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FICKLE FORTUNE.

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FICKLE FORTUNE.

BY

E. WERNER,

AUTHOR OF

'UNDER A CHARM,' 'NO SURRENDER,' 'SUCCESS,' ETC.

From the German

BY

CHRISTINA TYRRELL.

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FICKLE FORTUNE.

CHAPTER I.

'This is what they are pleased to call spring in these parts! The snow drifts thicker and thicker every minute, and the delightful north-east wind comes in vigorous blasts which threaten to carry us away into space, post-chaise and all. It is perfectly maddening.'

The carriage, one of the occupants of which thus gave vent to his ill-humour, was in truth working its way slowly and with difficulty through the accumulated snow on the high-road. Notwithstanding all their efforts, the horses could only advance at a foot-pace, so that the patience of the two travellers seated in the interior of the vehicle was put to a severe test.

Of these, the younger, who was attired in an elegant travelling-suit, far too light of texture, however, for the occasion, could certainly not be more than four-and-twenty years of age. All the hopefulness and confidence, or rather the bright audacity of youth beamed in his frank handsome face, in the dark eyes, which were bold and clear as though no trace of a shadow had ever clouded them. There was something peculiarly winning and agreeable about the young man's whole appearance, but he seemed highly impatient of the delay which now occurred in his journey, and gave expression to his annoyance in every possible way.

His companion, on the other hand, appeared altogether calm and indifferent, as he sat, wrapped in his cloak, leaning well back in the other corner of the carriage. But a few years older than his friend, he possessed little of the latter's attractiveness. He was of powerful, rather than of graceful, build, and he bore himself with an ease which was almost nonchalance. His face would have passed muster as being, at least, full of character, though it could lay claim neither to beauty nor regularity of outline, but it was spoiled by an expression of stern reserve which chilled and repelled.

The deeper bitterness of life, its harsher experiences, could hardly have come home to one so young, and yet there was a look which spoke of these, a something not to be defined or accurately traced, which set on the countenance its own distinctive mark, and made the man appear much older than he really was. The abundant dark hair harmonised with the bushy dark eyebrows, but the eyes themselves were of that uncertain hue which is not generally approved. They made, indeed, scant appeal to the sympathies, expressing none of the happy vivacity, none of those passionate emotions wherein, as a rule, youth is so rich. Their cold unmoved survey was hard, and hardness characterised the young man's entire appearance and demeanour.

The gentleman above described had hitherto sat silent, looking out at the hurrying, driving snow; but now he turned, and in answer to his companion's impatient exclamation, said:

'You forget that we are no longer in Italy, Edmund. In our climate, and especially here among the mountains, March counts among the winter months.'

'Ah me, my beautiful Italy! There we left all bathed in sunshine and fragrant with flowers, and here at home we are received by a snowstorm imported direct from the North Pole, You seem, however, to find no fault with the temperature. The whole journey has been nothing to you but just a troublesome task to be got through. Don't deny it, Oswald. Could you have chosen, you would rather have stayed at home with your books.'

Oswald shrugged his shoulders.

'What I wished, or did not wish, was not taken into consideration. It was decided that you were not to travel without a companion. I therefore simply had to obey orders.'

'Yes, you were given to me as a Mentor,' laughed Edmund; 'charged with the high mission of watching over me, and, at need, of applying a salutary check.'

'In which I certainly have not succeeded. You have committed follies innumerable.'

'Bah! of what use is it to be young and rich, if one is not to enjoy life? I must say this, I have always had to enjoy it by myself. You have not been a good comrade to me, Oswald, my friend. What made you always draw back into your shell in that obstinate, sombre fashion?'

'Because I knew, and know, that what is permitted to the heir of Ettersberg, or what, at most, will be condoned with a few tender reproaches, would be esteemed a crime in me,' was the brusque reply.

'Nonsense!' cried Edmund. 'You know very well that I should have taken the whole responsibility on myself. As it is, I must take all the blame. Well, the judgment on my backslidings will not be over-severe, I warrant, whereas, when you on our return publicly announce your plans for the future, you may hold yourself prepared for a storm.'

'I know that,' replied Oswald laconically.

'But I shall not stand by you this time as I did before, when you so decidedly refused to enter the army,' went on the young Count. 'I got you through that, for I naturally thought you would go into a Government office. We all thought so, looked upon it as a thing decided, and now you suddenly come forward with this insane idea of yours.'

'The idea is neither so new nor so insane as you suppose. It had germinated and taken root in my mind when I began my University career with you. I have directed all my studies with a view to it; but as I wished to avoid a useless conflict lasting through years, I have been silent until now, when the time for the decision has come.'

'I warn you, this project of yours will set the whole family in commotion. And I must say it is a most extraordinary one. Think of an Ettersberg turning barrister, and taking up the defence of any thief or forger who comes in his way! My mother will never hear of it, and she will be perfectly right. Now, if you were to enter a Government office----'

'Years must elapse before I should have mounted the first grades, and during that time I must be altogether dependent on you and your mother.'

This was said in so harsh and curt a tone that Edmund drew himself up quickly.

'Oswald, have I ever let you feel that?'

'You--never! But your very generosity makes me feel it more.'

'So here we are on the old ground again! You are capable of doing the most idiotic thing in the world, merely to shake off this so-called dependence. But what is the matter, I wonder? Why has the carriage stopped? I really believe we are fast in the snow here on the main-road.'

Oswald had already let down the window, and was looking out.

'What is up?' he asked.

'We are stuck,' was the phlegmatic reply of the post-boy, who seemed to consider the thing as perfectly natural.

'Oh, we are stuck, are we!' repeated Edmund, with an irritated laugh. 'And the man informs us of it with that sweet philosophic calm. Well, granted we are stuck. What is to be done?'

Oswald made no reply, but opened the carriage-door and stepped out. The situation could be taken in at a glance; agreeable it certainly was not. From the spot they had reached, the road descended in a steep incline, and the narrow defile through which they must pass was completely

blocked by an enormous drift. There the snow lay several feet high, and presented so compact a mass that to get through it seemed impossible. The coachman and horses must have become aware of this simultaneously, for the latter ceased all exertion, and the former sat with drooping whip and reins, gazing at his two passengers as though he expected from them counsel or assistance.

'This confounded post-chaise!' burst forth Edmund, who had followed his companion's example and alighted in his turn. 'Why the deuce had not we our own horses sent out to meet us! We shall not reach Ettersberg now before dark. Driver, we must get on!'

'There is no getting on, sir,' replied the latter, with imperturbable serenity. 'You, gentlemen, can see it for yourselves.'

The young Count was about to make an angry retort, when Oswald laid his hand on his arm.

'The man is right. It really is not to be done. With these two horses only we cannot possibly advance. There is nothing left us but to stop here a while in the carriage, and to send the post-boy on to the next station to procure us a relay.'

'So that we may be snowed up here meanwhile. Rather than that, I would go on to the post-house on foot.'

Oswald's eyes travelled with a somewhat sarcastic glance over his comrade's dress, which was suited only to a railway *coupé* or a carriage.

'You propose going through the woods on foot in that attire? Along a path where one sinks to the knee at every step? But you will take cold standing here exposed to this sharp wind. Have my cloak.'

So saying, and without more ado, he unfastened his cloak, and placed it about the Count's shoulders, the latter protesting violently, but in vain.

'Do not give it to me; you will have no protection yourself against the wind and weather.'

'Nothing hurts me. I am not delicate.'

'And, in your opinion, I am?' inquired Edmund tetchily.

'No, only spoilt. But now we must come to some decision. Either we must stay here in the carriage and send on the post-boy, or we must endeavour to push forwards by the footpath. Decide quickly. What is to be done?'

'What an abominable way you have of summing up things!' said Edmund, with a sigh. 'You are constantly setting one an alternative---choose this or that. How do I know if the footpath is practicable?'

Here the discussion was interrupted. The snorting of horses and the thud of hoofs on the snow were heard at some little distance, and through the mist and falling flakes a second carriage could be seen approaching. The powerful animals which drew it overcame with tolerable ease the difficulties of the way, until they reached the formidable descent. Here they, too, came to a stand. The coachman drew rein, contemplated the block before him with an ominous shake of the head, and then turned to speak to some one inside the carriage. His report was evidently as unsatisfactory as that delivered by the post-boy, and was received with a like impatience. The answer, which came in a clear, youthful voice, was given sharply and with much energy:

'It is all of no use, Anthony. We must get through.'

'But, Fräulein, if it can't be done!' objected the coachman.

'Nonsense! it *must* be done. I will just look for myself.'

No sooner were the words spoken in a most decided tone than they were carried into effect. The carriage-door flew open, and a young lady--a lady of whose youth there could be no possible doubt--sprang out. She appeared to be familiar with the March temperature of this mountainous country, and to have taken the necessary precautionary measures, for her costume was one suited to winter. She wore a dark travelling-dress, and over it a fur-trimmed jacket well buttoned about her slender figure, while securely pinned about her hat was a thick veil which covered head and face. The fact that on alighting her foot sank into the soft snow almost to the border of her boot seemed in no way to affect her. She advanced valiantly a few steps, then stopped on beholding another carriage drawn up just before her own.

The attention of the two gentlemen had, of course, also been attracted. Oswald, indeed, merely bestowed a cursory glance on the new-comer, and then addressed his mind again to the critical situation in which they found themselves; but Edmund, on the other hand, at once lost all interest in it.

He left to his companion any further consideration of the difficulty. In an instant he was at the stranger's side, and, executing a bow as elaborate as though they had been in a drawing-room,

spoke thus:

'Pardon me, Fräulein, but I perceive we are not the only persons surprised by this incomparable spring weather. It is always consolatory to meet with companions in misfortune; and as we are exposed to a like danger, that of being completely, hopelessly snowed up, you will allow us to offer you our aid and assistance.'

In making this chivalrous offer, Count Ettersberg lost sight of the fact that he and Oswald were as yet helpless themselves, having found no way of overcoming the obstacle in their path. Unfortunately, he was at once taken at his word, for the young lady, no whit abashed by a stranger's address, replied promptly in her former decided tone:

'Well, have the kindness then to make us a way through the snow.'

'I?' asked Edmund, dismayed. 'You wish me to----'

'I wish you to make us a road through the snow--most certainly I do, sir.'

'With the utmost pleasure, Fräulein, if only you will be so good as to tell me how I am to set about it.'

The toe of her little boot tapped the ground vigorously, and there was some slight asperity in her reply.

'I fancied you might have found out that already, as you proffered your help. Well, we must get through some way, no matter how it is managed.'

With this, the speaker threw back her veil, and proceeded to inspect the situation. The withdrawal of that dark blue gauze revealed features of such unwonted loveliness that Edmund, in his surprise, forgot to make response. A fairer sight, indeed, could hardly have been beheld than the face of this young girl, rose-tinted by the action of the keen mountain air. Her brown curly hair peeped and struggled rebelliously out of the silken net which sought to confine it. Her eyes, of the deepest, deepest blue, were not serene and calm as blue eyes are expected to be; on the contrary, they gleamed and sparkled with the saucy merriment which youth and happiness alone can give. Every smile brought a charming, delicious little dimple into either cheek, but there was an expression about the small mouth which hinted at waywardness and defiance; and it might well be that in that little head, beneath those rebellious locks, there lodged a child's caprice, all a child's manifold wilful conceits. Perhaps it was precisely this which gave to the face its own peculiar, piquant charm, which fascinated irresistibly, and forced those who had once looked to look again.

The young lady was by no means unaware of the impression her appearance had created. To the consciousness of it was due, no doubt, the involuntary smile which now chased the petulance from her features. Edmund's silence was not of long duration. Timidity and a want of self-confidence were not among his failings, and he was about to renew the attack with a well-turned compliment when Oswald came up and spoke.

'The difficulty can be overcome,' he said, bowing slightly to the stranger. 'If you, Fräulein, will allow us to harness your horses to our team, it will be possible in the first place to get the post-chaise through the snow, and then to proceed with your carriage in its track.'

'Uncommonly practical!' said Edmund, who was considerably annoyed at being thus interrupted, at the check to his compliment, and to the further development of his many delightful qualities. The young lady appeared somewhat surprised at the curt dry tone in which the proposal was made. The highly unpractical admiration of herself manifested by Count Ettersberg was evidently more to her taste than the cold commonsense of his companion.

She replied, speaking rather shortly in her turn:

'Pray do exactly as you think best.' Then she instructed the coachman to obey the gentleman's orders, and turning to her carriage, prepared to seek a shelter therein from the persistent, thickly-falling snow.

Edmund promptly followed. He felt it incumbent on him to help her in, after which he took up his station on the carriage-step, in order to keep her informed of the progress of the business which Oswald had energetically taken in hand.

'Now the procession has started,' he began his report, the carriage-window having been lowered to facilitate communication. 'They can hardly advance even with the double team. Ah, there, as they go downhill, things look serious. The ramshackle old post-chaise cracks and shakes at every joint; the two men are as awkward in driving as they can possibly be. It is lucky that my companion is commandant of the troop. If there is a thing he thoroughly understands, and in which he excels, it is the art of commanding! Upon my word, they are making a breach in the snow-rampart! They will manage it. Oswald is over yonder already, pointing out to them the direction they are to take.'

'While you are securely posted on my carriage-step,' remarked the young lady, rather

caustically.

'Why, Fräulein, you would not require of me to leave you all alone here on the highroad,' said Edmund, taking up his defence. 'Some one must stay here to protect you.'

'I do not think there is any danger of an attack by robbers. Our highways are safe, so far as I know. But you seem to have a fancy for your point of vantage.'

'Whence I enjoy so charming a prospect, yes.'

This too gallant speech was evidently distasteful, for instantaneously the dark blue veil was lowered, and the vaunted prospect disappeared from view. Count Edmund was a little discomfited. He saw his error, and grew more respectful.

A quarter of an hour had well-nigh elapsed before the chaise could be got over the difficult ground. At length it stood secure on the other side. Oswald retraced his steps, and the coachman followed with the horses. Edmund was still on the carriage-step. He had, as it seemed, received absolution for the impertinence of which he had been guilty, for a most animated conversation was going on between the lady and her self-appointed guardian. The former took, however, a certain malicious pleasure in concealing her features from view. Her veil was still closely drawn when Oswald again approached.

'I must beg of you to alight, Fräulein,' he said. 'The descent is rather precipitous, and the snow is deep. Our post-chaise was several times within an ace of being overturned, and your carriage is much heavier. It might be a risk for you to remain in it.'

'What an idea, Oswald!' cried Edmund. 'How can this lady pass along such a road on foot? It is impossible!'

'Not so, only rather uncomfortable,' was the unmoved reply. 'The carriages will have formed some sort of a track; if we follow in that, the journey will really not be so difficult as you imagine. Of course, if the lady is afraid to venture----'

'Afraid?' she interrupted, in an angry tone. 'Pray, sir, do not attribute any such excessive timidity to me. I shall most certainly venture, and that at once.'

So saying, she jumped out of the carriage, and next minute was braving the elements on the open road. Here the wind caught the veil which had been so persistently held down, and it fluttered high in the air. True, the little hand clutched quickly at the truant gauze, but it had wound itself about the hat, and the attempt to regain control of it failed signally; to the great satisfaction of Count Edmund, who was now able to enjoy the 'prospect' without let or hindrance.

Meanwhile the horses had been harnessed to the second carriage. Ruts having previously been made in the snow, the journey this time was more easily performed. Nevertheless, Oswald, who followed closely in the wake of the vehicle, was constantly obliged to offer his guidance and assistance. The driving snow knew no intermission, and the great white flakes whirled round and round, chased by the wind. The high dyke-walls on either side of the road were seen but indistinctly as through a veil, while all further prospect was completely blotted out, hidden in dense mist. It needed the elastic spirits of youth to support with philosophy so severe an ordeal, to find in it food for mirth. Fortunately, this talismanic quality was possessed by the two younger travellers in a high degree. The difficult progress, in the course of which they sank at each step ankle-deep into the snow, the incessant struggle with the wind, all the difficulties, great and small, which had to be overcome, were to them an inexhaustible source of merriment. Their lively talk never flagged an instant. Repartees flowed backwards and forwards rocketwise. Each joke was caught in its passage, and sent back with interest. Neither would allow the other to have the last word, and all this badinage went on as unrestrainedly, in as frank and natural a manner, as though the two had been acquainted for years.

At length the journey was performed, and the summit of the opposite hill reached in safety. Here the road branched off in two directions, and no further obstruction was to be apprehended. The carriages stood side by side, and the respective teams were speedily harnessed in their proper order.

'We shall have to part company now,' said the young lady, pointing to the divergent routes. 'You, no doubt, will continue along the highroad, while my destination lies in the other direction.'

'At no very great distance, I hope,' said Edmund quickly. 'I beg pardon, but all the small misadventures of this journey have done away with anything like etiquette. We have not even told you our names. Under the very exceptional circumstances, you will allow me, Fräulein'--here a violent gust of wind blew the cape of his cloak about his ears, and dashed a shower of wet flakes in his face--'you will allow me to introduce myself, your humble servant. Count Edmund von Ettersberg, who at the same time has the honour of presenting his cousin, Oswald von Ettersberg. You will excuse the reverence which should accompany these words. Our friend Boreas is capable of prostrating me at your feet in the snow.'

The young lady started at the mention of his name.

'Count Edmund? The heir of Ettersberg?'

'At your service.'

The stranger's lips twitched as with a strong inclination to laughter forcibly restrained.

'And you have acted as my protector? We have mutually helped each other in need with our horses. Oh, that is admirable!'

'My name would appear to be familiar to you,' said Edmund. 'May I in my turn learn----'

'Who I am? No, Count, you certainly will not learn that now. But I would advise you not to mention this meeting of ours at Ettersberg, for, innocent as we are in the matter, the avowal would, I think, at once place us both beyond the pale of the law.'

Here the young lady's self-control gave way, and she broke out into such a peal of merry laughter that Oswald looked at her in surprise. Not a whit disconcerted, Edmund immediately adopted the same tone.

'It seems that there exists between us a certain secret connection of which I had no idea,' he said. 'The secret, however, appears to be of a cheerful nature, and though you decline to raise the veil of your incognito, you will, I am sure, permit me to enjoy my share of the joke,' whereupon he joined in her merriment, laughing as heartily and extravagantly as herself.

'The carriages are ready,' said Oswald, breaking in upon this noisy gaiety. 'It is time, I think, for us to be setting out again.'

The two suddenly ceased laughing, and looked as though they considered such an interruption to be most unmannerly. The young lady threw back her head with an angry toss, looked at the speaker from head to foot, and then without more ado turned her back on him, and walked towards the carriage. Edmund naturally accompanied her. He pushed aside the coachman, who was standing by the wheel ready to assist, lifted his beautiful *protégée* in, and closed the door.

'And I really am not to hear whom chance has thrown in my way in this kind, but all too transitory, manner?' he asked, with a profound bow.

'No, Count. Possibly some explanation may be given you at home--that is, if my *signalement* be known there. I, most certainly, shall not solve the enigma. One question more, however. Is your cousin always as polite and as sociable as he has shown himself to-day?'

'Ah, you would say that he has not opened his lips once during the whole of our walk. Yes, that is unfortunately his way with strangers. As for any sense of gallantry, of deference towards ladies!' Edmund sighed. 'Ah, you little know, Fräulein, what efforts I have to make, how often I have to intervene and make amends for his utter deficiency in that respect.'

'Well, you seem to accept the task with much self-abnegation,' replied the young lady mischievously; 'and you have an extraordinary predilection for mounting carriage-steps. Why, you are up there again!'

Edmund certainly was up there, and would probably long have retained the position, had not the coachman, who now grasped the reins, given visible signs of impatience. The beautiful unknown graciously inclined her head.

'Many thanks for your kindness. Adieu.'

'Adieu, for the present only, I may hope,' cried Edmund eagerly.

'For heaven's sake, hope nothing of the kind. We must forego any such wild notion. You will see it yourself before long. Adieu, Count von Ettersberg.'

These farewell words were followed by the musical, merry laugh. The horses pulled with a will, and the young man had only just time to jump from his standing-point on the step.

'Will you have the kindness to get in at last?'--this in the remonstrant tones of Oswald's voice. 'You were in such a great hurry to reach home, you know, and we are considerably behind time now.'

Edmund cast one more glance at the carriage which was whirling from him his charming new acquaintance. Presently it disappeared among the trees. Then he obeyed his cousin's summons.

'Oswald, who was the lady?' he asked quickly, as the post-chaise in its turn began to move onwards.

'Why on earth ask me? How should I know?'

'Well, you were long enough away with the carriage. You might have inquired of the coachman.'

'It is not my way to question coachmen. Besides, the matter possesses little interest for me.'

'Well, it possesses a good deal for me,' said Edmund irritably. 'But it is just like you. You don't consider it worth while to put a question, though of course, as you are full well aware, one would like to have the matter cleared up. I really don't quite know what to make of the girl. She emits sparks, so to say, at the slightest contact--she attracts and repels in a breath. One minute you feel as if you may address her with perfect unconstraint, and the next you find yourself scared back to the most respectful distance. A most seductive little witch!'

'Exceedingly spoilt and wilful, I should say,' remarked Oswald drily.

'What an abominable pedant you are!' cried the young Count. 'You have always some fault to find. It is precisely her capricious, merry wilfulness which makes the girl so irresistible. But who in the world can she be? I saw no crest on the carriage-panels. The coachman wore a plain livery without any particular badge. Some middle-class family in the neighbourhood, evidently; and yet she seemed to know us very well. Why refuse to give her name? why that allusion to some connection existing between us? In vain I rack my brains to find some explanation.'

Oswald, who seemed to think such mental exertion on his cousin's part most unnecessary, leaned back in his corner in silence, and the journey was continued without further obstacle, but with the tedious slowness which had characterised it throughout. To the Count's great annoyance, instead of the four horses they desired and expected, two only could be had at each relay. In consequence of the downfall of snow, the available animals at each post-house had been put into requisition, so that the travellers had lost fully a couple of hours on the road since they started from the railway-station at noon. It was growing dark when the carriage at length rolled into the courtyard of Castle Ettersberg, where their arrival had evidently long been looked for. The portals of the spacious and brilliantly lighted hall were thrown open, and at the sound of approaching wheels a goodly band of servants hastened to receive their master. One of these, an old retainer, who, like the rest, wore the handsome Ettersberg livery, came straight up to the carriage.

'Good-evening, Everard,' cried Edmund joyfully. 'Here we are at last, in spite of snow and stress of weather. All is well at home, I hope.'

'Quite well, the Lord be praised. Count! but her ladyship was growing very anxious at the delay. She was afraid the young gentlemen had met with a mishap.'

As he spoke, Everard opened the carriage-door, and at that moment a lady of tall and imposing stature, clad in a dark silk robe, appeared at the head of a flight of steps which led from the entrance-hall into the interior of the castle. To spring out of the carriage, to rush into the hall and bound up the steps, was, for Edmund, the affair of an instant. Next minute he was fast in his mother's embrace.

'Dearest mother, what happiness to see you again at last!'

There was nothing in the young Count's exclamation of that light, airy playfulness which had marked his every utterance hitherto. His tone was genuine now, coming from the heart, and a like passionate tenderness thrilled the voice and illumined the features of the Countess as she folded her son in her arms again, and kissed him.

'My Edmund!'

'We are late, are we not? The block on the roads and the detestable arrangements at the post-houses are to blame for it. Moreover, we had a little adventure by the way.'

'How could you travel at all in such weather?' said the Countess, in a tone of loving reproach. 'I was hourly expecting a telegram to say that you would stay the night in B---, and come on here to-morrow.'

'What! Be separated from you four-and-twenty hours longer?' Edmund broke in. 'No, mother, I certainly should not have agreed to that, and you did not believe it of me either.'

The mother smiled. 'No; and for that very reason I have been in distress about you for several hours. But come now, you must need some refreshment after your long and arduous journey.'

She would have taken her son's arm to lead him away, but he stood still, and said a little reproachfully:

'You do not see Oswald, mother.'

Oswald von Ettersberg had followed his cousin in silence. He stood a little aside in the shadow of the great staircase, only emerging from it now as the Countess turned towards him.

'Welcome home, Oswald.'

The greeting was very cool--cool and formal as the salute by which the young man responded to it. He just touched his aunt's hand with his lips, and as he did so, her glance travelled over his attire.

'Why, you are wet through!' she exclaimed in surprise. 'How came that to be?'

'Oh, I forgot to tell you!' cried Edmund. 'When we had to alight, he gave me his cloak, and braved the storm himself without it. Oswald,' he went on, turning to his cousin, 'I might have given it back to you in the carriage at least; why did you not remind me of it? Now you have been sitting a whole hour in that wet coat. I do trust you will take no harm from it.'

He took off the cloak hastily, and passed his hand inquiringly over Oswald's shoulder, which certainly bore evidence of a good wetting. The other shook him off.

'Don't. It is not worth speaking of.'

'I really think not,' said the Countess, to whom this kindly concern on her son's part was evidently distasteful. 'You know that Oswald is not susceptible to the influence of the weather. He must change his clothes, that is all. Go, Oswald; but no, one word more,' she added carelessly, and, as it were, by an afterthought: 'I have this time given you another room, one situated over yonder, in the side-wing.'

'For what reason?' asked Edmund, surprised and annoyed. 'You know that we have always had our rooms together.'

'I have made some alterations in your apartments, my son,' said the Countess, in a tone of much decision; 'and they have obliged me to take possession of Oswald's room. He will have no objection, I am sure. He will find himself very comfortably lodged over yonder in the tower-chamber.'

'No doubt, aunt.'

The reply sounded quiet and indifferent enough, yet there was something in its tone which struck on the Count's ear unpleasantly.

He frowned, and would have spoken again, but glancing at the servants standing round, he suppressed the remark he had been about to make. Instead of pursuing the discussion, he went up to his cousin and grasped his hand.

'Well, we can talk this over later on. Go now, Oswald, and change your clothes at once--at once, do you hear? If you keep those wet things on any longer, you will give me cause for serious self-reproach. Do it to please me; we will wait dinner for you.'

'Edmund, you seem to forget that I am waiting for you.'

'One minute, mother. Everard, light Herr von Ettersberg to his room, and see that he has dry clothes ready without delay.'

So saying, he turned to his mother, and offered his arm to lead her away. Oswald had responded by no single syllable to all the concern on his account so heartily expressed. He stood for a few seconds, looking after the two as they departed; then, as the old servant approached, he took the candelabrum from his hand.

'That will do, Everard; I can find my way alone. Look after my trunk, will you?'

He turned into the faintly illumined corridor which led to the side-wing of the castle. The wax tapers he carried threw their clear light on the young man's face, from which, now that he was alone, the mask of indifference had dropped. The lips were tightly compressed, the brows contracted, and an expression of bitterness, almost of hate, distorted his features, as he murmured to himself under his breath:

'Will the day never come when I shall be free?'

CHAPTER II.

The house of Ettersberg had originally been great, and had boasted many branches; but in the course of years death and the marriage of the female descendants had lopped off one good member after another, so that at the time of which this story treats there were, besides the widowed Countess who lived at the patronymic castle, but two representatives of the name, Count Edmund, the heir, and his cousin Oswald.

The latter shared the fate common to younger sons in families where the property is strictly entailed. Destitute of any personal fortune, he was entirely dependent on the head of his house, or must be so, at least, until he had carved out for himself a position in life. Things had not always worn this aspect; on the contrary, he had at his birth been greeted by his parents as the presumptive heir to the family lands. The then head of the family, Edmund's father, was childless, and already well advanced in years when he became a widower; his only brother, a man considerably younger than himself, who held a commission in the army, might therefore legitimately count on the prospective inheritance. It was esteemed a special piece of good fortune for this gentleman when, after many years of wedlock, blessed so far only by the advent of daughters early deceased, a son was born to him. The uncle himself gladly hailed the event as assuring the continuance of his race, and during the first years of infancy, the prospects of little Oswald were as brilliant as heart could desire.

Then occurred a most unlooked-for reversal of fortune. Count Ettersberg, a sexagenarian and more, led to the altar as his second wife a girl of twenty. The young Countess was very beautiful, but she came of a ruined, though of a noble house. It was generally said that the family had spared no exertions to bring about so splendid an alliance. Splendid the match might certainly be called; but it was ill-qualified to satisfy the needs of a youthful heart, especially as, so it was whispered, this suit had interfered with, and roughly broken asunder, the bonds of a previous attachment. Whether absolute constraint, or persuasion only, had been used on the part of the relations, no one knew; however prompted, the young lady gave her consent to a marriage which insured her a brilliant and most enviable position. Old Count Ettersberg succumbed so completely to the influence of this tardily kindled passion that he forgot all else in it, and when a scarcely hoped-for happiness befell him, when a son and heir was placed in his arms, the dominion of his wise and beautiful wife became absolute.

It was natural that the younger brother should feel somewhat aggrieved at the utter destruction of all his prospects, and natural too that his sister-in-law should entertain towards him no feelings of special friendship. The affectionate relations formerly existing between the brothers gave place to a coldness and estrangement which lasted until the death of the younger. The Colonel and his wife died within but a short interval, and the orphan boy was taken to his uncle's house and there brought up on equal terms with the young heir.

But old Count Ettersberg did not survive his brother long. By his will he assigned the guardianship of the two boys to Baron Heideck, his wife's brother, and the latter justified the confidence placed in him, standing by his sister in every circumstance where a man's aid and assistance became necessary.

In general, however, the will assured to the Countess perfect freedom and independence of action. She it was who, in reality, had control of the property, and who directed the education of both son and nephew.

This latter was at length complete. Count Edmund had been absent all the winter, travelling through France and Italy in his cousin's company. He had now returned to make himself acquainted with the management of his estates, which at his approaching majority he was to take upon himself, while Oswald had to prepare to enter one of the Government bureaux.

On the day succeeding the arrival of the two young men, the weather cleared a little, though the outer world still presented a most wintry aspect. The Countess was sitting with her son in her own boudoir. Though she stood midway between forty and fifty, the lady yet in a great measure retained the beauty which once had been dazzling. Her appearance, albeit majestic, was still so youthful, that it was difficult to imagine her the mother of this son of two-and-twenty, more especially as there was no single trait of resemblance between them. Edmund, with his dark hair and eyes, his sparkling gaiety and mobile humour, which manifested itself in every word and gesture, was a direct contrast to his grave, beautiful mother. Her fair tresses and calm blue eyes harmonised with the cool serenity of mien peculiar to her, a serenity which towards her darling alone would occasionally yield to a warmer impulse.

The young Count had apparently been making an open breast with regard to what Oswald termed his 'follies innumerable,' but he could not have found it hard to obtain absolution, for his mother, though she shook her head as she spoke, addressed him in a tone more tender than reproachful.

'You madcap! It is time for me to take you in hand again. In the perfect unconstraint you have enjoyed abroad, the maternal rein has grown slack indeed. Will you bear it again, now that you have come back to me?'

'Bear control from you?--always!' returned Edmund, pressing his lips fervently to her white hand. Then relapsing immediately into his former lighthearted, saucy vein, he added: 'I told Oswald beforehand that the verdict on my misdeeds would be a merciful one. I know my lady mother well.'

The Countess's face darkened.

'Oswald seems to have altogether neglected his duty,' she replied. 'I could discover so much from your letters. As the elder and steadier of the two, he should have remained at your side;

instead of which he left you to yourself, going only where he was absolutely obliged to follow. Had your own nature not preserved you from anything worse than folly, his counsels certainly would not have done so.'

'Oh, he preached enough,' said Edmund. 'It was my fault, you know, if I did not listen to him. But before we say anything more, mother, let me put one question. Why has Oswald been banished to the side-wing?'

'Banished! What an expression! You have seen the alterations I have had made in your rooms. Are you not pleased with the new arrangements?'

'Yes, but----'

'It was necessary for you to have your apartments distinct.' The Countess interrupted him quickly. 'Now that you are about to take possession of your own house, it would not be seemly for you to share your rooms with your cousin. He will see that himself.'

'But it was not necessary to send him over to that old part of the castle, which is only used in exceptional cases,' objected Edmund. 'There are rooms enough and to spare in the main building. Oswald was hurt by this arrangement of yours. I could see it plainly. Have it altered--I beg of you.'

'I cannot do that without making myself ridiculous in the eyes of all the servants,' said the Countess, in a very decided tone. 'If you wish to revoke the orders I have expressly given, you are, of course, at liberty to do so.'

'Mother!' exclaimed the young Count, impatiently. 'You know very well that I never interfere with your proceedings. But this might have stood over for a time. Oswald will be leaving us in a few months.'

'Yes, in the autumn. By then my brother will have taken all necessary steps to introduce him into one of the Government offices.'

Edmund looked down.

'I rather think Oswald has other plans for the future,' he said, with some hesitation.

'Other plans?' repeated the Countess. 'I trust that we shall not encounter disobedience from him a second time. Once, when he rebelled against entering the army, I yielded, thanks to your persuasion and advocacy. You were always on his side. I have not yet forgiven him his wilful, defiant conduct on that occasion.'

'It was not defiance,' pleaded Edmund in defence. 'Only the conviction he felt that, as an officer and the representative of an old and noble name, he would not be able to keep up his position in the army without permanent assistance from us.'

'Assistance you would amply have afforded him.'

'But which he would on no account accept. He possesses, as you know, indomitable pride.'

'Say rather unbounded arrogance,' interrupted the Countess. 'I know the quality, for I have had to battle with it since the day he first came to this house. But for my husband's formally expressed desire that this nephew should share your education and opportunities, I would never have left you so exclusively to his companionship. I never liked him. I cannot endure those cold searching eyes, which are always on the alert, which nothing escapes, not even the best-guarded secret.'

Edmund laughed out loud.

'Why, mother, you are making a regular detective of Oswald. He certainly is a particularly keen observer, as may be noted from his occasional remarks on men and things which strike no one else as peculiar. Here, at Ettersberg, he can, however, hardly put his talents to account. We have, thank God, no secrets for him to discover.'

The Countess bent over some papers lying on the table, and seemed to be seeking for something among them.

'No matter,' she said. 'I never could understand your blind partiality for him. You, with your frank, warm, open nature, and Oswald with his icy reserve! You are about as congenial as fire and water.'

'The very contrast may be the cause of our mutual attraction,' said Edmund, jestingly. 'Oswald is not the most amiable person in the world, that I must admit; towards me he decidedly is not amiable at all. Nevertheless, I feel myself drawn to him, and he in turn is attracted to me--I know it.'

'You think so?' said the Countess, coldly. 'You are mistaken, most mistaken. Oswald is one of the class who hate those from whom they must accept benefits. He has never forgiven me the

fact that my marriage destroyed his own and his father's prospects, and he cannot forgive you for standing between him and the property. I know him better than you do.'

Edmund was silent. He was aware from experience that any advocacy from him only made matters worse; for it surely aroused the maternal jealousy, always prompt to ignite when he spoke openly of his affection for this cousin, the comrade of his youth.

Moreover, the conversation was here brought to a natural end, the subject of it at this moment appearing upon the scene.

Oswald's greeting was as formal, and the Countess's reply as cool, as their manner had been on the preceding evening. Unfavourable as were the lady's sentiments towards her nephew, the duty of this morning call and of daily inquiries after her health was rigorously imposed upon him. On the present occasion the tour so recently concluded furnished food for discourse. Edmund related some of their adventures; Oswald supplemented his cousin's account, putting in a finishing touch here and there, and so it happened that the visit, which in general was exceedingly brief, had soon passed the usual quarter of an hour's limit.

'You have both altered during the past six months,' said the Countess, at length. 'Your bronzed complexion especially, Edmund, gives you quite the appearance of a Southerner.'

'I have often been taken for one,' replied Edmund. 'In the matter of complexion I have unfortunately inherited nothing from my beautiful fair mother.'

The Countess smiled.

'I think you may be satisfied with what Nature has done for you. You certainly do not resemble me. There is more likeness to your father.'

'To my uncle? Hardly,' remarked Oswald.

'How can you be a judge of that?' asked the Countess, rather sharply. 'You and Edmund were mere boys when my husband died.'

'No, mother; don't trouble yourself to try and discover a likeness,' interposed Edmund. 'I certainly have but a vague remembrance of my father; but, you know, we possess a portrait life-size, which was taken when he was in his prime. I have not a single feature of that face, and it really is strange, when you come to think of it, for in our race the family traits have usually been especially marked. Look at Oswald, for instance. He is an Ettersberg from the crown of his head to the sole of his foot. He is in every feature an exact copy of the old family portraits in the gallery yonder, which from one generation to another went on reproducing the same lines and contours. Heaven only knows why this historical resemblance should be denied to me alone! What are you gazing at me in that way for, Oswald?'

The young man's eyes were, indeed, fixed on his cousin's face with a keen and searching scrutiny.

'I think you are right,' he replied. 'You have not a single Ettersberg feature.'

'That is but another of your venturesome assertions,' said the Countess, in a tone of sharp rebuke. 'It frequently happens that a family likeness, absent in youth, grows striking as the person advances in years. That will, no doubt, be the case with Edmund.'

The young Count laughed and shook his head.

'I doubt it. I am formed in altogether a different mould. Indeed, I often wonder how I, with my hot, excitable blood, my thoughtlessness and high spirits, for which I am always being lectured, could come of a race so desperately wise and virtuous; in fact, rather slow and stupid from overmuch virtue. Oswald, now, would represent the family far better than I.'

'Edmund!' cried the Countess indignantly.

It was uncertain whether her remonstrance applied to the young man's last assertion, or to his irreverent mention of his forefathers.

'Well, I ask pardon of the shades of my ancestors,' said Edmund, rather abashed. 'You see, mother, I have none of their traditional excellences, not even that of sober sense.'

'My aunt was meaning something else, I fancy,' said Oswald quietly.

The Countess pressed her lips together tightly. Her face plainly betokened the dislike she had avowed to the cold, searching eyes now resting upon her.

'Enough of this dispute on the subject of family likeness,' she said, waiving the point. 'Tradition affords at least as many exceptions as rules. Oswald, I wish you would look through these papers. You have some legal knowledge. Our solicitor seems to consider the issue of the affair as doubtful, but I am sanguine, and Edmund is of my opinion, that we must follow out the matter to the end.'

So saying, she pushed the papers, which were lying on the table, across to her nephew, who glanced at their contents.

'Ah, yes. They refer to the lawsuit against Councillor Rüstow of Brunneck.'

'Good heavens! is not that business settled yet?' asked Edmund. 'Why, the suit was on before we left home six months ago.'

Oswald smiled rather ironically.

'You appear to have peculiar notions as to the length of our legal procedure. It may go on for years. If you will allow me, aunt, I will take these papers with me to my own room to look through them, unless Edmund would prefer to see them first.'

'Oh no, spare me all that!' cried Edmund, parrying the threatened infliction. 'I have forgotten pretty nearly all about the business. This Rüstow married a daughter of Uncle Francis, I know; and he raises a claim to the Dornau estate, which my uncle bequeathed to me.'

'And with perfect justice,' added the Countess; 'for that marriage took place against his wish, expressly declared. His daughter, by her *mésalliance*, broke with him and with the entire family. It was natural, under such circumstances, that he should disinherit her absolutely; and just as natural, there being no nearer relations, that he should annex Dornau to the entailed family estates by leaving it to you.'

A slight cloud gathered on Edmund's brow as he listened to this statement.

'It may be so, but the whole subject is painful to me. What do I, the owner of Ettersberg, want with the possession of Dornau? I seem to be intruding on the rights of others, who, in spite of wills and family squabbles, are the direct and proper heirs. What I should prefer would be to see a compromise effected.'

'That is impossible,' said the Countess decidedly. 'Rüstow's attitude, from the very commencement of the affair, has been such as to preclude any idea of an arrangement. The way in which he attacked the will and proceeded against you, the acknowledged heir, was downright insulting, and would make any show of concession on our part appear as unpardonable weakness. Besides which, you have no right to set at nought the wishes of your relative as expressed in his will. It was his desire to shut out this "Frau Rüstow" from any share in his fortune.'

'But she has been dead for years,' objected Edmund. 'And her husband would not in any case be entitled to inherit.'

'No; but he advances a claim on behalf of his daughter.'

The two young men looked up simultaneously.

'His daughter? So he has a daughter?'

'Certainly, a girl of about eighteen, I believe.'

'And this young lady and I are the hostile claimants?'

'Just so; but why this sudden interest in the matter?'

'Eureka, I have it!' cried Edmund. 'Oswald, this is our charming acquaintance of yesterday. I see now why the meeting struck her as being so indescribably comic--why she refused to give her name. The allusion to a certain connection existing between us becomes intelligible. It all fits in, word for word. There can be no possible doubt about it.'

'Perhaps, when you have time, you will tell me the meaning of all this,' said the Countess, who seemed to think such animation on her son's part unnecessary and out of place.

'Certainly, mother; I will explain it to you at once. We yesterday made the acquaintance of a young lady, or, it would be more correct to say, *I* made her acquaintance, for Oswald, as usual, vouchsafed her little attention--I, however, as you may imagine, was gallant enough for both--and so the young Count set about relating the adventure of the preceding day, going into all the details with much sparkling humour, and exulting in the fact of having so soon discovered his beautiful unknown. Nevertheless, he did not succeed in calling up a smile to his mother's face. She listened in silence, and when he wound up with an enthusiastic description of his heroine, she said very coolly and deliberately:

'You seem to look on this meeting in the light of a pleasurable occurrence. In your place I should have felt it to be a painful one. It is never agreeable to meet face to face persons with whom we are at strife.'

'At strife?' cried Edmund. 'I can never be at strife with a young lady of eighteen--certainly not with this one, though she should lay claim to Ettersberg itself. I would with pleasure lay Dornau at her feet, could----'

'I beg you not to treat this matter with so much levity, Edmund,' interrupted the Countess. 'I know that you have a leaning to these follies, but when serious interests are at stake they must recede into the background. This affair is of a serious nature. Our opponents have imported into it a degree of bitterness, have acted with a churlish insolence, which makes any personal contact a thing absolutely to be deprecated. You will, I hope, see this yourself, and avoid any further meetings with firmness and consistency.'

With these lofty words she rose, and to leave no doubt in her son's mind as to the displeasure he had incurred, she left the room.

The young Master of Ettersberg, whose authority his mother was constantly asserting, seemed still docile to the maternal sceptre. He ventured no word of reply to her sharp remonstrance, though he might have urged that, after all, the lawsuit concerned no one but himself.

'That was to be expected,' remarked Oswald, as the door closed. 'Why did you not keep your supposition to yourself?'

'How was I to know that it would be so ungraciously received? There appears to be a deadly feud between this Rüstow and our family. No matter, that will not prevent my going over to Brunneck.'

Oswald looked up quickly from the papers he was turning over.

'You are not thinking of paying the Councillor a visit, are you?'

'Certainly I am. Do you think I mean to give up our charming acquaintance because our respective lawyers are wrangling over a cause which, in reality, is perfectly indifferent to me? On the contrary, I shall seize the opportunity of introducing myself to my lovely opponent as her adversary in the strife. I intend to go over very shortly, in the course of a few days.'

'The Councillor will soon show you the door,' said Oswald drily. 'He is known all over the country for his surly humour.'

'Well, that will only make me the more polite. I can take nothing amiss from the father of such a daughter, and I suppose even this bear will have some human points about him. What makes you look so solemn, Oswald? Are you jealous, old fellow? If so, you are free to ride over with me, and put your luck to the test.'

'Do not talk such nonsense to me,' said Oswald shortly, rising as he spoke, and going up to the window. The rapid movement and something in his tone told of a certain irritability with difficulty repressed.

'As you like; but I have one word more to say.' The young Count's face grew serious, and he cast a meaning glance in the direction of the adjoining room. 'Do not put forward your plans for the future just at present. We are not just now in a favourable humour to receive them. I wanted to take the lead, and make the inevitable disclosure easier to you, but I was met by such a hurricane that I wisely resolved not to acknowledge complicity in the business.'

'Why should I put off an explanation? The subject must of necessity be broached shortly between my aunt and myself. I see no advantage in a delay.'

'Well, you can hold your tongue for a week at least,' cried Edmund testily. 'I have other things to think of just now, and no desire to be always on guard as a mediating angel between my mother and yourself.'

'Have I ever asked you to mediate?' said Oswald, in so sharp and uncourteous a tone that the young Count was roused to anger.

'Oswald, this is going a little too far. I am accustomed, it is true, to such rudeness on your part, but really I hardly see why I should take from my cousin what I would endure from no one else.'

'Because your cousin is a dependent, one inferior in the social scale, and you feel yourself called upon to show generosity towards--the poor relation.'

The words breathed of such infinite bitterness of spirit that Edmund's ill-humour vanished instantly.

'You are irritated,' he said kindly; 'and not without reason. But why do you visit your anger on me? I am in no way responsible for yesterday's incident. You know I cannot put myself in open opposition to my mother, even when my views differ decidedly from hers. But in this case she will give way, for if your own rooms next to mine are not made ready for you to-morrow, I shall remove to the side-wing and quarter myself upon you, spite of bats and the accumulated dust of ages.'

The bitter expression vanished from Oswald's face, and he answered in a gentler voice:

'You are capable of it, I believe. But no more of this, Edmund. It really signifies little where I

spend the few months of my sojourn here. The rooms in the tower are very quiet, and admirably suited for study. I would far rather be there than here, in this castle of yours.'

"'This castle of yours,'" repeated Edmund, in a tone of pique. 'As though it had not always been as much your home as mine! But I believe you are seeking to estrange yourself from us. Oswald, I must say, if things are not always pleasant between my mother and you, a great share of the blame rests on your shoulders. You have never shown any affection for her, or any ready compliance with her wishes. Cannot you bring yourself to it, if you try?'

'I cannot comply where blind subjection is demanded of me, and where the whole future fortune of my life is at stake--no!'

'Well, then, we may expect another family quarrel at no very distant date,' said Edmund, evidently ill-pleased at the prospect. 'So you will not have any alteration made in the rooms?'

'No.'

'As you like. Goodbye.'

He walked off towards the door, but had not reached it when Oswald came quickly forth from the window-recess where he had been standing, and followed him.

'Edmund!'

'Well?' returned the other interrogatively, and halted.

'I shall remain where I am, in the side-wing, but---- I thank you for your kindness.'

The young Count smiled.

'Really? That sounds almost like an apology. I really did not think you were capable of such expansiveness, Oswald;' and suddenly, with an impulse of frank, hearty affection, he threw his arm round his cousin's shoulder. 'Is it true that you cherish a hatred towards me, because Fate has willed that I should be heir to the property, because I stand between you and the Ettersberg estates?'

Oswald looked at him again with one of those strange, penetrating glances which seemed to be searching the young heir's features for something hidden from him. This time, however, the keen scrutiny soon gave place to an expression of warmer, deeper feeling, to a kindlier ray which beamed suddenly forth, melting the icy rampart of suspicion and reserve.

'It is not true, Edmund,' was the steady, grave reply.

'I knew it,' cried Edmund. 'And now we will bury all past misunderstandings. As regards our travelling acquaintance, however, I warn you that I shall summon up all my talent--and you know how justly it is esteemed--to produce an effect at Brunneck. This I shall do in spite of your frowning visage and of my mother's high displeasure. And I shall succeed in my endeavours, you may rely upon it.'

So saying, he caught hold of his cousin's arm, and drew him laughingly from the room.

CHAPTER III.

Brunneck, the residence of Chief Councillor Rüstow, was situated only a few miles distant from Ettersberg, and had been in the hands of its present proprietor for a long series of years. It was a property of considerable extent and value, comprising various farms, and furnished with every improvement which modern science has devised. On all agricultural subjects the Councillor was looked upon as a first-class authority, and as, in addition to this, he owned one of the finest seigneurial manors of the province, his position was one of great influence. Brunneck could not, indeed, compare with the vast Ettersberg domain, but it was generally asserted that, in point of fortune, Rüstow was to the full as good a man as his noble neighbour. The numerous reforms he had introduced on his estates, and to the number of which he was with indefatigable energy constantly adding, had in the course of time become handsomely remunerative, and were now a source of wealth to him; whereas over at Ettersberg the management of the land was left almost entirely to underlings, and was conducted on so lofty and aristocratic a principle, that pecuniary interests were overlooked, and any tangible, practical return rendered out of the question.

As has already been stated, the two families were connected by marriage, but this circumstance was ignored on both sides with equal obstinacy and hostile feeling. In the position he now occupied, the Councillor might more fitly have ventured to sue for the hand of a Fräulein von Ettersberg. Twenty years or more ago, the young gentleman-farmer who had come to Dornau to pick up some knowledge of his future vocation, and who had but a slender fortune to rely upon, was certainly no suitable *parti* for the daughter of the house. The young people fell in love, however, paying little heed either to prejudices or obstacles.

When their elders harshly interfered and separated them, when all resistance, all entreaties, failed to move them, Rüstow persuaded his betrothed, who meanwhile had come of age, to take a decisive step. She left her home clandestinely, and the marriage was celebrated, without her father's consent, it is true, but with all due formality. The young couple hoped that, this step being once irrevocably taken, forgiveness would follow, but this hope proved illusive. Neither the young wife's oft-repeated overtures, nor the birth of a grandchild, not even the rapidly ensuing change in Rüstow's circumstances--he achieved wealth and position in a marvellously short time--could appease the father's wrath. The old Count was too completely under the influence of his relations, who looked on the middle-class connection with horror and aversion, and used every means in their power to strengthen him in his hard resolve.

Frau Rüstow died without having obtained pardon, and at her death all chance of a reconciliation vanished. Her husband had, from the first, openly avowed his dislike to a family which had so cruelly wounded his pride and self-love. For his wife's sake alone had he tolerated the former attempts at peacemaking; now that he had no longer her to consider, he assumed towards his father-in-law and the entire clan an attitude of hostility and surly defiance which precluded any intercourse. As a result of these tactics came the will which passed over the granddaughter, and, without even a mention of her or her mother assigned Dornau to the heir of the entailed family estates. This will was contested by Rüstow, who would not admit of his marriage being thus altogether ignored, and was determined to have his daughter acknowledged as her grandfather's legitimate successor and heiress. The suit had some base to rest upon, for the deceased had not disinherited his grandchild in so many words. He had contented himself with treating her as nonexistent, and had proceeded to dispose of his property in the manner which seemed to him good. This lapsus, and a few technical errors subsequently detected, rendered the will assailable. The issue was, however, most uncertain, and the lawyers on both sides had full opportunity of exercising their sagacity and judgment.

The Brunneck manor-house was neither so vast nor so imposing of aspect as Castle Ettersberg, yet it was a stately building, spacious, and bearing all the marks of age. The inner arrangements of the house, though boasting no pretence at luxury, were ordered on a scale suitable to the position and the fortune of the owner.

In the large veranda-parlour commonly used by the family, a lady was sitting, busy with household accounts. This was an elderly relative of Rüstow's, who, on the death of that gentleman's wife, eight years previously, had come to preside over her cousin's establishment, and to act as a mother to his young daughter. She was bending over her books and making some memoranda when the door was hastily thrown open, and the Councillor himself appeared on the scene.

'I wish all the lawsuits and parchments, the courts and everything related to them, lawyers included, were at the deuce!' he cried, throwing to the door with a violent bang which made his cousin jump.

'Oh, Erich, how can you startle me so! You have been absolutely unbearable ever since that wretched suit was instituted. You seem to think of nothing else. Cannot you wait patiently until you see what the issue will be?'

'Patiently?' repeated Herr Rüstow, with a bitter laugh. 'I should like to see the man who would not lose his patience over it. They go on pulling this way and that, protesting against everything we do, lodging one appeal after another. Every letter of that blessed will has been discussed, evidence has been advanced, proofs have been furnished, and yet they are no forwarder than they were six months ago, not a whit!' And as he ended his tirade he threw himself into a chair.

Erich Rüstow was a man still in the prime of life, who, it was plain to see, had been handsome in his youth. Now his brow was furrowed and his face lined with the cares of a restless, busy life. He was, however, a stately, well-built person, whose appearance would have been eminently agreeable, but for certain evidences of a hasty temper, prompt to break forth on every occasion; but for, so to say, a pugnacity of expression which considerably impaired his good looks.

'Where is Hedwig?' asked the master of the house, after a pause.

'She went out riding an hour ago,' replied her cousin, who had taken up her memoranda again.

'Went out riding? I told her not to ride to-day. This sudden thaw has made the roads impassable, and upon the hills the snow still lies deep.'

'No doubt, but you are aware that Hedwig generally does the thing she ought not to do.'

'Upon my soul, it is a strange fact, but I believe she does,' assented her father, who seemed to

consider it merely a 'strange fact,' and not one calculated to excite his anger.

'You have let the girl grow up in too great freedom. How often have I entreated you to send Hedwig to a boarding-school for a few years; but no, nothing would induce you to part with her.'

'Because I did not want her to be estranged from me and from her home. I am sure I have had masters and governesses enough here at Brunneck, and she has learned pretty nearly everything under the sun.'

'True; one thing she has learned especially, and that is how to tyrannise over you and the entire household.'

'Don't go on preaching in that way, Lina,' said Rüstow angrily. 'You are always finding some fault with Hedwig. First she is thoughtless, then she is too superficial to please you, not deep, not "feeling" enough. I am satisfied with her as she is. I like my girl to be a bright, merry young thing, taking some pleasure in life, and not one of your sensitive, fashionable ladies with "feelings" and "nerves."'

As he spoke the last words, he cast a rather meaning glance at Fräulein Lina, who was quick to take up the gauntlet.

'One has to divest one's self of any such appurtenances here at Brunneck, I think. You take good care of that.'

'Well, I fancy the last eight years have done something for you in the way of getting rid of your nerves,' said Rüstow, with much apparent satisfaction. 'But the feelings are there still. How you felt for your *protégé*, Baron Senden, the other day, when Hedwig sent him to the rightabout!'

A pink flush of vexation mounted to the lady's cheek as she replied:

'Hedwig, at all events, showed little enough feeling in the matter. She merely ridiculed an offer which would, at least, have brought any other girl to a serious frame of mind. Poor Senden! He was in despair.'

'He will get over it,' observed Rüstow. 'In the first place, I believe that both his passion and his despair had my Brunneck, rather than my daughter, for their object. Her dowry would have come in nicely to rescue his estates, which are mortgaged over and over again; in the second place, it was his own fault that he met with a refusal. A man should know how matters stand, before he proposes definitely; and thirdly, I should not have given my consent to the match under any circumstances, for I won't have Hedwig marrying into the aristocracy. I had too good experience of that with my own marriage. Of all the grand folk who come bothering us with their visits, not one shall have the girl--not one of them, I say. I will find a husband for her myself when the proper time comes.'

'And you really suppose that Hedwig will wait for that?' asked the lady, with gentle irony. 'Hitherto her suitors have all been indifferent to her. When she has an inclination towards anyone, she will certainly not stay to consider whether the gentleman belongs to the aristocracy, or whether she may not be acting contrary to her father's principles--and you, Erich, will submit, and do your darling's bidding in this, as in all else.'

'Lina, do you wish to exasperate me?' shouted Rüstow. 'You seem to think that where my daughter is concerned I can exercise no will of my own.'

'None at all,' she replied emphatically. Then she gathered together her papers and left the room.

The Master of Brunneck was furious, perhaps because he could not altogether dispute the truth of the assertion. He paced with rapid steps up and down the room, and turned wrathfully upon a servant who entered, bearing a card.

'What is it now? Another visit?'

Rüstow pulled the card out of the man's hand, but nearly let it fall in his amazement as the name upon it met his eye.

'Edmund, Count von Ettersberg? What can be the meaning of this?'

'The Count desires the favour of an interview with Councillor Rüstow.'

The latter looked down at the card again. There, clear and distinct, stood the name of Ettersberg, and, inexplicable as the circumstance undoubtedly was, he had no choice but to admit the strange visitor.

Orders to this effect being given to the servant, the young Count promptly made his appearance, and greeted his neighbour, who yet was a perfect stranger to him, with as much ease and assurance as though this visit had been the most natural thing in the world.

'Councillor Rüstow, you will allow me to make the personal acquaintance of so near a

neighbour as yourself. I should have endeavoured to do so long ago, but my studies and subsequent travels have kept me so much away from Ettersberg. I have only been home on flying visits, and this is my first opportunity of repairing previous shortcomings.'

At the first moment Rüstow was so staggered by this complete ignoring of the existing quarrel that he could not work himself up to anger. He grumbled something which sounded like an invitation to be seated. Edmund accordingly took a chair in the most unconcerned manner possible, and as his host showed no desire to open the conversation, he assumed the burden of it himself, and launched into praises of the admirable system of management obtaining on the Brunneck estates, a system with which it had long been his wish to make himself acquainted.

Meanwhile Rüstow had minutely examined his visitor from head to foot, and had no doubt satisfied himself that the young gentleman's appearance did not tally with this pretended zealous interest in matters agricultural. He therefore broke in on Edmund's enthusiasm with the disconcerting question:

'May I ask, Count, to what I am indebted for the honour of this visit?'

Edmund saw that he must change his tactics. The mere easy jargon of politeness would not help him through. The Councillor's far-famed churlishness was already roused. A low growl, betokening a storm, might, as it were, be heard in the distance; but the young Count was well prepared for this, and was determined to remain master of the field.

'You will not accept me simply in my quality of neighbour?' he said, with an affable smile.

'You appear to forget that we are something else besides neighbours, namely, opponents in a court of justice,' retorted Rüstow, who began now to be angry in right earnest.

Edmund examined with attention the riding-whip he held in his hand.

'Oh, ah! You are alluding to that tiresome Dornau suit.'

'Tiresome? Wearisome, endless, you mean, for endless it would appear to be. You are as well acquainted with the pleadings, I suppose, as I am.'

'I know nothing at all about them,' confessed Edmund, with great ingenuousness. 'I only know that there is a dispute about my uncle's will which assigns Dornau to me, but the validity of which you contest. Pleadings? I have had copies of all the documents, certainly, whole volumes of them, but I never looked over their contents.'

'But, Count, it is you who are carrying on this lawsuit!' cried Rüstow, to whom this placid indifference was something beyond belief.

'Pardon me, my lawyer is carrying it on,' corrected Edmund. 'He is of opinion that it is incumbent on me to uphold my uncle's will at any cost. I do not attach any such particular value to the possession of Dornau myself.'

'Do you suppose I do?' asked Rüstow sharply. 'My Brunneck is worth half a dozen such places, and my daughter has really no need to trouble herself about any inheritance from her grandfather.'

'Well, what are we fighting for, then? If the matter stands so, some compromise might surely be arrived at, some arrangement which would satisfy both parties----'

'I will hear of no compromise,' exclaimed the Councillor. 'To me it is not a question of money, but of principle, and I will fight it out to the last. If my father-in-law had chosen to disinherit us in so many words, well and good. We set him at defiance; he had the right to retaliate. I don't deny it. It is the fact of his ignoring our marriage in that insulting manner, as though it had not been legally and duly celebrated--the fact of his passing over the child of the marriage, and declining to recognise her as his granddaughter--this is what I cannot forgive him, even in his grave, and this is what makes me determined to assert my right. The marriage shall be established, in the face of those who wish to repudiate it; my daughter shall be acknowledged as her grandfather's sole and legitimate heiress. Then, when the verdict of the court has once placed this beyond all doubt, Dornau and all belonging to it may go to the family estates, or to the devil, for what I care.'

'Ah, now we are getting rude,' thought Count Edmund, who had long been expecting some such outbreak, and who was highly amused by the whole affair.

He had come with the settled resolve to take nothing amiss from the Master of Brunneck, who was looked on as an original in his way, so he chose to view this tirade from its humorous side, and replied, with undiminished good-humour:

'Well, Councillor, the association is, I am sure, a very flattering one. It does not seem particularly probable that Dornau will lapse to the devil--whether it be adjudged to Brunneck or to Ettersberg, we must wait to see. But that is the court's business, and not ours. I frankly confess that I am curious to hear what all the wisdom of these learned counsel will ultimately

bring forth.'

'I must say it has not occurred to me to look at the case in that light,' admitted Rüstow, whose amazement grew with every minute.

'No, why not? You are contending, you say yourself, for a principle only. I am actuated by a pious regard for my relative's expressed wishes. We are most enviably placed, being simply objective in the matter. So, for heaven's sake, let the lawyers wrangle on. Their squabbles need not prevent our meeting as good neighbours on friendly terms.'

Rüstow was about to protest against the possibility of any friendly intercourse when the door opened, and his daughter appeared on the threshold. The young lady, whose cheeks were brightly tinted with the rapid exercise she had taken, looked even more charming to-day in her dark closely-fitting riding-habit than she had looked on a previous occasion when wrapped in furs and attired in winter clothing--so, at least, thought Count Edmund, who had sprung up with great alacrity, with more alacrity, indeed, than politeness called for, to greet her on her entrance. Hedwig had, no doubt, already heard from the servants who was with her father, for she betrayed no surprise, returning the Count's bow as formally as though he had been a complete stranger to her. The merry sparkle in her eye, however, told him that she had no more forgotten their first meeting than he himself. The Councillor, whether he liked it or not, was forced to condescend to an introduction; and the manner in which he pronounced the name of Ettersberg, a name heretofore prohibited in that house, proved that the bearer of it, despite the great prejudice against him, had already gained some ground.'

'Fräulein,' said Edmund, turning to the young lady, 'but the other day I learned whom Fate had assigned me as an opponent in the Dornau lawsuit. I therefore seize this, the first opportunity, to present myself in due form as your adversary in the strife.'

'And you have come to Brunneck to reconnoitre the enemy's territory, I suppose?' replied Hedwig, entering at once into the spirit of the joke.

'Certainly. It was my evident duty, under the circumstances. Your father has already pardoned this invasion of the hostile camp. I may trust for a like clemency from you, though you once showed yourself inexorable, refusing even to disclose your name.'

'What is all this?' broke in Rüstow. 'You have met the Count before to-day?'

'Yes, papa,' said Hedwig serenely. 'You know that when I was returning from the town the other day with the carriage and Anthony, we very nearly stuck in the snow, and I think I told you of the two gentlemen by whose assistance we managed to get home.'

A light appeared to dawn on the Councillor, revealing the source of this sudden and extreme friendliness on his young neighbour's part. He had hitherto racked his brains in vain to find a reason for it, and the discovery now made did not seem to afford him any particular satisfaction; the tone of his voice was exceedingly sharp as he replied:

'So it was Count Ettersberg, was it? Why did you conceal the name from me?'

Hedwig laughed: 'Because I knew your prejudice against it, papa. I believe if an avalanche had come down upon us and swallowed us up, your first feeling would have been one of anger at my being caught and buried in company of an Ettersberg.'

'Avalanches do not occur on our highroads,' growled Rüstow, to whom this merry humour did not commend itself.

'Well, Councillor, something of the sort seemed really to have taken place where the road descends into the valley,' joined in Edmund. 'I assure you, the journey was both difficult and dangerous. I esteem myself happy to have been able to offer your daughter my assistance.'

'Now, Count, you remained almost all the time on the carriage-step,' laughed Hedwig. 'It was your silent companion who really helped us in our need. He'--the question came rather hesitatingly--'he did not come over with you to-day, of course?'

'Oswald was not aware that I intended riding over to Brunneck this afternoon,' confessed Edmund. 'He will, I know, reproach me with having thus deprived him of the pleasure----'

'Oh, pray, do not trouble yourself to make pretty speeches,' interrupted the young lady, throwing back her head with an angry little toss, and looking as ungracious as possible--much as she had looked in the carriage on that previous occasion. 'I have had experience of your cousin's politeness, and, for my part, I certainly have no wish to renew the acquaintance.'

Edmund did not notice the pique expressed in these words. He thought it natural that the sombre, unsociable Oswald should not be missed when he, Count Ettersberg, was present, and, moreover, using his best efforts to make himself agreeable. This he did with so much zeal and perseverance, that even Rüstow yielded to the charm. True, he struggled against it manfully, endeavouring by sundry barbed and sardonic remarks to impart a hostile tone to the conversation. But he was foiled at all points. His visitor's captivating manners and appearance

won upon him more and more. The young Count was evidently bent on doing away with the prejudice which existed against him. He fascinated his hearers with his bright and sparkling talk, seducing them by its easy flow, and charming even by his saucy humour. The enemy, as personified in the master of the house, was overthrown and bound hand and foot before either side was well aware of the fact. Rüstow, at length, altogether forgot with whom he was dealing, and when after a protracted visit Edmund rose to go, his host actually accompanied him to the door, and even shook him cordially by the hand on parting.

It was only when the Councillor returned to the sitting-room that a full consciousness of what had occurred loomed upon him. Then his anger revived in full force. As he came in, Hedwig was standing out on the balcony, looking after the young Count, who turned and waved her an adieu as he galloped away. This gave the signal for the storm to break forth.

'Well, upon my word, this passes all belief! I don't know that I ever heard of such a piece of impudence! Count von Ettersberg to come riding over here, doing the agreeable, treating the whole affair of the lawsuit as a mere bagatelle. He talked of a compromise, begad! of meeting on friendly terms, of the Lord knows what; fairly addling one, taking one's breath away with his audacity. But I will not put up with it a second time. If he really shows himself here again, I will have him told--politely, of course--that I am not at home.'

'You will do nothing of the kind, papa,' said Hedwig, who had gone up to him and laid her arm caressingly about his neck. 'You were too pleased with him yourself for that.'

'Ah, and you still more so, I suppose, my young lady?' said the father, with a highly critical, scrutinizing look. 'Do you imagine I can't guess what brought the young gentleman over to Brunneck? Do you think I did not see him kiss your hand as he took leave of you? But I will put a stop to this, once and for all. I will have nothing to do with any Ettersberg; I know the set by experience. Arrogance, selfishness, stupid obstinacy--those are the characteristics of the race. They are all alike, all cut out on the same pattern.'

'That is not true, papa,' said Hedwig decidedly. 'My mother was an Ettersberg, and you were very happy with her.'

The remark was so telling, that it quite disconcerted Rüstow.

'That--that was an exception,' he stammered at length.

'I believe Count Edmund is an exception too,' declared Hedwig confidently.

'Oh, you believe that, do you? You seem to have a great knowledge of character for a girl of eighteen,' cried the Councillor, and forthwith delivered a lecture to his daughter, in which the before-mentioned 'principles' were much insisted on. Fräulein Hedwig listened with an expression of countenance which said plainly enough that the said 'principles' were highly indifferent to her, and if her father could have read her thoughts, he would again have had the 'strange fact' forced upon him that, on this occasion as on most others, she proposed to adopt a contrary course to that enjoined upon her.

CHAPTER IV.

March and the greater part of April had gone by; snowstorms and sharp frosts were things of the past. Nevertheless, spring came but tardily. The country, which at this season of the year is usually decked in vernal bloom, looked bare and desolate. Warmth and sunshine were well-nigh unknown, and for weeks together the weather continued as ungenial as it well could be.

To all outward appearance, the hostile relations between Ettersberg and Brunneck remained unmodified. The lawsuit dragged its weary length along, both parties maintaining their original position, and no attempt at a compromise was, or seemed likely to be, made. The Countess furnished all instructions in her son's name, that young gentleman taking not the smallest interest in the affair; and the Councillor represented his daughter, a minor, who naturally could have no opinion in the matter.

It had been so from the beginning, therefore the delegation of authority was accepted as a thing of course.

But the principal persons concerned, the real opponents in this legal warfare, were by no means so passive as they appeared to be; and the parents, while pursuing their own determined course, upholding their 'principles' with the utmost persistency, little guessed what was

preparing for them in secret.

Rüstow himself had been absent from Brunneck during the last few weeks. Some business connected with a great industrial enterprise of which he was one of the promoters had called him to the capital. His counsel and aid were needed and sought in high quarters; unlooked-for delays occurred, and his stay, which was to have been a short one, had extended over an entire month.

When Count Ettersberg, after an interval of a week, repeated his visit to Brunneck, he found the master of the house absent. Fräulein Hedwig and her aunt were at home, however, and Edmund naturally made the most of his opportunity and ingratiated himself with the two ladies. This second visit was promptly succeeded by a third and a fourth; and from this time forward, by some remarkable accident, it invariably happened that when the ladies drove out, took a walk, or paid a visit in the neighbourhood, the young Count would be found at the same hour on the same road. By this fortunate chance, greetings were frequently exchanged, and meetings of varying duration occurred. In short, the friendly intercourse proposed some time before was thriving and prospering exceedingly.

The Councillor knew nothing of all this. His daughter did not consider it necessary to mention the matter in her letters, and Edmund pursued the same tactics with regard to his mother. To his cousin he had, indeed, imparted with triumphant glee the fact of that first invasion of the enemy's camp; but as Oswald made some rather sharp observations on the subject, describing any intercourse with Brunneck during the progress of the lawsuit as improper in the highest degree, no further communications were vouchsafed him.

On a rather cool and cloudy morning towards the end of April, Count Edmund and Oswald sallied out into the woods together. The Ettersberg forests were of great extent, stretching away to, and partly clothing, the low chain of hills which acted as advanced sentinels to the mountain-range beyond. The two gentlemen bent their steps in the direction of the rising ground. They had evidently something more than a pleasant walk in view, for they carefully surveyed the trees and the land as they advanced, and Oswald frequently addressed his cousin in terms of urgent appeal.

'Now just look at these woods! It really is astounding to see how things have been mismanaged here during the last few years. Why, they have cut down half your timber for you. I cannot understand how you were not at once struck by the fact yourself. You have been riding about all over the place nearly every day.'

'Oh, I did not think about it,' said Edmund. 'But you are right, it does look rather queer. The steward declares, I believe, that he had no other way of covering the deficit in the receipts.'

'The steward declares just what seems good to him, and as he stands high in favour with your mother, she accepts it all and gives him full tether, allowing him to act as he sees fit.'

'I will talk to my mother about it,' declared the young Count. 'It would be a great deal better, though, if you would do it yourself. You can explain these matters much more clearly and cogently than I can.'

'You know that I never offer advice to your mother on any subject. She would consider it an unjustifiable piece of impertinence on my part, and would reject it accordingly.'

Edmund made no reply to this last observation, the truth of which he no doubt recognised.

'Are you of opinion that the steward is dealing unfairly by us?' he asked, after a short pause.

'Not that precisely, but I consider him to be incompetent, wholly unfitted for the position of trust he occupies. He has no initiative, no method or power of keeping things together. As it is with the forests, so is it with all under his rule. Each man on the place does what seemeth best in his own eyes. If matters are allowed to go on in this way, I tell you they will absolutely ruin your property. Look at Brunneck; see the order that reigns there. Councillor Rüstow draws as much from that one estate as you from the whole Ettersberg domain, though the resources here are incomparably greater. Hitherto you have had to confide in others. You have been absent for years, first at the University, then abroad; but now you are on the spot--you are here expressly to look after your property for yourself. Energetic measures must at once be taken.'

'Good heavens! what discoveries you have made during the six weeks we have spent at home!' said Edmund, in a tone of sincere admiration. 'If it is all as you say, I certainly shall have to take some steps; but I'll be hanged if I know how I ought to begin!'

'First of all, dismiss those employés who have proved themselves incapable; put men of more power and intelligence in their place. I almost fear that you will have to change the entire staff.'

'Not for the world! Why, that would give rise to perplexities and disagreeables without end. It is painful to me to see all new faces about me, and it would take months before they settled down into harness, and got used to their work. Meanwhile, all the burden would fall upon me. I should have to do everything myself.'

'That is what you are master for. You can at least command those beneath you.'

Edmund laughed.

'Ah, if I had your special liking and talent for command! In a month you would have metamorphosed Ettersberg, and in three years you would make of it a model establishment after the pattern of Brunneck. Now, if you were going to stay by me, Oswald, it would be different. I should have some one to back and support me then; but you are determined to go away in the autumn, and here shall I be all alone with unreliable or strange new servants to deal with. Pretty prospect, I must say! I have not formally taken possession yet, and the whole concern has become a worry to me already.'

'As Fate has willed that you should be heir to the estates, you must perforce bear the heavy burden laid upon you,' said Oswald sarcastically. 'But once more, Edmund, it is high time something should be done. Promise me that you will proceed to action without delay.'

'Certainly, certainly,' assented the young Count, who had visibly had enough of the subject. 'As soon as I can find time--just now I have so many other things to think of.'

'Things of more importance than the welfare of your estates?'

'Possibly. But I must be off now. Are you going straight back home?'

The question was a particularly pointed one. Oswald did not notice this; he had turned away in evident displeasure.

'Certainly. Are not you coming with me?'

'No, I am going over to the lodge. The forester has my Diana in training, and I must go over and have a look at her.'

'Must your visit be made now?' asked Oswald, in surprise. 'You know that the lawyer is coming over from town at twelve o'clock to-day, to hold a conference with you and your mother on the subject of the lawsuit, and that you have promised to be punctual?'

'Oh! I shall be back long before then,' said Edmund lightly. 'Good bye for the present, Oswald. Don't look so black at me. I give you my word that I will have a thorough good talk with the steward to-morrow, or the day after. Any way, I will have it out with him, you may depend upon it.'

So saying, he struck into a side-path, and soon disappeared among the trees.

Oswald looked after him with a frowning brow.

'Neither to-morrow, nor the next day, nor, in fact, ever, will a change be made. He has some fresh folly in his head, and Ettersberg may go to the dogs for anything he cares. But, after all--and an expression of profound bitterness flitted like a spasm across the young man's face--'after all, what is it to me? I am but a stranger on this soil, and shall always remain so. If Edmund will not listen to reason, he must take the consequences. I will trouble myself no further about the matter.'

But this was more easily said than done; Oswald's gaze constantly wandered back to the mutilated forest, where such cruel gaps were to be seen. His anger and indignation at the senseless, purposeless work of devastation he beheld on all sides grew too strong to be subdued, and instead of returning home, as he had intended, he continued on his way uphill, to inspect the state of the woods on the higher ground. What he there saw was not of a consoling nature. Everywhere the axe had been at its work of destruction, and not until he reached the summit could a change be noted. Here, on the heights, began the Brunneck territory, where a different and a better order of things prevailed.

A wish to draw a comparison first drew Oswald on to the neighbour's land, but his anger swelled high within him as he paced on through the noble woods and carefully preserved plantations, with which, in their present maimed condition, the Ettersberg forests could certainly not compare. What a great work the energy and activity of one man had effected here at Brunneck, and how, on the other hand, had Ettersberg fallen! Since the old Count's death, the care of the estates had been left almost entirely in the hands of employés. The Countess, an exalted lady who from the day of her marriage had known nothing, seen nothing but wealth and splendour, considered it a matter of course that the administration of affairs should be conducted by subordinates, and that the family should be troubled on such subjects as little as possible. Moreover, the establishment was kept up on a costly footing; the sums for its maintenance had to be found, and, of course, the estates must be made to provide them--it signified little how. The Countess's brother, Edmund's guardian, lived in the capital. He filled a high office under the State, and was much taken up by the duties and claims of his position. He interfered but rarely; never except in special cases when his sister desired his counsel and assistance. Her husband's testamentary arrangements had vested all real authority in her. There would, of course, be an end to all this now that Edmund was of age; but proof had just been forthcoming of what might be expected from the young heir's energy and concern for the welfare of his estates. Oswald told himself, with bitter vexation of spirit, that he should see one of the finest properties of the country drift on to certain ruin, owing entirely to the heedlessness and indifference of its owner;

and the thought was the more galling to him that he felt assured a swift and energetic course of action might still repair the mischief that had been done. There was yet time. Two short years hence it might possibly be too late.

Absorbed by these reflections, the young man had plunged deeper and deeper into the woods. Presently he stopped and looked at his watch. More than an hour had passed since he had parted with Edmund--the young Count must long ere this have turned his face homewards. Oswald determined that he also would go back, but for his return he chose another and a somewhat longer route. No duty called him home. His presence at the conference to be held that day was neither necessary nor desired. He was therefore free to extend his walk according to his fancy.

Those must have been singular meditations which occupied the young man's mind as he paced slowly on. The forests and the steward's mismanagement had long ago passed from his thoughts. It was some other hidden trouble which knit his brow with that menacing frown, and lent to his face that harsh, implacable expression--an expression that seemed to say he was ready to do battle with the whole world. Dark and troubled musings were they, revolving incessantly about one haunting subject from which he strove in vain to tear himself free, but which, nevertheless, held him more and more captive.

'I will not think of it any more,' he said at length, half aloud. 'It is always the same thing, always the old wretched suspicion which I cannot put from me. I have nothing--absolutely nothing to confirm it, or to base it upon, and yet it embitters my every hour, poisons every thought--away with it!'

He passed his hand across his brow, as though to scare away all tormenting fancies, and walked on more quickly along the road, which now took a sharp turn and suddenly emerged from the forest. Oswald stepped out on to an open hill-summit, but stopped suddenly, rooted to the ground in astonishment at the unlooked-for spectacle which presented itself.

Not twenty paces from him, on the grassy slope close to the border of the forest, a young lady was seated. She had taken off her hat, so a full view of her face could be obtained--and he who had once looked on that charming face, with its dark beaming eyes so full of light, could not readily forget it.

The young lady was Hedwig Rüstow, and close by her, in most suggestive proximity, lounged Count Edmund, who certainly could not have paid his visit to the forester in the interval. The two were engaged in an animated conversation, which did not, however, appear to turn on serious or very important topics. It was rather the old war of repartee which they had waged with so much satisfaction to themselves on the occasion of their first meeting, the same exchange of banter, of merry jests accompanied by gleeful laughter; but to-day their manner told of much familiarity. Presently Edmund took the hat from the girl's hand and threw it on to the grass; after which, lifting the little palms to his lips, he imprinted on them one fervid kiss after the other, Hedwig offering no opposition, but accepting it all as the most natural thing in the world.

For some moments the amazed spectator stood motionless, watching the pair. Then he turned and would have stepped back among the trees unnoticed, but a dry bough crackled beneath his feet and betrayed him.

Hedwig and Edmund looked up simultaneously, and the latter sprang quickly to his feet.

'Oswald!'

His cousin saw that a retreat was now impossible. He therefore reluctantly left his position and advanced towards the young people.

'So it is you, is it?' said Edmund, in a tone which vacillated between annoyance and embarrassment. 'Where do you come from?'

'From the woods,' was the laconic reply.

'I thought you said you were going straight home.'

'I thought you were going over to the forester's lodge, which lies in the opposite direction.'

The young Count bit his lips. He was, no doubt, conscious that he could not pass off this meeting as an accidental one. Moreover, those fervent kisses must have been witnessed--so he resolved to put as good a face upon it as possible.

'You know Fräulein Rüstow, having been present at our first meeting; I therefore need not introduce you,' he said lightly.

Oswald bowed to the young lady with all a stranger's frigid courtesies.

'I must apologize for intruding,' he said. 'The interruption was most involuntary on my part. I could have no idea that my cousin was here. Allow me to take my leave at once, Fräulein.'

Hedwig had risen in her turn. She evidently was more keenly alive to the awkwardness of the situation than Edmund, for her cheeks were suffused by a flaming blush, and her eyes sought the

ground. Something, however, in the tone of this address, which, though polite, was icy in its reserve, struck her disagreeably, and she looked up. Her glance met Oswald's, and there must have been that in the expression of his face which wounded her and called her pride into arms; for suddenly the dark blue eyes kindled with indignant fire, and the voice, which so lately had rung out in merry jest and silver-clear laughter, shook with emotion and anger as she cried:

'Herr von Ettersberg, I beg of you to remain.'

Oswald, on the point of departure, halted. Hedwig went up to the young Count, and laid her hand on his.

'Edmund, you will not let your cousin go from us in this manner. You will give him the necessary explanation--immediately, on the spot. You must see that he--that he misunderstands.'

Oswald, involuntarily, had drawn back a step, as the familiar 'Edmund' met his ears. The Count himself seemed somewhat taken aback by the determined, almost authoritative tone which he now heard probably for the first time from those lips.

'Why, Hedwig, it was you yourself who imposed silence on me,' he said. 'Otherwise I should certainly not have kept the fact of our attachment secret from Oswald. You are right. We must take him into our confidence now. My severe Mentor is capable else of preaching us both a long sermon, setting forth our iniquity. We will therefore go through the introduction in due form. Oswald, you see before you my affianced wife and your future relation, whom I herewith commend to your cousinly esteem and affection.'

This introduction, though decidedly meant in earnest, was performed in the Count's old light, jesting tone; but the gay humour, which Hedwig was usually so prompt to echo, seemed to jar upon her now almost painfully. She stood quite silent by her lover's side, watching with strange intensity the new relative opposite, who was mute as herself.

'Well?' said Edmund, surprised and rather hurt at this silence. 'Have you no congratulations to offer us?'

'I must in the first place sue for pardon,' said Oswald, turning to the young girl. 'For such a piece of news, I certainly was not prepared.'

'That is entirely your own fault,' laughed Edmund. 'Why did you receive my communication so ungraciously when I told you about my first visit to Brunneck? There was every prospect for you then of filling the post of confidant. But I must say, Hedwig, we are not lucky as regards our rendezvous. This is the first time we have met alone, unsheltered by Aunt Lina's protecting wing--and behold, we are overtaken by this Cato! The philosopher's face is so eloquent of horror at witnessing an act of homage on my part that we are obliged at once to soothe him back into calm by notifying to him our engagement. You may recall your little pleasantry about the "intrusion," my dear fellow, and proceed to express--rather tardily--your wishes for our happiness.'

'I congratulate you,' said Oswald, taking his cousin's proffered hand; 'and you too, Fräulein.'

'How very monosyllabic! Can it be that we are to have a foe in you? That would be the drop too much. It will be quite enough for us to meet the opposition which our beloved parents will in all probability offer to our plans. We shall be between two fires, and I hope, at least, to be able to count on you as an ally.'

'You are aware that I have no influence with my aunt,' said Oswald quietly. 'In that quarter you must trust to your own powers of persuasion alone. But precisely for this reason you should avoid giving your mother any extra cause for offence, and offend her you certainly will, if you are not present at to-day's conference. Your lawyer must be waiting at Ettersberg at the present moment, and you have a good hour's walk before you. Excuse me, Fräulein, but I am forced to remind my cousin of a duty which he appears to have entirely lost sight of.'

'Is there a conference at the castle to-day?' asked Hedwig, who had remained wonderfully quiet during the last few minutes.

'Yes, about the Dornau business,' said Edmund, laughing. 'We are still at open feud--irreconcilable enemies, you know. In your company I had certainly forgotten all about lawsuits and appointments. It is fortunate that Oswald has reminded me of them. I must perforce be present to-day, and concoct plans with my mother and the lawyer for snatching Dornau from the enemy. They little dream that we settled the matter in dispute long ago by the unusual, but highly practical, compromise of a betrothal.'

'And when will they hear this?' inquired Oswald.

'As soon as I know how Hedwig's father takes the affair. He came back yesterday, and that is why we wanted some quiet talk together, to draw up the plan of the campaign. Ettersberg and Brunneck will thrill with horror at the news, no doubt, and do the Montague and Capulet business yet a little longer; but we shall take care there is no tragic ending to the drama. It will wind up to the tune of wedding-bells.'

He spoke with such gay confidence, and the smile with which Hedwig answered him was so superb and assured of victory, that it was evident the parents' opposition was not looked upon by the young people as a real obstacle, likely to involve any serious conflict. They were fully conscious of their power and influence where father and mother were concerned.

'But now I really must go home,' cried Edmund, making a start. 'It is true that I should not rouse my lady-mother's displeasure just now, and nothing displeases her more than to be kept waiting. Excuse me, Hedwig, if I leave you here. Oswald will replace me, and will accompany you back through the wood. As you are so soon to be related, you must become better acquainted with him. He is not always so taciturn as he appears at a first meeting. Oswald, I solemnly entrust my affianced wife to your protection and knightly conduct. So farewell, my charming Hedwig!'

He carried the girl's hand tenderly to his lips, waved an adieu to his cousin, and hurried away.

The two who were left were, it seemed, not agreeably surprised by the Count's sudden arrangement. They certainly did not fall into the tone of cousinly familiarity so promptly as he had wished. A cloud rested on the young girl's brow, and Oswald's manner showed as yet little of the chivalrous gallantry which had been enjoined upon him. At length he spoke:

'My cousin has kept his acquaintance with you so secret, that the disclosure he has just made took me altogether by surprise.'

'You made that sufficiently evident, Herr von Ettersberg,' replied Hedwig. It was strange how lofty and decided a tone she could adopt when really serious and in earnest.

Oswald approached slowly. 'You are offended Fräulein, and justly offended, but the greater blame rests with Edmund. He ought never to have exposed his betrothed, his future wife, to such misconceptions as that of which I was guilty.'

At this allusion a crimson flush again mounted to Hedwig's cheek.

'The reproach you address in words to Edmund is in reality aimed at me, for I was a consenting party. My imprudence was only made manifest to me just now by your look and tone.'

'I have already apologized, and now once more I pray to be forgiven,' said Oswald earnestly. 'But ask yourself, Fräulein, what a stranger, to whom a frank, straightforward explanation could not have been given, would have thought of this meeting? I say again, my cousin should not have induced you to agree to it.'

'Edmund always speaks of you as his Mentor,' exclaimed Hedwig, with unmistakable annoyance. 'It seems that, as I am engaged to be married to him, I also am to enjoy the privilege of being ... educated by you.'

'I merely wished to warn, and by no means to offend you. It is for you to judge in what spirit you should take the warning.'

She made no reply. The grave earnestness of his words was not without effect upon her, though it did not altogether calm her ruffled spirit.

Hedwig picked up her hat, which lay neglected on the ground, and sat down in her former place to rearrange the crushed flowers. The fresh and dainty spring headgear had suffered a little from its contact with the grass, still damp with mist and rime; such a hat was, indeed, hardly suited to the inclement April day. Spring comes tardily among the mountains, and this year especially she showed no smiling countenance. Her advent was heralded by rain and tempest. To frosty nights succeeded days of mist, through which the pale sunshine gleamed but fitfully.

On this day the sky was as usual shrouded in masses of gray cloud. A wall of fog shut out the distant horizon, and the air was close and laden with moisture. The woods were still bare and leafless; in the undergrowth alone signs of the first tender green could be seen sprouting timidly forth. Each leaflet, each bud, had to struggle for existence, with difficulty holding its own in that raw, keen temperature. The scene altogether was cheerless and desolate.

Oswald made no attempt to renew the conversation, and Hedwig, for her part, showed but little inclination to pursue it. After a while, however, the silence became oppressive to her, and she ventured the first remark that suggested itself.

'What a miserable April! Anyone would think we were in cold, foggy autumn, with winter closing in upon us. We are to be cheated this year of all our spring delights.'

'Are you so fond of spring?' asked Oswald.

'I should like to know who is not fond of it? When one is young, flowers and sunshine seem necessary as the air we breathe. One cannot do without them. But perhaps you are of a different opinion.'

'It all depends. Flowers and sunshine do not come with every spring; nor are they given to

everyone in their youth.'

'Were they not given to you?'

'No.'

The negative was very harsh and decided. Hedwig glanced up at the speaker; it occurred to her, perhaps, that he was austere and undelightful as the spring day which excited her displeasure. What a contrast was there between this conversation and the sparkling, playful babble in which the young engaged pair had so recently indulged here, on the self-same spot! Even the 'plan of campaign' to be undertaken against their parents had been sketched out in a spirit of drollery, amid endless pleasantries, and any lurking anxiety as to the issue had been chased away by jests and laughter. But now, with Oswald von Ettersberg standing before her in his cold unyielding attitude, not only all the merriment, but all desire for it, had vanished as by enchantment. This solemn strain of talk seemed to come as a matter of course, and the young girl even experienced a certain attraction in it and desire to pursue it.

'You lost your parents early? Edmund has told me so; but at Ettersberg you found a second home and a second mother.'

The stern, aggressive look, which for a while had disappeared, showed itself again in the young man's face, and his lips twitched almost imperceptibly.

'You mean my aunt, the Countess?'

'Yes. Has she not been a mother to you?' Again there came that slight spasmodic working about the corners of the mouth, which was anything rather than a smile, but his voice was perfectly calm, as he replied:

'Oh, certainly. Still, there is a difference between being the only child of the house--beloved as you and Edmund have been--and a stranger admitted by favour.'

'Edmund looks on you exactly as a brother,' interrupted the young girl. 'It is a great grief to him that you are meaning to leave him so soon.'

'Edmund appears to have been very communicative with regard to me,' said Oswald coldly. 'So he has told you of that already, has he?'

Hedwig flushed a little at this remark.

'It is natural, I think, that he should make me acquainted with the affairs of the family I am likely to enter. He mentioned this fact to me, lamenting that all his efforts to induce you to remain at Ettersberg had failed.'

'To remain at Ettersberg?' repeated Oswald, with unfeigned astonishment. 'My cousin could not possibly have been in earnest. In what capacity would he have me remain there?'

'In your present capacity of a friend and near relation, I suppose.'

The young man smiled bitterly.

'Fräulein, you have probably no idea of the position occupied by so superfluous a member of a family, or you would not expect me to hold out in it longer than necessity compels. There may be men who, accepting the convenient and pleasant side of such a life, could shut their eyes to its true significance; I have been absolutely unable to do so. Truly, it never was my intention to remain at Ettersberg and now I would not stay, no, not for the whole world!'

He spoke the last words with fire. His eyes kindled with a strange lightning-like gleam, of which one would not have supposed those cold orbs capable. It flashed on the young girl and was gone, and who should determine the true meaning of it?

To Hedwig, accustomed to read in other glances a tender homage and admiration, which this certainly did not convey, the look remained problematical.

'Why not now?' she asked in surprise. 'What do you mean by that?'

'Oh, nothing, nothing! I was alluding to family affairs which are unknown to you as yet.'

Evidently he repented his hasty error; as though in anger at himself, he fiercely snapped to pieces a branch which he had torn from a neighbouring bush.

Hedwig was silent, but the explanation did not suffice her. She felt there must have been other grounds for the sudden vehemence and bitter emphasis with which he had spoken those words. Was it the thought of her entering the family which had roused him thus? Did this new relation intend to take up a hostile attitude towards her from the very first? And what did that strange, that enigmatic glance portend? She sat thinking over all this, while Oswald, who had turned away, looked persistently over in the opposite direction.

Suddenly, from the higher ground, a low, far-off sound was wafted down. It was like the chirping of many birds, and yet consisted in a single note, long drawn out.

Hedwig and Oswald looked up simultaneously. High in the air above them hovered a swallow. As they looked, it directed its course downwards, shooting by them so close that it almost brushed their foreheads in its arrow-like swiftness. Quickly following the first came a second and a third, and presently out of the misty distance a whole flight was seen emerging. On they came, nearer and still nearer, winging their way rapidly through the moist, heavy air. Then, circling above the woods and hilltops, they dispersed fluttering about in all directions, joyfully greeting, as it were, the old home they had found again. Here, with their gracious, hopeful message, were the first harbingers of spring.

The lonely hill-side had suddenly grown animated, a scene of movement and of life. Restlessly, incessantly, the swallows darted hither and thither, sometimes high overhead at an unattainable distance, then quite low to the ground, almost touching the soil. Backwards and forwards shot the pretty slender creatures on facile wings, so swiftly that the eye could hardly follow them; and all the while the air was resonant with that low happy piping which has nothing in common with the nightingale's trill or the lark's ecstasy of song, and which yet is sweeter to man's ears than either, because it is the herald's note, proclaiming the approach of Spring, and bearing her first message to fair nature, fresh from the long winter trance.

Hedwig had started from her reverie. All else was suddenly forgotten. Bending eagerly forwards, with a glad radiance in her eyes, she watched the tiny newcomers; then, with all the delight, the joyful excitement of a child, she cried:

'Oh, the swallows, the swallows!'

'Truly, they are here,' assented her companion, 'and fortunate they may consider themselves in receiving so hearty a welcome.'

The cool observation fell like a chilling hoarfrost on the girl's innocent joy. She turned and measured the sober spectator at her side with an indignant glance.

'To you, Herr von Ettersberg, it appears inconceivable how one can rejoice over anything. It is not one of your failings, and I dare say the poor swallows to you signify nothing--you have never bestowed the smallest attention on them.'

'Oh, pardon me! I have always envied them for their distant journeyings, their free powers of flight, which nothing shackles or restrains. Ah, liberty! there is nothing better, no higher good in life than liberty!'

'No higher good?'

The question was put in a tone of anger and indignation, making the answer seem all the colder and more decided.

'None, in my estimation, at least.'

'Really, one would think you had hitherto been languishing in chains,' said Hedwig, with unconcealed irony.

'Must one breathe dungeon-air in order to long for freedom?' asked Oswald in the same tone, only that his irony amounted to scathing sarcasm. 'The accidents of life often forge fetters which weigh more heavily than the real iron chains of a captive.'

'Then the fetters must be shaken off.'

'Quite true, they must be shaken off. Only that is much more easily said than done. They who have never been otherwise than free, hardly prize their liberty, looking upon it as a thing of course. They cannot understand how others will strive and struggle for years, will stake life itself to secure that precious guerdon. But, after all, the efforts matter little, if the end be but attained.'

He turned away, and seemed to be attentively watching the swallows in their rapid flittings to and fro. A fresh silence ensued, lasting longer, and putting Hedwig's patience to a still severer test than those which had previously occurred. These lapses in the conversation were strange and intolerable to her. Really, this Oswald von Ettersberg was an audacious personage. In the first place he presumed to reprimand her with regard to her meeting with Edmund; then he declared sharply, and with an emphasis which was almost insulting, that nothing should now induce him to remain on in his cousin's house; then he began to talk of dungeons and all sorts of disagreeable things, and finally lapsed into absolute silence, giving himself up to his meditations as completely as though a young lady, his cousin's promised wife, were not in his company. Hedwig thought the measure of his rudeness was filled, and she rose to go.

'It is time for me to be returning,' she remarked shortly.

'I am at your service.'

Oswald moved forward, intending to escort her, but she waved him back with an ungracious

gesture.

'Thank you, Herr von Ettersberg. I know the way perfectly.'

'Edmund expressly charged me to see you home,' objected Oswald.

'And I release you from the obligation,' rejoined the young lady, in a tone which plainly said the young Count's wishes were not as law to her when opposed to her own will. 'I came alone, and will go back alone.'

Oswald retreated at once.

'Then you must make haste to reach Brunneck,' he said coolly. 'The clouds are gathering yonder, and in half an hour we shall have rain.'

Hedwig looked inquiringly at the threatening clouds. 'I shall be home long before then; and if it comes to the worst, I think nothing of being caught in a spring shower. The swallows have reappeared, you know--have told us that spring is coming at last.'

The words were spoken almost in a tone of challenge, but the gauntlet was not taken up. Oswald merely bowed with an air of constrained politeness, thereby forfeiting the young lady's last remnant of indulgence. She, in return, strove to infuse the utmost chilliness into her parting salutation, after which she hastened away, light and swift of foot as a roe.

This haste was not induced by fear of rain, for when she had left the hill-side well behind her, Hedwig slackened her pace. She only wished to get out of the neighbourhood of this unbearable 'Mentor,' who had tried to extend his system of education to her, and had been guilty of considerable rudeness in the attempt. He had not even raised any serious objection when she declined his escort. She had fully meant it, but the merest politeness demanded some words of regret at her decision. Yet there had been nothing of this; he was visibly delighted at being relieved of a troublesome office. This spoilt young lady, whose beauty, and perhaps also whose wealth, had won for her on all sides attention and lavish homage, looked on such indifference almost in the light of an insult, and she had not fully recovered from the vexation it caused her when she issued from the forest and saw Brunneck lying before her in close vicinity.

Oswald, remaining behind alone, seemed altogether to forget the rain he had prophesied. He stood motionless, with folded arms, leaning against the trunk of a tree, and made no sign of setting out homewards.

The clouds grew heavier and more lowering; the whole forest was now shrouded in mist, and the swallows almost swept the ground with their wings as they shot by to and fro. Patches of white might here and there be seen bearing witness still to the night's hoarfrost; but beneath, amidst all this mist and rime, a great work was going on. The life-germs hidden away in a thousand unsuspected buds and leafless branches were secretly, silently stirring; it wanted but the first balmy breath, the first glow of sunshine, to awaken all Nature from her long slumber. Ungenial as the air might be, there was in it just a touch, a faint suggestion of spring, and a whisper of spring ran through the bare forest. All around mysterious powers were active, weaving their chains, arraying their forces, unseen, unheard, yet felt and understood even by the lonely self-absorbed man who stood gazing dreamily out into the cloudy distance.

A while ago, as he pursued his solitary way through the woods, all had been void and desolate. Not a sound had reached his ears of the language which was now so distinct and eloquent to him. He knew not, or would not know, what had so suddenly opened his understanding; but the harsh, aggressive look died out of his face, and with it faded away the remembrance of a dreary, joyless youth--faded away the rancour and bitterness of spirit which dependence and neglect had engendered in a proud, strong nature. The soft, half-unconscious dreams, which visit others so frequently, had spun their magic web around the cold, impenetrable Oswald. It was, perhaps, his first experience of them, but the spell was therefore the more irresistible. Overhead the swallows were still busy, flitting incessantly to and fro through the heavy, rain-charged air. The happy chirping of their tiny throats, the wonderful whisperings about him, the low voice in his own breast, all repeated in constant refrain that message which other lips had so triumphantly proclaimed: 'Spring is coming, really coming to us at last.'

CHAPTER V.

In the course of a few days the plan of campaign devised by Edmund and Hedwig was carried

into execution. The young people made their important disclosure, declaring their sentiments in most unambiguous terms, and the effects produced were precisely those expected. First came a simultaneous outburst of indignation at Brunneck and at Ettersberg; then followed reproaches, prayers, threats; finally an irrevocable fiat was issued on either side. The Countess solemnly announced to her son, the heir, that she once for all refused her consent to such a marriage; and Fräulein Hedwig Rüstow, on making her avowal, encountered a small hurricane, before which she was fain for a while to bow her head. The Councillor grew fairly distracted with wrath when he heard that an Ettersberg, a member of the family he hated, and his adversary in the Dornau suit, was to be presented to him as a son-in-law.

The parental displeasure, though most pointedly expressed, unfortunately made but small impression on the young people. Prohibited, as a matter of course, from holding any further communication, they calmly within the hour sat down to write to each other, having, with a wise prevision of coming events, already fixed on a plan for the safe conveyance of their letters.

Councillor Rüstow was striding angrily up and down the family sitting-room at the Brunneck manor-house. Hedwig had thought it wise to retire and leave her infuriated parent to himself for a while. The worthy gentleman, finding his daughter beyond his reach, turned fiercely upon his unhappy cousin, whom he bitterly accused of having, by her unpardonable weakness and folly in favouring the acquaintance, paved the way for all that had occurred.

Fräulein Lina Rüstow sat in her accustomed place by the window and listened, going on steadily with the needlework she had in hand. She waited patiently for a pause to supervene. When at length her exasperated cousin was compelled to stop and take breath, she inquired, with perfect imperturbability:

'Tell me, in the first place, Erich, what objection you really have to offer to this marriage?'

The master of the house came to a sudden stand. This was a little too much! For the last half-hour he had been giving expression in every possible way to his anger, his fury, his indignation, and now he was coolly asked what objection he really had to offer to the marriage. The question so amazed and upset him that for a moment he could find no fitting answer.

'Upon my word, I do not understand why you should be so angry,' went on the lady, in the same tone. 'There is evidently a sincere and mutual attachment. Count Ettersberg, in himself, is a most charming person. That unhappy lawsuit, which has so tried your temper during the whole of the winter, will be brought to the simplest conclusion; while, in a worldly point of view, the match is in every respect a brilliant one for Hedwig. Why do you set yourself so strongly against it?'

'Why--why?' cried Rüstow, more and more incensed by this calm, argumentative tone of hers. 'Because I will not suffer my daughter to marry an Ettersberg. Because, once for all, I forbid it--that is why!'

Aunt Lina shrugged her shoulders.

'I do not think Hedwig will surrender to such reasons as those. She will simply appeal to the example of her parents, who married without the father's consent----'

'That was a very different matter,' interrupted Rüstow hotly. 'A very different matter indeed.'

'It was a precisely similar case, only that in that instance all the circumstances were far more unfavourable than they are now, when really prejudice and obstinacy alone stand in the way of the young people's happiness.'

'Well, these are nice compliments you are heaping upon me, I must say,' cried the Councillor, breaking forth anew. 'Prejudice! obstinacy! Have you any more flattering epithets to bestow on me? Don't hesitate, pray. I am waiting to hear.'

'There is no speaking sensibly to you to-day, I see,' observed the lady, tranquilly resuming the work which for a few minutes had been discontinued. 'We will talk of this another time, when you have grown calmer.'

'Lina, you will drive me mad with that abominable composure of yours, which is nothing but affectation. Put that confounded sewing stuff away, do. I can't endure to see you drawing your thread in and out as primly as though there were nothing amiss, while I--I----'

'Feel inclined to pull the whole house about our ears. Don't take the trouble; it will stand after all, you know, just as firm on its foundations as ever.'

'Yes, it will stand, though everyone prove rebellious, though even you set yourself in open opposition to me, the master. Thank God, I have an ally, and a strong one, in the Countess-mother over at Ettersberg. She will show more obstinacy even than I, you may depend upon it. We can't endure each other; we are doing our very best to harass and torment each other by raising fresh quibbles in the lawsuit; but on this point we shall, for once, be agreed. She will soon bring her son to reason, and I am glad of it. It meets my views exactly. I shall act in the same way by my daughter.'

'I do not suppose that the Countess will give her consent very readily,' said Aunt Lina, in a pensive tone. 'To obtain that from her must be Edmund's business.'

'Edmund!' repeated Rüstow, whose indignation was constantly being roused afresh. 'Dear, dear! how very familiar we are, quite like relations already! You regard him altogether in the light of a nephew, I suppose. But you will find yourself mistaken. I say no, and I mean no, so that is all about it.'

With these words he stormed out of the room, banging the door to behind him with a crash which set all the windows jarring. Aunt Lina must indeed have conquered 'her nerves,' for she did not start at the noise, but merely looked after the angry man with a shake of the head, and murmured to herself:

'I wonder how long it will be before he gives in!'

There was certainly less noise and bluster at Ettersberg, but the prospects of the young pair were not on that account more hopeful. The Countess thought the matter serious enough to warrant her in sending for her brother, Baron Heideck, who, in all cases of difficulty, was her stay and counsellor. He answered her summons in person, so Count Edmund had now to contend with the allied forces of mother and guardian.

The latter, who had arrived from the capital a few hours previously, was closeted with the Countess in her own boudoir. He was several years older than his sister, and while she had preserved an almost youthful appearance, a premature look of age, on the contrary, was to be remarked in him. Cold, grave, and methodical in speech and bearing, his outward man at once denoted the bureaucrat of high standing. He listened attentively and in silence to the Countess as she made her report, which concluded in rather desponding terms.

'As I told you in my letter, there is nothing whatever to be done with Edmund. He persists stubbornly in this marriage-scheme, and is constantly urging me to give my consent to it. I really did not know what better course to take than to send for you.'

'You did quite right,' said the Baron; 'for I fear that, left to yourself, you would not have the necessary firmness to resist your darling, and refuse him his heart's desire. I think, however, we are agreed in this--the alliance in question must be prevented at any pains or any cost.'

'Certainly we are,' assented the Countess. 'The only point to be discussed is *how* we are to prevent it. Edmund will shortly come of age, and he will then be absolute master, free to follow his own will.'

'Hitherto he has submitted to yours,' remarked the Count. 'His love for you is paramount.'

'Has been hitherto!' said the Countess, with a rush of bitter feeling. 'But now another shares his love. It remains to be seen whether his mother will retain her old place in his affections.'

'Ah, this maternal sensitiveness of yours has been the cause of all the trouble, Constance,' remonstrated her brother. 'You have loved your son with a jealous exclusiveness which has made you shrink from the thought of his marriage. That was why you refused to entertain the proposal I made to you last year. An alliance suitable in point of rank and in every other respect could then easily have been secured. You see the result of your conduct on that occasion. But let us to the matter in hand. This Rüstow is wealthy?'

'He passes, at least, for wealthy in this part of the country.'

'And in town also. Not long ago he contributed funds towards one of our great industrial undertakings to a surprisingly large amount. Moreover, he is looked upon as an authority in his own particular line. Even at the Ministry his opinion on all subjects connected with agriculture carries weight with it. Add to this his connection by marriage with the Ettersberg family, which, say what you will, exists, and must be taken into account, and it becomes evident that we cannot treat this intended marriage as we would an unworthy *mésalliance*.'

'No, and I think Edmund builds on that fact.'

'He builds simply on your unbounded affection for him, from which he hopes to obtain all he desires--perhaps would have obtained it, had I not stepped in in time. You owe it to your husband's memory and to the name you bear to resist this marriage, which, as you know, he never would have allowed. Remember how he condemned his cousin for contracting a union with Rüstow. You are bound to act according to his wishes.'

'I have done so in all respects,' said the Countess, a little piqued; 'but if Edmund will not listen----'

'It is for you to exact obedience from him, no matter by what means. This plebeian blood must not again be infused into the Ettersberg race. One such taint was sufficient.'

He spoke slowly and meaningly, and the Countess grew pale beneath the menace of his look.

'Armand, what do you mean? I----'

'I am alluding to Rüstow's marriage with your husband's cousin,' the Baron interrupted coldly. 'The reminder was, I think, necessary to warn you that there must be no weakness now. You are not wanting in energy generally, but to Edmund you have always been far too indulgent a mother.'

'Possibly,' said the Countess, with sad and bitter emphasis. 'I have had no one but him to love since you compelled me to accept the Count as my husband.'

'It was not I, but circumstances, that compelled you. I should have thought you had in your youth sufficient experience of poverty and privations to make you bless your brother's hand, which delivered you from that wretched life and placed you in a high position.'

'Bless?' repeated the Countess, in a low, half-stifled voice. 'No, Armand, I have never blessed your action in the matter.'

Baron Heideck frowned.

'I acted according to my conscience and sense of duty. It was my desire to procure for my father one last satisfaction on this side the grave, to free my mother from anxiety as to the future, and to secure for yourself a brilliant and much-envied position. If I used some pressure--some force to deliver you from the trammels of a first and foolish attachment, I did so with the firm conviction that for the Countess Ettersberg the past would be as though it had not been. I could not possibly foresee that my sister would not justify the confidence I placed in her.'

The Countess shuddered as he spoke these words, and turned away.

'Enough of these reminiscences, Armand; I cannot bear them.'

'You are right,' said Heideck, changing his tone. 'We will leave the past, and turn our attention to the present. Edmund must not be allowed to commit this act of youthful folly. I hardly touched on the subject as we drove here from the station--I purposely avoided any discussion of it until I had spoken to you; but a very decided impression was left on my mind that we have not to do with a very deep or serious passion, capable of breaking down all barriers and setting all at defiance in order to obtain its end. He has merely fallen in love with a young and, as I hear, beautiful girl, and is naturally in a great hurry to be married at once. We must take care that this does not occur. We have weapons enough in our armoury to combat any such juvenile sentiment.'

'I hope so,' said the Countess, making a visible effort to regain her composure, and speak in an ordinary conversational tone. 'That is why I asked you to come. You are his guardian, you know.'

Heideck shook his head.

'My guardianship has never been more than a barren legal fact, and in a few months it will lapse altogether. Edmund will hardly bow to its authority but to you he will yield, for he is accustomed to be guided by you. Place before him the choice between this new fancy of his and yourself. Threaten that you will leave Ettersberg if he brings this bride home to the castle. He worships you, and will take no step which would estrange his mother from him.'

'No; he would not do that,' said the Countess in a tone of absolute conviction; 'I am still sure of his love.'

'And you may continue to feel sure of it, if you know how to use your influence over him, as I doubt not you will, to the fullest extent. You are well aware, Constance, that in your son's case, in his case especially, the traditions of the family must be maintained. Remember this, I beg of you.'

'I know it,' said the Countess, drawing a deep breath. 'You may set your mind at rest.'

A long pause ensued. Then Baron Heideck spoke again:

'And now to the other disagreeable matter! Will you send for Oswald? I should like to have some talk with him about this wonderful new project of his.'

The Countess rang the bell.

'Let Herr von Ettersberg know that Baron Heideck wishes to speak to him, and is waiting for him here,' she said to the servant who answered the summons.

The man withdrew with his instructions, and Heideck continued, in a sarcastic vein:

'It must be admitted that Edmund and Oswald are outvying each other just now in their endeavours to add lustre to the family name. One is bent on marrying the daughter of a *ci-devant* farmer, and the other means to set up as a lawyer. Oswald cannot, I fancy, have conceived this idea quite suddenly.'

'I think he has cherished the project for years, but he has never committed himself by a word,' said the Countess. 'It is only now, just when he is on the point of passing his examination, that he thinks fit to publish his plan. I have declared to him, however, in the most decided manner, that he must give up all notion of the law, and prepare to enter a Government office.'

'And what reply did he make to you?'

'He made none--as usual. You know the moody, obstinate silence with which, even as a boy, he received reproof and punishment, the look of insufferable defiance which he always has in readiness, though his lips remain closed. I am persuaded that my opposition only makes him cling the more pertinaciously to his absurd plan.'

'Precisely what I should expect from him, but in this case he will have to give way. A young man who, like Oswald, is absolutely without resources of his own, must, no matter in what position, be for a time dependent on his relations. Disobedience would cost him too dearly.'

The conversation had undergone a marked change. Previously, when Edmund's conduct had been under debate, the Countess and her brother had spoken gravely and with a certain anxiety, but every word testified to the consideration in which the wilful young son and nephew was held. They merely wished to lead, to guide him back into the paths of prudence, and the love he bore his mother was the only constraining influence suggested. But from the moment Oswald's name was mentioned, another and a very different tone prevailed. His sins were reported with harshness, and condemned with great severity; measures of compulsion were at once discussed. Baron Heideck evidently shared in an eminent degree his sister's dislike to this young relation.

The offender now came in. He greeted his aunt and his guardian, whom he had seen only for a few minutes on arrival, with his accustomed calm composure; but a keen observer might have detected the fact that he had armed himself for the coming scene. He stood before them in the 'sombre, obstinate silence' to which allusion had been made, with his ever-ready look of 'insufferable defiance,' and waited for what should be made known to him.

'You have prepared a singular surprise for us,' began Baron Heideck, addressing Oswald. 'For me especially, as I was just about to move in your interest. What are these absurd ideas you are so suddenly disclosing? You refused formerly to enter the army, and now you object to a Government office. Let me tell you that, situated as you are, you have no right to vacillate thus between the only professions which are open to you.'

'I have never vacillated, for no choice has ever been offered me,' replied Oswald quietly. 'I was destined first for the army and then for a Government clerkship, but my inclination was never consulted.'

'And why did you never inform us by a single word that it would please you in the last instance to set yourself against this second plan?' asked the Countess.

'That is easily divined,' interposed Heideck. 'He wished to avoid a long struggle against you and myself, a struggle in which he was sure to succumb, and hoped that by taking us unawares he might paralyse our resistance. But you are mistaken, Oswald. My sister has already informed you that we consider the name and rank of a Count von Ettersberg to be incompatible with the calling of the law, and I repeat to you that you will never receive our consent to your present scheme.'

'I am sorry for that,' was the steady reply. 'For I shall thus be obliged to pursue the course I have determined on without the approval of my nearest relatives.'

The Countess would have started up in anger, but her brother signed to her to be calm.

'Say nothing, Constance. We shall see if he can carry out this famous plan. I really do not understand you, Oswald,' he continued, with withering sarcasm. 'You have been long enough away from home to form some idea of the world and its ways. Have you never said to yourself that without some assured means of existence you can neither pass the examination in the capital, nor live on for years until an income of your own be forthcoming? Have you not reflected that these means may be withdrawn, if you push matters so far as to provoke a rupture with your family? You probably rely on Edmund's good-nature and on his affection for yourself, but in this case my sister will take care that he does not second and support you in your wilful obstinacy.'

'I rely on no one but myself,' declared Oswald. 'Edmund knows that I shall make no claim on him for assistance.'

'Well, perhaps you will allow me, as your ex-guardian, to inquire how you propose to live during the next few years?' said Heideck, in his former scornful tone.

'I think of going to town to stay with Councillor Braun, a lawyer of eminence, whose name is probably known to you.'

'Certainly I know him. He has a considerable reputation at the bar.'

'He was my father's legal adviser, and the intimate friend of our house. I called on him and renewed our acquaintance when Edmund and I were in town together, and he has been good enough to transfer the old friendship from the father to the son. During the time I was at the university, he gave me many hints how best to direct my studies with a view to the career I had already chosen, and since then we have remained in constant correspondence. He wishes now for some assistance in his really overgrown practice, and the assistant of to-day may, very probably

will, be his successor in the future. The berth will be held open for me until I shall have passed my examination. He has asked me to stay at his house during the period of that examination, and this offer I have thankfully accepted.'

Oswald delivered this speech with imperturbable calm, but the astonishment of his hearers knew no bounds. They had supposed that a simple assertion of authority on their part would extinguish all 'absurd ideas,' and quell the rebellious nephew whose dependent position placed him so completely at their mercy. Instead of this, they were met by a steady resolve, a practical, matured plan, every detail of which had been considered and provided for, and which withdrew the young man altogether from their influence and control. The disagreeable surprise this discovery caused them was expressed in the look they now exchanged.

'Really, this is remarkable news,' said the Countess, who could no longer suppress her anger. 'So you have been conspiring against us with a stranger in secret--and this conspiracy has been going on for years!'

'And with what an aim in view!' added Heideck. 'Either in the army or in a Government office your ancient and noble name would have been of service to you; it would have assured you a career. But the advantages you possess you deliberately put from you in order to embrace the law as a profession. I really thought your ambition would soar higher. Are you so wedded--so enthusiastically attached to this new vocation of yours?'

'No,' said Oswald coldly; 'not in the least. But in any other profession I should have been compelled to go on for years accepting--accepting benefits I have hitherto enjoyed; and to this I will not consent. The path I have chosen is the only one that leads to freedom and independence, and to gain these I willingly sacrifice all else.'

The words told of a resolve which was not to be shaken, but at the same time they were barbed with a reproach which the Countess understood but too well.

'You have accepted these benefits so long that you can now conveniently do without them,' she remarked.

The tone of this observation was even more insulting than the words. Oswald's composure seemed to be giving way at length. His quick, short breathing betrayed his emotion, as he replied in accents to the full as biting as hers had been:

'If I have hitherto been held fettered by the chain of my dependence, that assuredly has not been my fault. It was not considered fitting for an Ettersberg to go out into the world and seek his fortune, as a man of humbler origin might have done. I could but yield to the traditional prejudices of my family. I have had to wait on and on for this hour when at length--at length I can take my future into my own hands!'

'Which you seem inclined to do in the most offensive manner possible,' said the Countess, with increasing warmth. 'With the utmost indifference to those family traditions of which you speak, in open opposition to the friends to whom you owe everything. Could my husband have foreseen this, he never would have directed that you should be brought up with his own son, and treated as a child of the house you now disown in this manner. But, indeed, gratitude is a word which seems to have no meaning for you.'

A dangerous light kindled in Oswald's eyes, and they flashed upon the speaker a glance of menace and evil portent.

'I know, aunt, what a heavy burden my uncle laid on you by those directions, but, believe me, I have suffered beneath it even more severely than yourself. It would have been better for me to have been driven out into the world and brought up among strangers, than to pass my life amid splendid surroundings, in a sphere where I have daily, hourly been reminded of my nothingness, where the proud Ettersberg blood in my veins had but to show itself to be instantly repressed. My uncle carried his point, and had me received into this house; beyond that, he made no attempt to shield or protect me. To you I was, from the first, simply a troublesome legacy left by an unfriendly and detested brother-in-law. I was accepted with disinclination, and endured with absolute dislike, and the consciousness of this has sometimes well-nigh driven me desperate. But for Edmund, the one person who showed me any affection, the one who held faithfully by me, in spite of all that was done to estrange us, I could not have borne the life. Gratitude! You require gratitude at my hands? I have never felt any, I never shall feel any towards you; for there is a voice within me which says I am not benefited, but injured. I need not thank, but might ... accuse!'

He flung the last word at her with loud and threatening emphasis. The dykes were broken down, and all the hatred, the bitterness he had secretly borne within him for years flowed out in a stream of fierce rebellion against this woman who, outwardly at least, had been as a mother to him. She had risen in her turn, and they now stood face to face. So might two deadly enemies have measured each other's strength before the fray; the next word would perhaps have led to an irreparable breach, had not Heideck intervened.

'Oswald, you forget yourself!' he cried. 'How can you venture to address such language to your aunt?'

The keen, cold tones of his voice brought reflection to both at the same moment. The Countess sank slowly back into her seat, and her nephew retreated a step. For a few seconds a painful silence reigned. Then Oswald spoke in a changed voice, in a tone freezing as ice:

'You are right; I have to apologize. But at the same time I must beg of you to allow me henceforth to go my own way unhindered. The path I shall follow will, in all probability, take me from Ettersberg for ever, and all further connection may cease between us. I think this is what we all should wish, and it will certainly be best for the family, collectively and individually.'

Then, without waiting for an answer, or any sign of dismissal, he turned and left the room.

'What did that mean?' asked the Countess in a low voice, when the door had closed upon him.

'It meant a threat,' said Heideck. 'Could you not understand it, Constance? It was, I think, plainly enough expressed.'

He sprang up, and paced several times uneasily up and down the room. Even the bureaucrat's cold and measured calm was not proof against such a scene as this. Presently he halted before his sister.

'We must give way. The matter has now assumed a different aspect--a very different aspect. Active resistance on our part might lead to serious trouble--the last few moments have made that evident to me.'

'You really think so?'

The Countess spoke these words almost mechanically. She was still gazing fixedly over at the door through which Oswald had departed.

'Decidedly I think so,' said Heideck, in a determined tone. 'The fellow suspects more than is good for any of us. It would be dangerous to irritate him--besides which, we have no longer any power to control his acts. By this masterly scheme of his, he has secured for himself an unassailable position. I certainly was not prepared for it, but at least we now know what lies hidden beneath that calm, indifferent exterior.'

'I have long known it,' declared the Countess, who seemed only now to be recovering the full use of her faculties. 'Not without reason have I feared those cold, searching eyes. From the very first time I saw that boy's face and met his look, a sort of presentiment awoke within me that he would work ruin to me and to my son.'

'Folly!' said Heideck. 'Whatever Oswald may suspect, it never can or will be more than a suspicion; and he will take good care not to put it into words. It was only in the great excitement of the moment that he allowed that hint to escape him; but no matter, there must not be a renewal of this scene. He is right in one thing at least--it will be better for him in future to avoid Ettersberg; thus the connection with Edmund will cease. In our own interest, we must let him pursue the career he has chosen.'

Meanwhile Oswald had passed rapidly through the Countess's apartments, and was about to turn from them into the corridor, where he met Edmund on his way to his mother. Gay, lighthearted, and careless as usual, the young Count stopped at once, caught his cousin by the arm, and proceeded to interrogate him.

'Well, Oswald, how did the judgment-scene in there go off? We must hold firmly together now, you know, for we are both in the same boat--only my case smacks of romance, whereas yours has a dry legal savour. I underwent a sort of preliminary examination in the carriage just now, and am about to appear before the high tribunal of justice. Is my uncle in a very ungracious humour?'

'He will hardly be ungracious to you,' was the laconic reply.

'Oh, I am not in the least afraid!' cried Edmund, laughing. 'I should have won my mother over long ago, if I had had her alone. She knows it, and that is why she summoned my uncle to her aid. He is just a trifle more difficult to manage, though I don't suppose even he will bear too hardly on me. But you, Oswald!--he came close up to his cousin, and looked him searchingly in the face--'you have that frown on your brow again, that bitter expression of countenance I dislike so much. They have been tormenting you, I am afraid.'

'You know these things cannot be settled without some rather warm discussion,' replied Oswald evasively. 'But I have gained my end, notwithstanding. One word more, Edmund. I shall probably leave Ettersberg sooner than I at first intended--perhaps in the course of a few days.'

'Why?' exclaimed the young Count. 'What has happened? You had determined to stay until the autumn. Has my uncle offended you, that you now talk of leaving at once? I shall stand no nonsense of that sort, as I shall let him know on the spot----'

'I tell you everything is arranged and settled,' Oswald interrupted. 'Nothing whatever has happened. My aunt and her brother are naturally rather incensed against me, but they will place no further obstacles in my way.'

'Do you mean it in earnest?' asked Edmund in surprise. He evidently could not understand this sudden strange compliance.

'In right good earnest. You will hear it from themselves by-and-by. Now go and stand your trial. They will not be too hard on you. You have only to appeal to your mother's love--whereas I had to invoke fear to my aid.'

Edmund stared at him in amazement.

'Fear? Fear of what--of whom? You really do sometimes use the most extraordinary expressions.'

'Never mind, go now,' insisted Oswald. 'I can give you an account of our interview later on.'

'All right.' Edmund turned to the door, but paused again on the threshold. 'I must say one thing more, though, Oswald. I will not hear of this sudden departure of yours. You promised to stay until the autumn, and nothing shall induce me to let you go before. It will be bad enough for me to have to do without you then for months--for you will hardly get to Ettersberg before that abominable examination is over. I know that beforehand.'

With these words he departed. Oswald looked after him moodily. 'For months? Ah, we must learn to do without each other for good and for all,' he said. Then in a lower voice he added, 'I did not think I should have felt it so keenly.'

CHAPTER VI.

More than two months had elapsed. Midsummer had arrived, but the houses of Ettersberg and Brunneck were still, as Count Edmund expressed it, playing the Montague and Capulet game. Neither the Countess nor Rüstow had yielded an inch. They were vigorous as ever in their opposition to the projected marriage between their children, but these latter only clung the more tenaciously to their plan. In spite of prohibitions they met often, and wrote to each other still more frequently. To manage the first, it had been found necessary to include Aunt Lina in the plot, and that good lady thought it better that the meetings, which certainly would have taken place under any circumstances, should be held with her sanction and in her presence. She had long ago been won over to the young people's side, and the lovers themselves took matters very easily. It was not in the nature of either Hedwig or Edmund to take a sentimental or tragic view of their temporary separation. A love affair, the course of which had constantly run smooth, would no doubt have appeared to them excessively tame and wearisome. Parental opposition gave to this courtship the necessary spice of romance. They revelled in the situation with all the eagerness of their youthful years, and looked on themselves and their true love as intensely poetical and interesting. Neither felt any uneasiness as to the final issue; they knew too well that they, their parents' spoilt and petted darlings, would ultimately carry their point. Meanwhile the Countess posed as the inexorable mother, and the Councillor was fiercer and more prone to ire than ever. Signs, however, were not wanting that the fortresses were not quite as impregnable as they pretended to be, that they would finally succumb to the daily assaults to which they were subjected.

The *dénoûment* came more speedily than any of the parties concerned had expected. Fräulein Lina Rüstow had been absent for a few days staying in town, where she had purchases to make. She came back to Brunneck suspecting nothing, and prepared to find the old feud with Ettersberg raging fiercely as when she left. Rather surprised at being received on her arrival by her cousin alone, she made inquiries after Hedwig, who was nowhere to be seen.

'Hedwig?' stammered Rüstow, looking half embarrassed, half wrathful. 'She is not here just now; you will see her by-and-by.'

Aunt Lina inquired no further. There had probably been some fresh discussion on the subject of the projected marriage, a circumstance which never promoted the comfort of any member of the household, for the Councillor was in the habit of venting his anger on all about him, his daughter only excepted. On this occasion, however, the traveller felt herself to be in possession of a piece of intelligence which would scare away ill-humour. They had hardly got into the parlour when she burst forth with it.

'I have brought you some news, Erich. Your solicitor wanted to send you a telegram, but I begged him to let me convey the pleasant tidings. You have won your suit in the first instance. Dornau has been adjudged to Hedwig.'

'I am glad of it, glad of it, in spite of all that has come and gone. But I wish the judgment had been given a few weeks back; now my pleasure in it is spoiled, completely spoiled! So we have won the suit?'

'Subject to appeal, of course--though our solicitor seems confident about the final issue. No doubt the opposite party will do everything in their power to contest the victory with us.'

'They will do nothing of the kind,' grumbled Rüstow, still with the same queer, embarrassed look.

'Of course they will; there can be no doubt of that. The lawyer has already taken his measures in view of an appeal to a higher court.'

'He may save himself the trouble,' Rüstow broke forth. 'Nobody is thinking of appealing. The lawsuit is over and done with, and the end of the story is that Dornau will go to Ettersberg after all.'

'To Ettersberg? Why, don't I tell you ... But, good heavens, Erich, what makes you look so black and miserable, and why is Hedwig out of the way? What has happened? Is she ill, or----'

'Now, don't get excited,' said Rüstow, interrupting the flow of questions. 'Hedwig is quite well and in excellent spirits, and at the present moment is staying over at Ettersberg with her future mother-in-law. That is right, Lina, sit down. I shan't take it amiss if you show some surprise. I showed and felt not a little myself at first.'

Aunt Lina had indeed dropped on to a seat, and was staring at her cousin in speechless, petrified amazement. He went on again:

'These young people have really had the most wonderful luck! You were within a hair's-breadth of finding us all dead and gone, Lina. The Countess was as nearly drowned as could be, and we were within an ace of having our necks broken.'

'Merciful powers! And you call that luck?' exclaimed the old lady, in a tone expressive of horror.

'I said "nearly" and "within an ace," did not I? Well, the upshot of it all was a betrothal on the spot. The whole business went upon wheels; deadly peril, consequent emotion, embracing of the lovers! We were in the midst of it all, and found ourselves giving our parental benediction almost before we knew what had happened. Oh, those confounded black Ettersberg beasts! Why do my horses never run away, I wonder?'

'What in the world are your horses to me at this moment?' broke in his cousin, half desperate with the prolonged suspense. 'If you go on in this way, I shall never hear what has happened. Do try and tell the story rationally.'

'Yes, yes, you are right. I must tell you all about it calmly and quietly,' said the Councillor, inaugurating the promised calm by pacing violently up and down the room, as was his wont when much excited. 'Well, then, the day before yesterday I drove over with Hedwig to pay a visit to Neuenfeld. You will remember that the road lies over that steep Stag's Hill, where just at the summit the path is so narrow that great caution is required for two vehicles to pass side by side. Precisely at this spot, what should we meet but the Ettersberg carriage with the Countess in it! We, of course, took no notice, pretended not to know each other; but our coachmen, instead of not noticing, rushed together like mad. I shouted to Anthony to stop, but the other idiot came tearing on, until the animals brushed against each other. The high-spirited Ettersberg steeds took this amiss. They reared and plunged and kicked, and finally set off at furious speed, almost smashing our wheels for us as they passed. The coachman tried all sorts of foolish manœuvres in the hope of checking them, upon which they took to their heels and ran away with him in good earnest. Springing out of the carriage, I saw at a glance that it was too late--they were spinning down the hill as fast as a top. The coachman flew off the box; the footman, instead of seizing the reins, clung to his seat with might and main. The Countess screamed for help, and so they went on, straight down towards the pond which lies at the foot of the hill, and is so admirably situated for drowning purposes.'

Aunt Lina was listening in breathless suspense.

'Frightful! Horrible! Was there no help at hand?'

'Certainly; I was at hand,' said Rüstow drily; 'and at need I can play the angel of rescue, though it is not my habitual occupation. There was not time for much reflection, and I soon gave up running after the carriage. Happily we had halted close to that steep footpath which shortens the way down by one half. How I got to the bottom I don't know. Anyhow, I was there as soon as the carriage, and just contrived to stop it as it reached the pond.'

'Thank God!' cried the old lady, with a sigh of relief.

'So said I, a little later on--just at that moment I was furious. There I stood with the Countess in my arms, and no one to give me any assistance. She had gone off into a swoon, and that fool of

a man was so bewildered and scared, that he was nearly as unconscious as his mistress. Now, a pair of restive horses I can manage at a pinch, but fainting ladies are altogether out of my line. Presently, however, Hedwig came flying down the footpath, and then Anthony, and then the man who had been thrown--he was limping terribly, and had a famous bump on his forehead, but that served him right. It was his folly and reckless driving which had caused all the mischief.'

'And the Countess?' interposed his listener eagerly.

'Well, happily the Countess had escaped uninjured. We carried her into a neighbouring house belonging to one of the rural police, and here she partly recovered from her fright. The gentle, well-mannered horses, besides running away, had accorded to themselves the special pleasure of breaking their carriage-pole and of so injuring our wheels in the rencontre, that we could not move the landau from the spot. So I sent the footman over to Ettersberg to fetch another vehicle, despatched Anthony and the policeman, who happened to be at home, to the scene of the disaster, and dismissed the coachman with his black monsters, which he conducted home in safety. We three remained alone--it was a pleasing moment, as you may suppose.'

'I do hope and trust, Erich, that you did not behave with rudeness,' said Aunt Lina reproachfully.

'No, rudeness was out of the question--unfortunately!' replied Rüstow, in a tone of sincere regret. 'The Countess was still as pale as death and half fainting. I had received a slight memorial of the affair myself, a mere scratch on the arm, which, however, bled rather profusely; and the poor child, Hedwig, ran from one to the other, not knowing whom she should help first. In such a situation politeness comes as a thing of course. We were therefore intensely polite to each other, and intensely anxious about each other's welfare. I hoped the matter would blow over with an expression of thanks and a courteous farewell, and I was looking out, longing for the arrival of the Ettersberg carriage, when suddenly, instead of it. Count Edmund came up at a tearing gallop. From the footman's confused report he had thought that his mother was injured or half dead, and he had not waited for the carriage to be got ready, but had jumped on the first horse that came to hand and had ridden over as though his own life had been at stake. I should not have believed the young jackanapes had so much heart. He rushed into the house and into his mother's arms like a madman, and for the first moment or so he evidently saw and thought of no one but her. I must say that pleased me--pleased me much. He seems to be passionately attached to his mother.'

At this point the narrator's voice softened a little. Unfortunately his cousin took it into her head to produce her handkerchief and press it to her eyes, which at once roused the Councillor to a contrary humour.

'I do believe you are going to cry,' he said, turning upon her sharply. 'Let us have no nonsense of that sort, pray. There has been emotion enough and to spare. Well, of course there now ensued a string of questions and explanations,' he went on, taking up again the thread of his narrative; 'a lively description, in which, in spite of my protests, I was made to figure as a sort of hero and knight-errant. The Countess overflowed with gratitude, and all at once Edmund threw his arms round my neck, declaring I had saved his mother's life, and that he would rather owe such a debt to me, the father of his Hedwig, than to anyone in the world.' Here Rüstow's strides grew longer and his countenance more wrathful. 'Yes, that is what he had the coolness to say, "the father of his Hedwig"! I tried to shake him off; then Hedwig got the other side of me, and began the same story about the mother of her Edmund. Presently the Countess stepped up, and held out her hand to me--well, you can imagine the rest. As I said before, a general embracing and reconciliation went on, and we only came to our senses when the carriage, which had followed the Count, drove up to the door. As it further appeared that ours was totally disabled, we had no alternative but to mount all together and drive over to Ettersberg. It was agreed ultimately that Hedwig should remain with the Countess, who was really much upset by the fright she had had, and I ... well, here I am, left by myself in my own house, without a soul to keep me company.'

'Please to remember I count as somebody,' said Aunt Lina, a little piqued. 'You don't seem to reckon me at all.'

Rüstow grumbled something that was unintelligible. At this moment a servant came in, and announced the pastor of Brunneck, who was a friend of the house.

'There!' cried the master, in a tone of desperation. 'There! he has come over to congratulate us on the approaching marriage--he has, as sure as I stand here. The story is going the round of the neighbourhood already. Each time I have shown my nose outside the door to-day, somebody has come up to me with a smirk and a smile, and some hint about the "happy event." But I can't stand it yet. I must collect my thoughts and get used to the idea first. Lina, you'll do me the favour to receive the parson. In my present frame of mind, I tell you, I am capable of chucking anyone out of the window who should come to me with his congratulations!'

So saying, the Councillor ran out of one door just as the pastor was admitted by the other. This was fortunate, for the worthy man had no sooner entered than he proceeded solemnly and with much unction to offer to the old lady his heartfelt congratulations on the coming 'happy event,' the news of which had, he said, filled him with genuine delight.

CHAPTER VII.

The day on which the young Lord of Ettersberg attained his majority had come and gone, being celebrated with much splendour. The Countess judged this a fitting occasion for the display of all the grandeur of which Ettersberg was capable, and displayed it accordingly was in fullest measure. In the spacious, brilliantly lighted apartments of the castle there gathered a gay and numerous throng, for whom the fête, besides its more immediate cause, had yet another and a special interest. The young couple, who had been quietly betrothed at Brunneck some weeks previously, in the presence only of members of the two families, now made their first appearance together in public, and were accordingly overwhelmed by the congratulations of their friends. The news of the engagement had, as may be supposed, created a considerable stir in the neighbourhood; but the astounding fact was in some small degree explained by a report of the incident which had brought it about. It was easy to understand how the Countess, carried away by her gratitude, had held out the hand of reconciliation to a man whose courage and presence of mind had saved her life, how in such a moment her class-prejudices had given way, and she had consented to an alliance which, so it was said, she had at first vehemently opposed. Equally intelligible was it that after such an episode the Councillor should have yielded up his long-cherished grudge against the Ettersberg family; especially as the Dornau lawsuit had been decided in his favour, and his stubborn pride had thus received satisfaction. On the whole, Count Edmund's choice provoked envy rather than hostile attack, particularly among his younger compeers. The heiress of Brunneck and Dornau was no unfitting consort, even for a Count von Ettersberg. Similar marriages were constantly arranged where no such romantic inclination prevailed, where the rich heiress was not, as in this case, a youthful, beautiful, and accomplished lady.

But whatever might be the judgment passed on them in private, the young engaged couple were, of course, met on all sides by flattering speeches and the most amiable expressions of interest.

Baron Heideck did not honour the castle with his presence on the occasion, though, in his quality of guardian to the heir, he had been confidently expected. He did not surrender his point so easily as the Countess, but persisted in his exclusive views. Fortunately, Edmund had wisely arranged that the news of his engagement should reach his uncle in the capital precisely at the time it was made generally public. The Countess could not possibly recede now, and any interference on her brother's part would come too late. Nevertheless, the Baron wrote a stern letter, reproaching his sister with her weak and foolish compliance, and would not understand how anyone could be so carried away by the emotion of the moment as to offer up their 'principles.' He did not know how the mother's love had secretly been at work, undermining her stern resolve, and paving the way for the sudden concession. It so angered him that he went the length of refusing to be present at the coming festivities. By his mother's express wish, Edmund wrote to him, begging him to reconsider this decision, but he merely sent a short cool note in reply, declaring that his official duties would not permit him to leave town just then; all the formalities attendant on the coming of age should be settled by writing.

Edmund bore the blow with much philosophy, but the Countess was greatly annoyed. She had always been guided by her brother's opinion, and now felt his displeasure the more keenly that in her heart she shared his way of thinking. She saw, however, that having gone so far, the position she had taken up must be maintained before the world. So she set herself to the task before her, and with much tact and charming affability of manner convinced everyone that the consent, which in truth circumstances had wrung from her, had been spontaneously and freely given.

Supported by her son and his promised bride, the Countess received the guests as they arrived. Her toilette was sumptuous and in finest taste, and the fact that she was still a very beautiful woman had never made itself so triumphantly manifest as on this occasion. At her side stood her future daughter-in-law, radiant in all the bloom and grace of early youth; yet the elder lady's beauty shone undimmed by the contrast. Edmund's eyes rested now and again with loving admiration on his handsome, proud mother, who seemed to claim his attention in almost equal degree with his affianced bride.

'The Countess looks magnificent to-day,' said the Councillor, going up to his cousin. 'Magnificent, upon my word! and she knows how to do this sort of thing--that, one must admit. It is all proportionate and on a grand scale, and the lady has a wonderful talent of making herself the life and centre of the whole affair. She sees everything, has something pleasant to say to everyone. Hedwig may learn much from her in this respect.'

'You seem fond of extremes,' remarked Aunt Lina, who had retired to a quiet corner seat, whence she could observe at ease all that was going on. 'From a most unreasonable dislike you

have gone over to boundless admiration of the Countess. Why, I noticed you even kissed her hand just now.'

'What, don't I please you even yet?' asked Rüstow, in a tone of offence. 'You wrung from me a solemn promise that I would make myself agreeable tonight, and now that I am doing everything in my power to keep my word--making extraordinary efforts, in fact--you won't even acknowledge it.'

Aunt Lina smiled rather mischievously.

'Oh, but indeed I do! I admire the "extraordinary efforts" quite as much as the rest of the company, who really do not know what to make of it. People are accustomed to see you shrouded in a sort of thundercloud, and this sudden sunshine puzzles them. But I have one question to ask, Erich. What has gone wrong between Hedwig and Oswald von Ettersberg? They avoid each other openly in a manner which almost courts attention.'

'Gone wrong? Nothing, so far as I know. Hedwig cannot endure this cousin, and I fancy he does not care much for her.'

The last words betrayed some little pique. Evidently the Councillor could not understand anyone not caring much for his daughter.

'But there must be some grounds for this mutual dislike. Young Ettersberg's manners are not particularly agreeable, I must say.'

'Ah, but he has a real genius for farming and agriculture generally. Now, if *he* were the heir coming into his own, things would wear a very different aspect here. He sees clearly how the estates are being mismanaged; and the other day, when he was over at Brunneck, he gave me some hints and information which will lead me to take serious steps myself, if Edmund will not act. We talked the matter over thoroughly.'

'Yes, and at great length,' rejoined the lady. 'It almost seemed to me as if Herr von Ettersberg held you to the conversation purposely, that he might not have to listen to all Edmund's tender speeches to his beloved.'

'I am afraid he has some nonsensical high-flying notions in his head,' said Rüstow. 'The marriage does not meet with his high approval. I saw that the very day of the accident. He received us here at Ettersberg, and when Edmund lifted his future wife out of the carriage, my young gentleman looked as if the skies had fallen upon him; he darted a glance at the pair which by no means pleased me. However, he recovered himself in a minute, and was very polite, expressing regret at his aunt's accident, and wishes for his cousin's happiness, but in a cool, half-hearted sort of way which showed that both were forced. He does not appear to possess much heart, but a genius for farming he has, and no mistake.'

'Did that flattering compliment refer to me?' asked Edmund, who just then drew near with Hedwig, and overheard the last words.

Rüstow turned.

'To you, no! We were talking of your cousin. You, I am sorry to say, have no practical gifts that I have been able to discover.'

'None in the world,' Edmund laughingly assured him. 'That was made plain to me the other day when I was over at Brunneck, and you were engrossed in one of your endless debates about forest-culture and drainage. Hedwig and I only caught a word here and there, but that was enough to make us yawn.'

'These are views which promise well for a landed proprietor, I must say,' remarked the Councillor tartly. 'So our conversation made you yawn, did it? Why, you and Hedwig had not a sensible word to say to each other. I heard nothing but jokes and laughter. Yet you had every cause to listen with attention. The state of the timber on your----'

'Oh, for Heaven's sake, spare me all that to-day,' broke in Edmund. 'If you really must talk on these subjects, I will bring you over the genius you admire so much. Oswald is capable of discussing timber all the evening. But where is he, I wonder? I have missed him for the last quarter of an hour or so. Everard, have you seen Herr von Ettersberg? Perhaps he is over in the ballroom.'

'No, Count, I have just come from there,' replied the old servant, who was passing with a tray.

'Well, I shall have to go and look him up myself. One can never reckon on Oswald on such occasions as this. He leaves the entire burden on me. Come, Hedwig, dancing will begin soon; we ought to go and see that all the necessary arrangements are made.'

So saying, the young Count placed Hedwig's hand within his arm, and led her away to the ballroom, which lay at the other extremity of the long and glittering suite of apartments.

The spacious ballroom was for the moment quite empty, as also was the adjoining

conservatory, and this fact probably had beguiled Oswald into seeking a refuge there. The intention he had expressed of leaving Ettersberg at once had been combated on all sides, and especially by Edmund, who warmly insisted on his cousin remaining at the castle, and besieged him perpetually with entreaties and reproaches. The Countess even, and Baron Heideck, after due reflection, had decided that it might be a serious matter to provoke an open rupture with this rebellious nephew, and to launch him forth into the world in hostile mood. They therefore also opposed his departure. The family differences, which could not be healed, must at least be hidden from others. No further opposition should thwart the young man's plans.

It was agreed that his future should be left altogether in his own hands; so he had yielded to the pressure put upon him, and consented to stay on until the autumn, according to his original intention.

Oswald was standing before a group of camellias, apparently absorbed in the contemplation of their wealth of bloom. In reality he was insensible to it, as to all else around him. The expression of his countenance had little in common with the general rejoicing of the day, which placed the young Lord of Ettersberg in full possession of his own. An ominous frown contracted his brow, which had been smooth enough as he mixed in the ranks of the company. It was one of those moments when the mask of calm, imperturbable indifference was dropped. This mask the habit of years and the young man's self-control had enabled him to assume, but how foreign to his real nature was the indifference he feigned might be seen from his heaving breast and clenched teeth as he now stood alone, battling with himself. It had been impossible to him to remain amid the brilliant throng. He felt he must seek solitude, that he might draw breath freely, that he might not stifle beneath the crowd of thoughts which surged wildly through his mind. Was this really but the mean, bitter envy of an ingrate, who repaid benefits received with hate, and could not forgive the Fortune which favoured his cousin more highly than himself? Oswald's attitude implied more than this. There was in it something of the proud defiance with which a subdued and downtrodden right may at times assert itself, something of unspoken yet menacing protest against all the gay, splendid doings of the day.

'So here you are!' Edmund's voice broke in upon the stillness.

Oswald started and turned round, to behold the young Count standing in the doorway. Edmund went up to him now quickly, and continued, in a reproachful tone:

'You seem to look upon yourself quite in the light of a guest to-day! You turn your back on the company and devote yourself to a quiet inspection of these camellias, instead of helping me to do the honours of the house.'

A moment had sufficed to restore to Oswald his wonted calm, but there was a lurking bitterness in his tone as he replied:

'That, I imagine, is your business exclusively. Are you not the hero of the day?'

'No doubt, in a double capacity,' replied Edmund lightly. 'As a man coming into his property, and a man about to be married. In this last quality, I have to read you a lecture. You have omitted to ask Hedwig for a dance; yet you might have foreseen that she would be besieged by petitions on all sides. Luckily, I interfered in your behalf, and have secured for you the only waltz that was left at her disposal. I hope you will duly appreciate my self-abnegation.'

It hardly seemed to be appreciated, or at least not in the measure expected. Oswald's answer betrayed a marked coldness.

'You are very kind. To tell you the truth, it had been my intention not to dance this evening.'

'Now this is too bad!' exclaimed his cousin angrily. 'It would be shameful if you were to refuse now. Why should you? you used to dance formerly.'

'Because my aunt would not excuse me. The duty was always an onerous one. You know how little taste I have for dancing.'

Edmund shrugged his shoulders.

'No matter; this waltz you will have to undertake, whether you like it or not. I have expressly retained it for you.'

'If Fräulein Rüstow has consented----'

'"Fräulein Rüstow"! Just the tone in which Hedwig said, "If Herr von Ettersberg desires it"! How often have I asked you both to give up this stiff form of address, and to behave towards each other as relations should? But it seems to me that every time you meet you grow more formal and freezing. This is getting quite unbearable.'

'I was not aware that I had been wanting in proper respect towards the lady of your choice.'

'Oh no, certainly not. You are, on the contrary, so exceedingly reverential to each other, that it chills the very blood in my veins to listen to you. I really do not understand you, Oswald. The

reserve you affect towards Hedwig is so patent, so obvious, you positively cannot complain if she is occasionally a little ... a little brusque in her manner towards you.'

Oswald accepted the rebuke with perfect equanimity. His hand toyed, absently as it were, with one of the flowering branches as he replied:'

'Say no more about it, Edmund--be very sure that this reserve of mine meets the lady's wishes exactly. As you have asked for a waltz in my name, I shall claim it, of course, but you must not force me to take any further part in the ball. It really was my intention not to dance tonight at all.'

'All right,' said Edmund, who was as easily appeased as ruffled, and whose anger never lasted long. 'If you are bent on depriving the ladies of a partner, I cannot compel you to favour them, and nothing shall induce me to put myself out of temper tonight. It really would be thankless of me on such a day as this, a day which fulfils my every wish. You see, Hedwig and I were right not to take a tragic view of the situation, though Rüstow's deed of heroism settled the matter more quickly than we had ventured to hope. The feud between the houses is at an end, and our romance winds up to the merry tune of wedding-bells. I knew it would be so!'

The fearless, happy confidence which marked the young Count's bearing, and was to-day more strikingly expressed than ever, formed a strong contrast to his cousin's almost gloomy gravity. Oswald's eyes rested with a dark and moody gaze on the other's bright face.

'You are Fortune's favoured child,' he said slowly. 'All the good things of this life fall to your share.'

'All?' repeated Edmund jestingly. 'No; you are in error there. My future father-in-law's genuine admiration, for instance, is given to you. He declares you are a heaven-born genius, extols your practical notions, and no doubt in his heart regrets that you are not destined to be his son-in-law in my stead.'

Harmless as was the jest, and lightly as the words were spoken, they produced a visible and painful effect. Oswald's brow contracted darkly, and he replied with much irritation:

'How often have I begged you to spare me this perpetual banter? Cannot you desist from it for once, if it be only for a moment?'

Count Edmund, who greatly enjoyed the spectacle of his cousin's wrath, broke into a fit of laughter.

'Make your mind easy,' he said. 'I should be the first to protest against an exchange, and I hardly think Hedwig would be disposed to agree to it. I have no intention of abdicating in your favour. But now come. It is high time for us to return to the guests.'

Oswald, who had no further pretext for lingering behind, obeyed the summons, and the two young men returned together to the reception-rooms. Here the heir's absence had already been remarked. The Countess's eyes were roving in impatient quest of her son, for she was waiting to give the signal for the dancing to begin, and a cloud lay on fair Hedwig's brow as the two gentlemen entered. The young lady thought it most unnecessary that Edmund should go off in search of his unsociable cousin, and could not excuse him for deserting her side for such an object. She did not like this particular new relation, with his icy hauteur and reserve, which never condescended to a word of flattery or admiration, and therefore gave herself little trouble to conceal from him the fact that the promise of a waltz had been almost wrested from her. Oswald was constrained to utter some words of thanks, but even in so doing he let it be seen that he was in reality little moved by the high distinction conferred on him. No special attention was vouchsafed his speech. Hedwig made a brief reply, cold as the address had been, diligently studying the design of her fan as she spoke, and then turned at once to her affianced husband. Poor Edmund saw that his efforts to establish a friendship between his cousin and future wife were worse than useless; they invariably produced an effect contrary to that desired. He had to confess to himself that this, his latest half-playful, half-serious attempt to bring the two together, had resulted in a complete fiasco.

The ball now began in earnest, and soon all the younger members of the company were taking part in its revels. Oswald von Ettersberg was the one exception. He remained true to his resolution, and abstained from dancing, to the great displeasure of the Countess. Since their last interview, however, that lady had refrained from any attempt to control her nephew, and she now allowed him to have his way in silence. Edmund and Hedwig, on the other hand, gave themselves up heart and soul to the pleasure of the hour. They both danced well, and were passionately fond of the exercise. It would have been difficult to find a handsomer couple than the young heir and his promised bride as they floated through the room, radiant with youth, happiness, and beauty, surrounded by the aureole of wealth and Fortune's fairest gifts. Not a cloud dimmed the broad, sunshiny horizon of their future.

Baron Heideck himself must that evening have given in his adhesion, have become reconciled to his nephew's choice, so charming did the young girl appear in her dress of pale pink silk adorned with airy white laces and roses strewn, as it seemed, with a random hand. Her luxuriant curly hair, restrained by no net, but held together simply by a flowering spray, waved over her

shoulders in all its rich abundance. A happy light shone in the dark-blue eyes, and the beautiful face, slightly flushed by the rapid movement of the dance, beamed with youthful excitement and delight--perhaps a little also with gratified vanity, for it could not be doubtful that the young lady was conscious of her all-conquering charms and of the triumph she had that evening achieved.

To this triumph Edmund was by no means insensible. The evident admiration which his betrothed excited on all sides flattered him most agreeably. He was unremitting in his attentions to Hedwig, and perfectly captivating in his general efforts to please. Oswald was right. The Count was indeed the favoured child of Fortune--of Fortune, which, in addition to all that had been his from birth, now set him free to follow the dictates of his heart. Truly, all the good things of this life fell to his share.

Three or four dances had gone by, and now came the waltz which Edmund had solicited in his cousin's name. Oswald approached his fair partner, and offered his arm with his accustomed cold politeness.

'You have not danced at all this evening, Herr von Ettersberg,' said Hedwig, a little ironically. 'It seems that an exception is to be made in my honour alone. Is it really true, as I heard a lady asserting just now, that you positively detest dancing?'

'I may say, at least, that I am not fond of it,' he replied.

'Oh, then I am sincerely sorry that you should impose such a penance on yourself on my account. It was Edmund's wish, I imagine, that we should fulfil the demands of etiquette by going through this waltz together?'

The sarcasm failed in its effect, for Oswald remained perfectly cool. He evaded any direct reply to her rather captious remark, and answered ambiguously:

'I hardly knew whether I was to accept Edmund's promise as sufficient. I thought it advisable to assure myself personally of your consent, Fräulein.'

Hedwig bit her lip. Her supposition was confirmed. This most ungallant new relation made no attempt to disguise from her that the arrangement had been a master-stroke of Edmund's diplomacy, but coolly allowed her to divine the fact. It almost seemed as though the young Count might have to pay some penalty for this, for the young lady's lip curled with a defiance of which he had already had some slight experience. The promise she had given could not, however, be recalled without absolute offence, especially as the dance had already commenced.

'I await your bidding,' said Oswald, pointing to the couples flying past.

Hedwig made no reply, but placed her hand on his arm with an air of resignation, and next moment they, too, were whirling through the room.

That was a strange waltz, danced merely in satisfaction of 'etiquette.' Hedwig had purposed to make it as short and as formal as possible, and yet something like confusion overcame her when her partner placed his arm about her waist. Hitherto they had not even shaken hands, but had restricted themselves to the severest outward forms of politeness, and now suddenly they were so near, so near each other! Up to this time Oswald had hardly noticed the girl's loveliness by a glance. He had, almost purposely, abstained from looking at her, and she had resented this as a sort of affront. But now his eyes were riveted on her face, fascinated, as it seemed, by some spell he could not break, and those eyes spoke quite another language from the sternly-set lips. His breast heaved with a quick tempestuous movement, and the arm which encircled the girl's slender figure trembled perceptibly.

Hedwig felt this. She raised her eyes in surprised inquiry to his face, and there met again that enigmatic expression which had so startled her on a previous occasion when they had been left together alone on the hill-side. She had not understood then the sudden, ardent flash, the kindling gaze--often had she pondered over it, wondering what it could purport--oftener than she cared to confess to herself; now some notion of its meaning dawned upon her. No clear recognition of the truth as yet, only a dim vague foreshadowing, which gradually, very gradually, took form and substance. Vague as was the feeling, it harassed and agitated her. Though the danger it seemed to imply as yet menaced only from afar, it already exercised a magnetic influence, which slowly, irresistibly drew her on and on towards the fatal orbit.

Mechanically, half as in a dream, the girl followed the windings of the dance. The brightly lighted ballroom, the sparkling music, the gay couples revolving round her--this all grew misty and unreal to her dulled senses, receding, as it were, to an illimitable distance.

It seemed to Hedwig that a great gap separated her from these surroundings, that she was alone with the man who held her in his arms, alone beneath the spell of those eyes, from which she strove to escape, but which held her ever inexorably fast. Suddenly, in the midst of all these surging emotions, indefinite and most unintelligible, a clear, strong ray of light streamed in upon her, a prescience, as it were, of some hitherto unknown, but infinite, amazing bliss.

The dance came to an end. It had hardly lasted ten minutes, and yet had been too long for either of them. Once again their eyes met--resting for a second or more, then Oswald bowed and

stepped back.

'I thank you, Fräulein,' he murmured.

Hedwig replied not a syllable. She merely inclined her head in acknowledgment. No time could she have found, indeed, to answer, for Edmund was already at her side, triumphing in the thought that he had successfully carried out his plan, and much disposed to venture some bantering remarks in consequence. But for once his mirth-loving humour had to be restrained; for at the conclusion of the dance the couples dispersed, and many ladies and gentlemen drew near their host. The Count and his betrothed were quickly surrounded; their attention was claimed on all sides, and a lively chatter soon set in about them.

Edmund was in brilliant vein, and soon became the soul and centre of the group. Hedwig smiled too, and made reply when appealed to, but her replies were faint, her smiles strangely forced. The radiant gaiety she had shown throughout the evening had suddenly faded away, died out. But a little while ago she had entered with the heartiest spirit into all the animation and the pleasure, luxuriating in it as in her true element; had moved through the bright and merry throng, brightest, merriest of all; but now it had all grown strange and indifferent to her. The light jests and flattering speeches that buzzed about her ears seemed to her quite meaningless and inane. A veil had fallen upon her soul, as it were, obscuring all the brightness and splendour of the scene. It was only by a great effort that she forced herself to play her part in it.

Oswald had taken advantage of the approach of strangers to beat a retreat unnoticed, and to leave the ballroom. Count Edmund would have been wiser not so pertinaciously to have insisted on having his own way. He little guessed, indeed, that his cousin had refrained from dancing simply and solely to avoid the duty which 'etiquette' marked out for him, and which he could hope to escape in no other manner. And now, after all, it had been forced upon him! Oswald could not but feel that he had in some measure betrayed himself, and it availed little that anger and self-reproach burned hot and fierce within him. That which he had denied to his own thoughts, which nothing would induce him to admit even to himself, had through that unhappy waltz become clear to him as the noonday. He knew now how matters stood with him.

The solitude the young man so longed for was not yet to be accorded him; for in one of the adjacent rooms he came upon Councillor Rüstow, who was resting there, seeking to recruit, after his unusual and amazing efforts at urbanity. He had surpassed himself this evening, and had been almost knightly in his behaviour towards the Countess; but the duty had become irksome to him after awhile, and he now joyfully seized the opportunity which offered of having a little sensible conversation. In an instant he had buttonholed Oswald, who was of necessity compelled to stand and surrender.

'You were right, I am sorry to say,' remarked Rüstow, in the course of their talk. 'In consequence of what you said to me, I have been looking into the state of affairs here on the Ettersberg estates. Things are, indeed, in a deplorable condition. I don't see one person employed on the place who is worth his salt. The bailiff is totally inefficient, and my lady, the Countess, has trusted to him entirely for years. Well, I suppose one could not expect her to exercise much supervision, but I shall take my son-in-law to task, I can tell you. There has been no doing anything with him at present--his head is so full of his marriage and all sorts of nonsense--but there must be an end to this at last. He has to-day become the actual and sole master here. With the possession comes the responsibility, and it is for him now to see that all is set in order.'

'Edmund will not move a finger in the matter,' said Oswald. 'He will promise anything you like, and will seriously intend to do as he promises, but nothing will come of it. You may rely on what I say.'

Rüstow started at this strong assertion, which was made with much decision of manner.

'You mean that Edmund is not equal to the task before him?' he asked anxiously.

'No; his nature is excellent, most amiable, but he lacks energy, and energy is here imperatively needed. You will have to take steps yourself, Councillor, if you wish to save the property.'

'And how is it you have not done so before this? You must have seen on your return how matters were going.'

'I have no right to interfere with other people's concerns.'

'Other people's concerns? Have not you been treated in all respects as the son of the house whose name you bear?'

Oswald was silent. He could not explain to this gentleman the terms on which he stood towards his aunt, or how little she would have brooked any interference on his part; so after a moment he replied evasively:

'Early in the spring I spoke to my cousin about the mismanagement reigning here, told him without any reticence whatever all I had observed, and called upon him to take some active

steps. I met with no success. You can summon your paternal authority to your aid; and Edmund will willingly agree to all you advise, if only you dispense him from the obligation of doing anything himself.'

Rüstow looked concerned and thoughtful. He did not seem particularly edified by the view of his son-in-law's character which Oswald's words, perhaps unintentionally, afforded him.

'Edmund is still so young,' he said at length, half apologetically; 'and he has hitherto resided little on the estate. With possession, pride and pleasure in his home will come to him, and interest in its welfare will spring up. In the first place, however, the senseless doings in the forests must be put a stop to.' Hereupon the Councillor began to develop his plans and ideas with regard to the new system to be pursued, and soon grew so absorbed by his subject that he failed to remark how completely he had the conversation to himself. Only when Oswald's answers, from being brief, became monosyllabic, when his assent to the propositions advanced came fainter and fainter, was Rüstow's attention aroused.

'Does anything ail you, Herr von Ettersberg?' he asked. 'You are looking so pale.'

Oswald forced a smile, and passed his hand across his brow.

'Nothing of any importance. Merely a headache, which has been tormenting me all day. If I could have chosen, I should not have appeared at all this evening.'

'In that case you were wrong to dance,' said Rüstow. 'It was sure to increase an ailment of that sort.'

The young man's lips quivered. 'You are right; I should not have danced. But it will not happen again.'

His voice was so low and agitated that Rüstow grew really anxious, and advised him to go out upon the terrace--he would get rid of his headache sooner in the open air. Oswald hastily seized the proffered pretext and went. The Councillor looked after him with a shake of the head, a little regretful that the pleasant chat was over already. Young Ettersberg's 'genius' had not displayed itself so obviously as usual on this occasion.

So the ball spent its course, noisy and brilliant as a ball should be, fully sustaining the castle's ancient renown for successful hospitality. No doubt, the Countess was a past mistress in the art of entertaining and in the ordering and arrangement of such festivities. The night was far advanced when the carriages containing the last departing guests rolled from the door, and the members of the family separated almost immediately. Edmund went down to see the Councillor and Fräulein Lina off on their return-journey to Brunneck, and Hedwig, who was to remain a few days longer with the Countess at Ettersberg, said good-night at once and retired to her own room.'

The splendid apartments, lately the scene of so much animation, were now empty and deserted, though still radiant with light and bright with festive ornament. The Countess alone remained in them. She stood before her husband's picture, absorbed, as it were, in thought. This portrait had been a present to her on her marriage, and now filled a prominent position in the great drawing-room. The face which looked forth from that richly-gilt frame was mild and kindly in its expression, but it was the face of an old man, and she who now stood gazing upon it could yet lay claim to beauty. This proud and almost royal woman, robed in rich satin, with diamonds of purest water gleaming on neck and arms, would have been no fitting consort for an old man even now, and five-and-twenty years had passed since this pair had been affianced. The story, perhaps the sorrow, of a life lay in that strange disparity between the lady and the picture.

A sense of this seemed to impress itself on the Countess in the present hour. The look she fixed on the portrait before her grew more absorbed, more gloomy, and when at length she turned from it and surveyed the glittering vista of rooms, a very bitter expression played about her lips.

The splendid surroundings testified so amply to the high position attained by the Countess Ettersberg, a position in which she for years had reigned alone and supreme. Perhaps some of the bitterness was due to the thought that this sole supremacy was over now, that a new, a younger mistress was to be introduced to the home; perhaps it was awakened by other, sadder reminiscences. There were moments when this haughty and self-confident woman, despite the brilliant *rôle* which, had been hers through life, could not forgive her Fate, or forget that she had been--offered up.

Edmund's voice, addressing her on his return, roused the Countess from her reverie.

'The worthy Councillor desires his compliments once more,' he said gaily. 'You have made a conquest there, mother. He became perfectly chivalrous in his homage to you, and was so extraordinarily good-tempered throughout the evening, that I really hardly recognised him.'

'It is less difficult to get on with him than I had expected,' replied the Countess. 'He is rather rough and unpolished, certainly, but his is a frank and vigorous nature, which one must just take with all its peculiarities. Your future wife enjoyed one long triumph this evening, Edmund. I must

admit that her appearance acts as the best advocate for your choice.'

Edmund smiled.

'Yes, Hedwig looked charming. In the whole assembly there was but one lady who could compare with her--and that lady was my mother.'

His eyes rested with a look of affectionate admiration on the beautiful face before him, saying plainly that his words were spoken in no spirit of mere flattery. The Countess smiled in her turn. She knew full well that she could yet outrival younger women, that even her much-admired daughter-in-law would not place her in the shade. But the transient satisfaction soon yielded to a deeper emotion, as she held out her hand to her son and asked:

'Are you satisfied with your mother now?'

The young Count carried the hand to his lips, and kissed it fervently.

'Can you ask me that to-day, a day which has seen my every wish fulfilled? I know that you made a great sacrifice in giving your consent, and that you have had to fight many a battle with my uncle on my behalf.'

The Countess repressed a sigh at this mention of her brother.

'Armand will never forgive me for yielding. Perhaps he is right! It would have been my duty, no doubt, to maintain the traditions of our house. And yet I could not resist your entreaties. I desired, at least, to see *you* happy.'

As she spoke, she glanced involuntarily at the old Count's portrait hanging opposite. Edmund caught the look, and understood the thought underlying the words.

'You were not happy?' he asked in a low tone.

'My husband never once in the whole course of my married life gave me ground for complaint. He was always most kind and indulgent towards me.'

'But he was an old man,' said Edmund, gazing up at his father's kindly but withered features; 'and you were young and beautiful, like Hedwig, and had a right to expect all happiness in life. My poor dear!' his voice shook with suppressed emotion. 'It is only since I have been so happy myself that I have understood how dreary and desolate your life must have been, notwithstanding all my father's goodness. He could not love you with the ardour of youth. You bore your lot bravely always, but it must be a hard lot, nevertheless, to have constantly to listen to the dictates of duty, and to stifle the voice which calls for a fuller life and fuller happiness.'

He paused, for the Countess sharply withdrew her hand from his, and turned away from him and the picture.

'Enough, Edmund!' she said, with a hasty gesture. 'You distress me.'

The son stood silent and confused. It was the first time he had permitted to himself such an allusion, but he had not dreamed his mother would be wounded by it.

'Forgive me,' he said, after a pause. 'I did not intend any reproach to my father's memory. It assuredly was no fault of his if anything were wanting to your contentment.'

'Nothing was wanting,' exclaimed the Countess, with a rush of genuine feeling. 'Nothing, for I had you, my Edmund. You have been all in all to me; you have made up to me for everything. I have desired no other happiness since I have had my son's love. So far indeed--here her voice sank--'so far his love has been mine alone; now I must share it with another, who henceforth will take the first place in his heart.'

'Mother!' broke in the young Count, half pleading, half reproachful. 'You will be to me still what you have ever been.'

The Countess shook her head gently.

'I have, of course, long known that the time would come when the mother must make way for the wife; but now that it is here, it seems hard--so hard to bear, that I sometimes seriously think of leaving Ettersberg when you are married, and of going to live at Schönfeld, which you know was appointed me as a dower-house.'

'Never!' exclaimed Edmund, with vehemence. 'You cannot, will not, act so unkindly by me. You must not leave me, mother. You know that I cannot do without you, even though I have Hedwig. Much as I love her, she would not make up to me for all that I should lose in you.'

The Countess heard these words with secret triumph. She knew that Edmund was sincere in his speech; the present moment convinced her of her power afresh. For his promised wife he had never anything but light talk and merry jests; Hedwig knew only the pleasant but superficial side of his character, which he showed to the world generally. All the deeper, intenser feelings of his

nature belonged exclusively to his mother. As they flowed out towards her in all their warmth and fulness, she triumphantly recognised the fact that the first place in her son's heart was still hers.

She had indeed known it, felt sure of it all along, and perhaps to this conviction Hedwig owed much of the friendly consideration which the Countess had always shown her. A bride more ardently, more passionately beloved would have found a redoubtable adversary in the jealous mother; this young girl, who neither gave nor required any great depth of affection, was endured because she did not endanger the maternal sway.

'Hush, hush! do not let anyone hear you,' said the Countess playfully, yet with a swift deep undercurrent of tenderness. 'It is not becoming in an engaged man, and the lord of many broad acres, to declare that he cannot do without his mother. Do you think, my dear, that it would be easy for me to leave you?'

'Do you think I would let you go? The mere formal recognition of my majority will not make a straw's difference in our position one towards the other.'

'It will, Edmund,' said the Countess gravely. 'This day signifies to you more than a mere form. Hitherto you have been my son, the heir, over whom I exercised a guardian's authority. Henceforth you will be the leading person, the head of the house. It now devolves on you to represent the name and family of Ettersberg. May you sustain your rank brilliantly and well, in all happiness and honour! Then no sacrifice will have been too great. All that I have borne and suffered will seem to me a light thing--for your sake.'

The words breathed of a great secret satisfaction. Perhaps they had another and a deeper meaning than any Edmund attached to them. He thought only of the sacrifice she had made in consenting to his marriage, and, stooping, he kissed her brow, thereby expressing his mute thanks.

The Countess warmly returned his embrace, but in the very act of doing so she started, and clasped her arms tightly, eagerly about her son, as though she would shield him from some danger.

'Why, what ails you?' asked Edmund calmly, following the direction of her eyes. 'It is only Oswald.'

'Oswald! Yes, indeed,' murmured the Countess. 'He, and always he!'

The interruption was indeed caused by Oswald, who had opened the glass-door leading from the terrace, and now, as he came in, appeared much surprised at beholding his aunt and cousin.

'I thought these rooms were quite empty,' he said, going up to them.

'And I thought you had long ago retired to rest,' replied the Countess. 'Where have you been?'

'In the park,' answered the young man laconically, not noticing the sharpness of her tone.

'What, at this hour of the night?' cried Edmund. 'If it were not an offence to attribute anything like mooning or romance to you, I should believe that one of our fair ladies this evening had touched your rebel heart. At such a time one feels instinctively a desire to sigh out to the stars alone one's bliss or misery. Do my words displease you again? Oswald, my mother has just solemnly proclaimed me head of the house and representative-in-chief of the family. In this exalted capacity, I now forbid me those black looks of yours, and call on you to show a smiling countenance. I will have no clouds, nothing but sunshine, in this my Castle of Ettersberg.'

He would have thrown his arms about his cousin's shoulder in the old familiar fashion, but the Countess suddenly stepped between the two. So energetic was this dumb protest against the young men's close intimacy that Edmund involuntarily receded. Oswald coldly scanned his aunt's face, and she returned the gaze. Neither of them spoke, but the expression of undying, irreconcilable hatred which gleamed in their eyes was eloquent enough.

'Sunshine alone?' repeated Oswald drily. 'I fear that you are stretching the supremacy you enjoy under your own roof too far. To command that is hardly possible even to the "head of the house," or to the "representative-in-chief of the family." Goodnight, Edmund. I will not intrude on you and my aunt any longer.'

He bowed to the Countess, without offering to kiss her hand, as usual, and left the room. Edmund looked after him, half angry, half surprised.

'Oswald grows harder in his manner and more unsociable day by day. Do you not think so?'

'Why did you force him to remain on here?' said the Countess, curtly and bitterly. 'You see how he repays your affection.'

The young Count shook his head. 'That is not it. This singular behaviour of his has nothing to do with me. There is some trouble weighing on Oswald. I can see it plainly, though he will not admit or speak of it. To you he always shows the more unpleasant side of his character, from some spirit of perversity, I suppose. I know him as he really is, and that is why I am so fond of

him.'

'And I hate him!' exclaimed the Countess. 'I know that he is secretly hatching something against us at the present moment. Just as I was about to give you my blessing, and wish you all happiness and joy in the future, he rose up like a shadow, and stepped between us like a messenger of evil tidings. Why did you keep him here when he wanted to go? I shall not breathe freely until he has left Ettersberg.'

Edmund looked at his mother in real alarm. Passionate outbreaks were so foreign to her nature that he positively hardly recognised her in this mood. Her dislike to Oswald was no secret from him, but this exceeding irritation he could in no way explain to himself.

The entrance of Everard and another servant here put an end to the conversation. They had extinguished the lights in the ballroom, and wished to continue and finish their work elsewhere. The Countess, accustomed to control herself in the presence of her servants, speedily recovered her usual composure of manner. After giving some few orders, she took Edmund's arm and begged him to take her to her room. Already she repented the vehemence of her speech to her son, and to him as to herself the interruption came opportunely. They never could, never would agree in their judgment of Oswald.

All grew quiet and dark in the state apartments. The doors were closed, and the domestics had withdrawn. In Edmund's room and in his mother's the lights were soon put out. Down the whole castle façade two windows only gleamed brightly: that of the turret-chamber in the side-wing where Oswald von Ettersberg had his lodging, and another in the main building, situated very near the Countess's own bedroom.

The young affianced bride, the heroine of the evening, had not yet retired to rest. She sat leaning back in a great armchair, her head half buried in its cushions, unmindful of the fact that the laces and roses adorning her dress were being unmercifully, irreparably crushed. Before her on a table lay her lover's latest offering, a costly pearl-necklace, which she had worn that day for the first time. To these jewels, however, she vouchsafed not a glance, though but a few days ago they had been received by her with great manifestations of delight.

The evening had been plentiful in pleasure. Hedwig had made her entrance into society as Edmund's promised wife, had appeared amid the brilliant surroundings among which her future life would be passed. To be mistress of Ettersberg was assuredly no unenviable lot, even for so rich an heiress, so spoilt a child of Fortune, as Hedwig Rüstow. She had never enjoyed such triumphs, never received so much homage, as had been lavished on her tonight in her quality of the future Countess Ettersberg.

Yet no happy smile, no sparkle of satisfied vanity, brightened the girl's face. Motionless, with her hands folded in her lap, she sat looking vaguely, dreamily before her into space. The veil still shrouded her soul; the dream still held her enchained. It led her away from the gaiety and glamour of the fête to a lonely wooded hill-side, where, beneath a gray and cloudy sky, the swallows flitted through the rain-charged air, piping their shrill greetings.

They really had brought spring upon their wings, those small, joyful messengers. Beneath all the frost and rime the mighty work of germination had been progressing, and everywhere around, noiselessly, invisibly, mysterious forces had been active, weaving their wondrous tissues. Yes; springtime, though tardy, surely comes to Mother Earth and to her wearying, longing sons. Sad is it when the bright season is too long delayed, when from despairing hearts the cry goes up, 'Too late! too late!'

CHAPTER VIII.

The Ettersberg festivities had taken place at midsummer, and now a September sun shone over the land. The young master had taken the reins, but it could not be said that any material change for the better was noticeable in the management of his estates. On the contrary, all remained *in statu quo*. Rüstow's urgent persuasion so far prevailed that the land-steward received notice to leave; but it was arranged that he should continue in office until after the new year, and though some restraint had become so necessary, none was laid either on him or any of the other officials. Count Edmund judged it superfluous--he knew it was most inconvenient--to trouble himself about such matters. He always lent a willing ear to his father-in-law's plans and projects, agreed with him on all points, and regularly gave him an assurance that he would see about it all 'to-morrow'; but that morrow never came. Oswald's prediction was verified. The Councillor soon found out that he must intervene himself, if any good were to be effected.

Edmund, for his part, would have been quite satisfied to let Rüstow act for him, but the latter encountered unexpected resistance from the Countess, who thought it highly unnecessary that anyone should now attempt to tutor her son, and was not disposed to yield up to the future father-in-law an authority she had hitherto exercised herself.

Besides this, the changes the Councillor proposed making were by no means to the lady's taste. Rules and arrangements which might be suitable for plain Brunneck would not fittingly serve aristocratic Ettersberg. The number of persons employed on the estates might be greater than was required, the system prevailing might be a costly and a comparatively unproductive one, but so it had been for long years. It was all part of the large and liberal style in which they were accustomed to live. Any limitation of the staff, that fretting and minute attention to all the details of management which Rüstow advocated, appeared to the Countess as a species of degradation; and hers being still the casting-vote at the castle, the opposition carried the day. Already there had been some lively skirmishes of debate between the reigning mistress and the Councillor, and though Edmund promptly interfered on these occasions and made peace, a certain amount of acrimonious feeling lingered on both sides.

Rüstow's admiration for the grand and haughty dame had considerably diminished since he had discovered how grandly she could assert and defend her own privileges; and the Countess, for her part, now declared that the Councillor was really too peculiar, and that it was impossible to accept all his whims without remark. In short, the harmony of their relations was disturbed, and there were clouds on the hitherto clear sky, clouds which seemed to menace the family peace.

Oswald had consistently held himself aloof from all these discussions. He seemed to look on himself as a stranger in the house he was so soon to leave. Moreover, his legal studies absorbed all his time, and afforded him a pretext for withdrawing from society, and declining most of the invitations with which the young engaged couple and their families were overwhelmed.

The end of September had now arrived, and with it the date appointed for his departure. All his preparations were made, the necessary farewell visits had been duly rendered, and his journey was fixed for the day after the morrow. One thing alone had been left undone. He must still pay his respects at the Brunneck manor-house, and take leave of the family there. In view of the connection now existing between the houses, this duty could not be avoided, though Oswald had postponed its fulfilment to the last moment. He had intended to drive over in Edmund's company, but the Count, it appeared, had agreed to join a shooting-party on that very day, so his cousin had no alternative but to proceed on his expedition alone. Despite the Councillor's friendly and oft-repeated invitations, Oswald had not set foot in the house since the day of the betrothal, at which ceremony he had been compelled to assist. Nevertheless, he had met his cousin's affianced wife on several occasions, for Hedwig now frequently came over to Ettersberg with her father. Part of the castle was already being put in readiness for the accommodation of the young married couple.

The Master of Brunneck was sitting in the veranda-parlour, reading his newspapers, while his cousin, stationed before a side-table, took up and carefully examined first one and then another of several elegant articles of toilette which lay spread out before her. They were patterns of new fashions, which had just arrived from town, and were destined to form part of Hedwig's trousseau, now in active course of preparation.

The Councillor did not appear to be much interested in his reading. He turned over the pages absently, and at length looked up from his paper, and said in an impatient tone:

'Have not you made your choice, or done looking over those things yet, Lina? Why don't you get Hedwig to help you?'

Aunt Lina shrugged her shoulders.

'Hedwig has declared, as usual, that she intends to leave it all to me. I must make a selection by the light of my own unaided judgment.'

'I don't understand how it is the girl shows so little interest in these matters. They all relate to her own trousseau, and formerly dress was to her an affair of state.'

'Formerly--yes,' said Aunt Lina emphatically.

A pause ensued. The Councillor seemed to have something on his mind. Presently he laid aside his newspaper, and stood up.

'Lina, I have something to say to you--Hedwig does not quite please me.'

'Nor me either,' murmured the old lady; but she avoided looking at her cousin, and kept her eyes fixed on a lace-pattern she had taken up.

'Not?' cried Rüstow, who always grew quarrelsome when he was at all worried. 'Now I should have thought her present manner would have been exactly what you would like. According to you, Hedwig was always too superficial and light-minded; now she is growing so wonderfully profound in her feelings that she is forgetting how to laugh. Why, she is never contradictious,

never up to tricks of any sort! Upon my word, it is enough to drive one mad!

'What, that she has given up contradiction, and all her foolish tricks?'

Rüstow took no notice of this ironical interruption. He went up to his cousin, and posted himself before her in a menacing attitude.

'What has happened to the girl? What has become of my merry, saucy Hedwig, my madcap who was never weary of frolic and fun? I must and will know.'

'You need not look at me so fiercely, Erich,' said Aunt Lina calmly. 'I have not injured your child in any way.'

'But you know what has brought about the change,' cried the anxious father, in a dictatorial tone. 'You can, at least, explain to me what it all means.'

'I cannot do that, for your daughter has not made me her confidante. Don't take the matter so much to heart. Hedwig has certainly grown grave and pensive of late, but you must remember she is about to take a most important step, to leave her father's house and enter upon new relationships and new surroundings. She may have much to fight through and to overcome, but when once she is married, a sense of duty will sustain her.'

'A sense of duty?' repeated the Councillor, petrified with amazement. 'Why, has not this love-affair of hers been a perfect romance? Have not they got their own way in spite of the Countess and of me? Is not Edmund the most tender, the most attentive lover the world ever saw? And you talk about a sense of duty! It is a very excellent thing in its way, no doubt, but when a young woman of eighteen has nothing warmer than that to offer her husband, you may reckon with certainty on a miserable marriage. Take my word for it.'

'You misunderstand me,' said his cousin soothingly. 'I only meant that Hedwig would be brought face to face with life's graver side and with its duties when she goes to live at Ettersberg. The situation does not appear to me so simple, the future so smooth and thornless, as we at first supposed.'

Rüstow did not observe that a trap was laid for him, a palpable effort made to lead him from the topic under discussion. He followed up the seemingly careless remark at once, and with some warmth.

'No, truly not. If things go on in this way, the Countess and I will come to words again. Whatever I do, or propose doing, I am met and stopped by those confounded uppish notions of hers, to which everything else must be kept subordinate. There is no making the woman understand that the ruin impending over the property can only be averted by strong and timely measures. No, all must go on in the old routine! The most necessary reforms are rejected if they, as she thinks, in any way diminish the glory of the house, or impair the halo surrounding it. The actual owner and master does just nothing at all. He thinks he has made the greatest effort that can be demanded of him, if he holds half-an-hour's interview with his steward. Beyond this he ventures not, but simply kneels and adores his wonderful mamma, whom he looks on as the embodiment of all wisdom and perfection. Hedwig will have to make very sure of her husband, if she does not mean to be altogether thrust into the background by her mother-in-law.'

The Councillor would probably have continued in this strain, disburdening his heart of its pent-up fears and anxieties, but he was interrupted by the sound of approaching wheels.

Aunt Lina, who was standing by the window, looked out.

'It is Herr von Ettersberg,' said she, returning that gentleman's salutation.

'Oswald?' inquired Rüstow in surprise. 'Ah, he has come to say good-bye, no doubt. I know he was to leave one of these days. Let Hedwig be sent for. She is somewhere out in the park.'

The old lady hesitated. 'I don't know--I rather think Hedwig intended going for a walk. It will not be so easy to find her; besides, you and I are both here to receive him.'

'I must say it would be more than impolite if Hedwig failed to appear when a near relation of her future husband comes to take leave of us,' said Rüstow angrily. 'The man shall go out, at least, and see if she is in the park. If he finds her, he can let her know who is here.'

He stretched out his hand to the bell, but Aunt Lina was too quick for him.

'I will send out after her. You stay and receive Herr von Ettersberg.'

So saying, she left the room, returning after the lapse of a few minutes. She knew very well that Hedwig was in the park, yet no order to seek her out was given, no summons was sent her.

Meanwhile Oswald had entered the house. He came, as had been rightly guessed, to take leave, but much pressing business awaited him at home. Some preparations for his journey were yet unmade, which must be completed that day; he could therefore only pay a flying visit. A little commonplace chat ensued. The Councillor regretted much that his daughter had gone out for a

walk. He had sent into the park after the truant, but presumably the man had failed to find her. Oswald, in return, expressed polite regret, begged that her father would present his kind regard to the young lady and say good-bye for him. In a brief quarter of an hour the visit was concluded. Rüstow looked on with a heavy heart at his favourite's departure, but Aunt Lina, on the other hand, drew a deep breath of relief when the carriage rolled out of the courtyard.

Oswald leaned back in the corner of the barouche. He was glad that this leave-taking was over, immensely glad--or so, at least, he told himself. He had long feared this hour--feared and yet longed for it. No matter, it was best so. The farewell, which accident had denied him, would have been but one pang more, and a useless one. Now the struggle of many days and weeks was at an end; a struggle which none had witnessed, but which had shaken the young man's being to its very centre, and had threatened completely to unhinge him. It was high time he should go. Distance would enfeeble, and perhaps ultimately break, the spell; and even were it not broken, a partition-wall of defence would be erected. Now he must throw all his energy into the new life before him, must zealously work, wrestle, and, if possible, forget. While Oswald thus reasoned with himself, his heart beat wildly, despairingly, in his breast, reminding him that he had looked forward to this one last pang as to a last gleam of happiness. Was he not going--going never to return?

The carriage passed the corner of the park. Oswald turned and looked back once more. There at some little distance above him, on a small wooded eminence, he caught sight of a slender girlish figure--and in a trice all the wise comfort he had been administering to himself, all his fine resolutions for the future, melted away, fell to pieces. Once more--just once! Reflection, prudence vanished at the thought. In a second Oswald had called to the coachman to stop, and had sprung out of the carriage.

The man drove on to the village, with instructions to wait there. Oswald entered the park by a side-gate, and proceeded towards the raised terrace; but as he approached the goal before him, his pace slackened, and when at length he mounted the steps, and Hedwig came forward to meet him, he had fully recovered his usual calmness of demeanour. He was, as it seemed, simply obeying the dictates of courtesy which called on him to stop and say a word of leave-taking to his cousin's future wife.

'I have just paid my farewell visit to your father,' he began; 'and I could not omit saying good-bye to you in person, Fräulein.'

'You are leaving shortly?' inquired Hedwig.

'The day after to-morrow.'

'Edmund told me that your departure was imminent. He will miss you sadly.'

'And I him; but in this life we cannot stay to consult our feelings. When Fate decrees a separation, we must perforce submit and obey.'

The remark was intended to be playful, but the young man's voice thrilled with a certain sadness. His gaze rested on Hedwig as she stood before him, leaning slightly against the wooden railing. The Councillor's anxiety must have been exaggerated. His daughter appeared rosy and blooming, full of grace and charm as ever.

No tittle of change could be detected in her outward appearance, and yet she seemed quite other than the merry capricious fairy who had emerged so unexpectedly before two travellers from the clouds of drifting, driving snow. The flower which has blossomed in the full sunshine, but on which suddenly a shadow falls, remains in form and hue the same; it sends forth the same fragrance, only the sunlight has gone from it. Such a shadow now lay on the face of Count Ettersberg's happy, much-envied chosen bride, and the dark blue eyes had a dewy shimmer, as though they had learned a trick which so long had been unknown to them--the trick of tears.'

'The separation will be painful to you, then?' Hedwig said, continuing the conversation.'

'Certainly. In the great city, a longing will often come over me, a longing for Edmund and ... for the dear old mountains.'

'And none for Ettersberg?'

'None.'

The answer was so brief and decided that the girl looked up in surprise. Oswald noticed this, and added, by way of amendment:

'Forgive me. I forgot that Ettersberg will shortly be your home. I was thinking only of the circumstances which have made my sojourn there a painful one, and which no doubt have long been known to you.'

'But surely the circumstances you speak of have been modified. The family now place no obstacle in the way of your future career.'

'No; I have forcibly secured for myself freedom of action; but it cost a conflict, and to contend with my aunt is no light task, as you will one day find out for yourself.'

'I?' asked Hedwig, in surprise. 'I trust no contention may ever arise between me and my mother-in-law!'

She drew herself up as she spoke, and measured her companion with a half-proud, half-angry glance. He replied firmly and quietly:

'It may perhaps seem indelicate in me to touch on this subject, and it may be that you will altogether reject my interference as unwarranted, but I cannot go without uttering at least one word of warning. My aunt often speaks of leaving Ettersberg after her son's marriage--of retiring to her house of Schönfeld. Edmund opposes this plan vehemently, and hitherto you have lent him your support. Do so no longer; on the contrary, persuade him, if possible, to let his mother go. You owe it to him and to yourself, for both his happiness and yours are at stake. There will be no room at Ettersberg for a young mistress, so long as the Countess retains her position there--and in your case, grafted on an old enmity is a new and strong prejudice which you will find it hard to encounter.'

'I really do not understand you, Herr von Ettersberg,' said Hedwig, not a little agitated. 'Prejudice? Enmity? You cannot possibly be alluding to that foolish lawsuit about Dornau?'

'Not to the suit itself, but to the hostile feeling which gave rise to it. You probably do not know who strengthened and confirmed your grandfather in his harsh obduracy, and induced him finally altogether to ignore his daughter's marriage with a commoner. But your father knows, and he is mistaken if he thinks that the Countess has outlived her prejudices. She gave her consent to this union in a moment of surprise, moved by a sudden burst of gratitude towards the man who had saved her life, moved, above all, by her great love for her son. What would she not do or surrender for his sake? But sooner or later she will repent the concession, if she does not repent already, and it is not Edmund, but you, who will be made to suffer for it.'

Hedwig listened with increasing agitation. The difficulties now so boldly and mercilessly set before her had become dimly apparent to herself, especially in these later days--but dimly only; she had as yet formed no clear idea of the situation.

'So far, I have had no reason to complain of Edmund's mother,' she said hesitatingly. 'She has always been most courteous and kind to me.'

'And heartily affectionate?'

The young girl was silent.

'Do not think I am influenced in my judgment by my own personal relations towards my aunt,' pursued Oswald. 'I assuredly would not take upon me to sow distrust, did I not know how misleading too guileless a confidence may here prove. You are entering on a difficult position. The ground at Ettersberg is perilous ground for you, and it is right you should be warned before you set foot on it. Your mother fought a hard fight for her wedded happiness, but at least she had in her husband a firm stay and valiant defender. In your case the struggle will begin only after the marriage, but I fear it will not be spared you; for you are entering the bigoted and narrow-minded circle from which she escaped, and it remains to be seen whether Edmund will afford you the support of which you will stand in need. At all events, it is best to rely on one's self. Again I entreat of you on no consideration to consent to the plan of a joint household. You and your mother-in-law cannot live under one roof--Edmund must give up the idea.'

Hedwig shook her head slightly. 'That will be difficult, if not impossible. He loves his mother so well----'

'More than his affianced wife!' concluded Oswald emphatically.

'Herr von Ettersberg!'

'My words hurt you, Fräulein? No doubt the fact is a painful one, but you must learn to look the truth in the face. Hitherto you have heedlessly toyed with Edmund's love, and have met with sportive homage and mere trifling in return. All the deeper feelings of his nature you have left to his mother, who has well known how to pursue her advantage. Edmund is capable of something better than superficial, playful tenderness. Beneath that gay exterior lie warm affections--I might almost say strong passions--but they must be awakened, and so far his mother alone has fathomed these depths. Make sure now of that which is yours by right. The power of a first and early love is in your hands as yet. When that fair glamour has spent itself, it may be too late.'

He had spoken with great earnestness, but with his wonted utter disregard of any susceptibilities he might wound. Every word fell on his listener's ear with strong, unsparing emphasis, and flattering the words certainly were not. But a few months previously Hedwig would either have resented such a warning as an offence, or have laughed it away in happy, lighthearted confidence--now she listened in silence, with bowed head. He was right, she felt it; but why must these counsels come to her from his lips, why must she hear these cruel words from *him*?

'You are silent,' said Oswald, when he had waited in vain for an answer. 'You reject my advice, you think my interference uncalled for and impertinent.'

'No,' replied Hedwig, drawing a deep breath. 'On the contrary, I thank you, for I feel all the importance of such a warning coming from you.'

'And what it costs me to speak it?'

The words rushed to Oswald's lips, but he did not pronounce them. Perhaps his thought was divined, nevertheless.

The little terrace on which the two were standing rose out of a group of thickly clustering bushes, and offered a fine panoramic view of the surrounding country. Over broad meadows and green wooded hills the eye could wander away to the lofty mountain-summits which were in reality far distant, but which in that clear atmosphere seemed to have advanced their posts and to have drawn quite near. The particular spur of forest which formed the boundary between the Ettersberg and Brunneck domains could plainly be distinguished, and the gaze of both Oswald and Hedwig sought this spot. It was the first time they had met alone since their memorable interview on yonder hill-side. A whole summer-time lay between then and now, and much, how much besides!

Raw and inclement had been that spring-day, void of warmth and sunshine. Leaves and blossoms still shrank, hiding in their sealed retreat. The landscape was shrouded in fog and raincloud, and those happy heralds, the swallows, had pierced their way through masses of dense mist, ere they emerged suddenly in the gray distance. Yet those winged messengers had borne spring on their swift pinions--none knew this better than the two who now stood speechless side by side. They had seen how the great transformation scene may be effected in a night, how grandly, victoriously Nature works when she rallies to the task before her.

Now it was autumn--a beautiful clear day, indeed, with soft mild air and bright sunshine, but still autumn. The foliage, still thick on bough and branch, had that faint gleam of russet which foretells a speedy fall. The gay wealth of flowers had vanished from the meadows, all but the pale saffron, which yet glimmered here and there, and the swallows, streaking the sky in long flights, were gathering for their journey southwards. Farewell was written everywhere on Nature's countenance, as on the two sorrowing human hearts--farewell to summer, home, and happiness.

Hedwig first broke the oppressive silence which had followed her last words.

'The swallows are leaving us too,' she said, pointing upwards. 'They are on the wing.'

'I go with them'--Oswald completed her meaning--'but there is this difference ... I shall not return.'

'Not return? You will come back to Ettersberg sometimes, will you not?'

She put the question with a certain eager anxiety. Oswald looked down.

'I hardly think that will be possible. I shall not have much leisure, and besides--when a man cuts himself adrift from old ties, and changes his way of life entirely, as I am about to do, it is best for him to remain away, and to devote all his energies to the sphere he has just entered. Edmund cannot be made to understand this. He hardly appreciates, as yet, the claims of duty.'

'And yet he is more anxious about you and your future than you believe,' interposed Hedwig.

Oswald smiled half disdainfully.

'He may spare himself any anxiety. I am not one to undertake a task beyond my strength, and then to abandon it feebly halfway. What I have begun I shall carry through, and, come what may, I shall, at least, have shaken off from me the bonds of dependence.'

'Did these bonds weigh so heavily on you?'

'Yes; with a crushing weight.'

'Herr von Ettersberg, you are unjust to your family.'

'And ungrateful,' added Oswald, with a sudden outburst of bitterness. 'You have heard that frequently from my aunt, no doubt--and she may possibly be right from her point of view. Perhaps I ought to have submitted myself more docilely to the yoke laid upon me, and patiently played out the *rôle* assigned to me by Fate. But then, you see, I *could* not. You do not know what it is constantly to bend to the will of another, when your own judgment has long been formed, to be thwarted in every effort, checked in every aspiration, not even to have the right of reply and remonstrance. I know that my future is uncertain, that it may be thorny, that I shall need all the energy and strength of will I possess, in order to succeed; but it will be *my* future, my own life, which I may shape and order as I please, unfettered by the galling chain of benefits conferred. And if I fail in the career I have marked out for myself, I shall, at least, have gained the right to fashion my own destiny.'

He drew himself up as he spoke these last words, and his chest heaved with a great sigh of satisfaction and relief. It seemed as though in this moment the great load he had borne so silently, but with so much grievous suffering, fell from the young man's shoulders. He stood bold and defiant, ready to accept the world's challenge, and to fight the battle before him to the bitter end. It was easy to see that he was one fitted to wrestle with Fortune, however hostile and uncompromising her attitude towards him might be.

Hedwig now for the first time understood how the iron had entered his soul, understood what this proud, unbending nature had endured from a position which many were disposed to envy, because it implied a share in the Ettersberg greatness and splendour.

'And now I must say good-bye to you,' Oswald began again, but the ring had died out of his voice now; it was very low and subdued. 'I came to take leave of you.'

'Edmund will expect you in December, if only for a few days,' said Hedwig, half hesitatingly. 'He counts on your being present at--at our wedding.'

'I know it, and know that he will think me coldhearted and unkind if I stay away. He must interpret it as he will. I can but submit.'

'So you will not come?'

'No.'

Oswald added no single word of pretext, for none would have found belief; but his eyes, resting full on Hedwig's face, gave the explanation of his curt, harsh-sounding answer. His meaning was understood. He read this in the look which met his; but fierce and poignant as might be the pain of parting in these two young hearts, no word was spoken, no outward manifestation of it was made.

'Goodbye, then, Herr von Ettersberg,' said Hedwig, offering him her hand.

He stooped, and pressed his hot, quivering lips on the trembling hand extended to him. That pressure was the only betrayal of how matters stood with Oswald. Next minute he released the little palm, and stepped back.

'Do not forget me quite, Fräulein,' he said. 'Good-bye.'

Hedwig was alone again. Involuntarily she grasped the bushes to draw them aside, and so once more gain sight of his departing figure, but it was too late. As the boughs closed again, the first faded leaves fell in a shower on the young girl's head. She shrank beneath them, as at some grave warning or reminder. Yes, there could be no mistake; autumn had come, though the whole landscape before her lay bathed in golden sunshine.

That rough, stormy spring day had been so rich in promise, with all its unseen magic movement, with its thousand mysterious voices whispering around. Now all these sounds had ceased. Nature's fair life had bloomed, and was slowly waning towards dissolution. The world was hushed and seemingly deserted.

Hedwig, pale and mute, stood leaning against the terrace railing. She did not move, did not weep, but with a sad ineffable longing in her eyes gazed over at the distant chain of mountains, and then up at the clouds, where the migratory birds swarmed, streaming hither and thither in long flights. Today the swallows swept not to the earth with loving greetings and pleasant messages of happy days to come. They passed high overhead, far, far beyond reach, flitting away into the blue distance, and their faint piping was borne down but as a vague murmur half lost in the immeasurable space. It was a last low echo of the word which here below had been spoken in the keen anguish of parting, an echo of the melancholy word Farewell.

CHAPTER IX.

The following day, the last Oswald was to spend at Ettersberg, brought a somewhat unlooked-for visitor. Count Edmund, though his coming was hourly expected, had not returned from his shooting expedition when Baron Heideck suddenly arrived in the forenoon, straight from town. He had thought fit to absent himself in demonstrative fashion from the festivities held to celebrate his nephew's coming of age. The announcement of the young gentleman's approaching marriage, then publicly to be made, should not, he decided, receive the sanction of his presence; but when more than two months had elapsed, he determined to pay a brief visit to his relations at

the castle. Though the fact of the engagement could not now be altered, an animated discussion on the subject seemed to have taken place between the brother and sister. They had remained more than an hour closeted together, and Heideck's reproaches took the more effect that Edmund's mother already secretly repented of her precipitate action in the matter, though as yet she would not admit it openly.

Finally the Countess, in evident perturbation, retired to her own room. Seating herself before her writing-table, she pressed a hidden spring, which opened its most secret drawer. The interview she had had with her brother must have borne upon, or at least have reawakened, memories of the past, for very certainly the article which the Countess took from that small compartment was a souvenir of distant, bygone days. It was a small leather case, a few inches long, containing apparently a portrait which perhaps for years had remained in its hiding-place untouched. That it belonged to a remote period was proved by its old-fashioned shape and faded exterior. The Countess held it open before her, and as she sat gazing fixedly down on the features thus exposed to view, her countenance assumed an abstracted air most unfamiliar to it.

She was lost in one of those vague, half-unconscious reveries which altogether efface the present, and carry the dreamer away to a far-distant past. Obliterated memories troop back upon the mind, forgotten joys and sorrows revive in all their old intensity, and forms that have long lain beneath the sod rise, move, and live again.

The Countess did not notice how the minutes sped by, lengthening into hours as she sat there, wrapt in contemplation. She started, half frightened, half annoyed, when, without any previous warning, the door of the room was suddenly thrown open. Quick as thought, she closed the little case and placed her hand upon it, while the angry look in her eyes seemed to inquire what the interruption could mean.

The intruder was old Everard, who came in with a haste much at variance with his usual formal, solemn demeanour. He was evidently agitated, and he began his report at once without waiting to be questioned by his mistress.

'The Count has just returned, my lady.'

'Well, where is he?' asked the mother, accustomed always to be her son's first thought.

'In his room,' stammered Everard. 'Herr von Ettersberg was at the door when the carriage drove up, and he helped the Count to mount the stairs.'

'Helped him upstairs?' The Countess's face blanched to a deadly pallor. 'What do you mean by that? Has anything happened?'

'I fear so, my lady,' said the old retainer hesitatingly. 'The groom said something about an accident out shooting. A gun was accidentally discharged, and the Count was wounded.'

He could not tell his tale at length, for the Countess sprang up with a cry of alarm. Asking no question, listening to no further word, the agonized mother rushed into the antechamber, whence a corridor led direct to her son's room.

The old servant, who had completely lost his head and was as terrified as his mistress, would have rushed after her; but just at that moment Oswald entered the boudoir by an opposite door.

'Where is my aunt?' he asked hastily.

'With the Count by this time, I think,' said Everard, pointing in the direction she had taken. 'My lady was so shocked when I told her about the accident, she hastened to him at once.'

Oswald frowned. 'How could you be so imprudent!' he said, with an impatient gesture. 'The Count's wound is not at all serious. I came myself to assure my aunt that there is not the smallest cause for anxiety.'

'Thank God, thank God!' breathed Everard, with a great sigh of relief. 'The groom was saying--'

'The groom has grossly exaggerated the affair,' Oswald interrupted him. 'Your master is very slightly injured--wounded in the hand, nothing more. It was quite unnecessary to alarm the Countess in this way. Go now and let Baron Heideck know the true state of the case, that he may not be startled in like manner by the news of some dangerous injury.'

Everard withdrew to fulfil his mission, and Oswald was about to leave the room, when his eyes, wandering with a casual and indifferent glance towards the writing-table, fell on the small case which lay thereon.

Curiosity did not rank among Oswald's failings, and he would have thought it impertinent to examine even that which lay open to view in his aunt's room. But now he was misled by a very pardonable error. Only the day before he had begged the Countess to make over to him a portrait of his father, which had been in the possession of the late Count Ettersberg, and was, no doubt, still to be found among his personal belongings. Now that he was leaving the old home, Oswald

wished to take this souvenir with him, and the Countess had been quite willing to accede to his wish, promising to look for the portrait. It appeared, so he said to himself, that she had been successful in her quest.

In this certain presumption, Oswald took up the picture. He had but a dim remembrance of it, and really did not know if it were enclosed in a frame or in a case. The faded appearance of the little *étui* seemed to confirm his belief, so he opened it.

The case contained a portrait, certainly--a miniature painted on ivory--but it was not the one he sought. At the first glance Oswald started, surprised in the highest degree.

'Edmund's likeness!' he murmured, under his breath. 'Strange that I should never have seen it before. Besides, he has never worn uniform, to my knowledge.'

With ever-increasing astonishment he examined first the miniature, which so unmistakably portrayed the young Count's features, and then the old-fashioned and discoloured case wherein it had evidently long lain enclosed. He had alighted on an enigma.

'What can it mean? The portrait is an old one. That is plain from its colouring, and from the shape of the case--yet it represents Edmund as he now appears. To be sure, it is not quite like him, it has an expression, a look which is not his, and ... Ah!'

This exclamation burst from his lips with sudden vehemence. In an instant the young man's eyes were opened. With the vividness of lightning, the truth flashed upon him, the perception of all that was, and had been. The enigma was solved. Hastily he strode up to a life-size portrait of Edmund, an oil-painting which hung in the Countess's boudoir, and with the open case in his hand, began comparing the two, feature by feature, line by line.

Lines and features proved identical; there were the same dark hair and eyes, but with a difference, a marked difference of expression. The resemblance to Edmund was so extraordinary that he might have sat for the miniature, and yet the face depicted in it was not his, but another's. Another's, differing from the young Count's most essentially, as a prolonged examination abundantly showed.

'So I was right!' said Oswald, in a low hoarse tone. 'Right in my suspicion after all!'

There was neither triumph nor malicious satisfaction in his tone. On the contrary, it conveyed a certain unfeigned horror; but as he caught sight of the secret compartment now standing open, every other feeling was merged in sudden, bitter anger.

'Yes,' he murmured. 'She hid it well--so well, that no eyes but hers would ever have beheld it, had not her mortal fear on Edmund's account for once robbed her of all prudence and power of reflection. To think that it should fall into my hands! This surely is more than a mere accident. I think'--here Oswald drew himself up to a proud and menacing attitude--'I think I have a right to ask whom this picture represents, and I shall retain possession of it until an answer to my plain question be given me.'

So saying, he thrust the little case into his breast-pocket, and quickly left the room.

The alarming report which Everard had conveyed to the Countess turned out to be a most exaggerated one. The accident that had befallen Edmund was of no serious importance. While scrambling through, or over, a hedge, his gun had been accidentally discharged, but fortunately the shot had only grazed his left hand. The injury was very slight, hardly deserving to be called a wound, yet the whole castle was in commotion about it. Baron Heideck hastened to his nephew's room, and the Countess could find neither rest nor peace until the doctor, sent for in post-haste, had assured her positively there was no cause for uneasiness, and that the lesion would be healed in a few days.

Edmund himself took the matter most lightly. He laughed and joked with his mother about her anxiety until it yielded beneath his cheery influence, protested strongly against being treated as a disabled man, and was with difficulty prevailed on to listen to the doctor, who prescribed absolute rest and quiet.

Evening closed in. Oswald was alone in his own room, which he had not left since his great discovery of the morning. The lamp burning on the table threw but a partial light over the apartment, which was large and rather sombre at night, with its heavy leather hangings and deep bay-window. The furniture was massive and good, as in every room throughout the house, but it had not been renewed for years, and was in strong contrast to the bright and handsome appointments of the main building, and especially of that part of it dedicated to the young Count's use. The nephew, the offshoot of a younger branch, had been banished to a distant wing. In this, as in all else, his inferiority to the heir must be well marked; he must stand back, yielding the precedence to the master of the house.

So the Countess had ordered it, and the temper of Oswald's mind was such that under no circumstances could he have brought himself to seek aid or protection from Edmund, or to complain to him of the constant mortifications to which he was subjected.

The side-table was strewn with letters and papers which Oswald had intended to set in order before leaving. Now he gave them not a thought. With restless steps he paced to and fro in the room, the excessive pallor of his countenance and his heaving breast telling of the terrible agitation that reigned within him. The dim tormenting doubt which had beset his soul for years, the vague presentiment which he had driven from him only by the full exercise of his powerful will, now stood revealed as truth. Though the actual course events had taken and the story of that portrait were as yet unknown to him, the always-recurring suspicions had resolved themselves into a certainty, calling up within him a perfect storm of contradictory emotions.

Oswald paused before the writing-table, and again took up the fatal portrait which lay there among the papers.

'After all, what avails this?' he said bitterly. 'I indeed, for my own part, require no further proof, but all corroboration is wanting, and the one person who could afford it will certainly keep silence. She would die rather than make a confession which would bring ruin on herself and on her son, and I cannot compel her to speak--I must not, could not, offer up the honour of our name, even though it be a question of the heirship of Ettersberg. Yet full and complete knowledge I must have--I must, cost what it may.'

He slowly closed the case and laid it down again, still standing before it, musing profoundly, moodily.

'Perhaps there might be a way, one single way. If I were to go to Edmund with this picture, and were to call upon him to explain, to inquire into the facts of the case, he could force the truth from his mother if he seriously set himself to the task, and he would so set himself if once I introduced the suspicion to his mind. I know him well enough to be sure of that. But what a terrible blow it would be to him--to him, with his sensitive notions of honour, with his candid, open nature, which has never condescended to a lie. To be hurled suddenly from a position which, in the fulness of his happiness and prosperity, must appear absolutely safe; to be branded as the instrument, perhaps the accomplice, of a fraud!--I think the knowledge of this would kill him.'

Love for the friend of his youth stirred in his breast, regaining all its old force and fervour, but with it awoke other and hostile emotions which clamoured to be heard. They recalled to him the deep-dyed treachery of which he had been the victim, and as he vacillated still, sought to influence him by counsels such as these:

'Will you really keep silence, and eschew the revenge which Fate has placed in your hands? Will you go hence with sealed lips, go out to a dark uncertain future, submit yourself to strangers, work your way up with much toil and weariness of spirit, perhaps perish in the vain struggle, while, if you will, you may be master here on the land which belongs to you of right? Shall the woman who has been your bitterest enemy triumphantly retain her power and endow her son with all the good things of this life, while you are oppressed and kept down, thrust out from the home of your fathers? Who has thought of your feelings, of your inward conflicts? Use the weapons chance has given you. You know the joints in the enemy's armour. Strike home!'

These accusatory voices had justice on their side, and they found but too responsive an echo in Oswald's breast. All the mortifications, all the humiliations he had suffered rose up before him afresh, and stung his soul with keen and cruel stabs. That which he had endured for years, with inward chafing, it is true, but yet mutely, accepting it as a decree of Fate, goaded him to wild rebellion and fury now that he recognised the treachery that had been at work. Gradually every other feeling was stifled by the bitterness and fierce hate raging within him. The Countess would certainly have trembled, could she at this moment have beheld her nephew's countenance. He could not meet her face to face, but he knew the spot where she was vulnerable.

'There is no other way,' he said resolutely. 'To me she will not yield an inch. She will defy me to her last breath. Edmund alone is able to extract her secret from her, therefore he must be told. I will no longer be the victim of a fraud.'

A light, rapid step in the corridor outside interrupted the young man's train of thought. With a quick movement he pushed the miniature out of sight beneath the papers on the writing-table, and cast an angry, impatient glance towards the door; but he started perceptibly as he recognised his visitor.

'Edmund--you here?'

'Well, you need not look scared, as though you had seen a ghost,' said the young Count, closing the door. 'I still number among the living, and have come expressly to prove to you that, in spite of my so-called wound, you have no chance of coming into the property as yet.'

Little did Edmund guess the effect this harmless jest and the fact of his appearance at that precise moment had upon his cousin. It was only by a violent effort that Oswald regained his self-control. His voice was hoarse with emotion as he replied:

'How can you be so imprudent as to come through these long cold corridors! You were ordered not to leave your room to-day.'

'Pooh! what do I care for the doctor's orders?' said Edmund carelessly. 'Do you think I mean to be treated as an invalid, because I have got a scratch on my hand? I have put up with all their nonsense a few hours to please my mother, but I have had enough of it now. My servant has instructions to say that I am asleep, should anyone inquire after me. I came over here to have a chat with you, old fellow. I cannot possibly stay away from you on this, the very last evening you have to spend at Ettersberg.'

These words were spoken with such heartiness that Oswald involuntarily turned away.

'Let us go back to your room, at least,' he said hastily.

'No; we are not so likely to be disturbed here,' persisted Edmund, as he threw himself into an armchair. 'I have so many things to say to you--for instance, how I came by this famous wound, which has set all Ettersberg in an uproar, though it is nothing more than a pin-scratch.'

Oswald's eyes wandered uneasily to the papers, beneath which the portrait lay concealed.

'How you came by it?' he repeated absently. 'I thought your gun was fired accidentally, as you were getting over a hedge.'

'Yes; that is what we told the servants, and my mother and uncle are not to hear any other version of the affair. But I need not make a secret of it to you. I was out this morning with one of the men who joined our shooting-party--with Baron Senden.'

'With Senden?' said Oswald, becoming attentive. 'What was the quarrel between you?'

'He made use of an expression which displeased me. I called him to account at once; one word led to another, and finally we agreed to settle our little difference by meeting this morning. You see no great damage has been done. I shall perhaps have to wear my hand in a sling for a week or so, and Senden has got off as cheaply, with just a graze on the shoulder.'

'So that is why you stayed all night? Why did you not send a message over to me? I would have gone to you.'

'To act as second? That was not necessary. Our host offered me his services--and as the mourning relative you could always arrive time enough.'

'Edmund, do not speak so lightly on grave subjects,' said Oswald impatiently. 'A duel always involves the hazard of a life.'

Edmund laughed.

'Good heavens! I ought to have made my will, I suppose, have summoned you to my side to take a solemn leave of you, and have left a touching message of farewell for Hedwig? Bah! the thing is to keep one's self as cool as possible, and just trust to one's luck for the rest.'

'You do not appear to have taken your adversary's words so coolly. What was the real ground of offence?'

The young Count's face darkened, and he replied with some warmth of tone:

'The subject of our old Dornau lawsuit was broached. They were joking me about my very practical idea of uniting the contending parties in matrimony. I laughed with them and entered quite freely into the spirit of the joke, until Senden remarked very pointedly that as the two properties were to be joined together so peaceably at last, the great efforts formerly made to this end turned out, after all, to have been unnecessary; it was so much trouble wasted.'

'You know that the Baron proposed to your future wife and was refused,' said Oswald, with a shrug of the shoulders. 'He naturally feels a certain degree of irritation, which he cannot help showing on every occasion.'

'His remark was levelled at my mother,' said Edmund warmly. 'It is no secret that she opposed the marriage between her cousin and Herr Rüstow, and openly declared herself on the side of the angry father. She has, as you know, a lofty idea of her class-privileges, and she then felt it incumbent on her to uphold the principles she professes. This is why I esteem so highly the sacrifice she is now making for me. Senden's speech implied that she had been actuated by interested motives, and had influenced Uncle Francis in the making of his will, in the hope that Dornau might fall to me. Could I submit to that, I ask it of you?'

'You go too far. I do not believe that Senden had any such *arrière-pensée*.'

'No matter, I understood him in that sense. Why did he not recall his words when I asked for an explanation? It may be that I was rather too warm, but on that point I can brook no insinuations. You reproach me frequently with my heedlessness and frivolity, Oswald, but even they have a limit. Once past that boundary, I am apt to take matters even more to heart than you.'

'I know,' said Oswald slowly. 'There are two subjects on which you feel seriously and deeply--'

the point of honour and--your mother.'

'The two are one,' retorted Edmund sharply.

'He who offends her by even the shadow of a suspicion rouses all the spirit in me, and makes me desperate.'

He sprang up as he spoke, and stood before his cousin, drawn up to his full height. The habitual gay, careless expression had vanished from his features, giving place to one of set, stern gravity, and his eyes flashed in his passionate excitement.

Oswald was silent. He was standing by the writing-table, and had already grasped the papers, ready to push them aside and draw forth the picture, but as the young Count's last words fell on his ear he paused involuntarily. Why must such a discussion have arisen at this precise moment?

'It never occurred to me that any such interpretation could be placed on that will,' went on Edmund; 'or I should at once, at the time of my uncle's death, have refused the bequest, and never should have allowed the suit to be instituted. If Hedwig and I had remained strangers, and the court had awarded Dornau to me, I believe the calumny would have thriven and prospered, until they had made me out to be the accomplice of a fraud.'

'It is possible to be the victim of a fraud,' said Oswald in a low tone.

'The victim?' repeated the young Count, stepping quickly up to his cousin. 'What do you mean by that?'

Oswald's hand rested heavily on the papers which overlay his great secret, but there was nothing to indicate the emotion within him. His voice was cold and unmoved, as he replied:

'Nothing. I am not alluding to Dornau. We know perfectly well that my uncle acted in accordance with his own will and judgment--but the instrument was drawn up in favour of a nephew, passing over the daughter and her rights. Calumny, of course, takes advantage of the scope afforded it, and hints at undue influence. In such a case, it would, no doubt, be considered only natural that a mother should lay aside any scruples, and act in the interest of her son.'

'But that would have been fortune-hunting of the most flagrant description,' cried Edmund, blazing up anew. 'I really do not understand you, Oswald. How can you speak so indifferently of such a possible view of the case, of the disgrace it would entail? How should you qualify a scheme formed to oust the rightful heir that another might succeed to his place and property? I should call it a swindle, a dishonourable, an infamous action, and the mere thought that such a suspicion should be coupled with the name of Ettersberg makes my blood boil within me.'

Oswald's hand slid slowly from the table, and he stepped back a little into the shadow, beyond the circle irradiated by the lamp.

'Any such suspicion would do you the keenest injustice, truly,' he said emphatically; 'but the world is generally prompt to think evil. No doubt, it often makes evil discoveries. In our sphere especially there are so many dark family histories which lie hidden for years, and then suddenly one day spring to light. So many, who hold a brilliant position and enjoy great consideration, carry about with them the consciousness of guilt which would utterly crush and annihilate them, were it to be found out.'

'Well, I could not do it,' said the young Count, turning his frank, handsome face full upon his cousin. 'I must bear an unsullied brow before the world, must feel myself to be without reproach, that I may breathe freely, and boldly meet the slander I despise--there would be no living for me else. Dark family histories! They are, no doubt, more plentiful than we wot of, but I would suffer no such lurking shadow in our annals, not though I myself must set to work to drag it to light.'

'And suppose silence were imposed on you--for the sake of the family honour?'

'It would probably kill me; for to live with the knowledge that there was a stain on our escutcheon would be, I think, to me a thing impossible!'

Oswald passed his hand across his brow, which was covered with a cold sweat. In keen and terrible suspense he followed his cousin's every movement. Perhaps no interference of his would be necessary; perhaps accident might relieve him of the onerous task which he felt must be fulfilled in one way or another. Edmund had gone up to the writing-table, and as he spoke on, he took up some of the papers unthinkingly, and threw them aside without looking at them. One minute more and he would probably discover the little case, the shape of which must necessarily attract his attention--and then--then would come the catastrophe.

'At all events, it will be seen what view I take of such innuendoes, and the lesson Senden has had will serve for others. Nothing is sacred to calumny, no object, however pure and lofty, not even one which to most minds is the ideal of all that is good.'

'Ideals may fade, idols crumble to the dust,' remarked Oswald. 'You have had no experience of that at present.'

'I was speaking of my mother,' said the young Count, with deep feeling.

Oswald made no reply, but it was well that he was standing in the shade; at least the other saw not the torture this interview inflicted on him. It happened so rarely that Edmund appeared in serious mood, and to-day of all days he was grave and earnest of speech, showing the deeper side of his nature. And all the time his right hand was busy, mechanically turning over the papers on the table, approaching nearer and nearer the fatal spot. Oswald's arm twitched, ready to drag the unsuspecting man back from the abyss which yawned before him--but he checked the impulse, and remained motionless in his place.

'You can understand now why I desire to keep this meeting from my mother's knowledge, notwithstanding its harmless issue.' Edmund continued. 'She would inquire, as you do into its origin, and the truth might wound her. Whilst I am to the fore not the very shadow of offence shall come near her. I would give my life rather than hear her aspersed by a calumnious word--give my life, aye, readily, willingly.'

Separately, one by one, he had taken up the papers and thrown them aside. Now he had come to the last sheet, that beneath which the picture lay, but suddenly Oswald's hand was upon his, grasping it with a grasp of iron, and impeding any further movement.

'What is it?' asked Edmund in astonishment. 'What is the matter with you?'

For all answer, Oswald threw his arm about him and drew him away.

'Come, Edmund, let us go to the sofa yonder.'

'What, you draw me violently from the table simply for that? One would have thought a mine was about to explode. Have you any combustibles, any train laid over there?'

'Possibly,' said Oswald, with a strange smile. 'Let those papers be. Come.'

'Oh, you need fear no indiscretion on my part,' declared the Count, with a sudden outbreak of tetchiness. 'There was no need to place your hand on your papers in that prohibitory manner. I did not look at them, and if I touched them, I did it mechanically. You appear to have secrets, and I, no doubt, am disturbing you when you would wish to be sorting your letters and putting them in order. It will be better for me to go.' He moved away, as though to leave the room; but Oswald held him by the arm, though he tried angrily to free it.

'No, Edmund, you must not leave me so--not to-day, old fellow.'

'Indeed, it is the last evening you have to spend here,' said Edmund, half wrathful, half appeased. 'You are doing all you can to show me how little that affects you.'

'You do me injustice. The separation is more painful to me than you can imagine.'

Oswald's voice shook so audibly that Edmund looked at him in surprise, and all his anger vanished.

'Why, what ails you, Oswald? You are as pale as death, and have seemed so strange all the evening. But I can guess: you have been searching among these letters and papers, which, no doubt, belonged to your parents, and they have awakened many sad memories.'

'Yes, much that is very sad,' said Oswald, drawing a deep breath; 'but it is over now. You are right, they were old memories which put me out of tune. I will drive the troubling thoughts from me, and altogether make an end of them now.'

'Then I really will go,' declared Edmund. 'I forgot that you might still have much to arrange and set in order. We shall meet to-morrow morning. Good-night, Oswald.'

He held out his hand to his cousin, but the latter, assuredly for the first time in his life, took him in his arms, and held him for a moment in a tight embrace.

'Goodnight, Edmund. I have often seemed harsh and cold in return for your warm and hearty friendship, yet you have been very dear to me--how dear I hardly knew myself until this hour.'

'The hour of parting,' said Edmund, half reproachfully, as he cordially returned the embrace. 'But for that, the confession would never have passed your lips. No matter, I have always felt, known how you cared for me in your heart of hearts.'

'Not fully, perhaps. I did not know it myself until to-day. But go now. With that wound of yours, you really should not stay up longer. Go and rest.'

Passing his arm round his cousin's shoulder, he walked with him to the door and down the corridor. There they parted; but as the young Count retraced his steps to his own room, Oswald stood again before his writing-table, holding the portrait in his hand. Once more he contemplated it, then closing the case with a firm pressure, he said under his breath:

'It would be his death. I will not reign as master of Ettersberg at that price.'

CHAPTER X.

Next morning the three gentlemen breakfasted alone, though Oswald's departure had been fixed for the forenoon. Count Edmund paid no attention whatever to the medical advice which would have confined him to his room. He appeared with a bandaged hand, but in good health and spirits, and laughed at the remonstrances of Baron Heideck, who recommended more prudence and greater care. The Countess remained invisible. She was suffering, it appeared, from a violent nervous attack, resulting probably from the fright she had sustained on hearing the first exaggerated account of her son's condition.

Edmund, who had paid a visit to his mother's room, had found her in a state of intense nervous excitement, and to his inquiry as to whether Oswald might take leave of her in person, she had replied decidedly that she was far too unwell to admit anyone but her son. The young Count was somewhat embarrassed when conveying this message to his cousin. He felt that the refusal to say good-bye involved a slight, and thought his mother might have exerted herself so far as to receive her nephew, if only for a few minutes, before his departure.

Oswald, however, accepted the fiat with great calm, and without the smallest show of surprise. He guessed, no doubt, what share the disappearance of the miniature and its probable fate had in this 'nervous attack.' The Countess would certainly have heard from Everard that her nephew had entered the room soon after she had left it, and had remained there alone.

The conversation at breakfast was rather monosyllabic. Baron Heideck, though he had ultimately acquiesced in Oswald's plans, was not disposed to show any special heartiness towards the young relative who had so resolutely set his will at defiance.

Edmund was disturbed, and unlike himself, being oppressed by the thought of the coming separation, the full meaning of which he only realized now that it was imminent. Oswald alone maintained his accustomed calm and grave demeanour. They were on the point of leaving the table, when the young Count was summoned away to see the doctor, who had just arrived. Baron Heideck would have followed--he wished to impress upon the medical man that greater strictness and vigilance would be necessary with so heedless a patient; but a low word from Oswald made him turn and pause. When they were alone together, the latter drew from his breast-pocket a small and carefully-sealed packet.

'I had hoped to see my aunt again before leaving,' he began. 'As this will not now be possible, I must beg of you to take charge of a last--a last commission for me. It is my express request that this packet be delivered into the Countess's own hands, and that it be given to her when she is alone.'

'What is this mysterious commission?' asked Heideck, in surprise. 'And why do you choose me instead of Edmund?'

'Because it would hardly accord with my aunt's wishes that Edmund should hear of the delivery or of the contents of this packet. I must repeat my request that it be given her when no third person is present.'

The icy tone in which these words were spoken, and the haughty, menacing glance which accompanied them, were the only revenge the young man permitted to himself. Heideck naturally did not understand his meaning, but he perceived that the matter referred to was of no ordinary nature, and he accepted the little parcel without more ado.

'I will undertake the commission,' he said.

'I thank you,' replied Oswald, stepping back, and showing by his manner that the interview was at an end. There was indeed no time for further conversation, as just then Edmund returned, accompanied by the doctor, whom he insisted on taking round to see his mother. Her condition made him anxious, he said.

The bulletins, however, proved favourable with regard to both patients. The Count's wound turned out to be most insignificant, and the Countess was merely suffering from a slight nervous attack, a natural consequence of yesterday's fright. Rest and a few simple remedies would restore them both, and Edmund even forced from the doctor the admission that he might safely leave his room and accompany his cousin to the carriage now waiting for him below.

Baron Heideck took a brief, cold leave of his nephew, but Edmund showed himself greatly

affected by the parting. He beset Oswald with entreaties to come back to Ettersberg at all events for the wedding, and promised in his turn shortly to pay a visit to the capital. Oswald accepted it all with rather a sad smile; he knew that neither project would hold good. The Countess would certainly find means to prevent her son's intended journey. One last hearty embrace--then the carriage rolled away, and Edmund, as he reentered the castle alone, felt a desolate sense of the void left by his friend's departure.

More than a couple of hours passed by before Baron Heideck betook himself to his sister's room to execute the commission which had been confided to him. He had been in no special haste; knowing the terms on which Oswald and his aunt stood, he thought it probable that this last message was of no agreeable import, and that it might increase, rather than lessen, the Countess's indisposition. Possessed by this idea, the Baron had at first proposed to postpone the business to the following day; but Oswald's look and tone, as he gave over the packet, had been so peculiar and impressive, that he resolved to have the matter cleared up without further delay. At his request, the Countess dismissed her maid, with orders to admit no one, and the brother and sister remained long closeted together.

The Countess sat on her sofa, looking very pale and worn. It was easy to see what she had suffered since the preceding evening, all that she was suffering now as she sat passive, allowing the stream of her brother's reproaches to flow on without response. He stood before her with the open packet in his hand, speaking in a rather subdued voice, certainly, but with every evidence of great excitement.

'So you really could not make up your mind to part with that unhappy picture! I thought it had been destroyed long ago. How could you be so mad as to keep it in your possession?'

'Do not scold me, Armand.' The Countess's voice was stifled as though by tears. 'It is the only souvenir I have kept--the only one. It came to me with a last message from him, after ... after his death.'

'And for the sake of this sentimental folly you conjure up a frightful danger, a danger which threatens ruin both to yourself and your son. Do not these features speak clearly enough? Formerly, when Edmund was a child, the likeness was not so striking, so extraordinary; but now that he is nearly of the same age as ... as the other, it is positively damning. Your imprudence has cost you a lesson, however, and a hard one. You know into whose hands the picture fell?'

'I have known since yesterday evening. My God, what will come to us now?'

'Nothing,' said Heideck coldly. 'The fact of his surrendering it is ample proof of that. Oswald is too good a lawyer not to know that a mere likeness is no evidence, and that a charge cannot be founded on such testimony. Still, it was a generous act to give it back. Another man would have held possession of it, if only to harass and torment you. That picture must be destroyed.'

'I will destroy it,' said the Countess.

'No, I will do that myself,' retorted her brother, replacing the little case carefully in his pocket. 'I rescued you once from a very real danger, Constance; now I must stand between you and the remembrance of it, which may be almost as fatal. That ghost has been buried for years. Do not let it rise up again, or the whole fortune and happiness of Ettersberg may be wrecked. This unfortunate souvenir must disappear to-day. Edmund must have no more suspicion of the secret than his father had before him.'

Involuntarily he raised his voice as he pronounced these last words, but he ceased speaking suddenly, for at that very moment the door which led into the adjoining room was thrown open, and Edmund appeared on the threshold.

'What am I not to suspect?' he asked with quick vehemence.

The young Count had naturally not supposed that his mother's prohibition of admittance extended to himself. He had crossed the anteroom softly, fearing to disturb her. The closed doors and the subdued tone in which the conversation had been carried on made it well-nigh impossible that he should have overheard more than his uncle's last words. The expression of his face bore proof of this. It betokened astonishment, but no fear.

Nevertheless, the Countess bounded from her seat with a terrible start, and it required a mute but significant gesture of warning from her brother, a pressure of his hand upon her shoulder, to give her back her self-control.

'What is it I am not to suspect?' repeated Edmund, as he came quickly towards them. He addressed his question to the Baron.

'Is it possible that you can have been listening?' asked the latter, his breath almost failing him as he thought of such a possibility.

'No, uncle,' said the young Count angrily. 'I am not in the habit of playing the spy or the listener. I merely caught your last words as I was opening the door. It is natural surely that I should like to know their meaning, and to learn what it is that has hitherto been kept secret from

me as from my father.'

'You heard me beg my sister not to mention the subject to you,' replied Heideck, who had now recovered his composure. 'I was alluding to a reminiscence of our youth which we shall do well to keep to ourselves. You know that our early days were passed amid graver, sadder circumstances than yours. We had battles to fight and sacrifices to make whereof you can have no conception.'

The explanation was plausible and appeared to find belief, but Edmund's tone, though tender, was fraught with deep reproach, as he said, turning to the Countess:

'I could not have believed, mother, that you had a secret from me.'

'Do not torment your mother now,' interrupted Heideck. 'You see how very unwell she is?'

'You should have spared her then, and not have called up painful reminiscences to-day,' replied Edmund, rather warmly. 'I came to tell you, mother, that Hedwig and her father are here. May I bring her to you? As you felt able to see my uncle, you will, I am sure, not refuse to receive us.'

'Certainly,' assented the Countess. 'Indeed, I feel much better now. Bring Hedwig to me at once.'

'I will fetch her,' said Edmund, and went; but before leaving the room he turned once again, and cast a strange scrutinising glance at his mother and uncle. There was no suspicion in his look, but, as it were, a vague presentiment of coming trouble.

The young Count had sent a message over to Brunneck on the preceding evening, with the news that he had been slightly wounded in the hand when out shooting, and therefore would not be able to pay his usual visit, adding that there was not the smallest cause for uneasiness. This piece of intelligence had brought the Councillor and his daughter over to Ettersberg without loss of time. The sight of Edmund, who received them with all his wonted gaiety, soon set any remaining fears on his account at rest. Almost simultaneously with them came the neighbouring squire on whose estate the accident had occurred. He had driven over with his son to inquire after the patient.

Under these circumstances Baron Heideck's first meeting with the new relations was more easy and unconstrained than it would otherwise have been. The young lady's beauty was not without its influence on the rigid aristocrat, who, in spite of his prejudices, could not altogether withhold approval of his nephew's choice. Towards the Councillor, Heideck did indeed preserve a cool and reserved, though a polite demeanour. The presence of strangers made the conversation more animated and general. Edmund alone appeared unusually silent and abstracted. He refused, however, to admit that this had anything to do with his wound, attributing the depression he could not disguise to his recent parting with Oswald. He would not confess even to himself that any other vague trouble was weighing on him.

The two neighbours did not remain very long, and an hour or so after their departure, Rüstow and his daughter set out on their return-journey to Brunneck. Edmund lifted his betrothed into the carriage, and took a tender leave of her. Then he went away back to his own room, but he could feel settled nowhere; a strange restlessness was upon him which drove him from place to place. At length he threw himself upon the sofa, and tried to read, but he could not force his mind to follow the words or understand their sense. A most unwonted cloud lay on the young Count's brow, usually so clear and serene; he had a sombre, harassed look as he sat brooding over the words he had heard spoken in his mother's room. With painful persistency they recurred to his mind, strive as he might to turn his thoughts into another current. What was he not to know? What was it they were hiding so carefully from him?

Edmund was so little accustomed to bear the pressure of any care, to carry about with him any troublesome problem or doubt, that this condition soon became intolerable to him. He threw his book aside, sprang to his feet, and walked straight up to his uncle's room.

Baron Heideck was lodged in the visitors' suite, situated in the upper story. Hither he had retired as soon as the guests drove off. He was standing before the fireplace, busily fanning the flames which had recently been kindled on the hearth, when his nephew entered. As the door opened, he looked round in surprise, and the surprise hardly appeared to be a pleasant one.

'Am I disturbing you?' asked Edmund, who noticed this.

'Oh, certainly not,' said Heideck. 'But it seems to me imprudent of you in your present condition to be wandering about the house instead of remaining quietly in your own room.'

'I have the doctor's permission to leave it, you know, and I wanted to speak to you for a few minutes. You have had a fire lighted, I see. Do you not find it too warm this mild weather?'

'I feel it rather chilly up here in these rooms, especially as evening draws on,' replied Heideck, dropping into a chair near the fire, and motioning to his nephew to be seated opposite. Edmund, however, remained standing.

'I want you to give me some explanation of the words I chanced to overhear to-day,' he began, without further preface. 'I would not press the matter seriously at the time, my mother being present; she is really too unwell to be troubled in any way. But now we are alone and can speak more freely. I positively have no peace for thinking of it. Tell me what that speech of yours meant.'

Heideck frowned. 'I have already said that I was speaking of affairs relating to *our* family. These affairs have long since been settled and forgotten, and the mention of them could only affect you painfully.'

'But I am no longer a child,' said Edmund, with unusual earnestness; 'and I may now claim to be initiated into all the family affairs, without exception. You spoke of some shadow which might obscure the Ettersberg fortunes. At this present time I am Master of Ettersberg. The matter therefore concerns me, and I have a right to inquire into it. In short, uncle, I am determined to know the meaning of all this.'

The demand was made with an energy quite foreign to the young Count's usual manner. Baron Heideck, however, merely shrugged his shoulders, and replied impatiently:

'What absurd questions, Edmund! How can you cling so pertinaciously to this fancy, or attach such importance to a mere word? It was just one of those expressions which escape one sometimes in the heat of conversation, but which have no real or deep significance.'

'But you spoke in a very excited tone.'

'And in spite of your protest against being thought a listener, you appear to have paused some minutes outside the door.'

'Had I been willing to humiliate myself so far, I should probably have heard more, and should not now have to sue for information,' returned Edmund angrily.

Heideck pressed his lips together, and for a moment remained silent, thinking, no doubt, what would have been the result if his nephew had really stooped to play the listener. He saw the necessity, however, of warding off any further attack; so he replied, with the coldest decision of manner:

'The matter in question affects me principally, and I do not desire to discuss it further. I fancy you will accept this answer as final and sufficient, and that you will besiege neither your mother nor myself with useless inquiries on the subject. If you please, we will say no more about it.'

To such a speech, delivered with firmness, and with all the authority of the ex-guardian, no reply was possible.

Edmund was silent, but he felt that he had not heard the truth; that, on the contrary, an endeavour was made to divert him from his search after it. He saw, however, that he should obtain nothing from his uncle, and that for the present he must abandon all attempt to solve the mystery.

Heideck seemed determined to put an end to the conversation. He seized the poker, and plied it in very demonstrative fashion, raking the coals vigorously, and repeatedly striking the stove in his efforts to quicken the flames. His whole manner testified to extreme impatience, and an irritation of spirit he with difficulty controlled.

Presently he bent imprudently forward over the fire, and as the blaze he had kindled suddenly burst forth, amid a shower of sparks, the Baron started back, hastily withdrawing his hand, and uttering a half-suppressed exclamation of pain.

'Have you burnt yourself?' asked Edmund, looking up.

Heideck examined his hand, which certainly showed a small red scar.

'The stoves here are so badly constructed,' he cried petulantly, giving vent to his secret vexation, and still with the same nervous haste tore a handkerchief from his breast-pocket to apply to the little wound. The handkerchief brought with it another article, which fell on the floor, and rolled close to Edmund's feet. Heideck stooped to pick it up, but it was too late; his nephew had been beforehand with him.

Already the miniature-case was in Edmund's hands. The spring, long grown slack, had given way in the fall, and the cover had started open. A fate must have attached to this unhappy picture. Precisely as it was about to be destroyed, it thus fell into the hands of him who never should have beheld it!

'My likeness?' cried Edmund, in the greatest amazement. 'How did you come by it, uncle?'

Every trace of colour had faded from the Baron's face, but it was only for a moment. He felt how much was at stake. By a strenuous effort of his will he succeeded in recovering outward calm, and taking advantage of the error, replied:

'You seem surprised. Why should I not possess a portrait of you?'

As he spoke, he made an attempt to take the case from the young man's hand, but the latter stepped back, and declined to surrender it.

'But I never sat for this portrait, and what is the meaning of this uniform, which I have never worn?'

'Edmund, give me back that case,' said Heideck authoritatively, stretching out his hand for it again--but in vain. Had it not been for that previous occurrence in the Countess's room, Edmund would probably have allowed himself to be deceived by any pretext invented on the spur of the moment, for suspicion and distrust were far removed from his open, ingenuous nature. But now both had been inoculated, now he knew that some secret, some baneful secret, was being kept from him. His instinct told him that it had some connection with this picture, and he obstinately clung to the clue thus obtained, little dreaming as yet, it is true, whither it would lead.

'How did you come by the picture, uncle?' he asked again, this time in a somewhat louder key.

'That I will tell you when you have restored it to me,' was the sharp reply.

For all answer, Edmund stepped from the centre of the room, growing dark in the gathering twilight, to the window, where he could still see clearly, and began to study the picture, trait by trait, and line by line, as Oswald had studied it on the preceding day.

A long and troubled pause ensued.

Heideck convulsively grasped the back of the chair from which he had sprung. He had no choice but to look on in silence; for he told himself that any false step now, any attempt at forcible interference, might be the ruin of them all; but the ordeal of suspense was hard to bear.

'Are you satisfied?' he asked, when some minutes had elapsed; 'and do you intend to restore to me my property?'

Edmund turned.

'That is not my portrait,' he said slowly, emphasising each word; 'but it bears an extraordinary resemblance to myself, one which deceives at the first glance. Whom does it represent?'

Baron Heideck had foreseen the question, and was prepared for it. So he answered without hesitation:

'A relation of ours who has been dead many years.'

'An Ettersberg?'

'No; a member of my family.'

'Indeed. And why have I never heard of this relative, and of the wonderful resemblance existing between him and me?'

'By mere accident, probably. Good heavens, you need not stare at the picture so persistently! Such likenesses are frequent enough among relations.'

'Frequent?' repeated Edmund mechanically. 'Was this the fatal souvenir which must disappear to-day? Had you destined it to be consumed by those flames? Was it for this you had the fire lighted?'

The young Count's deadly pallor, the faint accents of his voice, showed that he felt himself to be nearing an abyss, though as yet he could not fathom its depth. Heideck saw this, and made a last desperate effort to drag him from the brink.

'Edmund, my patience is now thoroughly exhausted,' he said, taking refuge in simulated anger. 'You cannot seriously suppose that I shall make reply to this folly, or try to solve all the mad fancies of your brain.'

'I demand that the secret of this portrait be made known to me,' cried Edmund, summoning up all his energy. 'You must give me an answer, uncle, now--at once, or you will drive me to extreme measures.'

Heideck racked his brain in vain to find a way out of the dilemma. He was not skilful in lying, and felt, moreover, that his nephew would no longer be deceived. The one chance left him was to gain time.

'You shall hear the story later on,' he said evasively. 'At this moment you are too excited, you are still suffering from the effects of your wound. This is not a fitting time to discuss such matters.'

'So you refuse to answer me,' Edmund broke out, with sudden fierce vehemence. 'You cannot,

or will not, reply. So be it. I will apply to my mother, she shall give me an account of this.'

He rushed out of the room, and was down the stairs before his uncle could check him. The Baron hastened after the young man, but the pursuit was fruitless. When he reached his sister's room, Edmund had already entered, and closed the door of the boudoir behind him. It was impossible even to hear what was going on in the inner apartment. Heideck saw that he must abstain from further interference. The matter was taking its fated course.

'There will be a catastrophe,' he said to himself hoarsely. 'Poor Constance! I fear that your punishment may prove greater than your offence.'

CHAPTER XI.

Next morning brought inclement autumn weather. Fog and drizzling rain obscured the landscape, and bushes and flowers bore evidences of the first nipping frost.

All the Ettersberg servants had their heads together, and were asking each other what could possibly have happened. That something had happened was as clear as day.

But the afternoon before, when the visitors from Brunneck had been at the castle, perfect union and cheerfulness had reigned; but shortly afterwards, from the moment the young master had left his mother's apartments, there had been disturbance throughout the house.

Since then the Count had remained invisible, shut up in his own room. The Countess was very ill, so her maid reported; but she would see no one, and had even forbidden that a doctor should be sent for.

Baron Heideck had made two attempts that morning to gain access to his nephew. To him, as to all others, admittance was refused. Family scenes being things quite unfamiliar to this household, imagination had the greater scope, and supplied various explanations, none of which, however, approached the truth.

It was almost noon. Heideck had made a third essay to reach the young Count, but once more without avail. Old Everard, dismayed and helpless, stood in the presence of the Baron, who was saying, with great determination of tone:

'I must see my nephew, cost what it may. It is impossible that he can be deaf to all this calling and knocking. Something must have happened to him.'

'I heard the Count pacing incessantly up and down all night,' timidly remarked Everard. 'He has only been quiet for the last half-hour.'

'No matter,' declared Heideck. 'He may have had a fresh hemorrhage from his wound and have fainted. I have no alternative but to force open the door.'

'There may, perhaps, be another way,' said Everard hesitatingly. 'The small tapestried door, which leads from the Count's dressing-room to his bedroom, is generally kept unlocked. If we----'

'Why did you not tell me this before?' Heideck interrupted him, with some heat. 'Why did I not hear of this the first thing this morning? Show me the door at once.'

The old servant suffered the rebuke in silence. He did not believe in the fainting or the hemorrhage, the fear of which was to serve as a pretext for a forcible intrusion. He had distinctly heard his young master's footsteps all the night through, but had felt that the latter desired to be left absolutely alone. Now, however, no choice was left him; he must point out the door of which he had spoken. It proved to be unlocked, as he had supposed.

Heideck motioned to the old man to remain outside, and went in alone to his nephew. The bedchamber was empty, the bed untouched. With rapid steps, the Baron passed on into the adjoining sitting-room, and an exclamation of relief escaped his lips as he caught sight of Edmund. For the last few minutes he had feared the worst.

'Edmund, it is I,' he said, in a low voice.

No answer came. The young Count seemed to have noticed neither his words nor his approach. He was lying on the sofa with his face buried in the cushions, having, as it seemed, thus thrown himself down from sheer fatigue. His attitude betrayed that utter exhaustion which

comes as a reaction after any great tension of mind or body.

'How could you cause us so much anxiety?' said Heideck reproachfully. 'Three times to-day have I knocked at your door in vain, and I have been compelled almost to force an entrance here.'

Again there was no reply. Edmund remained quite motionless. His uncle went nearer, and bent over him.

'Give me a word of answer, Edmund. You rushed away like a madman yesterday. There was no holding you back. I trust that you have grown calmer by now, and that you can at least listen to what I have to say. I have just come from your mother----'

The mention of this name seemed at length to produce some effect. Edmund shivered slightly, and sat up.

At sight of his countenance the Baron started back, scared and shocked.

'For God's sake, what ails you? How can you allow yourself to be so utterly overcome?'

The young man's features were indeed so changed as to be hardly recognisable. The misfortune which had befallen him seemed at one dire stroke to have taken from him all strength and courage. The dimmed look of his eyes and the complete prostration evident in voice and bearing told this plainly, as he replied:

'What is there for me yet to hear?'

'You know no details. Have you really no questions to put to me?'

'None.'

Heideck glanced uneasily at his nephew. A passionate outburst of feeling would have pleased him better than this numb listlessness. He sat down by Edmund and took his hand.

The young man offered no resistance; he seemed hardly to know what was going on about him.

'Yesterday I did all in my power to conceal the truth from you,' pursued the Baron; 'for I myself am perhaps not blameless in this unhappy business. I interfered in a somewhat arbitrary manner with the lives of two human beings, and the fault, if fault it were, has been cruelly avenged. My intentions were indeed of the best. I knew that the young officer to whom my sister was attached, and even secretly engaged, was as poor as herself. He had no fortune to offer her, he could not have married for years, and I had too sincere an affection for Constance to allow her to lose the bloom of her youth, to pine away in anxiety and sadness. When I separated her from her first love, and persuaded her to accept the hand of Count Ettersberg, I did so in the firm persuasion that her attachment had been a mere transient romance, a passing fancy, which marriage would cure at once and effectually. Could I have guessed what deep root the feeling had taken, I would not have interfered. It was only about a year later, when I heard that the regiment had been moved and quartered in the garrison-town nearest to Ettersberg, that I began to divine a danger, and my next visit here transformed the suspicion into a certainty. When the two met, their old love sprang up with fresh intensity, and developed into a passion which bore down all barriers before it. When I discovered this, when I stepped between them and forcibly recalled them to a sense of their duty, it ... it was, I grieve to say, too late!'

He paused, and seemed to expect an answer. Edmund withdrew his hand from his uncle's grasp, and stood up.

'Go on,' he said, in a half-stifled voice.

'I have nothing more to add. With this separation all was over. I told you yesterday that the portrait was the portrait of a dead man. He fell the very next year, being one of the first victims of the war which then broke out. My sister never saw him again. Now you know the chain of events, and how it all happened; now try to regain composure. I can understand that it has been a terrible blow to you. You must accept it as a hard decree of Fate.'

'Yes, a hard decree,' repeated Edmund. 'You see that I succumb to it.'

'A man must not so easily succumb to life's first trouble,' said Heideck earnestly. 'You will learn to bear that which must be borne. But now exert yourself, and put from you this useless brooding over the unalterable, the irreparable. Will you not come with me to your mother?'

The young Count negatived the proposal with a hasty gesture.

'No, uncle. Do not ask that of me, not that!'

'Edmund, be reasonable. You cannot remain shut up in your rooms for ever.'

'I shall leave them to-day. In a couple of hours I shall start on a journey.'

'On a journey? Where do you mean to go?'

'To town, to Oswald.'

'To Oswald!' cried Heideck, bounding from his seat, and staring at his nephew as though he had not heard aright. 'Are you out of your senses?'

'Did you imagine that I should be the accomplice of this fraud?' burst forth Edmund, his unnatural calm suddenly merging into a fierce blaze of anger. 'Did you really think it possible that I should be silent and continue to play the master here, when the rightful heir is driven out, leading a life of privation and almost of poverty? If you two can do it, I cannot. How I am to bear the terrible existence before me, whether I shall be able to bear it at all, I know not. But this I do know. I must go to Oswald, must tell him that he has been cheated, defrauded, that Ettersberg is his of right. He shall hear it all; then ... then it will matter little what becomes of me.'

Heideck had listened in mortal alarm. Whatever he may have feared, for this turn of affairs he certainly was not prepared. Were Edmund to learn that his cousin knew, or at least divined, the secret, an explanation between the two could no longer be prevented, and so the whole edifice would crash to pieces.

The uncle understood all the incalculable consequences of such a catastrophe better than his impetuous nephew, and he was resolved to prevent it at any price.

'You forget that you are not the only person concerned in this,' he said emphatically. 'Have you not thought whom the confession you propose making would disgrace and dishonour?'

Edmund recoiled, and the feverish glow which had overspread his features gave way to a livid pallor.

'Oswald has always been your mother's enemy,' continued Heideck. 'He has always hated her, and she has never deceived herself as to his sentiments. Will you really go to him--to him of all people, with a tale which will ruin her? What a triumph for him to see at length the woman he hates in the dust before him, to hear her own son----'

'Uncle, no more,' broke in Edmund, with a wild cry. 'I cannot bear it.'

'I should not have supposed you could hesitate a moment between your mother and Oswald,' said the Baron, frowning. 'But here there is really no alternative. You must yield to necessity.'

Edmund had thrown himself on to a chair, and hidden his face in his hands. A low groan escaped his overcharged breast.

'Do you think it has been a light thing for me to keep silence, and to aid and abet that which you call fraud?' asked his uncle, after a short pause. 'But I repeat, you have here no choice. The entailed estates are not transferable; they cannot be alienated from you. You must either remain Master of Ettersberg, or proclaim your secret to the world--in which case the honour of two houses, of Heideck as of Ettersberg, will be irretrievably lost. There is no other issue. I set this distinctly before my sister in years gone by, when she was on the point of owning all to her husband; now again I must call upon you to recognise it. You must be silent. If Oswald's future is sacrificed through our silence, we cannot help that. The family honour stands higher than his right.'

He spoke with iron firmness and composure, but this only lent more power to his words, and Edmund felt the truth that was in them. A desperate struggle was going on in the young man's breast, a struggle between his sense of justice and the stern necessity which was so forcibly demonstrated to him.

Oswald's query recurred to his mind. 'Suppose silence was imposed on you for the sake of the family honour?'

He was, indeed, far from attributing to his cousin's words any deeper significance, or from divining his knowledge of the truth. That conversation had come about most naturally. The young Count remembered in this hour how he had been fired with indignation at the bare notion that anyone could impute to his mother interested motives. How proudly and disdainfully had he declared that no shadow, no slur should attach itself to his life, that he must ever bear himself before the world with a clear conscience and unsullied brow! Two days ago he had held that language, and now....

Baron Heideck lost not a moment in pursuing his advantage. He had recourse to the last and most effectual weapon in his armoury.

'Now come with me to your mother,' he said, in a milder tone. 'You do not know how cruelly she has suffered since yesterday evening. She is waiting in terrible suspense for news of you, for a word from your lips. Come.'

Edmund passively allowed himself to be raised from his seat and led a few steps towards the door. There he halted suddenly.

'I cannot,' he said.

Heideck, who had thrown open the door, which had been locked on the inside, paid no attention to this protest, but endeavoured to draw his nephew from the room. The latter now resisted energetically.

'I cannot see my mother. Do not press me, uncle; do not try compulsion, or there will be a repetition of last night's scene.'

He freed himself from Heideck's grasp, and pulled the bell. Everard came in at once.

'My horse,' commanded his master. 'Have him saddled immediately.'

'Is this your reply to all that I have been saying to you? Has it all been in vain?' cried Heideck, in despair, when the man had withdrawn. 'Can you really still intend to take that journey?'

'No, I shall remain; but I must be out in the open air, or I shall stifle. Let me go, uncle.'

'First give me your word that you will do nothing rash, nothing desperate. In your present state, you are capable of any madness. What am I to say to your mother?'

'What you will. I have no other intention than to ride about the country for a couple of hours. Perhaps I shall be better then.'

With these words Edmund hurried away, his uncle making no further effort to stop him. He saw that neither persuasion nor soothing words of comfort could avail at present. Perhaps it would be well to let the storm spend itself.

Hour after hour passed. Noon came, then gradually dusk drew on, and still the young Count did not appear. At the castle the anxiety produced by his protracted absence grew with every minute. Baron Heideck reproached himself most bitterly for having allowed his nephew to leave him in so excited a frame of mind, but he was obliged to conceal his fears. He had to be strong, to think and act for his sister, whose brain seemed well-nigh to reel beneath the weight of dread and suspense. She wandered from room to room, from window to window, rejecting all her brother's attempts at encouragement with a mute, despairing gesture. Better than he, than anyone, she knew her son, and knew therefore what was to be feared.

'It really is useless for us to send messengers, Constance,' said Heideck, as he stood near her at the window. 'We have not even an approximate idea of the road Edmund took, and it only causes the servants to shake their heads and gossip more persistently. The young madman must have tired himself out by this time. Now that it is growing dark he is sure to turn homewards.'

'If he has not started on his journey after all,' whispered the Countess, whose eyes never once swerved from the avenue leading up to the castle.

'No,' replied Heideck decidedly. 'I made it evident to him that his confession would involve another, and who that other would be; we have nothing to fear on that score. He has certainly not gone to Oswald, but----'

He forebore to finish his speech, out of consideration to the Countess, but a great dread had seized upon him. Might not his nephew, by some despairing act, have sought a solution which would be worse, more cruel even than the threatened avowal to Oswald?

Another troubled pause ensued, another interval of painful silence, such as had frequently occurred that afternoon. Suddenly the Countess started up with a cry, and bent forward, far out of the window. Heideck, following her example, could discern nothing, but the mother's eye had already recognised the figure of her son, in spite of mist and gathering darkness. There he was--still distant, however--at the farther end of the avenue. The Countess's self-control now utterly forsook her. She did not remember that a plea of illness had been advanced for her to the servants: did not stay to consider how Edmund might receive her. She only wanted to see him; to have him with her again, and she rushed to meet him, so swiftly and impetuously that her brother could hardly follow her.

Outside in the vestibule they had a few minutes to wait, for the young Count, who had set off from home at a furious gallop, was returning at a snail's pace. The horse, fairly bathed in sweat, trembled in every limb; at length it halted before the door. The animal was evidently completely spent, and its rider seemed to be in the same condition. He, who usually would swing himself so lightly from the saddle, dismounted now slowly, almost laboriously, and it cost him a visible effort to ascend the few steps leading up to the entrance-hall.

The Countess stood on the very spot where some months before she had received her son on his return from his foreign travels. Then, radiant with the happiness of meeting her, he had rushed impetuously into her arms. Today he did not even notice that his mother was there. His clothes were saturated with rain, his damp hair clung to his brow, and he moved slowly forward, never looking round, but walking straight in towards the staircase.

'Edmund!'

It was a faint, trembling cry. Edmund turned, and beheld his mother standing close before him. She said not another word, but in her eyes he could read the misery, the anguish of the last few hours. And as she stretched forth her arms to him, he did not recoil, but stooped down to her. His lips met her forehead with a damp and icy touch, and in a whisper, audible to her alone, he said:

'Be at peace, mother. I will try and bear it for your sake.'

CHAPTER XII.

Two months had now passed since Oswald had taken up his abode in the capital, where he had met with a most friendly welcome. His friend and patron, Councillor Braun, ranked among the first jurisconsults of that city, and this gentleman, happy to lend a helping hand to the son of his deceased friend, stood warmly by him, advancing his interests, and lending him all the assistance in his power. He comprehended and sympathized with this young man in the resolution he had taken. It was a worthy impulse, the old lawyer felt, which withdrew Oswald from a life of dependence, easy and brilliant though it might be in outward circumstances--a right feeling which made him prefer to work and struggle on alone, rather than to receive constant benefits from his relations, and submit, in return, to play a subordinate part through life.

Herr Braun and his wife were childless, and their young guest was received by them almost on the footing of a son. Oswald threw himself zealously into the work before him, and the approaching examination left him little leisure to ruminate on all that he had left at Ettersberg; still, it surprised him greatly that no news from the castle had reached him. Edmund had replied to his first long letter full of details by only a few lines, the style of which seemed strangely forced.

An excuse was offered for this brief note on the score of a maimed hand, the writer's wound being not yet healed. Oswald was still looking for a response to his second epistle, though weeks had elapsed since it had been despatched.

The young man knew full well that by the return of that picture the bridge of communication between himself and the Countess had been broken once and for all, that she would now use every effort to loose the bonds which bound him to her son; but it seemed impossible that Edmund should succumb so quickly and completely to her influence.

Thoughtless as the young Count often showed himself, his friendship for his cousin had ever been faithful and true. He could not have forgotten the friend of his youth in the course of a few short weeks. There must be something else that prevented his writing.

The first days of December had arrived. Oswald's examination was over; he had passed it brilliantly, and was desirous of at once entering upon his new career. But Councillor Braun declared decidedly that after the exertions of the last few weeks the young man stood in need of rest, that he must grant himself a respite, and remain on some little while longer as a guest in his house.

Half reluctantly Oswald yielded. He felt himself that he required a certain breathing-time after the constant study and strain, which had lasted since the preceding spring.

In that passionate struggle for independence he had made almost too great demands on his strength.

The great lawyer was in his consultation-room, where he had just completed the business of the day, when Oswald came in with a letter, which he placed on a pile of correspondence prepared for the post. It was about the hour when the servant generally collected and despatched it.

'Have you been writing to Ettersberg?' asked the old gentleman, looking up.

Oswald replied in the affirmative. He had conveyed to Edmund the news of his successful examination. An answer must come now at length, he thought; this protracted silence began to cause him some uneasiness.

'We were talking of the Ettersberg property here, not long ago,' said the lawyer. 'One of my clients intends to purchase timber from the estate to a large amount, and he consulted me as to one or two points in the bargain.'

Oswald's attention was roused at once. 'Purchase timber to a large amount? There must be some mistake. So much wood has been cut down of late years in the Ettersberg forests, that they now require great care and the nicest handling. My cousin is aware of this; he could not possibly have been persuaded into taking such a step.'

The lawyer shrugged his shoulders. 'Nevertheless, I can assure you, it is as I say. My client does not treat with the Count himself, but with the bailiff. Of course, the man must be empowered to make such arrangements.'

'The bailiff will be leaving his situation shortly,' remarked Oswald. 'He received notice to quit in the summer, having proved himself flagrantly incompetent. He cannot, I should suppose, have been left in possession of the extended powers Baron Heideck conferred on him years ago. I imagined that Edmund would recall those when he took upon himself the management of his own affairs. Suppose such not to have been the case?'

'It would be an act of unpardonable negligence on the part of the young Count,' replied the lawyer. 'To leave for months powers such as these in the hands of a person whom he is about to dismiss, with whose services he is dissatisfied! Do you really think it possible?'

Oswald was silent. He well knew Edmund's heedlessness and indifference to all business matters, and was persuaded that he had left matters exactly as he had found them.

'The sum in question is an important one,' went on the lawyer, who understood his silence. 'Yet the price to be paid by the purchaser is a very low one, immediate payment in cash being demanded.'

'I think there must be something more here than a mere assumption of authority on the steward's part,' said Oswald uneasily. 'Hitherto he has been looked upon as an honest man, but the fact that he is about to lose his situation may tempt him to take fraudulent advantage of the means at his command. My cousin has certainly not given his consent to this bargain. Why, it would entail the devastation of his forests! I am convinced that he knows nothing at all about it.'

'That may be--but if the man's powers are not cancelled, he will have to recognise a transaction which is concluded in his name. You had better telegraph to Ettersberg, and inquire how the matter stands. Perhaps a timely warning may be of some avail.'

'No doubt, if timely it prove. When are the formalities of the sale to be settled?'

'In two or three days. Probably the day after to-morrow.'

'Then I must go over to Ettersberg myself,' said the young man resolutely. 'A mere telegram will serve us nothing. Immediate and active steps must be taken, for as I understand the business, there is an act of robbery in contemplation which we have to prevent. Edmund unfortunately is too confiding in such matters, and will allow himself to be deceived by all sorts of shifts and subterfuges until it is too late to think of a remedy. I am at liberty just at present, and in three days I can be back. It will certainly be best that I should see my cousin and give him the necessary information, that he may act without delay.'

Councillor Braun assented. The whole business, and especially the hurried manner in which it was transacted, seemed to him suspicious in the highest degree, and it pleased him that the young man, who had, so to say, broken with his relations, should now so decidedly, and without a moment's hesitation, interfere to protect them from loss and injury.

In the course of that same evening Oswald made all preparations for his improvised journey. Ettersberg was situated within easy reach of the city. By taking the morning train he could be there by noon. Some pretext could easily be found by which his visit to the castle could be limited to a day or two at most, and the wedding, which at all costs he was determined to avoid, was not to take place until Christmas.

At Ettersberg nothing, of course, was known of this intended visit. The dwellers at the castle had enough, and more than enough, to do with the preparations for the coming wedding and for the accommodation of the young couple in their future home. Many alterations were being made on the *bel étage*, which was to be given up altogether to the Count and his wife, and the necessary arrangements were as yet by no means completed. Besides this, Schönfeld had to be set in readiness for the Dowager Countess, who intended to take up her residence there directly after the wedding.

The Countess's resolve to leave Ettersberg after her son's marriage had taken everyone by surprise. She had, it is true, occasionally alluded to such a plan, but never in real earnest, and had always submitted with a very good grace to Edmund's vehement protests against the idea of a separation. Now both seemed to have altered their views. The Countess suddenly announced that in future she should make her home at Schönfeld, a smaller dwelling which her husband had expressly appointed her for a dower-house, and Edmund raised no objection whatsoever. At Brunneck this sudden determination excited much amazement and comment, but at the same time it gave entire satisfaction. Rüstow had always feared for his daughter a life under the same roof with her mother-in-law, and this unexpected turn of events was too welcome and acceptable in itself for him to muse or ponder much over the cause of it.

The last two months had sped by with wonderful rapidity, leaving little or no time for meditation of any sort. First, there was Dornau to take possession of, to restore and furnish throughout, before, as Hedwig's dowry, it returned to Ettersberg for ever. What with this and the preparations for the coming wedding, which was to be a very brilliant affair, with the constant flow of visits and invitations from all quarters--they had lived in a whirl of occupation and excitement. Autumn was always the gay season here in the country. Great hunts were held and shooting-parties organized by the landed proprietors in the neighbourhood, and to these balls and other festivities were naturally superadded. There had been an almost uninterrupted series of fêtes and entertainments ever since September. If now and then, by some chance, the Brunneck family remained at home without visitors, there was so much to talk over and to discuss that anything like quiet domestic comfort was out of the question. Rüstow had more than once declared that he could not hold out under such pressure much longer, and that he wished to heaven the wedding were over--then perhaps he might enjoy a little peace once more. The day of the great event was already fixed; in three weeks' time the marriage was to take place at Brunneck, and the newly-married couple would then proceed to Ettersberg, their future home.

In the drawing-room at the castle, where the family generally assembled when alone, the Countess sat with a book in her hand, reading, or appearing to read. Hedwig, who was paying one of her frequent visits to Ettersberg, stood by the window, looking out at the snow-clad landscape. Winter had long ago set in, and to-day there was a fine continuous fall of drizzling flakes which certainly did not induce to outdoor exercise.

'Edmund is not coming back yet,' said the young lady, breaking a silence which had lasted some considerable time. 'What an idea to ride out in such weather as this!'

'You know that it is his daily habit,' replied the Countess, without looking up from her book.

'But he has only taken up the habit of late. He used to be very sensitive on the score of the weather, and a shower of rain would send him home at once. Now he seems rather to prefer wild and stormy days for rushing about the country, and he will stay out in the rain and snow for hours together.'

The words, or rather their tone, betrayed a certain unmistakable anxiety.

The Countess made no reply. She turned over the pages of her book, apparently absorbed by its interest, but a close observer would have remarked that she did not read a line.

Hedwig turned from the window, and, coming back into the room, approached her hostess.

'Do you not think that Edmund is strangely altered, mamma? I have noticed it for the last two months.'

'Altered? How? In what?'

'In everything.'

The Countess leaned her head on her hand, and again remained silent. She clearly wished to avoid any discussion on this subject, but the young girl held steadily to her point.

'I have been wishing to speak to you about this for some time, mamma. I cannot conceal from you that Edmund's behaviour makes me feel very uneasy--frightens me, in fact. He is so different from what he used to be; so uneven and variable in mood and temper; so strange even in his manner towards me. He seems feverishly anxious that all the preparations for the wedding should be pushed on as quickly as possible, and, on the other hand, there are times when he shows himself to be quite indifferent, and so totally unsympathetic that I have fancied he may wish the marriage to be deferred.'

'Set your mind at rest, my child,' said the Countess, in a tone which was intended to be soothing, but which yet rang with concentrated bitterness. '*You* have not lost his love. His tenderness towards you has suffered no change. I think you must feel this yourself. Edmund does appear rather excitable just now, I admit. He has been too gay, too much into company of late--indeed, we have all of us been involved in a perfect whirl of dissipation. Really, these incessant *réunions*, these meets, these dinners and evening parties, have hardly left us time to breathe. You yourself have been rather overtaxing your strength in this way, and it is not surprising if your nerves are a little tried by overmuch excitement.'

'I would willingly have refused half the invitations,' said Hedwig, with some emotion; 'but Edmund insisted on our accepting them. We have had no peace ever since September, but have been fairly driven from one fête, from one visit to another; and when we contrive to stay at home, meaning to rest a little, Edmund comes with some new proposal, or brings some new visitor to the house. It seems really as though he could not bear to be quiet an hour either here or at Brunneck, as though anything like solitude were a positive torture to him.'

The Countess's lips quivered, and accidentally, as it were, she turned her face away, replying, however, with perfect outward composure:

'Nonsense! Why indulge in such silly fancies? Edmund has always been fond of society, and

you yourself formerly took delight in constant gaiety and pleasure. I should not have expected such a complaint from you, of all people. What has happened to produce such an alteration in your feelings?'

'I am anxious about Edmund,' confessed the young girl; 'and I see plainly that he takes no pleasure in all this dissipation, though he seems to seek it so eagerly. There is something so unnatural, so spasmodic in his mirth, that it gives me quite a pang to witness it. Do not try to deny this either to me or to yourself, mamma. It is impossible you should not have remarked the change. I fear that in secret it troubles you as much as it troubles myself.'

'What avails my trouble or anxiety?' said the Countess, almost harshly. 'Edmund cares nothing for either.' Then, with a quick diversion, as though feeling that she had said too much, she added, with assumed coldness, 'You must learn to understand your husband's character and little ways without assistance from anyone else, my dear. He is not quite so easy to manage as you perhaps imagined at the outset. But he loves you--this is certain, and you will therefore have no great difficulty in discovering the proper course to take. I have made up my mind never to interfere between you. You see that I have even abandoned the idea of living under one roof with my son and his wife.'

The rebuff was plain enough. Hedwig felt chilled to the soul, as had often been the case when she had attempted to win from her future mother-in-law any mark of hearty confidence or affection. That interview with Oswald had shown her what a rock lay ahead, and what a rival she would have in the Countess; but on this occasion she felt that the cool repellent answer had been prompted by some other motive than mere jealousy. There was some secret misunderstanding between Edmund and his mother.

Hedwig had long remarked this fact, though they strove outwardly to preserve their old demeanour. In the first days of the engagement the Countess had relinquished none of her claims, had shown herself by no means inclined to yield to her successor the first place in her son's affections. Why should she suddenly make open renunciation of her influence? The step was little in accordance with her character.

In the eagerness of their talk, the two ladies had failed to hear the sound of a horse's hoofs without. They turned in some surprise as the door opened, and the young Count appeared. He had laid aside his hat and overcoat, but a snowflake still hung here and there in his dark hair, and his heated face showed how wild had been the ride from which he had just returned. He came in quickly, and pressed his lips hastily, almost roughly, to Hedwig's brow, as she went forward to meet him.

'You have been out two whole hours, Edmund,' said the young girl, with an accent of reproach. 'If the snow-storm had set in earlier, I should not have let you go.'

'Why, do you want to make me effeminate? This is just the weather that suits me.'

'How long has it suited you? Formerly you liked, you were satisfied with nothing but sunshine.'

Edmund's face darkened at this remark, and he replied curtly:

'Formerly, perhaps. But we have changed all that.' Then he went up to the Countess, and kissed her hand. There was, however, no attempt at the affectionate embrace with which in the old days he had always greeted her; as though accidentally, he avoided the armchair which stood vacant between the ladies, and threw himself on a seat near Hedwig. There was a certain nervous haste and restlessness in all his movements which had never before characterized them, and a like feverish excitableness was to be remarked in his voice and manner, as in the course of conversation he passed from one subject to another, never pursuing any for more than a few minutes.

'Hedwig was becoming very anxious at your long absence,' remarked the Countess.

'Anxious?' repeated Edmund. 'What in the world could make you anxious, Hedwig? Were you afraid I might be buried beneath a drift?'

'No; but I do not like these wild rides of yours about the country. You have grown so extremely reckless and imprudent of late.'

'Nonsense! you are a dauntless horsewoman yourself, and never show the smallest signs of fear when we ride out together.'

'When you are with me you are more careful, but whenever you go out alone you rush along at a mad pace which is positively dangerous.'

'Bah, dangerous! No danger will touch me, you may rely upon it.'

The words conveyed none of the old merry, lighthearted confidence wherewith the young Count had been wont to boast of his happy star. On the contrary, they seemed rather to imply a challenge to Fate, a mute impeachment of its hard decrees.

The Countess raised her eyes slowly, and fixed on her son a stern and sombre gaze. He, however, seemed not to remark this, but continued more lightly:

'It is to be hoped we may have finer weather for our shooting to-morrow. I am expecting some gentlemen who will probably be here this afternoon.'

'Why, two days ago the whole neighbourhood was gathered together for a monster shooting-party here at Ettersberg, and the day after to-morrow we are to have exactly the same affair over at Brunneck.'

'Does the invitation displease you?' asked Edmund jestingly, 'I certainly ought first to have solicited the gracious permission of you ladies, and really the thought of my omission overwhelms me with confusion.'

'Hedwig is right,' said the Countess. 'You do exact too much of us all just now. We have not had a day to ourselves for weeks, not one quiet day without visitors to receive or visits to pay. I shall be glad to retire into my nook at Schönfeld and to leave you to continue this fatiguing round of dissipation by yourselves.'

But a few months previously, such an allusion to the approaching separation would have called forth from Edmund an energetic protest, a warm appeal. He had always vowed that he could not live without his mother. Now he was silent; by not a syllable did he gainsay her resolution, nor did he reproach her for her longing to depart.

'Well, well, you need only see these gentlemen at dinner,' he said, completely ignoring the last remark. 'They will be out in the woods all day.'

'And you with them, I suppose,' said Hedwig. 'We hoped we might at least have you for one day to ourselves.'

Edmund laughed outright. 'How very flattering! But your nature seems to have undergone a wonderful change, Hedwig. In former times I never remarked in you this romantic fancy for solitude. Have you grown misanthropic?'

'No; I am only tired,' said the young girl, in a low voice, which certainly bespoke profound weariness.

'How can a girl of eighteen feel tired when there is some pleasure or a party in view?' Edmund returned in a tone of banter, and then went on in the old vein, alternately teasing and coaxing his betrothed.

It was quite a firework-display of wit and humour, the jests following each other in quick rocket-like succession, but the old spirit was wanting to them. This was no longer the bright, saucy badinage in which the young Count had so excelled of old.

Hedwig was right. There was something wild and spasmodic in his gaiety, which was far too loud and tempestuous to be natural. His mirth turned to mockery, his satire to a sneer. Then his laughter was so shrill and his eyes shone with so feverish a glow that it was almost painful to see and hear him.

Old Everard now came in, and announced that the messenger, who was going over to Brunneck, was awaiting his orders without. Fräulein Rüstow had said there was a letter she desired to send. Hedwig rose and left the drawing-room, and almost simultaneously Edmund stood up and would have followed her out, but the Countess called him back.

'Have you anything to say to the messenger?'

'Yes, mother. I was going to send word over to Brunneck that they might reckon on our coming the day after to-morrow.'

'That is quite understood. Besides, Hedwig has repeated it in her note to her father. There is no necessity for you to add a message.'

'I obey orders, mother.'

The young Count, who had already gained the door, closed it rather reluctantly, appearing undecided as to whether he should return to his former seat or not.

'I give no orders,' said the Countess. 'I only mean that Hedwig will in all probability not be absent more than five minutes, and that you need not so anxiously seek a pretext for avoiding a *tête-à-tête* with me.'

'I!' exclaimed the Count. 'I have never---'

'You have never openly said as much,' his mother finished the phrase for him. 'No, my son, but I see and feel full well how you shun my company. And now I should not keep you with me had I not a request to make. Give up this wild search after excitement--these furious, protracted rides about the country. You will wear yourself out. Of my anxiety I will not speak. You have long

ceased to heed it; but you can no longer deceive Hedwig with this constrained gaiety. She was speaking to me on the subject before you came in, saying how uneasy and unhappy she felt about you.'

The Countess spoke in a subdued tone. Her voice was low and lacked all ring; yet there ran through it a subtle thrill of pain. Edmund had drawn nearer slowly, and was now standing by the table before her. He did not raise his eyes from the ground as he replied:

'Nothing ails me. You are both troubling yourselves most unnecessarily on my account.'

The Countess was silent, but again there came that nervous working of the lips which Hedwig's words had previously called forth. It told what poor comfort this assurance gave her.

'Our present life is so busy and full of agitation,' went on Edmund. 'We shall all do better when Hedwig has fairly taken up her abode here.'

'And I mine at Schönfeld,' added the Countess, with profound bitterness. 'Well, we have but an interval of a few weeks to pass.'

'Mother, you are unjust. Am I the cause of your leaving? This separation takes place by your own express wish.'

'I saw that it was necessary for us both. We could not continue to live on together, as we have lived during the past two months. You are frightfully overwrought, Edmund, and I do not know how it will all end, whether your marriage will produce some change in your frame of mind. Perhaps Hedwig may succeed in making you calm and happy once more. Your love for her is now my one hope ... for I ... my power is over!'

Things must indeed have gone far when the proud woman, who had so long triumphantly maintained the first place in her son's affections, stooped to such an avowal as this. There was no bitterness and no reproach in her words, but their tone betrayed such poignant grief that Edmund, with quick remorse, went up to her and took her hand.

'Forgive me, mother. I did not mean to hurt you. Indeed, indeed, I would not wound your feelings. You must be indulgent to me.'

He spoke with a touch of the old tenderness, and more was not needed to make the Countess forget all the estrangement. She moved as though she would have drawn her son to her breast, but it was not to be. Edmund, yielding, as it were, to an irresistible impulse, recoiled involuntarily; then, remembering himself at once, he bent over his mother's hand and pressed his lips to it.

The Countess turned very pale, but she had been too long accustomed to this shy avoidance, this horror of her embrace, to be offended by it. So it had been for months, but the mother could not, or would not, understand that her son's love was altogether lost to her.

'Think of my request,' she said, collecting her energies. 'Take some care of yourself for Hedwig's sake. Show some prudence and moderation; you owe it both to her and to yourself.'

Then she rose from her seat and left the room, hesitating yet a moment on the threshold. Perhaps she hoped to be detained; if so, the hope was futile. Edmund stood quite motionless, not looking up until she had quitted the room.

Left thus alone, the young Count drew himself erect, gazed for some minutes fixedly at the door through which his mother had passed, and then, going up to the window, pressed his hot brow against the panes. Now that he knew himself to be alone, the mask of gaiety with which he sought to deceive those about him fell, and in its place came an expression so gloomy, so despairing, that the Countess's anxiety seemed but too fully justified. Sombre and terrible must have been the thoughts which racked the young man's mind as he stood there, looking out at the now thickly-falling snow. So completely was he absorbed by them, that he did not hear the door open, and was only conscious of another presence when the rustling of a dress near him roused him from his brooding. Then he started and turned round.

'Ah, you are there, Hedwig. Have you told your father he may expect us?'

Hedwig could hardly have caught sight of her lover's face, but from the tone of his voice she became aware that for a moment he had given up all feigning. Instead of replying to his question, she laid her hand on his, and said very quietly:

'What is the matter with you, Edmund?'

'With me? nothing. I was inwardly swearing at the weather, which promises us nothing good for to-morrow. I know what this driving snow portends when once it fairly sets in among our mountains. Very possibly we shall be blockaded to-morrow, and not able to get out into the woods at all.'

'Well, give up your sport then. You take no real pleasure in it.'

Edmund frowned.

'Why should I not take pleasure in it?' he asked, in rather an angry tone.

'That question I should put to you. Why have you lost pleasure in all that you cared for formerly? Am I never to learn the trouble that is tormenting you and weighing on your spirits? I have, it seems to me, the best right to know it.'

'This is a regular inquisition,' cried Edmund, laughing. 'How can you take a momentary caprice, a mere passing bout of ill-humour, so seriously to heart? But I notice you have got into the way of striking the pathetic chord on every possible occasion. If I would consent to do my part, we should be a most sentimental couple; unfortunately, I think that to be sentimental is invariably to be ridiculous.'

Hedwig turned away deeply wounded. It was not the first time that Edmund had repelled her with harsh derision. He had so met her every attempt to solve the strange riddle of his altered manner and behaviour. It seemed as though he must defend his secret to the death--defend it from her as from the rest of the world.

What a change had come over the youthful radiant pair, who had accepted it as a matter of course that Fortune should shower on them her best and brightest gifts, who had looked forward with such bright assurance to the sunny future before them, and in whose playful mirth hardly a shade of earnestness had mingled! They had both made acquaintance with life's graver side, and if to the girl trouble were as yet but a cold dim shadow, obscuring all the sunlight, in Edmund's heart a flame had burst forth which burned with a consuming fire, and oftentimes directed its intensity against those who were nearest to him.

Hedwig turned to go. But she had only time to take a few steps; then Edmund's arm encircled her and held her fast.

'Have I pained you?' he asked. 'Scold me, Hedwig. Load me with reproaches, but do not go from me in this way. That is more than I can bear.'

The prayer for pardon was so passionate, so earnest, that the girl's just anger gave way before it. She leaned her head on his shoulder, and said:

'I think this habit of constant sarcasm is bad for you as well as others. You do not know how harsh and cruel your words often sound.'

'I have been intolerably disagreeable of late, have I not?' said Edmund, with an attempt at playfulness. 'After the wedding you will see I shall be all the more charming. Then we will make our bow to the gay world, retire from the hurly-burly, and shut ourselves up in our fortress. Just at this present time I cannot bear tranquillity and solitude. But I look forward with an intense longing to the day which will unite us.'

'Do you really long for it?' asked Hedwig, looking fixedly at him. 'Sometimes, do you know, I have fancied you rather dreaded that day.'

The scarlet flush which mounted to the young man's brow almost seemed to bear out her words; yet the passionate tenderness with which he folded his betrothed to his heart gave them contradiction.

'Dread? No, Hedwig! We love each other, do we not? And your love is given to me, to me personally, not to the Count Ettersberg, not to the heir of these estates? You had so many suitors to choose from, so many who could offer you wealth and fortune, and you chose me, because ... because you liked me best, was it not so?'

'Good heavens, how can such things come into your mind?' cried Hedwig, half frightened, half offended. 'How can you imagine that I ever gave them a thought?'

'I do not, I do not,' said Edmund, drawing a deep breath. 'And therefore I hold fast to that which is mine, mine alone, and will maintain it in the face of all. In your love, at least, I may believe. That, at least, is no lie. If I were to be deceived here, if I must doubt and despair of you--then the sooner I make an end of it, the better.'

'Edmund, this wild talk of yours distracts me,' cried Hedwig, starting back, scared by his vehemence. 'You are ill, you must be ill, or you would not use such language.'

This anxious cry brought Edmund to his senses. He made a great effort to regain composure, and even succeeded in forcing a smile as he replied:

'Why, are you beginning that tale? A few minutes ago my mother was lecturing me, saying I was excited and overwrought. And in fact it is nothing more than that. I am nervous and unstrung, but the fit will pass. Everything comes to an end, you know, sooner or later. Do not be anxious, Hedwig. Now I must go and see if Everard has got all ready for my expected guests. I forgot to give him any special orders. Excuse me for ten minutes, will you? I shall be with you again immediately.'

He released the girl from his arms and left her, once more breaking off abruptly, fleeing, as it were, from further explanation or discussion. It was impossible to solve the enigma. The Countess and Edmund were alike impenetrable.

Hedwig returned to her former place, and sat, absorbed in troubled meditation, resting her head on her hand. Edmund was concealing something from her, yet his love for her had suffered no change or diminution. It needed not the Countess's words to assure her of this; her own feelings told her the fact far more convincingly. His affection seemed indeed to have gained in intensity. She was more to him now than in former days, when his mother stood so prominently in the foreground; but the girl involuntarily trembled at meeting an outburst of fervid passion there, where she had been wont to look only for gay and sportive tenderness. How strange, how fitted to inspire uneasiness had been Edmund's manner again to-day! Why did he so vehemently demand an assurance that her love was given to him, to him personally? And why would he 'make an end of it,' were he to be deceived in this belief?

Hedwig felt that she should have thrown herself on her lover's breast, and forced from him a frank and open confession.

Obstinately as he might withhold his confidence from her, he would surely have given way, if she had prayed him with all the eagerness and earnestness of heartfelt love--but this she could not bring herself to do. Something like a secret consciousness of guilt restrained her from using her full power. Yet she had valiantly fought against the dreams which constantly brought before her another figure, the figure of one who now was far away, and whom she would probably never see again.

Oswald von Ettersberg since his departure had been completely lost sight of. He might almost have vanished into space. The Countess never voluntarily alluded to her nephew, and to some inquiries of Rüstow's she had merely replied curtly and coldly that she believed he was well, and satisfied with his new mode of life, but that he rarely communicated with his relations. She evidently desired to avoid the subject, and it was accordingly not again broached. The fact that Edmund never mentioned the name of his cousin, from whom he had hitherto been inseparable, that any allusion to the absent one appeared unpalatable to him as to his mother, was just one of the many eccentricities which now marked his behaviour. They had probably had some fresh quarrel shortly before Oswald's departure, and it seemed that the rupture between the cousins and old allies was this time complete.

Weary of thinking, of pondering over mysteries she could not fathom, Hedwig sat leaning back in her chair. She heard the door of the anteroom open, heard the approach of footsteps, but, supposing that it was Edmund coming back, she did not alter her attitude, and it was only as the new-comer entered that she languidly turned her head in his direction.

Then suddenly an electric thrill shot through the girl's frame. Trembling, blushing to the temples, she sprang from her seat, her eyes fixed on the door before her. Was it alarm, or was it joy that seized upon her with such paralyzing might? She knew not--she rendered no account to herself; but the name which burst from her lips, and the tone in which it was uttered, betrayed all that she had long so sedulously hidden.

'Oswald!'

Yes, it was Oswald who stood on the threshold. He must have been prepared for the possibility of seeing her when he started on his journey to Ettersberg, but this sudden meeting was quite unlooked for. The flush which dyed his brow on beholding his cousin's promised wife was evidence enough of this.

For a moment he waited, irresolute, but when his name struck on his ear, pronounced in those accents, all hesitation was over. In an instant he was at her side.

'Hedwig! Have I startled you?'

The question was well warranted, for Hedwig's perturbation was still visible and extreme.

'Herr von Ettersberg! You appear so suddenly, so unexpectedly.'

'I could not send word of my coming. I am here on pressing business, which made it necessary for me to see Edmund at once.'

He spoke, almost without knowing what he said, gazing fixedly the while at the girl's face before him. The sight of her did away in a moment with the ramparts which for months he had laboriously been building up.

Hedwig moved as though to withdraw.

'I ... I will let Edmund know.'

'He has been informed of my arrival. Do not fly from me in this way, Hedwig. Will you not grant me one minute?'

Hedwig paused. The sorrowful reproach in his tone chained her to the spot, but she did not dare to make reply.

'I do not come voluntarily or in my own interest,' pursued Oswald. 'Tomorrow I shall leave again; I could not possibly divine that you would be here at Ettersberg just at this time, or ... or I would have spared us both this meeting.'

Us both! Through all his bitterness there gleamed a ray of satisfaction. That unguarded exclamation of hers had changed a dim half-knowledge into a certainty, and though he could fasten on it no single hope, this certainty had in an instant become to him the one all-precious thing in life, a possession he would have surrendered at no price.

During their farewell interview, the young man had valiantly maintained his self-control, but the joyful shock of this unexpected meeting threatened to unseal his lips. The long-hidden passion in his breast was fanned to a quick, sudden blaze. Hedwig read this in his eyes, and the imminent danger gave her back her self-command, which did not again desert her.

'We can, at all events, shorten this interview,' she said, speaking in a low, steady tone, and turned to go. But Oswald followed.

'Will you leave me suddenly in this way? May I not say a word to you--one word?'

'I fear we have already said too much. Let me go, Herr von Ettersberg. Let me go, I entreat of you.'

Oswald obeyed. He stepped back to let her pass. She was right, he felt, and it was well that she should be strong and prudent when his prudence was on the verge of failing him. He looked after her silently, with an expression of infinite sadness, but he would no further detain her.

Hardly had Hedwig disappeared in the direction of the Countess's apartments when Edmund came in from the other side. His cousin's arrival had been notified to him, but his face showed no joyful surprise. On the contrary, the young Count appeared disturbed, nay, agitated. As Oswald hastened towards him, and held out his hand with all the old friendly cordiality, he evaded taking it, and the welcome he expressed was strangely forced and formal.

'What a surprise, Oswald! I did not think you intended to pay Ettersberg a visit just now.'

'Am I unwelcome?' asked Oswald, astonished at and chilled by this unwonted reception, and his outstretched hand fell to his side as he spoke.

'No, certainly not!' cried Edmund hastily. 'Quite the contrary. I only meant that you might have sent me word previously.'

'It was I who had the right to expect a letter,' said Oswald, with some reproach in his tone. 'You only replied to my first by a few lines: of my second you took no notice at all. I could understand your silence as little as I now understand the manner of your welcome. Have you been ill, or has anything happened?'

The young Count laughed--the loud derisive laugh which in these days was so frequent with him.'

'What an idea! You see I am as well as I can be. It was only that I had no time for writing.'

'No time?' said Oswald, much hurt. 'Well, I have found more leisure for you, then, in spite of all the urgent claims my work makes upon me. I have come now solely and entirely in your interest, not to pay you a visit, but to guard and save you from certain loss. Have you cancelled the powers formerly conferred on your land-steward?'

'What powers?' asked Edmund, who was absent and uneasy.'

He persistently avoided meeting his cousin's eye.

'The authority to act in your name, with which Baron Heideck, as your guardian, thought fit to invest him, and by means of which the entire management of the Ettersberg affairs was left in his hands. Does he still hold the document which gave him this authority?'

'Probably. I have never asked him for it back.' Oswald frowned.

'How could you be so imprudent?' he said impatiently. 'How could you continue to place confidence in a man whom you know to be unreliable? In all probability you will find that he has grossly abused his trust. Are you aware that the third part of your forests is doomed--that the timber is to be cut down and sold?'

'Oh! Is that in contemplation?' Edmund replied, still absently. The news seemed to make little or no impression on him.

'Do reflect,' insisted Oswald. 'If you know nothing of this transaction, if it has been entered into without your consent, the intent at robbery is as clear as day. The purchase-money, which is

fixed at an absurdly low figure, is to be paid in cash, and the steward, no doubt, hopes to pocket it, and to be clear of the place before the affair is found out. I heard of it accidentally. The would-be purchaser consulted my friend Braun on the subject, and I hurried over here at once, in the hope of saving you and Ettersberg from this tremendous injury.'

Edmund passed his hand across his brow, as though it required an effort on his part to follow the conversation.

'That was very kind of you! Did you really come expressly for that? Well, we can talk it over another time.'

This utter lack of interest still further increased Oswald's amazement, but what roused even greater anxiety in his mind was the strangely-fixed and half-distraught expression of the young Count's face. Evidently his thoughts were busy elsewhere.

'Edmund, have you not heard what I have been saying to you? This matter is of the first importance--it will not brook the slightest delay. You must at once rescind those powers, and you must make sure of the rascal to whom they were committed, or you will be compelled to recognise the bargain he has made. This bargain means ruin to your forests, and considerable, perhaps irreparable, damage to the entailed estates.'

'Ah, the entail,' repeated Edmund, who, of the whole exordium, seemed only to have caught this word. 'True, the estates must not be injured. I give this matter over into your hands, Oswald. You have taken it up--go through with it.'

'I? How can I give orders, make arrangements regarding your property, while you yourself are here present? I came merely to warn you, to disclose to you the intended fraud. It is for you to take action--for you, the master and owner of Ettersberg.'

A spasm passed across the young Count's face, telling of some racking pain, dissimulated by an effort, and his eyes fell before Oswald's astonished, questioning gaze. He pressed his lips together, and was silent.

'Well?' asked Oswald, after a pause. 'Will you send for the steward and speak to him?'

'If you think it advisable.'

'Of course I think it advisable. It must be done without delay.'

Edmund went up to the table, and was about to grasp the bell, when Oswald, who had followed him, suddenly laid his hand on his shoulder, and said, in an earnest, urgent tone:

'Edmund, what is your cause of complaint against me?'

'Against you? I have none. You must excuse me if I seem rather absent. I am beset by all sorts of worries just now--disagreeables regarding the management, with the people on the place. My head is full of it all. You see by this incident with the steward what unpleasant things are constantly turning up.'

'It is not that,' said Oswald decidedly. 'I feel that you have some grudge against me personally. See how hearty and affectionate you were towards me when we parted, and how differently you receive me now. What has come between us?'

He grasped the young Count's shoulder as he put the last question, and would have looked him scrutinizingly in the face, but Edmund tore himself free with some violence.

'Do not tease me with all these absurd fancies and imaginings,' he broke out hastily. 'Must I render you account of every word and every glance?'

Oswald receded a step, and gazed at his cousin in amazement. He was indeed more astonished than offended. This sudden outbreak, so entirely unprovoked, as it seemed to him, was absolutely inexplicable. At this moment the roll of approaching wheels and the barking of dogs were heard outside. Edmund drew a deep breath, as though he had been relieved of some unendurable pain.

'Ah, our guests are here! Forgive me, Oswald, if I leave you alone. I am expecting some gentlemen who are to join our shooting-party to-morrow. You will make one of us, will you not?'

'No,' said Oswald coldly. 'I did not come for my pleasure, and to-morrow afternoon I must leave you again.'

'So soon? I am sorry for that, but of course you know best how much time you have to spare. I will give orders for your room to be put in readiness for you.'

He had already reached the threshold.

'One thing more, Oswald. Take the steward to task for me, will you? I have no talent for that sort of thing, and no patience. I shall agree to anything you may decide. Your orders will be equivalent to mine. Goodbye for the present.'

The last words were spoken rapidly, with a feverish excitement of manner which contrasted strangely with his former listless indifference. Then he hurried away, as though the ground were scorching his feet. Oswald stood there alone, hardly knowing whether to be angry or alarmed at such a reception. What could it mean? There could be but one explanation. Edmund had entered the drawing-room as Hedwig quitted it. Possibly he might have approached some minutes before and have partly overheard the short but pregnant conversation that had taken place between the girl and himself. Although not a word had fallen which could be construed into an understanding, there had been enough to show how matters were between Oswald and his own promised bride--enough to kindle a blaze of jealousy in the young Count's breast. That would explain his shrinking from the hand Oswald extended to him, his indifference to the money-loss with which he was threatened, his vehement, excited manner. There could be no other reading of the problem.

'So it was that,' said Oswald to himself. 'He must have overheard something. Well then, he heard how innocent we both were with regard to the meeting, and how we parted. I know myself to be free from blame, and if we ever come to a discussion on the subject, I will meet him and speak out frankly.'

Outside, in the courtyard, loud talk could now be heard, and a lively interchange of greetings, Edmund's voice rising above all the others as he welcomed his guests with noisy hilarity.

Oswald glanced out of the window. The gentlemen who had just alighted were, one and all, old acquaintances of his, but he was not in the humour to make polite speeches to them, or to run the gauntlet of their questions. So he quickly left the drawing-room, and was on the way to his old dwelling in the side-wing before the strangers had set foot in the castle.

CHAPTER XIII.

The weather on the following day proved more propitious than had been expected. Though it did not clear up brightly, there was a cessation of the snowfall and the mists had disappeared, so that the morning seemed to promise a somewhat overcast, but, on the whole, fine day, favourable to sport and sportsmen.

At a very early hour Oswald left his room and turned his steps towards the main building, where the Count's apartments were situated. None of the guests were visible as yet, but downstairs the servants were busy preparing for the departure of the gentlemen, who were to set out immediately after breakfast.

Strange to say, Oswald found his cousin's room locked. It had never been Edmund's habit to ensure solitude by any such precautions. Not until his cousin had knocked repeatedly did he open the door.

'Oh, it is you, Oswald? You are here very early.'

His tone said plainly enough that the surprise was no pleasant one. Notwithstanding this, Oswald walked in.

'You are dressed, I see,' he said; 'so I am not disturbing you with this morning visit.'

The young Count was, indeed, fully equipped for the day, but he looked pale and haggard, and his eyes shone with an unnatural light. The traces of a wakeful night were but too visible on his features. He had evidently found neither sleep nor rest since the preceding evening.

'You have altered your mind, I suppose, and have come to say you will make one of the party,' he said lightly, evading the keen survey of the other's eyes by turning away and busying himself at his writing-table.

'No,' replied Oswald. 'You know that I must start again this afternoon. You may not have returned when I leave, so I wished to say good-bye to you now.'

'Must it be said in private?'

'Yes; for there is something else of importance I would speak of. You used not of old to avoid me so persistently, Edmund. I tried in vain to get hold of you yesterday evening. You were so completely taken up with your guests, and you seemed so excited, I had to give up all hope of finding a hearing, or of discussing with you any matters of business.'

'Matters of business? Ah, you mean that affair of the steward. Have you been so good as to

Speak to him for me?'

'I was compelled to do so, seeing that, in spite of my remonstrances, you would not stir a step. It all turned out precisely as I feared. When the man discovered that I was acquainted with the whole transaction, he desisted from lying. I gave him the choice of leaving Ettersberg this very day, or of submitting to a thorough investigation before a court of law. He naturally preferred the first alternative. Here is the document which empowered him to act in your name. He handed it over to me, but you will do well to have it properly cancelled. The intending purchaser has had notice already. I took down his address, thinking it might prove useful, and I have telegraphed to him that the sale of timber will not take place, that all authority is withdrawn from your agent, who had treated without your knowledge or consent. So this time the loss has been averted.'

He made this statement in a quiet, business-like tone, laying no stress on his own services, or on the diligent zeal which had brought about this happy result.

Edmund must, however, have felt how much he owed to his cousin's wise and thoughtful action. Perhaps the sense of obligation weighed upon him, for his answer was very brief.

'I am really most grateful to you. I knew you would understand these things far better than I, and would act more energetically.'

'In this instance it was for you to act,' said Oswald reproachfully. 'I allowed the steward to believe that at present I alone had cognizance of the intended fraud, that I called him to account on my own responsibility, and that I should not make any communication to you until he had taken his departure to-day--otherwise he would have thought it extraordinary that you should hold aloof from an affair which, after all, concerns yourself alone.'

'As I said to you yesterday, I was not in a mood, a frame of mind----'

'That I could see, and I make every allowance for the frame of mind, knowing, as I do, its cause and origin.'

'Its cause and origin? What do you mean? What do you know?'

'The reason of your strange reception, of your almost hostile attitude towards myself. This alone it is which brings me here. All misunderstandings must be cleared up between us, Edmund. Why this silence and concealment? Between true friends such as we are, frankness is best.'

The young Count leaned heavily against the table near at hand. He made no reply, but stood speechless and pale as death, staring at his cousin, who continued calmly:

'You need not withhold any accusation you may have to make. I can face it, can meet it without flinching. I love Hedwig, and am not ashamed to own it to you, for I have honestly, loyally struggled against the passion. When I saw it was not to be overcome, I went. Not a word on the subject has passed between us. If yesterday I was so far carried away as to allude to the state of my feelings, it was the first, it will be the last time. The unexpected meeting for a moment robbed me of my self-control, but it was only for a moment. I was myself again directly. If this is guilt in your eyes, it is guilt I am not afraid to confess, for I feel that in all points I can justify my conduct.'

This open, manly avowal had a most unlooked-for effect. Edmund listened as in a dream. The horrible shock of surprise, which quite paralyzed him at first, gradually passed away, but he evidently did not yet grasp the full purport of the words addressed to him.

'You love Hedwig? You? No, it is impossible. I do not believe it.'

'Had you not found it out?' said Oswald, dismayed in his turn. 'Was it not a feeling of jealousy which stood between us and estranged you from me?'

Edmund did not heed the question. His glowing eyes rested with an expression of terrible, unutterable suspense on Oswald's face, as he panted forth, in breathless agitation:

'And Hedwig--does she return the feeling? Does she love you?'

'I have said that no word of explanation has passed between us.'

'Words are not needed. You know, must know, if she cares for you, or not. That is felt in every glance, in every pulse. I have felt, I have known that she did not give me her whole wealth of love, that something stood between us, dividing us. Were you that barrier? Speak; I will have certainty, be the cost to me what it may.'

Oswald cast down his eyes.

'Hedwig will hold her promise sacred, as I do,' he replied, in a low voice.

The answer was unequivocal, and to it there was no rejoinder. For the next few minutes a terrible silence reigned. No sound was heard but that of the young Count's short, quick breathing.

'So this drop is added,' he said at length. Oswald looked at him anxiously. He had been prepared for a stormy scene, for passionate reproach and fierce anger. This stony resignation, so utterly at variance with Edmund's character, roused in him amazement and alarm.

'We shall conquer and live it down,' he said, taking up the thread again. 'We have never either of us thought of any further possibility. Were Hedwig free, I could entertain no hopes. I have always felt a contempt for adventurers who owe all to their wives, having themselves nothing to offer in return. Such a position would weigh me to the ground. I could not accept it, even at the hands of the woman I love. And my career is only just beginning. For years I must go on working for myself alone, whereas you have it in your power to confer in marriage the most brilliant advantages.'

The words were spoken innocently enough. They were intended to soothe, but how contrary was the effect produced! Edmund bounded, as it were, beneath the lash. His whole manner, his voice even was changed, as he burst forth, with scathing bitterness, with fierce, scornful rage:

'You mean to envy me, perhaps, to envy me my brilliant lot in life! I am a favourite of Fortune, am I not? All the good things of this world fall to my share? You were mistaken in your prophecy, Oswald. Fortune is fickle, and we two have changed *rôles*. Hedwig's love, at least, I still believed to be mine; of that one possession I thought myself sure. That, too, has been taken from me, taken from me by you. Oh, the measure is full, full to overflowing!'

'Edmund, you are half distracted,' said Oswald remonstratingly. 'Try to regain composure. We will speak of this more quietly----'

'Leave me,' Edmund interrupted. 'I can hear nothing now, endure nothing more. Your presence is intolerable to me. Go!'

Oswald drew nearer, seeking to pacify him, but in vain. In a fury, which bordered on madness, the Count thrust him back.'

'I will be alone, I tell you. Am I not even master here in my own rooms? Must I insult you to drive you from me?'

'That will not be necessary,' said Oswald, now grievously offended, and as he spoke, he drew himself up. 'I was not prepared for such a reception of my frank and loyal statement, or I should have been silent. You will see later on what injustice you have done me, but the knowledge will probably come too late to save our friendship. Good-bye.'

He went, casting not another glance behind him. Then Edmund sank into a chair. The blow which had just fallen was perhaps not the heaviest that had struck him in these latter days. Most direful of all had been the shock which in a moment had destroyed the son's love for, and proud trust in, his mother--not the heaviest, perhaps, but the last; and the last felled him to the ground.

An hour later the whole company had gathered in the dining-room, where breakfast was laid. The gentlemen were all in high spirits, for the weather promised excellent sport.

The Countess did the honours of the house with her accustomed grace. Whatever cares might be gnawing at her heart, she was too thorough a woman of the world to betray any emotion in the presence of strangers. Hedwig also forced herself to appear gay.

The conversation was most animated, and Oswald's grave taciturnity and reserve were not specially remarked, as they were considered natural to and customary with him.

Count Ettersberg himself appeared late on the scene. He excused himself by saying that he had been delayed, giving some necessary orders in reference to the day's sport; and he endeavoured to make up for his tardy arrival by redoubled efforts to charm and amuse his guests.

Edmund no longer looked pale and haggard, as he had looked an hour before. On the contrary, a hectic flush glowed in his cheeks, and a current of fire seemed to speed through his veins, while he exhibited an exuberant gaiety which could only be the product of over-excitement. He at once took the lead in the conversation, and his brilliant talk soon carried all the others away with it. Jests, repartees, and sparkling anecdotes followed quickly one upon the other. He seemed bent on convincing everyone about him of his cheerfulness and excellent humour, and so far as his guests were concerned, he succeeded in his aim.

The elder men, one and all landowners of the neighbourhood, thought they had never known the young Count so agreeable as on this occasion: the younger, stimulated by the effervescence of his wit, became witty in their turn. So the time sped quickly by, until the master of the house gave the signal for a general rising.

Oswald still continued very silent, but he kept a constant, anxious watch on his cousin. After all that had taken place between them, it was no matter of surprise to him that Edmund should seem to shun him even more persistently than yesterday, should even avoid addressing him directly; but he was not to be deceived by the other's assumed flippancy. After the scene of that morning, desperation alone could have produced such feverish excitement. Now only, when the first stings of wounded pride had passed, did the young man reflect how horror-stricken, how

half-distraught Edmund had appeared on hearing his confession. He had had no suspicion, it seemed. His unaccountable behaviour had not been actuated by, was not owing to jealousy. If not to jealousy, to what then?

The company had now risen and were preparing to depart. The sportsmen took their leave of the ladies of the house, and said good-bye to Oswald, who was also to be left behind. Herr von Ettersberg was generally condoled with for having to return to the city so speedily, and to lose his chance of a day's shooting, and a few more polite speeches of a like nature were exchanged in all haste.

Edmund parted from Hedwig with some merry words, still showing the extreme and rather reckless gaiety which he seemed unable to put from him that morning.

As he passed his cousin, he called to him, 'Adieu, Oswald,' but so briefly and hastily as to preclude any reply. He evidently wished to avoid any further contact with the man by whom he considered himself injured. He went up to the Countess, who was talking to one of the gentlemen.

'I have come to say good-bye, mother.'

The words were spoken hurriedly, but something of the old tone was in them, of the tone which the mother's ear had so long sought in vain, and which now it instantly caught. Her eyes sought her son's; and meeting them, she no longer read there that shy avoidance which had so tortured her for months.

Today they had a different, an undefinable expression in which, however, there was no reproach. The hand the Countess extended to him trembled a little. A cold formal kiss imprinted on this hand was the only salute Edmund had for her now as he came and went. He stooped over it as usual, but suddenly the mother felt his arms close round her, felt his hot, quivering lips on her brow. It was their first embrace since the day on which he had discovered the fatal secret.

'Edmund?' whispered the Countess, with a half-tender, half-anxious inquiry in the murmured word.

Edmund made no reply. He held his mother tightly to him--but for a moment, yet enough to show her that the old love had blazed forth anew, ardent, mighty as ever. His lips touched hers, then he freed himself quickly and resolutely.

'Farewell, mother. I must go; it is more than time.'

He stepped back among his guests, who at once closed in upon him. In the general leave-taking, and in the noise and confusion which preceded their merry departure, all chance of saying another word to her son was lost to the Countess.

The sportsmen were gone at last. No one had noticed the short scene between mother and son, no one had seen anything unusual in their embrace--with one exception. Oswald's eyes had never quitted them for an instant. His strange, keen scrutiny was on the Countess now as she left the room.

It was her wish, no doubt, to escape being alone with her nephew. Hedwig had accompanied her lover downstairs, and was watching the departure from the entrance-door.

In the castle-yard all was life and animation. A number of sledges stood ready to receive the gentlemen, and to convey them to the neighbourhood of the somewhat distant covers which had been chosen for the day's sport. The servants were busily moving to and fro. The Count's chasseur, who had charge of the dogs, could hardly check their ardour, and even the horses gave signs of impatience at the long delay by pawing the ground and champing the bit.

Most restless of all were a pair of handsome black steeds harnessed to a small sledge which contained seats for but two persons. They were the restive, high-spirited animals which had brought about the accident on Stag's Hill. Since then the Countess, having once been exposed by them to imminent peril, had constantly used other horses for her daily drives. Could she have chosen, the black pair would, indeed, long ago have been banished from the stables; but Edmund had a strong predilection for the beautiful creatures, which certainly were matchless in their symmetry and grace. He had given special orders that they should be put to his own sledge to-day. It was his habit to drive himself, and he now advanced, ready to take the reins from the groom's hands.

All seemed ready for the start, yet some further delay occurred before the party actually set out. Some remark of Edmund's had called forth a debate, and much lively discussion was going on among the sportsmen. Evidently the pros and cons of a disputed question were being argued. A sound of loud voices and noisy laughter reached Oswald's ear as he stood at his post above, but the closed windows prevented his hearing the words used in the parley. The young Count was the most eager speaker. Some of the elder men present shook their heads and seemed to attempt dissuasion. At length a settlement was arrived at. All was made ready for the general departure, and Edmund mounted to his seat in the sledge. Strangely enough, he meant to drive alone. The place at his side remained unoccupied. At a sign from him the groom in attendance fell back, as

he gathered up the reins and whip.

One more look from the sportsmen--one farewell salute in the direction of the great entrance-door where stood the castle's future mistress. Edmund, like the rest, turned and waved her a final adieu, but immediately his eyes were raised to the tier of windows above. These were his mother's rooms, and the Countess must have appeared at this moment, for her son's gaze was riveted on a certain point. He sent her a greeting far warmer and more heartfelt than that he had accorded to his betrothed. There came a momentary break in the gaiety he had so sedulously maintained, a glimpse as of some wild, unutterable sorrow. That farewell glance seemed almost to convey a mute, beseeching appeal for pardon. Then his lash descended so sharply that the fiery steeds reared high in the air, and the snow rose up in a small whirlwind about him, as they set off at full gallop. The other sleighs followed, and so amid noise and merriment the whole retinue departed.

Oswald turned from the window, struck by a sudden apprehension.

'That seemed like a farewell,' he murmured. 'What can it mean? What scheme can Edmund have in his head?'

He left the drawing-room, and was quickly passing through the antechamber when he met Everard, the old retainer, who had just left the courtyard.

'What caused the delay in starting?' asked Oswald hastily. 'What was the discussion about, and why did your master go off in his sledge alone?'

'It was about a wager,' said the old man, who looked greatly perturbed. 'The Count intends to drive over Stag's Hill.'

'Over that steep hill, just after a heavy downfall of snow? That must mean danger.'

'Yes; so most of the other gentlemen declared; but my master laughed at their fears. He said he would bet that by taking that road he should reach the rendezvous a good quarter of an hour before the rest of the party. It was of no use to remonstrate or retreat. Even Fräulein Hedwig tried in vain. The wager stands. If only he had any other horses to manage than those unruly black beasts....'

'By whose orders were those restive animals put to my cousin's sledge to-day? He generally drives the grays.'

'It was done by the Count's own order. He came down before breakfast to give the grooms their instructions.'

'And the man? Why was he left behind?'

'Also by the Count's directions. He said he wanted no attendant.'

Oswald said not another word. He left the old man standing where he was, and without further consideration or delay hurried across to his aunt's apartments. The Countess still watched at the window, though the cortège had long disappeared from sight. She knew nothing of the scene that had taken place that morning in her son's room; yet she seemed to have some foreboding sense, some vague dread upon her, for her hands were folded in mute anguish, and the face she turned towards the new-comer was perfectly ashy in its extreme pallor.

She started violently as Oswald came in thus, unexpected and unannounced. For the first time since he had left his old home at Ettersberg they met alone, and face to face.

On the preceding evening and that morning they had seen each other only in the presence of strangers, and their intercourse had been limited to a few formal words of greeting. The Countess looked for no mercy from the man whom she estimated as her bitterest enemy, and who certainly had ample cause to be so.

Though by an impulse of generosity he had parted with the weapon which would have proved most dangerous, its strength was known to him, and the knowledge gave him power enough over his aunt. But it was not this lady's habit to show herself weak, save only where her son was concerned, and now she at once roused her energies, and assumed a resolute attitude of defence. She stood cold and immovable, determined not to yield an inch, prepared for anything that might come.

But no syllable of that she feared and expected came from Oswald's lips. He only approached her quickly, and said, in a low and eager voice:

'What has happened to Edmund?'

'To Edmund? I do not understand you.'

'He is frightfully changed. Something must have occurred since I left. There is some trouble on his mind which harasses him, and at times seems almost to shake his reason. I thought at first I had guessed the cause of it, but I find now I was utterly mistaken. What has happened, aunt?'

Not a word passed the mother's set lips. Better than anyone she knew the piteous change which had come over her son, but to this man she could not, would not, confess it.

'Forgive me if I put a painful question,' went on Oswald. 'We have to fear, to guard against the worst; in such a case, all other considerations vanish. Before I left, I gave into your brother's charge a small packet. I told him expressly that it was to be delivered to you alone, that Edmund was not to know its contents. Can it be that, in spite of this ... can he have learned----'

He paused, unable to frame his question, and the marked agitation displayed by one usually so cold and self-possessed revealed to the Countess the true nature of the danger of which hitherto she had had but a dim foreboding. She gazed anxiously into Oswald's face, and in lieu of making answer, asked:

'Why did Edmund start alone? What was the meaning of that last look, that farewell gesture? You know it, Oswald.'

'I know nothing, but I fear the worst after the scene which took place between us this morning. Edmund has made a mad wager. He means to drive over Stag's Hill on such a day as this. By his express directions, the most unmanageable horses in the stables have been put to his sledge, and the groom has been left behind. You see, it is a question of life or death, and I must know the truth. Is Edmund acquainted with the contents of that packet?'

A faintly articulated 'Yes' was the reply wrung from the Countess's panting breast. With this one word she confessed all, gave herself over completely into the hands of her nephew; but at the moment no sense of this occurred to her. Her son's life was at stake. What cared the mother for her own ruin or shame?

'Good God! Then he has planned some terrible deed,' exclaimed Oswald. 'Now I see, I understand it all.'

The Countess uttered a shriek, as a full comprehension of that last farewell dawned suddenly on her also.

'I must go after him,' said Oswald, with quick determination, pulling the bell as he spoke. 'There is not a moment to lose.'

'I ... I will accompany you,' gasped the Countess, advancing a step; but she staggered and would have fallen, had not her nephew caught and supported her.

'Impossible, aunt. You could not bear it. Besides, all the sledges are out. There is not one at our disposal, and we could not get through the snow with a carriage. I will mount a horse and ride after him--ride for dear life. That is the one chance left us.'

He turned to Everard, who at that moment entered the room.

'Have the English chestnut saddled. Be as quick as possible. I must follow the Count at once.'

The old man withdrew hastily. He saw that an effort was to be made to avert some danger from his young master.

Oswald went up to the Countess, who sat trembling and pale as ashes, and essayed to reassure her.

'Try to be calm. Nothing is lost as yet. The chestnut is one of the swiftest horses in the stables, and if I take the road by Neuenfeld, I shall cut off a third of the distance. I must come up with Edmund.'

'And when you do come up with him!' cried the Countess despairingly. 'He will not listen to you any more than to me or to his affianced wife.'

'He will listen to me,' said Oswald, with profound emphasis; 'for I alone can put an end to the conflict raging within him. Had I this morning known the real situation, things would not have reached this pass. We have been friends from our earliest childhood. That must count. You will see, we shall win through this trouble yet. Courage, aunt. I will bring your son back to you.'

The young man's brave, resolute tone was not without its influence on the tortured mother. She clung to the hope held out to her, clung to the once dreaded, hated Oswald as to a last anchor of salvation. Not a word could she utter, but the look she cast up at him was so suppliant, so heart-rending, that Oswald, deeply moved, clasped her hand in his. In their anxiety about the one being they loved with almost equal fervour, the long-cherished enmity died out, the hatred and rancour of years were buried.

Oswald took the half-fainting lady in his arms, and gently placed her in an arm-chair--then he hurried out. The hope of achieving a rescue gave him courage and confidence; but to the mother who remained behind, the weight of anguish, the cruel suspense, proved well-nigh crushing. She knew but too well what had driven her son to his death; and this terrible consciousness, now brought home to her, put the last stroke to the torture of the past few weeks. Baron Heideck was right. The unhappy woman's punishment was greater even than her offence had been.

Everard had urged the grooms to the utmost alacrity. The horse was being led round as Oswald emerged from the castle. He swung himself into the saddle and galloped off.

It might safely be assumed that Edmund would choose the highroad. The way by Neuenfeld, though considerably shorter, ran for the most part through the forest, and was so narrow and uneven that it would have been hardly practicable with a sledge. To a horseman it offered no great difficulties, and the chestnut was, indeed, incomparably swift of pace. Its hoofs hardly touched the ground where the snow lay thick, but not so deep as to prove an obstacle. So the good steed pressed on through the woods all gaunt and rigid with frost and ice, through a village which lay, as it were, still sleeping in its winter shroud--onwards, onwards, with the speed of a bird, yet all too slowly for the craving impatience of him who rode.

There was not a doubt in Oswald's mind that some desperate deed was in contemplation, a deed it might yet be in his power to prevent. There must be some issue to this terrible situation. If Oswald raised no accusation, asserted no claim, none else had a right to do so. The world might be left in ignorance, as it had been heretofore. The two most nearly concerned might clasp hands and swear that the house of Ettersberg should henceforth boast two sons. Yet through all these plans and sanguine meditations came the remembrance of the evening which preceded Oswald's departure, the remembrance of Edmund's words still vibrating in his cousin's ears:

'I could not live with the knowledge of a secret shame. My conscience must be clear, and I must stand before the world with an unsullied brow.'

The path now issued into the highroad, where a free open view of the country round was to be had. Oswald drew rein a moment, and gazed about him searchingly--but in vain. He saw nothing but a broad, white expanse of plain, at some distance the dark firs on Stag's Hill standing out in sombre relief, and beyond them the lowering mists of an overcast winter forenoon.

All around was desolate; not a living creature was to be seen. The hope of barring Edmund's passage proved illusory. He must have passed long since. The track of his sledge was distinctly visible on the freshly-fallen snow.

Now for the first time Oswald's brave assurance threatened to desert him--he would not hearken to the sad presentiments which besieged him, but gave rein to his horse, and rode fleetly on until he reached the foot of the hill, and the ascending path before him brought him to a footpace.

Stag's Hill, though not very high, was excessively steep, and was esteemed an awkward bit of road, which, as a rule, drivers gladly avoided. To climb and descend in safety certainly required prudence. It was necessary to have the carriage well under control, to be sure of the horses, when this route was chosen. In wintertime the steep incline, covered with a sheet of snow and ice, was positively perilous, as Oswald soon found. More than once his horse stumbled, and but for his vigilance would have fallen. Happily, he was both a skilful and a prudent rider, and his accomplishment now stood him in good stead; but with every minute that elapsed, with every bend in the road which opened out fresh lengths without revealing the object of his search, his anxiety increased, waxed keener and keener. He urged on his horse with whip and spurs, granting neither to the animal nor to himself a moment's respite. One thought alone possessed his mind: 'I must find him!'

And he found him. With a snort and a last strong pull the horse now reached the summit, and trotted on a few minutes over the even ground. On the opposite side of this plateau the road declined again sharply. The track of the sledge was still visible, but about a hundred paces further on, just at the most precipitous part, the snow was ploughed up and much betrotten, as by the hoofs of rearing, plunging horses. The low hedge which bordered the road was broken through, torn down; the young firs on the hill-side were bent and broken as though a hurricane had passed over them, and in the depths below lay a dark, inert mass, sledge and horses, all together, borne down to a common destruction, dashed to pieces in that dizzy, dreadful fall.

At this sight Oswald forgot his caution. Reckless of the imminent peril to himself, he spurred his horse down the road at full speed. When he reached the valley below, he sprang from the saddle, and at once plunged into the ravine.

There he saw the shattered sledge, the horses lying, one beneath, one above--and at a little distance from these--Edmund, stretched motionless upon the ground. He had been flung from his seat in the fall--this and the snow, which here in the valley had drifted thick and deep, had preserved him from being absolutely mangled and mutilated; but the rocky ground had nevertheless wrought cruel injury, as was abundantly proved by the blood which streamed from a scalp-wound, reddening the white snow in a great circle about his head.

Oswald threw himself on his knees by his cousin's side, and strove to stanch the blood, to recall the unconscious man to life. At first, all his efforts were in vain, but after long minutes of weary watching and agonized suspense, Edmund opened his eyes. Their dull veiled look seemed, however, to lack all recognition. Slowly only, and by degrees, at the sound of Oswald's voice, as he put his anxious questions, did full consciousness return to the sufferer.

'Oswald,' he said, very softly, and his tone was the old loving tone he had ever been wont to

use towards the friend of his youth. All the bitterness, the wild frenzied agitation of the last few hours, had died out from those pain-stricken but calm features.

'Edmund, why had you not confidence in me?' burst forth Oswald. 'Why have I only just heard of your trouble--of the trouble which drove you to this? I have ridden after you in all mad haste, but I come too late, too late perhaps by a very few minutes.'

Edmund's half-dimmed eyes gained life and fire again as he turned them towards the speaker.

'You know?'

'All!'

'Then you understand all,' said Edmund faintly. 'To have to lie to you, not to be able to meet your eye, that was the hardest trial I have had to bear. Now it is past. Today, this very day, you will be Master of Ettersberg.'

'At the cost of your life!' cried Oswald, in despair. 'I have known the secret long. That fatal picture had passed through my hands before you saw it. I kept it from you almost by force, for I knew that the sight of it would kill you. And it has been all in vain--the whole sacrifice has been in vain! One frank, outspoken word between us, this morning, and everything might have been settled and made smooth.'

Edmund replied with a sorrowful negative gesture.

'No, Oswald; that could never have been. I could not have borne the perpetual lie of such a life. I have tried for weeks, for months. You do not know what I have endured since the fearful hour of that discovery. Now all is well. You will enter upon your own, and my mother's name will remain unstained. It was the only way, the one solution!'

Oswald held the dying man in his arms. He saw that the time for help was past. It was impossible to stanch the blood, impossible to stay the fleeting life. He could but stoop to catch the last words from the lips which were about to close for ever.

'My mother--tell her. I *could* not have borne it. Farewell!'

Edmund's voice died away. His beautiful dark eyes grew dim with the shadow of Death; but a few minutes more, and Oswald was kneeling on the snow-clad earth by a dead man's side. He pressed his lips on the cold, calm brow, and murmured to now unheeding ears the despairing cry of his heart:

'My God! my God! Must this be the end? Was there no other way--no other way?'

CHAPTER XIV.

Twice the swallows had come and gone since the grave had closed on Edmund von Ettersberg. Now for the third time they arrived, bearing Spring upon their pinions; and as, after all the icy frost and snow of winter, the earth blossomed forth in newborn splendour, so the dark shadow of that grave, watered by many tears, was lightened, and from it there emerged a fair vision of human hope and happiness.

The death of young Count Ettersberg had caused the greatest consternation, and awakened general sympathy in the neighbourhood.

This universal mourning was due as much to Edmund's personal characteristics, which had endeared him to all, as to the frightful circumstances of his death. So young, so beautiful, rich and happy--his wedding-day so near! And for a mere mad frolic's sake, for a rash, senseless wager, to perish miserably, to be torn from his mother and his betrothed, without even seeing them or hearing their last farewell. It was a terrible fate!

How bright, how exuberantly gay the young Count had been the very morning on which the catastrophe befell! The darker, more secret sequence of events, none suspected. Edmund had gained his end. His mother remained spotless as before, and the rightful heir entered into possession of his own.

Many changes had been effected on the Ettersberg estates during the past two years. The present owner, Count Oswald, who on his cousin's death had succeeded to the title and the

property took a serious view of the duties of his new position. Rarely indeed comes such a change in the life of a man as had come to him--a change so precipitate, so unexpected. Oswald, who had been bred in dependence and subordination, who, even when he shook off the fetters of that dependence, went forth to meet a life of care, of grave unflagging work, suddenly found himself transformed into the head of the house, the owner of wealthy family estates. His legal career was at an end before it had fairly begun. There was no failure of gratitude towards the friend in the great city who, in his need, had given him fatherly protection and assistance. Their relations continued excellent and affectionate as before; but, of course, a return to that sphere, to the life previously planned out for him, was not now to be thought of.

Other and greater tasks devolved upon Oswald, and he gave himself up to them with all the thoroughness and energy pertaining to his character. His strong hand grasped the helm in time to rescue the long-neglected estates from the ruin which seemed imminent. Gradually but surely he raised the value of the property until it reached its former zenith.

With but few exceptions, the reigning officials were superseded, and the system of administration underwent a complete change, while the large sums of money which in the old days had been called in to support the castle household on a lordly scale were now devoted to the restoration and improvement of the estates.

The new Master of Ettersberg led a solitary and retired life, and seemed at present in no way minded to select a companion or bring home a bride. This circumstance caused some wonderment in the neighbouring circles.

It was freely said that the Count, now in his nine-and-twentieth year, might think of marrying, ought to think of it, seeing that he was the last and only scion of the Ettersberg race. Plans were laid, and efforts were not spared to secure so brilliant a *parti*, but hitherto without avail.

Similar schemes and expectations were formed with regard to Brunneck. The hand of the young heiress was again disengaged, though at first a certain delicacy of feeling forbade would-be suitors to take advantage of the fact. Genuine and universal as had been the sympathy felt for Hedwig, it was considered inadmissible that this girl of eighteen should pass her life in sorrowing for the lover who had been taken from her; and many pretensions and desires, which that engagement had blighted, came to the front again.

They were, however, again doomed to disappointment, for Hedwig, by a decided step, withdrew herself from all possible overtures.

Before the period of mourning was over, she left Brunneck to accompany Edmund's mother on a visit to Italy. The Countess's health had quite given way beneath the shock of her son's death, and in spite of the most skilled advice, her malady made such serious progress that the doctors in consultation gave no hope save in a lengthened stay in the South.

It was thought an act of self-sacrifice on Fräulein Rüstow's part to leave her home, and even her father, that she might accompany the invalid--the good neighbours who thus judged being quite ignorant of the fact that Hedwig was longing to escape, to place the barrier of distance between herself and hopes which seemed to her an offence against the dead.

The two ladies had been absent almost a year and a half. In vain had the Councillor remonstrated and made impatient supplication for his daughter's return; his prayers found no favourable hearing. Hedwig had always given as a pretext the Countess's continued illness, declaring that she neither could nor would leave her in so piteous a condition. But now, at length, the travellers were at home once more. Rüstow, who had gone some stages on the road to meet them, brought his daughter straight back to Brunneck, whilst the Countess proceeded to Schönfeld, where, since Edmund's death, she had taken up her residence.

On the second day after the ladies' return, the Councillor was sitting as usual with his cousin in the veranda-parlour. He was full of delight at having his daughter with him again, and never weary of looking at her after their long separation. He declared that she had grown much more lovely, more sensible, more charming in every way, and the expression of his fatherly pride culminated in a solemn announcement that never again would he part with his darling as long as he lived.

For once his cousin actually agreed with him, admitting the improvement visible in Hedwig; but at these last words she shook her head and replied, with a certain meaning emphasis:

'You should not speak so decidedly, Erich. Who knows how long you will enjoy exclusive possession of Hedwig! That may be disputed you even here at Brunneck.'

'I shall not allow it,' interrupted Rüstow. 'I have no doubt that the Countess would like to have her over at Schönfeld for weeks at a stretch, but she will not have her way in this. I have been deprived of my child's society long enough, and mean to take a stand on my rights at last.'

'Count Ettersberg was at the station, I suppose, when you arrived with the travellers the day before yesterday?' said the lady.

'Certainly. It was very considerate, very proper of him to come himself to receive his aunt and

take her over to Schönfeld. He was glad, too, to see Hedwig, and say a word of welcome to her on her return; but this, of course, was secondary.'

'Of course, quite secondary!' murmured Aunt Lina softly, but with an ironical twitch of the lips.

'The Count was not on particularly good terms with his aunt in the old days,' said Rüstow, turning to his cousin; 'but ever since her great misfortune he has shown her much kindness and attention. Indeed, I see a considerable alteration in that young man. He can even be pleasant and affable in his manners now, and as concerns his management of the Ettersberg property----'

'Yes, we are aware that he is an agricultural genius,' put in Aunt Lina. 'You discovered his talents in that line years ago, you know, when no one guessed that he was the future owner and Master of Ettersberg.'

'It would have been an unpardonable mistake if Fate had ordained that that man should be a lawyer,' said the Councillor solemnly. 'It always gratifies me when I remember what a clearance he made directly the reins fell into his hands, how quickly he put a stop to the old routine of reckless waste and mismanagement. He struck hard and struck home. In less than three months all the old worthless lumber had been thrown out. The parasites, which for years had clung to the good tree, sapping its strength, were destroyed. And how the man set to work when it came to ordering a new system! My spirit of enterprise is not small, but I believe I must yield the palm to him. I never should have imagined that in so short a time the estates could have been so raised in value. I ought to feel some annoyance, for hitherto Brunneck has passed for the model establishment of this part of the country, and now I suppose Ettersberg will be disputing its claim to the first rank.'

'And to a good many other things, I fancy. But you will take it all very patiently and quietly, Erich, for Count Oswald has always been a declared favourite of yours.'

'So he has, but I admit one great fault in him.'

He will not marry. The whole neighbourhood is full of it. I shall take him to task seriously on the subject.'

'Do nothing of the sort,' said Aunt Lina. 'Interference is quite unnecessary, especially from you.'

Rüstow did not catch the hidden meaning of her words. He took them as expressing distrust in his skill and diplomacy, and was much offended in consequence.

'You think that where marriage is concerned, nobody but a woman has a right to speak. I will show you that I know what I am about. Count Oswald sets great store by my opinion.'

'I have not a doubt of it, on this subject more than on any other. I am convinced even that he will not marry without previously seeking your consent and approbation. You need not put yourself in a passion, Erich. I mean what I say--and there! why, there is the Count's carriage just turning into the courtyard. I knew very well he would be over here to-day.'

'How could you know that?' asked Rüstow, still angry at her supposed sarcasm. 'You have taken no interest whatever in my new steam-engine.'

'What steam-engine?'

'A new and most practical invention which I had down from town a little while ago. You were indifferent as usual. It failed to rouse your interest, but the Count, to whom I was explaining all the details when we met at the station the other day, is burning with desire to examine it.'

The old lady seemed to have her own ideas on the subject of this punctuality and burning zeal. She shrugged her shoulders significantly, as the Councillor hurried eagerly away to receive his visitor, in whose company he returned a few minutes later.

No striking change had taken place in Oswald's outward appearance, yet it produced an impression quite different from that of former days. With the pressure of untoward circumstances, with the fruitless, constant struggle against a galling chain, the bitterness of spirit had disappeared which once threatened to gain complete dominion over his proud and sensitive nature. Freedom and a new sense of personal importance had given him fuller development. The harsh expression had vanished from his features, the former coldness and abruptness from his speech and demeanour. He was not indeed possessed of that frank charm of manner with which Edmund had conquered all hearts, but his grave superior calm, his simple and yet imposing mien, showed that the present owner of Ettersberg was better fitted to rule and to command than his deceased cousin ever could have been. The Count, on this occasion, came of course solely and entirely to see the famous steam-engine, and to judge by a certain perturbed restlessness which he sought in vain to conceal, his interest in the useful invention must have been of an intense and all-absorbing character. Yet he listened with rather an absent air to the Councillor's florid description of his new treasure, and kept his eyes fixed on the door. He appeared to be momentarily expecting something, or some one; at length his patience gave way,

and, turning to Aunt Lina, he observed in the most innocent and natural tone in the world:

'Fräulein Hedwig is out in the park, I suppose. I fancied I caught sight of her as I drove through.'

The old lady cast at him a glance which plainly said, 'If you had fancied that, you would not be herewith us now;' but aloud she replied, with an innocent simplicity equal to his own:

'I think you are mistaken. Count. My niece, I regret to say, has gone out to take a walk, probably to revisit some of the favourite old haunts which she has not yet seen since she came home.'

'Her favourite haunts!' The hint was sufficient for Count Oswald. He suddenly discovered that he had very little time at his disposal, and was bound to return to Ettersberg with all speed, but this availed him little. Rüstow took it as a fresh compliment to the steam-engine that, notwithstanding the urgent calls upon his time, his guest had come over to inspect and admire it. Inexorably he dragged him forth.

Oswald had to listen long to all the detailed explanations of this enthusiastic farmer, though in his impatience the ground on which he stood seemed to scorch his feet. At length he succeeded in getting free, and leaving the Councillor with a hurried good-bye, jumped into the carriage, which was waiting for him, and drove away.

Rüstow returned to the house a little put out at the unusual shortness and hasty nature of the visit vouchsafed him.

'There was nothing to be done with the Count to-day,' he said to his cousin. 'He seemed quite absent in his manner, and hardly looked at the engine, after all. Now he is rushing back to Ettersberg like the wind. It really was not worth while to come so far for such a flying visit.'

'It was too bad of you to torment him in that way,' remarked Aunt Lina, with sly malice. 'A full quarter of an hour you kept him standing there by your tiresome old steam-engine! He did not come to see that, bless you! and he is not driving back to Ettersberg now--not a bit of it, no more than I am!'

'Where in the world is he, then?' asked Rüstow, who was so overcome by these assertions that he overlooked the insulting word 'tiresome,' applied to his steam-engine.

'Very probably he is not driving at all. I dare say he has sent his carriage on into the village, and is taking a walk in the woods, or on the hills, or somewhere about. How can I tell in what direction Hedwig may be strolling?'

'Hedwig? What do you mean? You don't intend to say----'

'I intend to say that Hedwig is destined to become Countess Ettersberg, and that this time nothing can or will prevent it--depend upon it, I am right.'

'Lina, I really do believe you are going crazy,' exclaimed Rüstow. 'Why, they never could endure each other! They have been separated now for more than a year. In fact, since Edmund's death, they have only met about half a dozen times at the Countess's house at Schönfeld. It is impossible, absolutely impossible. This is just another of your foolish romantic notions.'

'Well, wait until they both come back,' said Aunt Lina emphatically. 'But in the meantime you may make up your mind to give the paternal benediction, for, rely upon it, it will be required of you. Count Oswald will hardly care to lose more time now, and certainly he has waited long enough. I think it was an overstrained feeling of delicacy on Hedwig's part which made her leave her home and father, just to prevent any earlier appeal from that quarter.'

'What? That is why she went to Italy with the Countess?' cried Rüstow, falling, as it were, from the clouds, 'You don't mean to pretend that this fancy existed during Edmund's lifetime?'

'This is no question of a mere fancy,' replied his cousin instructively; 'but of an ardent, unconquerable attachment which has, no doubt, cost them both much pain and many struggles. Hedwig, it is true, has never alluded to the subject by so much as a word. She has obstinately kept her confidence from me, but I could see how she was suffering, how hard it was to her to fulfil the promise which, without reflection, without full knowledge of her own heart, she had given to another. I do not doubt that she would have fulfilled it, but what the future consequences might have been both to herself and Oswald--that Heaven only knows!'

The Councillor folded his hands and gazed at his cousin with an expression of profound respect.

'And you found out all this by your own powers of observation? Lina, it strikes me that you are a wonderfully clever woman.'

'Ah, you have discovered that at length, have you?' asked the old lady, with gleeful satisfaction. 'It is rather late in the day for you to begin to recognise my talents.'

Rüstow made no reply, but his face literally beamed at the thought of having for a son-in-law his favourite, his genius--and in the joy of his heart he treated the speaker to a vigorous hug.

'I will admit them all, Lina. I will admit anything you like,' he cried. 'But this affair can hardly be settled so quickly as you say. How can the Count have gone after Hedwig? He does not know where she is, any more than we do.'

Aunt Lina escaped from his embrace, laughing.

'Ah, that is his business! We will rack our brains no further. Lovers have extraordinary luck in these matters. They are gifted with a species of second-sight which is very useful. I do not suppose that Count Oswald knows exactly the spot where Hedwig is, or he would hardly have come on to Brunneck first; but find her he will, you may be sure, be she hidden away in the thickest wood or perched on the top of the highest mountain. They will come back together, you may take my word for it, Erich.'

This prophecy, delivered with much deliberate confidence, was verified almost to the letter.

Oswald had, indeed, driven down to the village, but he had then sent on the carriage and had hurried towards the hills on foot. The faculty of 'second-sight' must have been well developed in him, for without a moment's vacillation, doubt or delay, he struck into a path which led direct to a certain wooded hill-side. His pace grew more eager, more rapid, as he neared his goal, and when at length he reached it, the object of his search was found. He had guessed that Hedwig's first ramble after her return home would take her to that spot.

Again the swallows came, in swift flight out of the far distance, back to their beloved woods, their old familiar haunts. With easy strokes they winged their way through the clear air, circling round tree and mountaintop, and then fluttering off in all directions to rejoice the whole countryside with their happy greetings, to be welcomed everywhere as the first messengers of spring.

But this time the earth was not wrapt in slumber or swathed in mist. It had long since wakened from its winter sleep. Through the sunlit forest might be seen the delicate green tracery of budding leaves. Verdure lay on field and meadow, peeping up, breaking through every clod, and over earth and sky streamed a sea of golden light. The breath, the pulse of spring was everywhere--on all sides jubilant voices sounded, hailing the new life.

So for the two human beings standing on that sunny height a true springtime had dawned. They had waited long for it, but now it had come to them in all its wealth and splendour. The words of love spoken here to-day must have been more ardent, more passionate, than those which three years before Hedwig had heard from other lips. Profoundly earnest they had certainly been. Oswald's face, as he bent over his betrothed, testified to this, as did the tears still glistening on Hedwig's lashes. Her dark-blue eyes had grown so deep in meaning, so full of soul and expression since they had learned to weep.

'I have had to wait so long,' said Oswald, and a slight accent of reproach mingled with the passionate tenderness of his tone. 'So long, so long! For more than a year you have held aloof from me, and I was not permitted even to write to you. Sometimes I thought I was altogether forgotten.'

Hedwig smiled, still through her tears.

'No, Oswald; you have not thought that. You knew surely and well that I suffered from the necessary silence and separation to the full as much as you--but I felt I owed that time of silence to Edmund's memory and to his mother's grief. You saw her when we arrived, and the sight will have explained to you why I could not have the courage to be happy while living at her side.'

'She is terribly changed, certainly. Her long sojourn in the South has brought about no real improvement, I fancy.'

'A postponement, at most. I fear she has returned hither only to die.'

'I knew that she would not survive the blow,' said Oswald. 'I feel so deeply what Edmund was to me, and how much more was he to his mother!'

Hedwig shook her head slightly.

'Sorrow one learns to bear, and it moderates with time, but the trouble that is gnawing at her heart has so sharp a tooth, it tortures and wastes her strength so constantly and cruelly, that I am sometimes tempted to think some other feeling must mingle with it--remorse, perhaps, or a sense of guilt!'

Oswald was silent, but the cloud which settled on his brow was answer enough.

'Before we started on our journey you made me promise that I would not distress the poor lady with questions,' the girl went on. 'I have kept my promise, and have never alluded to the doubts or the painful uncertainty which weigh on my mind. There is so much that is dark and enigmatic

to me in all the circumstances connected with that terrible event. One thing only I divine, namely, that Edmund voluntarily sought his death. Why? To this hour the question has been left unanswered. It remains to me a mystery. There should be no secrets between us, Oswald. You must answer me now when I pray and entreat you to tell me the truth. I cannot, will not see that dark cloud upon your brow.'

She could use the language of entreaty now, could beseech with all the intensity and power of love; and here she was sure of victory. Oswald clasped her more tightly in his arms.

'No, my Hedwig, there must be nothing secret between us. All must be clear and open as day. But not now, and not here, can I disclose to you that sad story of guilt with all its fatal consequences. I cannot tell that story to my betrothed. When you are my wife, you shall hear what drove Edmund to his death, what is gradually, irresistibly drawing his mother after him to the grave. That dark shadow must not intervene to mar the brightness of this hour. So often have I dreamed of it, aye, dreamed from the moment your sweet face first dawned on me in the midst of that fierce snowstorm. You came to me, a spring-day personified, with all its promises of hope and happiness--though then, indeed, I could not, dare not hope those promises would ever be fulfilled.'

Hedwig looked up at him. She had not quite forgotten her old arch, sunny smile. It played about her lips with all its own bewitching charm as she replied:

'Why not? We met for the first time in a March storm, and here, on this very spot, when you were speaking so gloomily of life in general and of your own sad past, I proclaimed to you that Spring, bright happy Spring, would come at last.'

As an echo to her words sounded the low murmured greeting of the swallows fluttering overhead, as they had fluttered on that former day in the thick drizzling mist. But now they winged their airy flight in full sunshine. Higher and higher they soared, until they disappeared in the illimitable azure of the sky. These small feathered messengers, which bring to the earth after its long winter sleep a promise of new light and life, came this time charged with a still fairer mission. They brought ease to longing hearts, rest after a cruel fight, a whole springtime of peace and happiness to two loving human beings.

THE END.

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