizing influence of Capriani.

There is probably no evil, from a murder to an epidemic, which Truyn would not have liked to trace directly or indirectly to the sinister influence of Conte Capriani. Oswald who had been merry enough at first gradually grew taciturn and monosyllabic.

"Capriani's ears must tingle," he exclaimed at last, no longer controlling his impatience, "can we talk of nothing else but that scoundrel!"

"Do not grudge us this innocent amusement," rejoined Truyn good-humouredly, and Pistasch added, "I cannot see why it should make you nervous. The mere sound of Capriani's name affects you as an allusion to the cholera affects other men." Oswald changed colour, and Georges proposed a toast to the betrothed couple.

After dinner, whilst they were all drinking coffee in the drawing-room, Pistasch contrived a *tête-à-tête* with his cousin Mimi Dey for the purpose of asking all sorts of questions about Zinka, which he could not well put directly to the Lodrins. "Is she the same Sterzl about whom there was so much talk in Rome? The girl who--etc.,--etc.?--a very delightful person, really charming." It was beginning to be the fashion to declare Zinka charming.

In the meantime the heroine of the Roman romance, was sitting beside the Countess Lodrin on a small divan in a dim corner of the spacious room, and whispering, "Have you heard?"

"Of course I have! Ossi learned it from your husband; I congratulate you with all my heart," replied the Countess in a low tone, taking the young wife's hand in her own.

"And you understand how very glad I am," whispered Zinka, blushing, and brushing away a tear.

The Countess smiled her own grave beautiful smile, and nodded assent; Zinka moved a little closer to her. "Who should understand it better than you?" she whispered. She felt a positive reverence for the Countess, whose kind and tender treatment of her she could not but regard as

a special mark of favour and distinction. The childlike deference of her manner towards the elder lady was very graceful and very winning.

"If--if the good God should grant me a son," she whispered more softly still, and with a deeper blush, "I should like to learn from you how to educate him."

Countess Wjera laid her hand kindly on Zinka's shoulder. "Your husband will be a better teacher there than I can be; that Ossi is what he is is due to the grace of God,--not to me."

"And is it by God's grace alone, that Ossi has preserved so profound and filial a veneration for his mother?"

The Countess took her hand from Zinka's shoulder; the younger woman, startled, gazed into her face.

"It is nothing," said Wjera, with a forced smile, "a pain in my heart--it will soon pass."

Mimi Dey, with Pistasch, was approaching the corner where the Countess and Zinka were sitting, and noticing Wjera's sudden pallor, inquired as to its cause, instantly vaunting the merits of a certain specific, in which she had implicit confidence. As soon as Fräulein Klette observed that the conversation was taking a medical turn, she too joined the group. "Wjera, I know a wonderful remedy; a Swiss physician, gave me the prescription,--it really will cure everything,--everything."

"From scrofula to 'despised love,'" added Pistasch. He knew the famous prescription well, and knew, too, that it was the basis of one of Fräulein Klette's numerous financial manœ uvres.

"It really is an extraordinary remedy, Wjera, and it would do you good, too, Mimi;--it would be the very thing for Zinka I am sure," Fräulein Klette rattled on. "I have wrought wonders with it. Do let me have a few bottles of it put up for you."

"You needn't take that trouble, Carolin," said Pistasch maliciously, "I have two or three quarts of your specific on hand, and it will give me pleasure to supply the ladies."

"As you please, I do not insist," said the Fräulein chagrined; whereupon she drew from her reticule the famous negro's head and with great energy and a very long thread began to embroider a sulphurous gleam on his ebony nose.

CHAPTER V.

The fierce heat of the day is over, the rays of the westering sun cast mildly gleaming bands of gold here and there amid the pleasing confusion of furniture in the drawing-room, where both coverings and hangings of Flemish stuff made the prevailing colour a dim, cool green.

The world forgetting, the betrothed pair were standing by a little table whereon was a large, blue Sèvres vase, filled with crimson Jacqueminot roses, a vase, whereof the depressing shape was that of a funeral urn, and whereof the decorations were after the pedantic taste of the first Empire, with medallions of gaudy flowers upon a dark-blue surface. Oswald and Gabrielle had just agreed in declaring the vase almost as hideous as the pretentious monstrosity placed in the library of the Vatican as a memorial of Napoleonic generosity.

"Mamma's Russian relatives have a positive passion for blue Sèvres vases, and green malachite table tops upon gilded tripods," said Oswald, "but one cannot throw a well-meant gift out of doors!"

And then they went on to talk of the future, of their wedding-trip which was to be to the East, and to laugh over certain events of the first days of their young affection, in that fair spring-time in Paris. Suddenly Gabrielle interrupted their talk with "Now you are yourself again, but at dinner you looked so cross, I was absolutely afraid of you!"

"Oh, you foolish little girl, how could you be afraid of me?"

"You mean that a great lion like you, is far too noble to hurt a poor little King Charles!"

He shook his head, saying, "I never should think of comparing you to a King Charles."

"To what would you compare me then?" she asked, lifting her large, shining eyes to his.

"Are you angling for flattery, Ella?" he said banteringly.

"Flattery from you?" was her half-offended reply.

"Ah, I did not mean that,--I will tell you to what I love to liken you," he whispered very softly, leaning towards her,--"to a white lily, Ella,--you are just as pure and fair, with a golden heart deep down in your breast."

Her dark-blue eyes glittered with tears of tenderness.

"Oh Ella, if you only knew how I long to clasp you in my arms this moment, and kiss away the tears from those dear eyes! But ...." and he gave a glance around.

"No one is looking," she said saucily.

It was true; the ladies were absorbed in teazing Pistasch about his last conquest, and Truyn and Georges were again at it in argument over the internal policy of the government; but none the less did the sound of her own audacious little speech startle Gabrielle, and when Oswald with a merry glance whispered "Say that again, Gabrielle," she turned away.

"How Papa is shouting!" she observed in order to change the subject as quickly as possible. And in fact Truyn's voice is tolerably loud as he utters the significant, momentous words: "It is our mission to protect the people from the influence of ambitious political theorists, and from its own folly!"

"He is in a downright fury," assents Oswald, "let us try to calm him, Ella." And as they went together towards the two politicians, Oswald said, "Would you not like to have a rubber, uncle, before you carry out your mission?"

Truyn, as became his age, had a weakness for whist, quite as pronounced as for politics, and therefore accepted the proposal. The ladies were politely invited to play, but no one accepted save Fräulein Klette, and since Pistasch refused point-blank to have her for a partner, the four gentlemen sat down to the game by themselves.

The sunbeams slant more and more, one long, level ray is now shining directly through the bouquet of crimson roses in the ugly Sèvres vase, the flowers glow like strange, weird jewels.

A carriage stopped before the castle. "Who can it be?" said Countess Lodrin.

It was the Baroness Melkweyser. The customary greetings over, she begged the gentlemen not to let her interrupt their game, and sank into an arm-chair beside the Countess Lodrin. "I hope I do not disturb you!" she exclaimed. "I really could not stand it another hour over there. I was perfectly wild!"

"Aha!" Mimi Dey smiled provokingly. "I cannot pity you as much as you seem to expect, Zoë; I thought you would repent it, when I heard you were staying with those queer people."

"What would you have?" said the Baroness meekly enough, "I have known those Caprianis ever so long, they live magnificently in Paris."

"Indeed?" asked Mimi, "does any one visit them?"

"Oh yes, crowned heads even," said Zinka, "and especially Princes of the blood travelling incog."

"Oh, they--why, they go even to the *Mabille*," said Mimi, "and--well--perhaps there is a certain similarity between ....!"

"Oh, no, no," interrupted Zoë, "they have very decent manners; Capriani even turned out of his house lately a person who came without an invitation."

"Really?" said Zinka, "that, certainly, shows great progress; but is it true that at the Conte's last ball neither the eldest daughter, nor her husband was present?"

"Yes," Zoë admitted. "Those are some of the insolent airs with which Larothière contrives to awe his father-in-law."

"Go on," said Mimi.

"I do not say that only the *élite* appear at these balls. *C'est toujours le monde à côté*, as they say in Paris, but,--good Heavens! these Caprianis have been of service to me, and they always heaped me with attentions, but here they are beginning to behave positively disagreeably to me."

"Perhaps your services in your native country have not answered their expectations," said Mimi, "Pistasch told me that you had been invited to Schneeburg on purpose to introduce the Caprianis into Austrian society. Was that only one of his poor jokes, or ...."

"I really did promise to do my best ...."

"My dear Zoë'," exclaimed Mimi Dey horrified, "had you clean forgotten your Austria?"

"No, I had not forgotten it, only I fancied that in the last twenty-five years you might have conformed somewhat to the spirit of the age; but no, you are precisely the same as ever. When will you cease to entrench yourselves behind triple barriers?"

"When we feel sure that no suspicious individual will try to invade our realm," said Mimi; "our circle, moreover, is quite large enough, and if we are asked to admit a stranger, at least we have a right to discover beforehand whether he will or will not be an acquisition."

That this didactic little speech was uttered principally for her edification, the Countess Truyn was perfectly aware. She merely smiled calmly.

"I have no prejudices," asserted Fräulein Klette boldly. "I am perfectly ready to be introduced to the Caprianis."

"Yes, you are a great philosopher," replied Mimi, gravely patting her on the shoulder, "we all know that."

"I shall not fail to represent to Capriani the advantage to be derived from your acquaintance," said Zoë drily. "And now I must make haste and execute a commission; I should really prefer to extricate myself from these associations, but since I have got into the claws of this vulture I must keep him in good humour at least until he has gotten my finances into a better condition. And that brings me to what I have to ask of you, Wjera; I want you to do me a great favour." Up to this point the Countess Lodrin had taken no part in the conversation, but had continued, apparently lost in thought, to work away with her large wooden needles at her woollen piece of knitting. Zinka, who had been watching her, thought her unusually pale. "A favour? What is it?" asked the Countess.

"It is about your 'old Vienna' set of china, which you used to be so anxious to complete. The other half was at Schneeburg, and now belongs to Capriani. When he learned from me that you--er--were very fond of the set, he--er--asked me,--very kindly, as you must admit,--to offer you his half."

The Countess's large wooden needles clicked louder, and more busily than ever, but she said not a word in reply.

"You really would do me a very great favour, Wjera," persisted the baroness, "three weeks ago he asked me to say this to you, and I have only to-day brought myself to do it. You will embarrass me exceedingly by rejecting the china."

Then Wjera with a quick angry gesture dropped her work, and looked up. Her face in its stern pallor was like chiselled marble, but a dark glow shone in her eyes; Zinka thought that she had never beheld anything more beautiful or more haughty than that face at that moment. "What price does your Herr Capriani ask for the china?" she asked curtly.

"Price?--Price?--he will deem himself only too happy by your acceptance of it...!"

"Ossi, that's a revoke!" exclaimed Pistasch spreading out two tricks upon the whist-table.

"He is playing very carelessly," remarked Truyn.

"Every allowance must be made for a man in love," said Georges kindly as he shuffled the cards.

Oswald, whose back was towards his mother, heard her say: "Your Monsieur Capriani's officiousness seems to me to pass all bounds. Pray tell him *de ma part* that I am quite ready to buy the service of him, at any price that he may name, however high, but that it is not my habit to accept gifts from those with whom I neither have nor wish to have any social intercourse."

"But, good Heavens! I had forgotten one half of my message," said Zoë, striking her forehead. "He expressly hoped that you would see in this little attention nothing more than a proof of respectful esteem from a former servant,--he would not venture to say friend,--of your family. He assures me that he attended yourself and your husband years ago while you were in the Riviera, and he declares that if you do not recognise Conte Capriani, you will surely remember Doctor--Doctor--I have forgotten the name--but at any rate the doctor that you had there."

"Why it must be Stein!" exclaimed Fräulein Klette.

"Yes, that was the name," said Zoë.

"Why, I knew him," Fräulein Klette went on eagerly. "You must remember me to him; he was practising at Nice, when I spent the winter with the Orczinskas. The women raved about him--he was a very handsome man then, and he had invented a hygienic corset, all the women wore it.--You must have known him too, Wjera. I am certain that I met him once at your villa, that winter that you and your husband passed in the Riviera."

"He declares that he attended your husband," said Zoë.

There was a brief--a very brief pause, and then the Countess said clearly and distinctly, "Possibly, but it does not interest me, and you can tell him from me that I do not remember it!"

"How young you look when you're angry, Wjera," said Mimi Dey, laughing, "the old demon flashes in your eyes when you're vexed."

"There's a deal of pleasure in playing whist with you, Ossi," exclaimed Truyn at the same moment,--he was Oswald's partner,--"that's five trumps that you have thrown away--I had a slam in my hand."

"How could I guess that you had anything in diamonds?"

"I led."

"Clubs."

"No, diamonds! Just look."

"Don't you think that Ossi, when he puts on that gloomy face, looks astonishingly like young Capriani?" observed Pistasch.

No longer master of himself Oswald threw his cards down on the table.

"Come, come, behave yourself, Ossi," said Truyn.

"There's no use in trying to jest with you: you are as sensitive as a commoner," grumbled Pistasch.

"Let us rather say as irritable as a crowned head," said Georges laughing, "*Les extrèmes se touchent*."

"I really believe it is the reappearance of your old family spectre which must have affected your nerves lately, Ossi," Pistasch said innocently.

"Which family spectre are you talking of?" asked Oswald hoarsely.

"Have you several of them then?" asked Pistasch. "I know only of the blind one that laughs--my man told me to-day while I was dressing that it has been heard laughing again. The butler had told him so."

"The gardener was talking to me of it to-day too," said Georges, "but I told him that there have been no ghosts since '48; ghosts as an institution were quite done away with by the March revolution, whereupon, as he is an aspiring person addicted to free thinking he replied that he had arrived at that same conclusion himself."

"Stupid superstition!" muttered Oswald; then controlling himself by an effort he said very quietly, but pale as ashes. "Shall we not have another rubber?"

CHAPTER VI.

The world of spirits is a favourite topic with your aristocratic dilettanti, and every Austrian family *qui se respecte* has its spectre.

The Zinsenburgs have their White Lady, the Truyns their magnificent four-in-hand, which, as the fore-runner of any terrible domestic calamity, rattles past the windows of the Truynburg in the Bohemian forest--no one knows whither or whence.--The Kamenz family have only a black hand that inscribes weird characters of fire on the walls; the Lodrins have their blind woman who is heard laughing when disgrace or misfortune threatens the family. Of all the family spectres in Bohemia this laughing, blind woman is the most grisly. Her origin dates from dim antiquity. The legend runs that in the eleventh or twelfth century a knight, Wolf von Lodrin, married in accordance with a family arrangement, but with no love on the bride's part, a beautiful and noble maiden. Inflamed with passion for her, and finding it impossible to win her affection, in an evil hour, and in a fit of devilish rage, he struck her across the face with his riding-whip, and blindness followed the blow. Overcome by horror at what he had done the knight fell into a brooding melancholy, and at last killed himself. When his blind widow was told of it, she laughed; she herself lived to be a hundred years old, but after the knight's suicide she never spoke a single word,--only every time that any calamity befell the family, or one of its sons suffered disgrace she

could be heard laughing. It was this blind spectre that still haunted Tornow. Formerly she had been seen frequently, it was said, a tall figure in grey, with a black bandage over her eyes, and an uncanny smile upon her pale lips, and the apparition always preceded some dire family misfortune. Her laugh had last been heard the day before Oswald's birth, wherefore it was feared that either the mother or the child would die, or that the Countess would give birth to some monster. But when a beautiful boy was born, and the mother recovered after her confinement much sooner than had been predicted, the blind Cassandra rather fell into disrepute, especially as both the Count and Countess set their faces against any belief in her existence, the Count because of his devout religious faith, and the Countess because she was too enlightened to encourage any such superstition.

Oswald had never bestowed much thought upon the spectre, merely smiling in a superior way when it was mentioned, but in the present excited, irritated state of his nerves even the superstitious gossip of his old servants made an impression upon him. During the rest of the evening, however, he put forth all his force to obliterate the impression that his irritability at the whist-table had made upon Truyn and Pistasch. And he succeeded; but when, after all the guests had departed, he retired to his room for the night his strength was exhausted. The old torture assailed him, only it was even keener and more agonizing than that which he had brought with him from Prague. He tossed his head from side to side on his pillow in feverish sleeplessness. Endowed from boyhood with that faultless courage which is rather a matter of temperament than of education, to-night for the first time in his life he was thrilled with a vague dread. Every noise, however slight, made him catch his breath with a suffocating sense of oppression.

At last his eyes closed in troubled and restless sleep, but his anguish pursued him in his dreams. He seemed to be lying upon a meadow of emerald green, with bright flowers blooming all around, and gay butterflies fluttering here and there, while above him arched the cloudless blue, lit up by golden sunshine. Suddenly he felt the earth beneath him move, and he began slowly to sink into it. Overcome with horror he tried to arise, but the more he tried the deeper he sank into what was loathsome, slimy mud. He awoke, bathed in cold perspiration, gasping for breath, his heart beating wildly.

He gazed around; everything wore a weird unwonted look in the half-light of the summer night that encircled every object with a halo of grey mist. Through the open windows the heavy, sultry air floated in and out. He listened,--everywhere was silence, all nature lay as under the ban of an evil spell. Then a stir broke the silence,--did something rustle softly?--he seemed to hear the very wings of the night-moths fluttering above the flowers. His father's death mask glared white through the gloom; it grew longer and longer as if fain to descend from where it hung---- What was that----? a low chuckle seemed to sound behind the very wall beside him! The bodiless shadows floated hither and thither and suddenly grouped themselves in one spot; a tall grey figure with bandaged eyes and white lips drawn into a scornful smile stood leaning against the wall--it moved! It glided to his bed; uttering a cry he grasped at it; it vanished and he fell back on his pillow.

A few minutes afterward a light step approached his door, the latch was cautiously lifted, and his mother in a long white dressing-gown, holding a lighted candle in a little flat candlestick, entered. Her bedroom was just beneath his, and she had heard his cry. "Ossi!" she called gently.

"Yes, mother!"

"What was the matter?"

"I had a bad dream."

She lit the candles upon his table and leaned over him, scanning his features, startled by their ghastly pallor. "What is the matter with you, Ossi?--I cannot endure any longer to see you silently suffering such pain and distress."

"Nothing," he said dully--"nothing."

"Nothing! Can you--will you say that to me,--to me, your mother! A while ago, when you returned from Prague, I thought you changed, but you soon recovered; yet all last evening I was conscious that you were tormented by some secret anguish. For God's sake, tell me what it is." As she spoke she stroked his arms soothingly from the shoulder downwards. "If you only knew what torture it is to me to see you suffer without being able to help you, or at least to share your pain with you!"

The nameless magic of her presence affected him more powerfully than ever--her tender caress produced in him the delightful, languid sensation of convalescence. For a moment he half-resolved to tell her everything, that she might once for all allay his pain. But his cheek flushed,--how could he?--no, he must master it of himself. He pressed both her hands to his lips.--"Do not ask me, mother, I pray you," he murmured, "how often must I repeat that I cannot, try as I may, tell you everything."

The Countess gravely shook her head. "That excuse does not satisfy me; I can understand that it is easier to speak of certain things to a father than to a mother, but don't you know that never since your boyhood have I tried to keep you in leading-strings? When did I ever play the spy upon

your actions, or meddle with what did not concern a mother?"

"Never, mother dear, so long as I was well and happy," he assented, involuntarily adopting a tone of tender raillery, "but, if I happened to hang my head,--oh, then, you were sometimes very indiscreet."

"A son who is ill or unhappy is always about two years old for his mother," she said. "Come now, confess; I am an old woman, you can speak out before me. I am convinced that your exaggerated conscientiousness is leading you to magnify some very commonplace affair;--an old love scrape is perhaps casting a shadow over your betrothal...."

"You are mistaken, mamma, there is nothing to trouble me in my past; it is all as if it had never been."

"Well, then, what troubles you?"

For a moment he did not speak, then he said in a low tone rather hastily, "A wretched nervousness--sorry fancies! Can you believe it?--just before you came in, I saw plainly, as plainly as I see you, the laughing blind woman come towards me!"

"Are you beginning to suffer from the Lodrin hallucinations?" the Countess exclaimed.

The 'Lodrin hallucinations,'--she uttered the words carelessly, without reflection. His soul drank them in thirstily.

"Apparently, mamma, but I shall get rid of them, I shall certainly get rid of them," he replied in a clear, joyous voice.

"And what other fancies did your nerves suggest?" she asked, scrutinizing his face anxiously.

"Loathsome imaginings which sullied my heart and soul, and which I tried in vain to banish, foul suspicions of those whom I venerate most. I was free from them in your presence only, mother, and that is why I have come to you so often of late; these phantoms never dare to assail me when I am with you!"

The Countess arose and extinguished the candles; for a while there was silence.

"Mother," he said softly, and almost overpowered by sleep as he took her hand in his, "tell me what it is that rays out from your hallowed eyes, with power to chase all shadows from my soul?"

Again there was silence. For a few minutes she listened to his calm regular breathing. He had fallen asleep.

With hands folded in her lap, deadly pale, and with a look of horror in her eyes, she remained seated on the edge of the bed. The day had just dawned when she arose. Oswald half awoke and opened his eyes. "You here still, mamma? Oh what a delicious sleep I have had!"

"Sleep on, my child," she whispered, leaning over him and kissing his brow, before she left the room. She glided slowly along the corridor, her hand upon her heart. "Shall I have the strength," she murmured, "shall I have the strength?"

CHAPTER VII.

If he could only have got hold of these Lodrins,--if he could only have found an opportunity to speak with them, he could have humbled their pride before now, the Conte said to himself. He was still endeavouring to find some such opportunity; yesterday he had positively forced his friend the Baroness Melkweyser to drive over at last to Tornow to lay at the feet of the Countess Lodrin the antique set of china, albeit not in the name of the Conte Capriani, but of her humble servant, Doctor Alfred Stein. He was curious to hear what Zoë would have to tell, but after her return from Tornow Zoë had incontinently retired to her apartment with a violent headache, and the request that a cup of strong tea might be sent to her.

The headache lasted all through the next forenoon to the great vexation of the Conte, who was, moreover, in extreme bad humour. He was annoyed by a trifle, a perfectly absurd trifle, but it had sufficed to stir up all the gall in his nature. His *maître d'hôtel* had given him warning this morning, or, as that worthy expressed it, had handed in his resignation. When the Conte, who set great store by him, asked him his reason for so doing, and whether his salary was not sufficiently

large, Monsieur Leloir, with the respectful air proper to the well-trained servant that he was, but with a distinctness that left nothing to be desired, replied that the salary corresponded to his wishes, and he had nothing to object to in the treatment that he had received, but--he felt too lonely, secluded,--"*Monsieur le Comte voit trop peu de monde*."

Two highly satisfactory messages, brought him shortly afterwards by the telegraph that connected his study at Schneeburg with the business world, did not suffice to drive this vexatious occurrence from his mind. He looked considerably sallower than usual when he appeared at lunch. All the rest were seated at table when the Baroness Melkweyser appeared. In her character of convalescent she wore a gorgeous, brocade dressing-gown upon which was portrayed a forest of gigantic sunflowers against an olive-green background. Otherwise she betrayed no indication of feeble health; her appetite was particularly reassuring.

"You are very subject to headache nowadays," said the Conte, in a tone of reproof.

Instead of replying Zoë helped herself for the second time to omelette with truffles, and Parmesan cheese.

"Perhaps the long drive was too fatiguing," suggested the mistress of the house, always kindly desirous of atoning for her husband's rudeness.

"Had you a pleasant visit at Tornow?" asked Fermor.

"It is always pleasant to see dear old friends again," said Zoë curtly. Her mood was undeniably irritable; apparently she had laid in a stock of arrogance at Tornow, that would last her several days.

"I really must go over to Tornow," said Fermor, "I trust, Baroness, that you did not mention my having been here so long; the Countess might well think it very strange that I had not been over to see her." Kilary smiled, and Fermor went on in his affected, drawling way. "Very admirable people, the Lodrins, but they are not very interesting to me;--they are too matter-of-fact;--they have too little feeling for art."

After lunch, whilst Fermor was testifying to the depth of his feeling for art, by improvising on the grand piano an accompaniment to a new ode by Paul Angelico, who, in his immortal waterproof, draped like Sophocles, stood opposite and read the ode aloud in a sonorous voice out of a little volume bound in red morocco, Capriani took occasion to draw Zoë Melkweyser aside that he might ask: "Did you have any opportunity yesterday to deliver my message to the Countess Lodrin?"

"Yes," replied Zoë drily.

"And what answer have you brought me?"

"The Countess says she is quite ready to purchase the china of you."

"To purchase it of me!" repeated the Conte, pale with anger, "but my dear Zoë,"--in moments of great excitement the Conte was wont to call the Baroness by her first name,--"but my dear Zoë what did you propose to her?"

"Exactly what you told me."

"Indeed?"--the Count drew closer to her, and leaned forward,--"did you tell her that I laid the china at her feet, not in the name of the Count Capriani, but of the Doctor Stein whom she knew years ago in the Riviera?"

"Yes, and I told her that you said you had formerly attended the Count, her husband."

"Well?"

"She replied--do you really wish to hear her reply."

"Yes."

"Well, then, she replied, 'that may possibly be so, but I do not remember it.'"

The Conte grew still paler, and his face wore an ugly expression;--he picked up a paper-knife of beautiful oriental workmanship, and began to toy with it restlessly.

"I beg you to observe," Zoë began, "that I am entirely innocent in this matter. You certainly remember that I postponed for weeks the delivery of your message, and that I fulfilled your commission reluctantly at last. I told you beforehand what the result would be; but you were so perfectly sure that the Countess would remember the name of Stein...."

"What's the matter?" asked Kilary approaching them. "What agitates you so, my dear Capriani."

"The Conte is determined to prove to me that nothing can withstand his power, not even a

paperknife," said Zoë sharply, pointing to the one which the Conte was bending.

"Or the Lodrin arrogance," observed Kilary, "eh? My dear Capriani, in my native town in Upper Austria they have an old proverb, 'What can't be lifted must be let alone.' Now if you would only take this proverb to heart you would save yourself a vast amount of time and vexation."

Just then the paper-knife snapped in two, and the Conte threw the pieces on the floor.

"Who is riding past?" asked the baroness, with undisguised curiosity, leaning out of the window by which she had been standing.

"It must be Count Kamenz," said Ad'lin, who had been busy encouraging by her applause the united, artistic efforts of Fermor and Paul Angelico, "I am surprised that he has not paid us a visit before now."

"No, it is the Lodrin cousins," said Kilary, "they are evidently going to see Malzin."

Ad'lin looked disappointed. And the Conte turning away from the Baroness and Kilary began to pace the room slowly to and fro. After a while he paused in front of his wife, who with a sadder face than usual was cutting out her cretonne flowers. "You went to see the Malzins to-day,--how is he?"

"Very ill; unlike other consumptives, he is perfectly aware of his condition, and consequently the future of his children lies heavy on his heart. I did my best to comfort him--but that was little enough." "Do you know whether he still proposes to go to Gleichenberg?" her husband interrupted her.

"Yes, he is getting ready to go. Müller, the old nurse voluntarily offered to accompany him; she could not find it in her heart to have him waited upon and tended by strangers."

But Müller's touching devotion did not interest Capriani in the least. "This is evidently just the time to talk with him about the vault," he said as if to himself.

"What do you mean?" exclaimed Frau von Capriani startled out of her usual submissive gentleness,--"with an invalid!" ....

"Come, come, let us have no sentimentality!" he interrupted her sharply. "You know I understand nothing of the kind."

CHAPTER VIII.

In his childhood, beside his father's sick-bed, Oswald had learned how to treat an invalid with rare tenderness; but what he never had been taught nor could have been taught,--what was his very own nature,--was his impetuous, untiring kindheartedness, a kindheartedness that was never content with passively theorizing, but always refused to discontinue effort even in the case of the most distressing emergencies, and always longed to soothe with hope the pain which it could not cure.

Fritz, on the day after the dinner, had sent a note to Tornow, telling of his sad condition and of his projected journey to Gleichenberg, and Oswald and Georges had instantly ridden over to Schneeburg, where they found Fritz coughing incessantly, propped up with pillows in a large easy-chair before his writing-table, painfully endeavouring to write out his last will. Ten minutes of Oswald's presence sufficed to cause life to wear a different aspect for Fritz. Oswald scolded him for giving them all such a fright with that desponding note of his, protested that a man looking as well as he did had no right to depress his friends with melancholy forebodings, told of the miracles wrought by Gleichenberg on many of his acquaintances, and declared that 'a mere hemorrhage' was of very little consequence, particularly in cases like Fritz's where consumption was not in the family.

"I had one, when I was a volunteer, after parade one day," he concluded, "and I never should know it to-day."

"That must have been something different, Ossi," said Fritz, laughing at his friend's earnestness;--the laugh brought on a violent fit of coughing. Oswald put his arm around him and supported his head;--"it will soon be over, hand him a glass of water, Georges, there...."

"However low down a fellow may be, it lightens his heart to look into your eyes, Ossi," said Fritz, taking breath after the cough had gone.

"You're right there, Fritz," Georges agreed, "and yet there's no more inflammable, and momentarily unjust man in the world, than he."

"Yes, but then...." began Fritz.

"Now be quiet," Oswald ordered, "the best thing for you to do would be to lie down for a while, and we will do our best to entertain you without making you laugh."

"Thanks," said Fritz, "but I .... I should like to say something to you. When a man stands on the brink of the grave...."

"Aha, you are posing again as an interesting invalid," Oswald rallied him; "well--Georges, go down stairs and pay your respects to Pipsi, there's a good fellow; I hear her chattering with her little brother beneath the window;--I know how pleased Fritz is with your visit, but, just now, you are a little in the way."

Georges laughed, and withdrew bowing low.

They were left alone in the long, low room; against the windows the leaves of the old apricot-trees rustled dreamily, and the air was fragrant with the scent of the last flowers of summer. The portraits of Fritz's parents and of their Imperial Majesties looked down from the wall, their outlines rather vague in the darkened apartment, and on the old door-jamb, scored with the children's names a prismatic sunbeam was playing.

"Now tell me, Fritz, what is the matter? You know there is no need of any beating about the bush between us," said Oswald leaning towards the sick man, "speak low, I can hear you."

Fritz fixed his gaze upon the door-jamb where among the old names two new ones had been written, 'Pipsi five, Franzi three years old.' "God knows, I have no reason to cling to life," he said with a sigh, "and yet my heart is sore at the thought that next year I shall--make no mark there!--Poor children!--who will care for them when I am gone?" His voice broke, and it was with difficulty that he kept back the tears. "I have taken a great deal of pains with them, and hitherto they have been good little things,--at least so they seem to me ...."

"Your children are charming," was Oswald's warm assurance.

"Are they not?" gasped Fritz, and his hollow eyes sparkled, "but they are still so little--when I am dead they will run wild. Capriani will not let them starve--assuredly not; but *how* will he provide for them?--and my wife agrees with him in everything--that is the worst of it;--Ossi, in my will I have expressed a wish that my children should be separated from their mother. She does not care for them very much; I think she would be glad to be rid of the burden of bringing them up .... and I have begged you--you will not take it ill of me, Ossi,...." he hesitated.

"Would you like me to be their guardian?"

"Ah, Ossi!"

"Then that is settled," said Oswald, holding out his hand, "and, moreover, my mother told me to tell you that when I am married she should have nothing more to do, and would take pleasure in attending to the education of your little ones. You can hardly ask anything better for them."

"Ah, Ossi, your mother is an angel!"

"Indeed she is," said Oswald gravely.

"She is well?"

"No, she was very weary to-day at dinner, she had a sleepless night from anxiety on my account--my poor mother! And now since your mind is easy on all points, old fellow, it is to be hoped that you'll torment yourself no longer with gloomy forebodings, but do your best to get well and strong. Let us recall our poor exiled Georges, shall we not--*ça*! who's there? some one knocked!"

"Come in!" said Fritz.

Conte Capriani entered, a roll of parchment in his hand.

Oswald winced.

"For Heaven's sake stay," panted Fritz, holding his friend fast by the wrist.

"Yes, pray stay, my dear Count," said Capriani, who must have heard Fritz's words, or had understood his gesture. "I knew that I should meet you here, but what I have to arrange with our friend, Malzin, might as well be discussed before a hundred witnesses. I am really glad to see you again--our last conversation came to so sudden a termination," and the Conte familiarly held out

his hand to the young man.

Oswald measured him from head to foot with a haughty glance, and put his hand in his pocket. Then leaning his elbow upon the high back of Fritz's easy-chair, he stood motionless while Capriani angrily pushed a chair near to the table and sat down.

"So, my dear Malzin, you are off for Gleichenberg," he began, with his left thumb stuck into the arm-hole of his waistcoat, and his right hand resting on the roll of parchment on his knee.

Oswald's gaze was fixed with a strange curiosity upon the face of the stock-gambler; all the loathsome ideas which had sullied his soul of late recurred to him; how disgraceful, nay how ridiculous his foul suspicions seemed when confronted with the flesh and blood Capriani.

Meanwhile the Conte, irritated to the last degree by the young Count's cold stare, continued, "You must, of course, be desirous of settling your affairs, Malzin, before your departure. Under present circumstances you ought to be glad to be able to provide for the future of your children."

"Certainly; I have discussed it fully with my relatives," murmured Fritz, trembling with agitation, and clasping his thin hands on the table.

"Discussed?--that can lead to nothing," Capriani asserted, "I see, I see, the same loose way of attending to business. A matter of such importance ought to be definitely settled. It is time for you to listen to reason, as regards that vault; of course we all hope that you will return from Gleichenberg sound and well, but we must be prepared for the worst. If you close your eyes to this you leave your children unprovided for, and you, you alone will be to blame, seeing that by merely executing this deed of sale for that burial-vault--downright rubbish--you will receive the extremely handsome and liberal sum of thirty thousand gulden. Now, pray be reasonable."

The Conte spread the parchment out on the table before Fritz, dipped a pen in the ink, and handed it to him.

The tears came into the wretched man's eyes. "My poor children!" he groaned and took the pen.

On the instant Oswald snatched the fateful parchment from the table, and threw it on the floor; "You shall not sign it, Fritz!" he exclaimed, his voice hoarse with indignation; then turning to the Conte, he said sharply, "You see that my cousin is not equal to the excitement of an interview like the present. May I beg you to leave us?"

The Conte sprang up, his breath came in quick gasps, and a dark menace shot from the eyes that he rivetted upon the young man's face.

"May I beg you to leave the room," Oswald repeated with icy disdain.

"You show me to the door?"--the Conte said, beside himself with rage,--"you dare to do this to me--you--were not my hints the other day plain enough?...."

Oswald lost all self-control; "Scoundrel! Liar!" he gasped hoarsely. His riding-whip lay on the table--he seized it and pointed to the door; "Begone!" he thundered.

For an instant Capriani hesitated, baleful threatening flashing in his eyes. "I am going," he said, "but you shall hear from me!" and the door closed behind him.

Quivering with rage, Oswald turned about. "My God! Fritz ....!" he exclaimed in terror. Fritz had risen from his chair, and after advancing a step, had fallen drenched in blood beside his couch!

CHAPTER IX.

The hemorrhage had at last been arrested, the doctor sent for, and the sick man put to bed. Oswald was sitting beside him, awaiting the arrival of the physician. From time to time he whispered a comforting word to the invalid or gave him a bit of ice. Some one gently lifted the latch of the door. "Ossi!" Georges called softly.

"Well?"

"Capriani has sent this note to you."

"To me? Let me have it."

Oswald took the note and retired to the bedside again. Shortly afterward he appeared in the adjoining room where Georges was, his eyes filled with gloom, his face ghastly pale.

"What does the dog say?"

"He asks where his second can find me, as I might not like to receive him beneath my mother's roof. He is right--!"

"Second?" Georges interrupted him. "Have you quarrelled?"

"Yes, he was insolent to me and to Fritz, and so I called him a scoundrel and turned him out of the room."

"And you are going to accept his challenge?"

"Yes!"

"You, you mean to fight with Conte Capriani--with a wretched swindler, with no claim to the satisfaction of a gentleman? Are you insane? Do you not see how such a duel must degrade you?--Show me his letter that I may know what to do, and then let me go to him. I assure you that the matter can be settled in a quarter of an hour; it is nothing but empty brag on his part."

"I tell you that I insist upon this duel," exclaimed Oswald, beside himself.

"Upon a duel with an adventurer who, with his money, comes from no one knows where? It is impossible, downright impossible! Show me his letter."

Oswald changed colour, felt in his pocket--"I have not got it,--I threw it away--" he stammered disconnectedly, "moreover, the letter has nothing to do with the matter. Go to him,--it is against all rule,--but I will not have his seconds cross my threshold. One second is enough for me, I will not have another dragged into this disgusting affair. Arrange everything with Kilary, and as soon as possible--pistols!"

"Pistols?--at thirty-five paces?"

"Fifteen if he chooses,--or for all I care across a handkerchief!"

Georges went close up to his cousin, and looked into his eyes as if to read his very soul; then he drew a long breath and said, "You are not alone in the world, Ossi,--you have a mother and a betrothed who idolize you! and yet you would hazard your life for the sake of a single angry outburst, for a mere whim; you would accept the challenge of a man who, spurred on by envy and wounded vanity, is capable of anything, and to die by whose hand could only disgrace you? And all because--because you are possessed for the moment by some fixed delusion which makes life intolerable to you!" Oswald winced. Georges went on, "The only one who could gain anything by your death is myself,--and God knows I would give my life at any moment to save yours! I do not grudge you the position that you occupy."

"What do you mean? What stuff are you talking," Oswald interrupted him imperiously; his face was still ashy pale, and his voice sounded harsh--"'You do not grudge me the position that I occupy!'--Perhaps you think you have a right to it?"

"But, Ossi!--How can you--? you are beside yourself--you are insane!" ejaculated Georges, utterly confounded.

"Yes, yes,--I have known it for some time, Georges, I am losing my reason!" Oswald murmured in broken, weary tones. He groped for support, sank into a chair, and covering his face with his hands, sobbed like a child.

There was a long pause. At last Oswald raised his head. "Now, go!" he said in a sharp tone of command, such as he had never before used to his cousin. "Go to him--pistols--and soon. If you will not go, I will send Pistasch,--judge for yourself whether that would improve matters!"

And Georges shrugged his shoulders and went.

CHAPTER X.

As soon as he was alone Oswald took the Conte's fateful letter from his pocket, and read it through once more.

No! he had read it aright, there it stood in black and white!.... "After what I have thus told you," so the letter concluded, "it is evident that a duel between us two can be nothing but a mere formality--it is, however, a formality which I demand as due to my honour as a man ...."

He must go to his mother and show her the letter; there was nothing else to be done--nothing--! He must know whether he had the right to shoot him down like a dog, or .... He was overcome by a sudden dizziness, and the thought occurred to him, 'What if I should faint away, and some one should find this letter here and read it--!' He rose, lit a match and burnt the letter, with a feeling akin to relief when nothing remained of the disgraceful document, save a few ashes.

George's words recurred to him; evidently Georges suspected something wrong, that was clear,--but what? the contents of that letter he could not suspect. But what if it were true? What if some one should discover it? Every one would flee from him, even those who had loved him most. And on a sudden he himself felt a fearful, paralysing disgust at the blood in his veins! A dull lump seemed to rise in his throat,--it choked him. 'But it cannot be,' he said to himself, 'it cannot be.' Then he sat still for a long time, scarcely daring even to think; he himself did not know for how long, but when at last the door opened and Georges entered, he noticed that it had begun to grow dark.

"Well--the affair is settled!" began Georges gloomily.

"For when?"

"To-morrow morning at six o'clock--devil that he is, it could not be soon enough for him; he pretended that he must leave for Paris in the evening; probably he thought that if the duel were delayed you might reconsider it, and instead of giving him satisfaction for the insult of which he complains, add to it the thrashing which he deserves."

Oswald sat leaning his head on his hand and did not speak.

"God knows, I would not have gone to him," Georges went on, "if I had not hoped to arrange matters amicably, even against your will,--if I had not thought I could persuade him to withdraw his crazy challenge! But the swindler has resolved to fight you; it is the greatest social triumph that he has achieved in all the years that he has been trying to climb. Kilary told me, in so many words, that it was only for show, that it was to be a mere formality,--but--. Even that cynic, Kilary, declares that he cannot understand your condescension. Well, you rank so high in public opinion, that people will only wonder at your eccentricity. Will you say good-bye to Fritz, or shall we go immediately?"

Fritz had fallen asleep, Oswald would not disturb him, and so they rode off.

There must have been a storm in the neighbourhood; the air had grown cooler, a light wind whirled the dust aloft. Heavy broken clouds were driving overhead, and where the sun had set there was a glow as of a conflagration, as if the sun in descending had set fire to the clouds. The red light slowly faded, and all colours were merged in melancholy, uniform gray.

The two men rode on in silence, which was broken at last by Oswald; "Georges, I know that if this affair turns out badly to-morrow you will be blamed for your share in it, blameless though you be. Wherefore I will leave a letter behind me, telling how I absolutely forced you to be my second."

"What an idea!" exclaimed Georges angrily; then he added affectionately--"if so terrible a misfortune should occur, I should have neither heart nor head to care what people said! Moreover, after what Kilary told me, there can be no chance of any tragical conclusion to the affair."

"One never can tell," rejoined Oswald.

Georges was startled, and after a short pause began. "Don't be childish, Ossi! It depends entirely upon you whether this duel ends harmlessly or not;--there's not much honour to be gained in provoking a mad dog. Since you condescend--to my utter mystification--to fight with Capriani, do not irritate him by disdainful conduct on the ground. A very minute portion of courtesy will suffice to satisfy him,--but thus much is absolutely necessary!"

Oswald made no reply. After a while he turned his horse. "Where are you going?" asked Georges.

In a constrained, unnatural voice Oswald replied. "You ride on towards home, I should like to go to Rautschin to see Gabrielle, before...."

Georges, who had failed to understand so much in his cousin's behaviour through the day, thought this desire at least quite natural. He let Oswald go, and rode on alone to Tornow. He looked round once after Oswald, and was surprised to see him ride so slowly,--he was walking his horse.

What the young man wanted was,--not to clasp his betrothed in his arms,--all that he wanted by this prolongation of his ride was the postponement of the interview with his mother. When he reached Rautschin he stopped short and looked up at the windows of the castle. He thought of the first happy days of his betrothal in Paris; image after image passed before his mind with beguiling sweetness;--for a moment he forgot everything.

The windows of the corner drawing-room where the family were wont to pass their evenings were open;--he listened. He could hear them talking, and could distinguish Zinka's soft, somewhat veiled tones, and the sweet, childlike voice of his betrothed, but without catching her words;--once he heard her laugh merrily, almost ungovernably. When was it that he had last heard that very laugh? He shuddered,--it was on the evening of his betrothal in the Avenue Labédoyère--when Zoë Melkweyser had unfolded her ridiculous mission.

And from out the past resounded distinctly on his ear; "Gabrielle and the son of the Conte Capriani--! Gabrielle and the son of Capriani!"

He struck his forehead with his fist.--Over the low wall on this side of the castle, that separated the park from the road, hung the branch of a rose-bush heavy with Marèchale Niel roses. Oswald plucked one, kissed it, and tossed it through the open window of the drawing-room. "Good-night, Gabrielle!" he called up.

When she came to the window to bid him welcome, she saw only a horseman enveloped in a cloud of dust trotting quickly past the castle in the direction of the little town.

CHAPTER XI.

Night had set in, and Oswald had not yet returned to Tornow. The Countess was waiting for him, sitting beside a table whereon stood a lamp with a rose-coloured shade. Georges had told her that her boy had gone round by the way of Rautschin, which she had thought quite natural, but none the less was she anxious for his return.

The clock struck a quarter past ten; perhaps he had returned after all and had not come to her. But no, he would certainly have come to ask after her health; he had thought her looking ill to-day, and had been anxious about her, had tenderly begged her to lie down for a while to recover the sleep that she had lost on his account. She had tried to smile at him unconcernedly, but it had been a hard task; a casual remark by Pistasch that morning had informed her of Oswald's interview with Capriani in Prague, at which no one else had been present, and which had agitated him excessively. She divined his misery. His love for her, and his confidence in her were so unbounded that he regarded his torturing suspicion as an *idée fixe*. Perhaps this temporary distress of his would pass away without its cause ever being mentioned between them. God grant it might! But if not? If he should come to her to-day or to-morrow and say 'Mother I cannot of myself be rid of this,--forgive me, mother, if I lay down at your feet this burden that oppresses me, and beg you to soothe my pain!'

She shuddered as this possibility occurred to her. What answer should she make? 'Shall I have the strength to lie?' she asked herself, and then she told herself, 'I must find the strength; what do I care about myself? My whole life for years has been falsehood and deceit,--but he must have peace--his life I must save!'

She knew that if she could succeed in uttering this lie calmly, his suspicion would be laid at rest forever, that no evidence in the world would prevail with him against her word. How she should continue to live on after this lie, was quite another thing, but she could die, and God knew she would willingly lay down her life for her child.

She tried to shake off these evil forebodings. All that she dreaded might never come to pass; surely she might succeed, by preserving a calm, circumspect demeanour, in slaying his doubt, in destroying his suspicion without recurring to a direct falsehood.

Poor woman! Upright to a rare degree as was her nature in its essence, it became distorted beneath the terrible burden weighing on her, and she was ready to resort to every petty artifice that could afford her any stay in her miserably false position! She had buried her sin deep, deep, and had reared above it a wondrous temple sacred to all that is fairest, noblest, and most unselfish in the world. So grand and firm was this temple towering aloft to the blue skies, that she dreamed it would endure forever. She trusted it would. Out of love for her child she had grown devout. For years she had prayed the same prayer every evening: "Oh God! I thank Thee for my dear, noble child--accept his excellence, as an atonement for my sin!"

She believed that God had heeded her prayer, nay, she even believed, in her boundless affection for her child, that God had wrought a miracle in her behalf! She forgot that the great mysterious Power that shapes our destinies never transgresses the laws that it has made, and that the consequences of our guilt inexorably pursue their way, until their natural expiation is fulfilled. In this case that expiation took a shape far different from any that a mother's tender heart could have devised.

The clock had struck eleven. Her anxiety increased although she could not have defined her dread. Her windows were open, she listened;--at last there was the sound of hoofs, the jingle of a bit and bridle. She breathed a sigh of relief.

A few moments elapsed, and then a weary, lagging step came along the corridor to her door;--why did that step instantly reveal to her that the decisive moment had come? There was a knock at her door,--Oswald entered. "Forgive me for disturbing you so late, mamma," he said in a tone lacking all animation, "I saw your light from below...."

"Late?--it is hardly eleven o'clock; you know that you never disturb me, dear child. Since when have you learned to knock at my door? The next thing you will send in your name."

The forced gayety of her tone did not escape him. "Oh, I did not know--I--" he murmured vaguely, dropping, without kissing, the hand which she extended to him; then he took a seat near her, but outside of the little oasis of light shed by the lamp on the table beside the Countess.

"You came home by the way of Rautschin?"

"Yes."

"Are they all well there?"

"I do not know; I did not go in, it was too late."

"And Fritz? How is the poor fellow?"

"Very ill!"

"Did you give him my message?"

"Yes, he sends you his thanks."

Oswald seemed metamorphosed. Never before had he answered her so curtly; she glanced at him anxiously, he was sitting leaning forward, his elbows on his knees, his head resting on his hand like one longing to carry out a terrible resolve.

A distressing silence ensues. He feels as if he were about to ask of a competent authority whether or not there be a God. He cannot bring himself to do it, and then too how shall he shape the fearful question?--how can he utter anything so vile in her presence?--he who all his lifelong would rather have blasphemed in a church than have spoken an evil syllable before his mother!

The minutes pass; tick, tick, goes the antique watch with the silver face on the Countess's writing-table. He clears his throat.

"Mother!" he begins.

She interrupts him. "I feel very ill, Ossi!" she says, rising with difficulty from her arm-chair, "give me your arm, I should like to go to bed."

But he gently urges her back in her chair again. "Only a moment, mother; I have something to say to you,--I cannot spare you!"

"Well--say it then!" She sits erect, deadly pale, clutching the arms of her chair; he stands before her, one hand resting on the table, his eyes cast down.

"It will not pass my lips," he murmurs, "it will not;--my *idée fixe* has assailed me again with a strength that I cannot master, try as I may,--it perverts and absorbs my sense of duty, my conscientiousness.--Mother....!" the blood rushes to his face, "Mother--could you forgive me if, in a fit of madness, I struck you in the face?"

Can she ever forget the imploring, despairing tone of his voice?

"Yes, what do you wish?--I cannot understand--" she stammers.

He gazes at her in surprise. "Mother!" he exclaims--his breath comes short and quick, when, as though repeating memorised phrases, he says, "Capriani and I have quarrelled--to revenge himself upon me he has written me a letter in which he says that you----" he sees her sudden start--"Great God! can you dream of what he accuses you?"

She gasps for breath, her lips part, she tries with all her strength to say "no!"--has God stricken her dumb? Struggle as she may only a faint gasp issues from her lips, no word can she

speak!

"Mother!" he moans, "Mother!" She is mute.

The ground seems to rock beneath his feet, the outlines of every object grow indistinct, dissolve into undefined spots of colour which fade and mingle.

For a moment he stands as if turned to stone; then he turns towards the door, walking slowly as if under a crushing weight,--on a sudden he hears the rustle of skirts behind him, two frail, ice-cold hands clasp his arm;--half-fainting his mother crouches beside him on the floor. "My son! my child!" she gasps "Have mercy!"

But he loosens the clasp of her hands, without impatience, without anger, with the apathy of a man whose heart has been slain in his breast, and leaves the room.

CHAPTER XII.

It was over,--over and gone,--sentence had been pronounced,--her child's life was destroyed. This she repeated to herself again and again, without any clear comprehension of the fact, as she lay, still half-stunned, on the floor where she had sunk down when he left her. After a while she staggered to her feet, and began to move aimlessly to and fro, steadying herself at times by grasping a chair or table. At last she sank into a seat, her memory had given way;--she asked herself the meaning of the dull weight at her heart, her eyes wandered vaguely around, her thoughts dazed by agony groped backward through the past, and forward through the future, finding no resting-place. She recalled her child's birth, and how every one rejoiced in it, except herself; when the doctor showed her the little thing as a perfect model of a baby, did she not thrust it from her impatiently? Farther back, beyond Oswald's birth, all light faded--everything was dark. That within her which had sinned had been so long, so completely dead; a woman capable of such a lofty ideal, whom maternal affection had so entirely purified and refined, could not but lose all comprehension of her past. All her inner life preceding the hours of Oswald's life, was to her mental consciousness misty and undefined; the birth of her child had revealed a new world to her, and though for years she had denied it, and had crushed down the mother in her, it was none the less true that after his birth she had no interest save her child. Urgent regard for her health prompted the physician to order that she should nourish the boy herself, if only for the first two months of his life; she obeyed him fretfully, eyeing the child suspiciously--nay, well-nigh malignantly,--when it was first placed in her arms, and then .... then she enjoyed it, and longed for the hours when her baby was to be brought to her, and when the two months were over, and the physician informed her that she could now without detriment to her health hand over the child to a hired nurse, she was angry, and felt strangely vexed with the man, who after all had thought only to please her in relieving her of what he supposed was an intolerable burden. What was intolerable to her was the idea of laying her child on the breast of a stranger, and for an instant she was on the point of flatly refusing to do it. But no, that would have been too eccentric, and she gave the boy up. For a couple of days she feared she should lose her reason, so consumed was she with restless jealousy; she could not sleep at night, and when the hours came round at which her baby had usually been brought to her, she trembled from head to foot, and sometimes burst into tears of agitation and longing. She could not forget the warm little bundle that had lain upon her knees, and the boy had thriven so well in her arms, had begun to be so pretty, to smile back at her and to gaze slowly about him in solemn surprise, after the fashion of such human atomies, to whom everything around is strange, and a deep mystery. Still she conquered herself and avoided all sight of the child, trying to divert her mind, but--'the wine of life was drawn.'

The child's existence caused her infinite torment; she was not one whom shams could satisfy. She called everything by its right name, and this foisting of a false heir upon the Lodrins she called, in her soul a crime. Sometimes she wished he would die--that would have untangled everything;--good Heavens! how many children die! but he--was never even ill, he throve and grew strong.

The Count, who had never before ventured upon the slightest remonstrances with his headstrong wife, now reproached her continually for her neglect of the child. She listened to him with brows gloomily contracted and lips compressed, but said not a word in reply. In winter she could contrive never to see the boy, but in summer this was more difficult, especially at times when her husband declared that he could receive no guests at the castle, that he wished to be alone. She could hardly set foot in the park without hearing soft childish laughter, or without seeing some plaything, or the gleam of a little white dress among the bushes. Once, on a lovely day in June, after a thunder-shower, as she was walking in the park she suddenly noticed two tiny

footprints on the damp gravel. She stood still, her eyes riveted upon the delicate outlines, when from the shrubbery close at hand a little creature toddled up to her, grasped her dress with his chubby hands and looked up roguishly at her out of his large dark eyes. But she extricated herself, and hurried past the little man so quickly and impatiently, that he lost his balance and fell down. What else could she do but turn and look at him....? Had he cried like other children of his age it would probably have made no impression upon her; but he sat stock-still, his little legs stretched out straight, and gazed at her in indignant surprise like, a little king to whom homage had been denied. He could not understand it. He was a comical little fellow, with tiny red shoes, a white frock that did not reach to his bare knees, and a broad-brimmed, starched, linen hat tied beneath his chin, shading his charming little face. In a flash her heart was conscious of a consuming thirst; she stooped and lifted him in her arms.

Some children there are who dislike to be caressed, and will fretfully turn away their heads from their mother's kisses, but little Ossi was of a different stamp, and responded with a bewitching readiness to his mother's tenderness, nestling his head on her shoulder with a satisfied chuckle, and pressing his little lips to her cheek. For just one moment she resolved to yield, she would forget everything, and take her fill of kisses, and of delight in his beauty, in his bright eager looks, and in the droll way in which words, robbed of every harsh consonant by rosy little lips, came rippling like the twittering of birds.

"Papa!--Papa!" the child shouted. She looked round,--there stood the old Count watching her in mute delight.

"Has he conquered you too at last?" he exclaimed, "there's no finer little fellow in all Austria than our Ossi!" And he held out his hands to the child. She let him be taken from her, and without a word walked away toward the castle. Ah, what a wretched night she passed after this episode! No, she would not think of him, it hurt too much.

Time passed; for weeks she would not look at him; then suddenly she would appear when he was taking his lessons, and for a couple of days she would watch him with a morbid intensity which sometimes degenerated into lurking distrust; then finding nothing to justify the distrust she would again turn from him.

In spite of his excellent disposition the boy might perhaps have grown up a good-natured but inconsiderate egotist, had not Count Lodrin taken an unwearied interest in his training, guiding him aright with the most affectionate gentleness. The influence of the frail old man upon the child was invaluable. In the society of an invalid so tender and so loving, the boy learned what he could have learned nowhere else,--to bow before weakness, and helplessness, the only two potentates whose sway natures as proud as Oswald's acknowledge. He learned to refine his innate haughtiness by the most considerate delicacy towards his inferiors, and to consider his pride as inseparable from devotion to duty and an impregnable sense of honour.

Sometimes the Countess would steal to the door of the library, where the father and son were wont to talk together, and would listen. She did so once when the old man was seriously reproving the boy for some rudeness that he had shown towards his tutor.

"I know it, papa, I am wrong, but Herr Müller is a coarse kind of man, and I cannot abide coarseness," she heard the boy say, and the old man rejoined gently, "He is unfortunate, Ossi, remember that before all. How, think you, could he endure his lot if in his veins ran such blood as yours?"

All things swam before the mother's eyes, as with downcast looks she hurried away, locked herself in her room and wrung her hands.

* * * * * She never addressed a kind word to him, treating him with studied indifference, with almost malignant severity. Under such treatment the boy suffered, grew pale, thin, and nervous. Then came a damp, warm autumn, the skies were every day veiled behind leaden clouds,--it drizzled continually without actually raining, and the leaves instead of falling rotted on the trees. A terrible epidemic broke out in the country around Tornow, and raged like a pestilence, carrying off victim after victim, until at last it appeared in the market town itself.

The Count, fanatically faithful as ever to the duties of his position, would not leave Tornow for fear of increasing the panic, but he entreated his wife to go away and take the boy with her, but this she obstinately refused to do, not even allowing Oswald with his tutor to be sent to her relatives.

One morning the Count came to her saying, "Ossi has the fever! The disease is of a malignant and contagious character; it is quite unnecessary that you should expose yourself to it, Schmidt and I can take care of him." Whereupon he left her.

She was fearfully agitated; the hour of her liberation was perhaps about to strike; she determined not to lift a finger to save the child's life. She forced herself to keep away from his sick-room for several days; the boy rapidly grew worse; for his recovery the Count had mass said in the chapel of the castle, although he himself was not present at it,--he would not leave the child's bedside; but of course the Countess attended at the religious celebration. She was very generally beloved by her servants, but on that day she could see on their faces ill-concealed

surprise, nay, scarce-repressed indignation, beneath their conventional expression of respect.

After the Elevation the chaplain delivered a short discourse in which he praised the sick boy's amiable qualities, and requested all to join him in imploring God's grace for the heir of the house. Tears ran down the cheeks of all the old servants while the priest prayed, but the Countess kneeled on her *prie-dieu*, her face pale, her eyes tearless, her lips scarcely moving.

The day wore on; hour after hour passed into eternity, the early autumnal twilight descended from the gray clouds upon the earth, and gradually deepened to black night; throughout the castle reigned unbroken silence, and not even outside was heard the sound of a falling leaf. The Countess's pulses throbbed with a feverish longing for her child, that nearly drove her mad. She wondered if he in turn did not feel a yearning for her presence?--if his grief at her absence from his sick-bed did not aggravate the disease?--how if it were killing him? She pictured him borne away upon the dark, swiftly-rushing stream of eternity so close beside her that she might have stretched forth her hand to save him,--and she dared not! Oh, that she could have commanded fate, "Take him, I will not keep him, but take me too!"

Minutes grew to hours; perhaps at that very instant he was breathing his last. She sprang up,--she would not nurse him back to life, no, but she must see him once more, once more clasp him to her heart before he died.

She hurried to the door of the sick-room, listened, and heard the low monotonous moan that is wrung from a half-conscious sufferer. She entered; at the foot of the bed sat the old Count, bent and weary. Schmidt, Oswald's old nurse, was applying a cold, wet towel to the boy's forehead. The Countess took it from her, thrust her aside with jealous haste, and herself laid the wet cloth upon her son's head. Strange! at the touch of her hand he opened his eyes, and even in his half-unconscious state, recognised her with a faint, wondering smile.

From that hour she never left his bedside. The famous physician in whom she had great confidence, and for whom she telegraphed to Vienna, frequently declared afterwards: "Never have I seen a child nursed with such devotion by a mother!"

She tended him like a sister of charity,--like a maid-servant. She gloried in his refusal to allow any one else to wait upon him, that he screamed with pain when another hand than hers touched him, that he turned from his medicine if she did not administer it.

The crisis passed; the physician pronounced all danger over if no unforeseen relapse occurred. This he made known to the Count and Countess in the antechamber of the sick-room, whither they had withdrawn to hear his opinion. When the Count feelingly thanked him for saving his child's life, Doctor M .... denied that any credit was due to him, "my share," said he, "in this fortunate result is but trifling; the recovery of our little patient is owing solely to the wonderful nursing that he has been blessed with," and turning to the Countess he added respectfully, "Your Excellency may say with pride that your child owes his life to you for the second time."

The ground seemed to reel beneath her,--she could have shouted for joy, and yet never in her life had she been so wretched as at this blissful, terrible moment. Without a word she returned to the sick-room, and sat down by the little white bed; she motioned to Schmidt who had been watching the boy's sleep, to retire, she wanted to be alone with her child. He was sleeping soundly, his breath came and went regularly, and his brown head rested comfortably on the pillow. She could not look long enough at the dear little emaciated face, wearing now a smile in sleep. He was like herself, his every feature resembled hers, his straight, broad brow, the short, delicately chiselled nose, the finely curved mouth, firm chin, nay, even the gleam of gold in the dark hair about the temples, all were her own. Even his hands lying half-closed on the coverlet resembled hers; they were longer and more muscular, but they were shaped like hers. How she admired him, how proud she was of him in her inmost soul! She had not been able to let him die,--he *owed his life to her for the second time!* It was useless to combat a feeling that always gained the upper-hand; but how was she to adjust herself to her false position?--what was her duty? This question she asked herself in desperate earnest, honestly ready to atone for her guilt by any sacrifice. Her stern, cold duty was perhaps to go to her husband, confess to him the terrible truth, and then, with her child, and with all the means that was her own, depart for some quarter of the world where amid strangers she could provide a tolerable existence for her boy. She shuddered!--her own disgrace was of no consequence; she suffered so fearfully beneath the weight of the falsehood of her life, that it would have been a relief to burst its bonds,--but her child!--Why, in comparison with the torture to which her confession would subject him, it would be merciful to stab him to the heart. He was too old and too precocious not to appreciate fully the disgrace of his position; he was too proud and too sensitive to find any consolation or support under such fearful circumstances in the love of a dishonoured mother.

She must continue to carry out the lie. Who would thus be the sufferer?--Her own conscience; hers must be the torture! A confession would ruin the existence of her husband, and her son, and would overwhelm two families with disgrace, while now ....! The only being who had any claim to the Lodrin estates was a good-for-naught, who never could be to his people what Oswald promised to be. And suddenly she seemed to see her duty clear before her, a noble sacrificial duty!

She would so train Oswald that he should fill the station that he occupied better than any

other could possibly fill it,--his excellence should justify her deceit.

She solemnly vowed, by her child's bedside, to watch over his heart and soul, to guard his fine qualities like a priceless treasure, to see that no breath of evil should ever taint them. Then she bent over him and kissed his hands gently. He woke and smiled, whispering, "Mamma, will you go on loving me when I am well?"

Love him indeed! Ah, how she petted and indulged him during his long convalescence, how willingly she complied with all his little whims, how gladly she submitted to the exactions of his affection, half selfish though they were at times, as those of an invalid on the road to recovery are so apt to be! How well she knew how to amuse, and occupy him! how many games of chess and of cards she played with him! how she read aloud for his entertainment, albeit unused to such exertion, Cooper's Leatherstocking Tales, and Dumas' *Trois Mousquetaires*!

When he had fully recovered, her treatment of him was more serious. She kept the vow she had made to herself, she watched his every impulse, his every breath, spared no pains to train him to be,--what he must be to satisfy her conscience, her pride,--a blessing to all around him. She even did what was for her the hardest task of all, she repressed her tenderness for him, lest it should make him effeminate. She made it her duty, when the time came for him to resume his studies, to engage a new tutor for him, and, quite out of patience with the cringing, fawning candidates for the position that had hitherto made their appearance in Tornow, she wrote to a foreign Professor of her acquaintance asking him to aid her in procuring the person whom she needed. A month later there came to Tornow a young fellow with the lightest possible hair standing up like a brush above a very intelligent face, not at all handsome, ruddy, clean-shaven, and with a very sympathetic expression. He carried himself erect, and his manner, while it was perfectly easy, was never obtrusive. He was much interested in his profession of tutor, although he fully recognised its difficulties, and it never occurred to him to regard it simply as a provision for impecunious scholars whose hopes were bounded by the prospect of a future pension. Oswald ridiculed the Prussians, until this particular Prussian not only compelled his respect, but won his friendship.

The Countess's social relations dwindled to a point; everything that interfered with her care for her child wearied her. She was often present while his lessons were going on, she rode with him daily, and he and his tutor always took their meals with the Count and Countess.

She adjusted her life by her boy in every respect. One word from Ossi sufficed, where her mother's and her brother's entreaties had failed, to produce a change in her hard, impatient bearing towards her invalid husband. It was long before she perceived how her conduct in this respect wounded Ossi's feelings; she sometimes wondered what depressed the boy. It made her anxious, and one day she asked him about it. Taking his face tenderly between both her hands she said, "How sad your eyes are, Ossi, does anything trouble you?" For a moment he hesitated, and then he spoke out bravely. "Mother, dear, you are so very kind to every one else; be a little kind to papa!"

She started, turned pale, and left the room without a word; he looked after her anxiously. Had he alienated her affection again?

No! that which all the arguments and representations of her mother and brother had failed to accomplish a couple of words from boyish lips had achieved. From that hour she testified towards her invalid husband the unvarying respect, the careful regard of a dutiful daughter, and although his various, and increasing infirmities,--he lost his hearing, and very nearly his eyesight,--becoming at last a complete paralytic,--made her tendance upon him most distressing, she was never again betrayed into uttering an impatient word. Hers was a hard task--especially at the beginning--a very hard task! But what of that? Ossi was pleased with her, and that was reward enough! She had learned to read his eyes; for love of him she altered everything in herself that could displease him, although he himself could not have explained why; she purified and strengthened her character day by day, and really became the mother that he dreamed her.

The old Count died; Georges Lodrin had disappeared. An American newspaper announced his death, and as the announcement was not contradicted it was held to be true. Georges was the last heir; at his death the property would have escheated to the government; thus the Countess need no longer be tormented by the thought that she was depriving another of his rights.

Days of cloudless delight ensued; Ossi grew to manhood, left her protecting arms, and launched forth upon the broad, perilous stream of life, while she, gazing after him anxiously, was forced to stay upon the shore. The time was past when tenderly, delicately, and yet with a certain shyness of the son already a head taller than herself, she could ask to know all of his life, could extort from him his small confessions. She had to leave him to himself, with, at times, a secret tremor. Only secret, however; she would not interfere with his freedom of action. Praise of him greeted her on all sides; she was satisfied with her work.

He was like her in every way, even in his faults; but those faults which had wrought her ruin,--pride, and passionate blood--became him well. There was no throne upon earth that she did not consider him worthy to fill, and which should not have been his if she could have given it to him; there was no conceivable torture that she would not have borne willingly if thereby she could have added to his happiness.

His excellence was her justification; her maternal love was her religion.

She still sat in the same arm-chair where she had resolved to utter the falsehood, which, after all, her lips had refused to speak! Her heart seemed to have burst in twain, and from it had fallen the whole treasury of fair memories which she had stored within it; her slain joys lay about her in disarray, shattered, dead. She tried to collect them, groping for them in memory; all at once her thoughts hurried to the future,--the confusion subsided,--she understood!

She moaned, and stroked back the hair from her temples; her wandering glance fell upon a newspaper lying on her table. The date caught her eye,--the sixth of August,--she started, the morrow was his birthday! She remembered the little surprise she had prepared for him; she had selected from among her jewels something very rare and beautiful which he could give to his betrothed. Rising from her chair, she said to herself aloud, "The marriage is impossible!" Then followed the question, "What will he do, how will he live on?"--"Live?" she repeated, and on the instant a wild dread assailed her. "For God's sake!" she groaned, "that must not be, I must prevent it."

Again her thoughts hurried confusedly through her mind. She would go to him, and on her knees before him entreat, "Despise me, curse me, but be happy, live to bless those whose fate lies in your hands, and who could find no better master. The injustice of it I will answer for here, and before God's judgment-seat! Or--if you cannot sustain the burden of these unlawful possessions, cast it off. Let my name be blasted, I deserve nothing better. But you,--you live, take everything that is mine and that is yours of right, and found a new existence for yourself wherever it may be!"

She hurried out into the corridor, wild, beside herself. Before his door she paused, overcome by a horrible sense of shame,--she could never again look him in the face! What would have been the use? Another might perhaps compromise philosophically with circumstances. But he,--detestation of the blood flowing in his veins, would kill him! She raised her arms, and then dropped them at her sides, like some wounded bird, that, dying in the dust, makes one last vain effort to stir its wings to bear it to its lost heaven. Then she kneeled down and pressed her lips upon the threshold of his door before groping her staggering way back to her room.

CHAPTER XIII.

The mood in which Conte Capriani took his place beside Kilary in the victoria that was to carry him to the place of meeting, was a very strange one. Never had he felt such pride of victory; his thoughts reverted to his first meeting with the beautiful Countess Lodrin at the beginning of his career, when with his keen scent for all that was lowest in human beings, he had divined her passionate nature, a nature held in check with despotic resolution after the great disappointment of her early life.

With calculating cunning he had plotted and schemed to get her into his power. But when at last he thought he had quelled and broken her pride, she suddenly reared her head more haughtily than ever, and thrust him from her.--He had not believed such audacity possible!

And now the woman whom he had thought to tread beneath his feet stood at so unattainable a height above him, that his treachery was of no avail as a weapon against her. How his heart had been consumed by futile rage! Only the day before yesterday she had dared to send him word by Zoë Melkweyser that she did not remember him.

"But it is my turn now," he thought, "this duel has forced an explanation between herself and Oswald,--she has had to humble herself before her child!" A fiendish exultation thrilled him to his very finger-tips. "At last they must bow before me," he said to himself.--"Mother and son, the two haughtiest of the whole haughty crowd!"

It never occurred to him that this explanation which he had forced so relentlessly upon the mother and son could have results other than those which he contemplated. Absolutely content, for the first time in his life, he leaned back among the cushions slowly puffing forth big clouds of

smoke into the fresh morning air, as the carriage approached the old monastery of St. Elizabeth.

It was a large building blackened by time, standing quite isolated at about half a league from Tornow upon fallow land. Formerly a monastery, afterwards a hospital, and then a poor-house, it was now one of those melancholy ruins that only await the pickaxe of demolition. The walls were dirty, the windows black, with half the panes broken and patched up with paper.--Two grape-vines trailed over the grass where once had been a garden, and a couple of knotty mulberry-trees grew close to the ruinous walls.

Leaning against one of these walls stood an ancient black, wooden crucifix; the nail that had held fast the right hand of The Crucified had fallen out and the arm hung loose, lending to the rudely-carved image a strange reality. It looked as if the Saviour in the death struggle had torn away his bleeding hand from the cross to bless mankind with it once more.

Beneath the figure of Christ was a tablet with an inscription, the gilt letters of which, much faded by time, still glistened in the morning sunlight.

The atmosphere was unusually clear, the skies cloudless. Oswald, Georges, and old Doctor Swoboda arrived before Capriani; whilst Georges and Doctor Swoboda walked about the old building discussing various parts of it to keep themselves cool, Oswald leaned against the doorway of the old cloister, and gazed silently into the distance. Not a trace was perceptible of the irritability which Georges had observed on the previous day. His was the repose of one who sees the goal where the terrible burden with which destiny has laden him can be cast off.--His soul was filled with anguish, but was conscious of the remedy at hand.--Release went hand in hand with duty.

Dear old memories arose upon his mind,--vaguely as if obscured by thick vapour. His mother's image hovered before him; he clasped his hands tightly, stood erect, threw back his head and looked upwards as desperate men always do before final exhaustion. His glance fell upon the Christ; the tablet at His feet attracted his attention, he approached it.

"What have you found there?" asked Georges, with forced carelessness.

"I am only trying to decipher the inscription," replied Oswald.

"The inscription?--'God--God--have....'" Georges spelled out.

"'God have mercy upon us all!'" Oswald read, and at that moment the old iron-barred gate of the monastery garden creaked on its hinges,--Kilary entered first and Oswald returned his bow with friendly ease. But when the Conte, following Kilary closely, bowed with a sweet smile Oswald scarcely touched his hat.

The Conte glanced keenly at him; for an instant his eyes encountered those of the young man and gazed into their depths, but found nothing there save immeasurable disgust.

The conditions of the duel called for thirty paces with an advance on each side of ten paces. The seconds measured off thirty paces and at the distance of ten paces apart laid two canes down on the grass.

The whole proceeding was to Georges a disgusting farce; he seemed to be acting as in a dream, without any will of his own. It was impossible that his cousin Oswald Lodrin should condescend to fight with this adventurer.

Oswald and the Conte took their places, the seconds gave the signal. On the instant Oswald shot wide of the Conte. A brief, dreadful pause ensued; the Conte hesitated. With utter disdain in his eyes, his head held erect, Oswald advanced; the Conte had never seen him look so haughty.

The sight of the handsome set face recalled to the adventurer the manifold humiliations that he had been obliged to endure all his lifelong at the arrogant hands of 'these people.' All his hatred for the entire caste blazed up within him,--all power of reflection gone he blindly discharged his pistol!

Oswald felt something like a hard cold blow on his breast,--a crimson cloud seemed to rise out of the earth before him, he staggered and fell.

"Good God!" exclaimed Georges quite beside himself, as he raised the dying man in his arms and held him there while the old Doctor bent over him.

Oswald opened his eyes. His mind was somewhat astray,--everything about him seemed wavering vaguely; then, in the midst of the terrible, chaotic confusion of every sense that precedes dissolution he made a mighty effort to grasp and hold a thought that glided indistinctly through his half-darkened mind. "Georges," he gasped, "what day of the month is it?"

"The seventh of August."

"My birthday."--Suddenly his mind grew clear once more, and there came over him the incredible celerity of thought, the wonderful illumination of vision of the dying, who in a moment of time grasp the memory of an entire life. As the earth slipped away from him he was able to

judge human weaknesses in the light of eternity.

"Georges!" he began.

"Yes, dear old fellow!" said Georges softly, in a choked voice.

"Tell my mother--and for God's sake do not forget--that for the happy twenty-six years that are past I thank her, and that I kiss her dear, dear hands in token of farewell!"

He was silent, he breathed with difficulty,--his lips moved again, and Georges put his ear down to them that he might understand him--"Georges,--if I have ever done you wrong,--you or any one else in my life--without knowing it,--then...."

"Ah Ossi, would to God that I could ever lay down my head as calmly and proudly as you can," whispered Georges, clasping him closer in his arms.

The dying man smiled--possessed by a great calm. He knew that what had been his secret was his own forever.

He tried to raise himself a little, rivetting his eyes upon the crucifix;--the gilt letters gleamed in the morning light. He lifted his hand by an effort, to make the sign of the cross,--Georges guided his hand. A bluish pallor appeared upon his features,--twice a tremor ran through his limbs, his hands fell clinched by his side--his lips moved for the last time. "Poor Ella!" he murmured scarcely audibly.

God have mercy upon us all!

CHAPTER XIV.

The Countess Lodrin had passed the night without lying down. When her maid appeared to see if her mistress were not ill, she had been dismissed by a mute wave of the hand. At last, towards morning, sitting beside her writing-table, she had fallen into the leaden sleep that is wont to follow terrible mental agitation.

The sun was high in the heavens when she awoke with stiffened limbs and a dull pain at her heart, but without any distinct consciousness of misfortune. She looked around her, and started, perceiving that some strange commotion was astir in the castle; she could hear footsteps overhead, and outside her door.--She hurried out, the corridor was filled with people--people who had no claim to be up here. And all the servants were hurrying hither and thither in the confusion of a household where some catastrophe has occurred, all weeping, trembling, not one showing unsympathetic curiosity, and amongst them was Pistasch, vainly trying to quiet the loud howling of Oswald's Newfoundland.

"What is the matter?" the Countess shrieked,--"what has happened?"

But no one had the courage to answer her. She ran to Oswald's bedroom--all gazed after her in horror-stricken compassion; they might have restrained her, but who could dare to do so? At the door she met Georges.

"What is it?" she gasped, clutching his arm, "where is Ossi?"

"In there," he murmured hoarsely, "but ...!"

"'But'--for God's sake tell me what has happened?"

"A duel," said Georges with an effort,--he would fain have detained her, would fain have found the conventional phrases with which men attempt to break bad news, he could not recall any, and he stammered.

"A duel?" she asked sharply, "with whom?"

"With Capriani;--he...."

Before he could say another word she had opened the door and had entered Oswald's room.

They had lain him on his bed,--the noble outlines of his stalwart figure were distinctly visible beneath the white sheet;--his face was uncovered, and bathed in all the ideal charm of dead

youth.

The Countess staggered, tried to hold herself erect, tripped over her dress, and fell; then dragged herself on her knees to the bed of her dead child. At its foot she lay, her face buried in her hands.

When, two hours afterward, Truyn who had been informed of the frightful catastrophe entered the room with Georges Lodrin, she was still kneeling in the same place, her head still in her hands.

Profoundly shocked Truyn bent over her, and gently begged her to leave the room. She arose mechanically, and leaning upon his arm went to the door. There she paused, turned, and hurried back to the bed. They feared that force would be necessary to separate her from the dead body, when Georges remembered the message entrusted to him by the dying man. In the tumult, the horror, in his own terrible grief he had forgotten it. "Let me try to persuade her, wait for me here," said he to Truyn, and going to the bedside where the Countess was again kneeling he whispered: "Aunt, I have a message for you from him; he died in my arms, and while dying he thought of you!"

She shrank away from him.

"To-day is his birthday," Georges continued, "he remembered it in his last moments and begged me to tell you, and, for God's sake not to forget it, that he thanked you for the past happy twenty-six years, and that he kissed your dear, dear hands in token of farewell."

The wretched woman, who had hitherto seemed carved out of marble, began to tremble violently; a hard hoarse sob burst from her lips.

It was the first warm breath of spring breaking up the ice. She instantly rose and threw herself in an agony of tears upon the corpse, exclaiming: "My child, my fair, noble boy!"

Georges withdrew; the moment was too sacred to be intruded upon. Shortly afterwards she tottered, bent and bowed, from the room. Truyn, whom she had not seemed to perceive, offered her his arm, and she quietly allowed herself to be led to her own apartment.

CHAPTER XV.

The death of the young man excited universal sympathy. He was mourned not only by his relatives and friends, but by all his dependants, the peasants on his estates, nay, even by strangers to whom he had only been pointed out as he passed by. And on the day when he was buried, with all the honours befitting the noble name which he had borne so worthily, there was in the whole country round no little child whose hands were not folded in prayer for him, no poor labouring woman who had ever met him in the road, and whose existence his kindly smile had helped to lighten, who did not wear a black apron or a black kerchief, in loving memory of him. No one, perhaps, could have told what he or she had expected of the young Count, but all felt that with him some hope had died, some sunshine had been buried.

Fritz Malzin, the only witness of the insult offered to the Conte, died the night before the duel; nothing therefore was known save what the Conte chose to tell; the versions of the reasons that had induced Oswald's rash acceptance of the Conte's challenge were many and widely differing, but not one of them bore the least relation to the truth.

As Oswald had foreseen, his relatives overwhelmed Georges with reproaches for the part he had borne in a duel between his cousin and a parvenu. But the letter to Truyn which Oswald left behind, exculpated Georges completely.

People declared, to be sure, that Georges ought to have restrained the folly of his hot-tempered cousin, but the unaffected grief evinced by the man, hitherto regarded as careless and indifferent, disarmed every one. His devotion to his dead cousin revealed itself in his every action, in the exquisite tenderness of his treatment of Oswald's wretched mother, and his management of the estates thus suddenly fallen to him, absolutely in accordance as it was with all Oswald's wishes, soon won him the warmest sympathy from all.

Of course the Conte was denounced; Oswald's associates in his own rank regarded the man as no better than a murderer. But he coldly defied public opinion, and held his head higher than ever; he seemed even to pride himself upon his deed, and several newspapers defended him.

CONCLUSION.

When in May a white-edged, black cloud discharges a storm of hail upon the fresh, green wheat, the tender blades break and are buried out of sight beneath heavy sleet; when the storm is past, and the ice melted, and the sun once more beaming bright and warm in cloudless skies, the bruised blades think they cannot bear the light, and lying close upon the ground would fain die. Then over the fields thus laid waste many a head is shaken, and many a sigh is breathed for the broken promise of the harvest.

But some there are who, seeing farther and knowing better, shrug their shoulders, and say "A hailstorm in spring prostrates, but does not kill!" and they look forward hopefully to the future.

Gradually, and very slowly, the warm sunshine penetrates the crushed blades, awakening and strengthening within them the benumbed forces of youth. Before the summer is fully abroad in the land, the wheat stands erect and tall, to the inexperienced eye all unharmed, but the husbandman can detect the callous ring where the blade was bent, and says: "The wheat has been shot in the knee."

Thus it is with youthful souls, crushed to the earth in the spring-time of life by some fierce tempest. Slowly but surely the spirit, well-nigh wounded to death, recovers, and God grants to the hearts of those whom he loves a glorious resurrection.

Gabrielle recovered from the fearful blow that had befallen her,--very slowly, and painfully to be sure, but at last. At first indeed, her grief was so profound, she suffered so silently, so tearlessly, that they feared for her reason, and then, when all seemed darkest to her, she was suddenly possessed by an intense, inexplicable yearning to return to the pretty home in the Avenue Labédoyère in which the fairest hours of her shattered bliss had been spent.

Her desire was complied with; and for many a long winter night Zinka sat beside her by the same little white bed where the girl had once whispered to her in the delirium of her happiness that it seemed as if her heart would break with joy. With tenderest sympathy the young stepmother talked of the departed unweariedly with the girl, allowing her tears free course, without ever cruelly attempting to restrain the expression of her grief. And when Truyn, in despair over such endless grieving, unreasonably taxed his wife with exciting Ella's emotion, and with hindering her from forgetting, Zinka replied gently, "Let me alone; I know what I am doing. There is nothing more terrible, more dreadful than the spectre of a grief that has been violently stifled; it lurks in wait for us, and persecutes us all the more persistently, the more resolutely we thrust it from us. The memory of our beloved dead must not be banished, it must be tenderly welcomed and cherished, until in time it loses all bitterness, and is ever with us, sad, but very dear."

Truyn listened incredulously, but a few weeks later he perceived with surprise, and with trembling delight that Gabrielle's pale cheeks began to show a faint colour, and that her weary gait grew more elastic. Then when he was alone with Zinka he kissed her gratefully, saying "I see you understand better than I how to comfort."

"And from whom did I learn the art?" she asked in reply, with a loving glance, "do you not see that I am only repaying old debts?"

With the first snowdrops in February came a golden-haired little brother for Gabrielle, who, by Zinka's desire was christened "Ossi." Thus Gabrielle learned to utter her dead lover's name without tears. She idolizes the little one, and sometimes smiles when she has him in her arms; he has given her a fresh interest in life. Georges who came to Paris the last of May, only to see the Truyns, and to find out especially how Gabrielle was, perceived this with pleasure, and said much that was encouraging to Truyn, who is still anxious about his sorrowing child. A hailstorm in spring prostrates, but does not kill.

But when a storm of hail just before harvest beats down the ripened ears, the grain never recovers. Bowed down to the earth, broken and blasted by the weight of the hailstones, the crop lies prostrate in the fields, only awaiting the hand that shall clear it away.

Never again will the Countess Lodrin rally. Had her health been less vigorous she might have died of agony, had her mind been less strong, she might have forgotten. But her health is perfect, and her mind clear as daylight.

She occupies her modest suite of apartments at Tornow, which Georges has prayed her always to consider as her home. Her rooms are but a shrine for relics and memorials of the dead. Every object which Oswald's hand ever touched is sacred for her. Every benevolent scheme devised by Oswald in his generous desire, 'to brighten the existence of as many people as possible,' she promotes. She heaps his former servants with benefits, his faithful Newfoundland is her constant companion. She tried to employ her widow's jointure in buying back Schneeburg for poor Fritz's children, but her agent could effect nothing against Capriani's obstinacy and millions. At least she succeeded in buying Malzin's children of their mother.

Charlotte married again, another secretary of Capriani's. The little Malzins live at Tornow under the care of an English governess, and thrive apace. The Countess attends to every detail of their education and training, and sees them every day although only for a short time; there is no close tie between them. In spring when she hears their sweet voices resounding with merriment in the park, she winces, and grows paler than usual. She avoids them, but if she encounters them by chance she never fails to speak a kind word to them, or to bestow upon them a gentle caress. She is no longer capable of a fervent affection for any living being. Her heart is a tomb, completely filled by a single, idolized, dead son, but for his dear sake she does all the good that she can to the living. Thus, even after his departure, she seems striving for his approval.

She devotes the greatest part of her income and of her time to the most self-sacrificing benevolence. There is no misery in all the country round which she does not search out, and try to alleviate, going from hut to hut, and never shrinking from even the most menial services to the sick. She is revered as a saint throughout the district. In her social intercourse with her peers, which grows less year by year, her son's name never passes her lips; if others mention it she turns the conversation. But when the country-people utter his name with blessings, and recall his constant kindliness and readiness to aid;--when the peasants and day-labourers kiss the hem of her dress, with tears, saying, "God give him his reward in Heaven, we shall never have another such master!" she lifts her head and her eyes gleam with intense, sacred pride. Those who meet her then walking erect and with beaming looks on her way back to the castle, think her wonderfully recovered, and never dream how utterly shattered her life is. But could they see her later, when, exhausted by the temporary exaltation, she takes refuge in her chamber and sinks into the arm-chair wherein she fell asleep on that horrible night, they would be horror-struck by the fearful misery of her expression.

There she sits for hours, erect, her elbows close pressed, her hands folded in her lap. Her whole life is but a protracted, lingering agony; with fixed gaze she seems listening for the rustling wings of the messenger who shall release her: the Angel of Death.

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