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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK ALBRECHT ***



ALBRECHT.

ARLO BATES.

Sô gesach sie valken vliegen.
Dietmar von Aist.

BOSTON:
ROBERTS BROTHERS.
1890.

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By ARLO BATES.

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To
THE MEMORY OF MY FATHER,
NIRAN BATES,
AND OF MY MOTHER,
SUSAN THAXTER BATES,

I Dedicate this Book;

*profoundly conscious that it can bring to me no other
satisfaction or honor so great as the keeping in remembrance
the fact that I am their son.*

FORE-WORD.

It must be evident to the most careless observer that the treatment of the theme with which the present story deals would probably not have taken the form it has, had "Undine" not been written before it; but it is to be hoped that "Albrecht" will not on that account be set down as an attempt either to imitate or to rival that immortal romance.

No effort has been made to secure historical exactness, as the intent of the tale was wholly independent of this. To furnish a picture of the times was not in the least the thing sought.

A romance can hardly fall into a more fatal error than to attempt the didactic, and there is no intention in the present story of enforcing any moral whatever; and yet the problem which lies at the heart of the tale is one which is of sufficient significance in human life to furnish a reasonable excuse for any book which, even without contributing anything to its solution, states it so that it appeals to the reader until he recognizes its deep import.

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ALBRECHT.

HOW ONE WENT.

Like a vast sea the mighty Schwarzwald stretched its forests of pine and its wide wastes of heather around Castle Rittenberg, its surface forever fretted into waves by the wind. Like the sea it seemed measureless, and the lands which lay beyond its borders appeared to the scattered dwellers in its valleys as remote as might appear the continents to the people of far islands.

Like the sea, moreover, the Schwarzwald was peopled by strange beings, of whom alike the peasant folk who dwelt upon its borders, the rude churls whose huts stood here and there in clusters in its less intractable nooks, and the nobles whose castles overtopped the wilderness of trees and bracken, went always in secret dread. In the north lurked the hordes of the Huns, the terrible barbarians who from time to time descended, hardly human, upon the fertile lands which lay beyond the borders of the forest, swarming as they went upon whatever luckless castle lay in their path. The boldest knight might well tremble at the name of the ferocious Huns, and even the army of Charlemagne himself had hardly been able to cope with this foe.

But more near at hand, and more terrible than even the Huns, were the strange creatures who abode in the forest, and who walked invisible at their will, the mysterious beings who lurked in dim recesses, and of whom men spoke only in awe-struck whispers. Even what they were it was not easy to say; and who could tell how they were offended or how to be placated? The nixies of the lakes and streams; the dwarfs and gnomes of cave and mountain; the kobolds, who were more daring and more human in appearance than either, so that haply a man might endanger not only his life but even his soul holding commerce with them, unsuspecting that they were not of his fellow mortals,—all these and many others dwelt in the shadowy recesses, and against these not even the hosts of the Great Emperor would avail.

The wind souging all day in the pine-trees, and the weird, sweet music of the elfin harps which belated wanderers heard sounding to lure them on into blinder depths of the wood, seemed to sing the same song; but its mystery human ears might not fathom, and scarcely could human will resist its spell. In the tempest the bugles of the Wild Huntsman pealed shrilly through the storm, and the retainers at Castle Rittenberg crossed themselves at the sound almost as openly as did the damsels; but there was less danger in this than in the heavenly sweet strains which beguiled the wayfarer into forgetfulness of home and of dear ones until he joined himself to the soulless folk of the forest, and was heard of no more.

It was music of this sort, more sweet than words might tell, faint on the air as the breath of a sigh or yet again swelling full and strong as a blast from the horns when the hunt is rushing through the wood, that had of late been heard around the castle. Delicious, enervating, seductive and yet pleading, the strange melodies had seemed to surround the towers, as if throngs of invisible musicians floated in the air to bring their heavenly minstrelsy to the Countess Erna.

There had indeed been more than one token that something mysterious was forward in the forest; and although the priest of Rittenberg frowned upon all talk of the wood-spirits and their doings, the folk of the castle whispered under their breath many a wild surmise.

Mayhap it was of these things that the Countess Erna dreamed as one spring morning she sat by her open lattice, albeit she had before her a parchment from which she might be reading. From below arose the noise of horses' hoofs, the cries of grooms and pages, the clatter of spurs upon the stone pavement, and all the sounds that betoken the preparation of a troop to leave the castle. So little did she heed, however, that she seemed not to hear. So motionless was she that the doves which had perched upon the wide window-ledge in perfect fearlessness had ceased to regard her at all, and preened themselves in the sun with soft, full-throated cooings, contrasting oddly with the clamor which arose from below.

The morning sun shone gloriously, casting a flood of light through the room; and although Erna sat withdrawn from the fervor of its direct rays, she seemed to glow in the radiance like a lily golden-hearted. Her hair, yellow as the flax on a fairy's distaff, caught a stray sunbeam which stole through a crevice in the curtain-folds, and scattered the light in a hundred reflections, making of them an aureole about the graceful young head. The eyes, blue as an oker-bell, were now and then raised from the richly illuminated parchment before her, absently regarding the doves as if she saw them not, while the slender hands which held the scroll were only a little warmer in their color than the robe of snowy wool loosely confined at the waist with a golden girdle. As she sat there in the still chamber, withdrawn from the bustle of the courtyard below in mind no less than in place, there was about the countess an atmosphere of peace, of innocence, of purity, one might almost have said of holiness, that he must be dull indeed who could not feel, or who, feeling, failed to reverence.

There was little reverence, however, in the mien of the old dame who came hastily into the chamber, and broke in upon the reading and the dreaming of the Countess Erna with exclamations full of vexation.

"Body of Saint Fridolin!" she cried. "Thou sittest here reading as quietly as if thy suitor, Count Stephen, were a thousand leagues away instead of waiting below to take leave of thee. No wonder that he declares that thou hast not a drop of warm blood in thy body, as his squire reported to my damsel."

"Count Stephen is no suitor of mine," Erna responded calmly, "as no one knoweth better than thou, Aunt Adelaide. He is my guest, however, and I should be loath to fail in aught of courtesy toward him. Why have I not been summoned if he be in truth waiting?"

"Well, if he be not waiting," the old dame replied with a lower voice and some softening of manner, "he is at least ready to set out, and that is much the same thing. It would certainly look more attentive on thy part shouldst thou be in the hall when he comes to take leave rather than to wait to be sent for."

"Doubtless; but I have no wish to be attentive to Count Stephen beyond the claim of any guest."

"But Count Stephen is a member of the family."

"His connection is hardly near enough to count in this matter," Erna answered. "Dear Aunt," she continued, coming closer to the other, and laying a caressing hand lightly upon the old woman's arm, "I am sorry that thou shouldst be disappointed. I did what I could to fulfil thy wish when I bade thee have Count Stephen come here, although what we had heard of him was so little of the sort to make me long for such a guest, because I knew that more than for aught else in the world thou didst long for the perpetuation of the Von Rittenberg name by my becoming his wife. I shrank from the knight from the first moment I saw him, and never could it be that I should be brought to look upon him with favor. Happily he feels the same repugnance to me, so that I am spared the pain of telling him nay; but I cannot fail to be glad at his departure."

The old dame, who was so small and so old that she seemed to have shrivelled away in long centuries, overlooked and forgotten by the Angel of Death, was evidently moved by the caressing air of the countess; but her grievance was too deep and of too long standing to be so lightly passed over, and she could not restrain herself from the further venting of her displeasure.

"Why does he feel cold toward thee?" she demanded. "Hast thou been other than an ice-hill to him since he entered the castle? I sent for Count Stephen to come here to pay his respects to me because he is the only man alive who bears our name; and whatever thou mayst say, he bears it like a brave knight. Thou hast met him as if thou wouldst remind him that while he hath no great possessions thou art chatelaine of the richest domain in the Ober-Schwarzwald."

"Aunt Adelaide!" interrupted Erna, a flush of indignation rising in her clear cheek, "not even thou hast a right to charge me with insulting my guests."

"God's blood!" the other returned. "There spoke thy father, Heaven rest his soul! But thou knowest," she continued, softening her tone, "that I cannot live forever to have care for thee, and that I cannot die easy till thou art well wed. There are strange rumors in the air, too, and who knoweth what the music from the forest that has been heard of late may betoken? And Elsa tells me that there hath been about the place a weird creature in the guise of a man who walketh limpingly. It all bodes some wonderful thing that is to hap, and I would to the saints that Rittenberg had a man to defend it, whatever may befall."

The entrance of a servant who announced that the Count von Rittenberg was now in truth waiting to take leave, interrupted Lady Adelaide, and brought her at once to a request which had been in her shrewd mind ever since she learned that the guest was likely to set off without having made that proffer for the hand of Erna to secure which she had invited him to the castle.

"At least this thou canst do to please me," she said; "thou canst invite him to rest here on his way back from Strasburg, whither he is journeying."

"It will be idle for thy project, Aunt," the countess answered kindly; "but if it will please thee I will do it."

The old aunt looked after the slender maiden as she left the chamber, and sighed. The Lady Adelaide was almost a century old, and she had lived to see one generation after another fall around her like snowflakes that are a moment in the air and then are seen no more. She felt that upon her rather than upon her niece rested the burden of preserving the honor of the house of Von Rittenberg, and she could but feel keenly the failure of her schemes for the perpetuation of the line and the name. She had been accustomed, moreover, to being obeyed. For three generations she had held an important place in the councils of the family, even her imperious grand-nephew, the father of the Countess Erna, having been accustomed to consult her in matters of importance. She was not without a feeling of indignant surprise that her plans should be disregarded, and perhaps this helped her to endure the genuine sorrow which she felt whenever she thought of the possibility of the failure of the family name.

The late count had fallen fighting in the place of honor in the advance guard of the Great Emperor, at the head of the corps of Suabians whose valor inspired in Charlemagne so warm an admiration. So high had Count von Rittenberg stood in the favor of the emperor that a special messenger had been despatched by Charlemagne's order to bear the knight's sword and shield to his family with rich tokens of the royal favor and expressions of sympathy. But not even this great honor could prevent the shock from breaking the heart of his young wife, just recovering from the birth of her first child, the present countess; and Erna was thus left doubly orphaned while yet in her cradle.

During her infancy and girlhood Erna had been under the guardianship of the Lady Adelaide, who seemed to hold the infirmities of age at bay with a success little short of a miracle. The retainers believed her to be in possession of some secret by means of which she preserved her vigor; and

many were the uncanny whispers which circulated through the castle concerning her. Father Christopher, the chaplain of the Von Rittenberg household, had more than once set himself to combat these rumors; but the Lady Adelaide herself never exhibited any annoyance if she chanced to hear them hinted at, and indeed seemed not ill-pleased that she should enjoy a reputation which so lifted her above the rest of her fellow mortals.

The marriage of Erna and Count Stephen von Rittenberg was a project which had long occupied the thoughts of the Lady Adelaide. The count belonged to a younger branch of the family which had settled near the Lake of Constance half a century before, and lorded it over a petty colony of boatmen whose settlement was called Schaffhausen from their boat-sheds. There had never been very cordial relations between the two branches, and Count Stephen would never have been sought out by his aged relative had not her desire to perpetuate the Von Rittenberg name overcome her traditional scorn of the "Schaffleute," as the Schaffhausen Von Rittenbergs were contemptuously called by the elder branch. The count had a reputation not of the best, it was unhappily true; but he was at least a Von Rittenberg, and that outweighed all other considerations in the mind of the old matchmaker. She had invited him to visit her, taking care that he should understand that he was to be considered in the light of a possible candidate for the hand of the heiress of Rittenberg, and it was with sincere regret as well as vexation that she saw her scheming come to naught.

From the first the repulsion had been mutual between the countess and her guest. He was by no means insensible to the advantages of the match, which offered him the lordship of the richest holding in all the Schwarzwald, confirmed to the Von Rittenbergs by special decree of Charlemagne himself, but he was a man accustomed to consider his inclinations in all things and first of all things; so that when he found the countess not to his liking, he pushed the affair no further. He was a man to whom life meant sensuous pleasure; and Erna, in her white innocence, her purity and devotion, failed to please him. He found her cold and tediously religious, and instinctively felt that the presence of a wife with her standards of conduct would be a perpetual rebuke to his pleasure-loving life.

On her side Erna shrank from the count without understanding why. The taint of evil was on him, and her pure maidenly sense was offended without comprehending how. She felt in a way degraded by his very presence; the bold, curious looks with which he regarded her affected her like an affront. Her instinctive purity was repelled by the sensual atmosphere which he created wherever he came. She could not have explained even to herself what she felt, but it was impossible for her to endure his presence save by the strongest effort. It was with a feeling of relief that she passed down the long hall to say good-by to him; and even the fact that she had promised her aunt to ask him to return did not at the moment trouble her, since his return seemed too uncertain and remote to weigh against the present departure. The Lady Adelaide, with a diplomacy which was wholly wasted, had herself taken leave of Count Stephen earlier, to the end that her niece might receive his farewell alone.

There was short speech between the guest and his hostess, neither of whom wished to prolong the interview; and hardly ten minutes from the time she had left it, Erna re-entered her chamber. She took up the scroll she had been reading, a copy of the writings of Saint Cuthbert, but paused before she opened it to look out at the train of the departing guest, which was already in motion. She watched it cross the drawbridge and wind down the side of the hill upon which the castle stood; and after it had vanished, with its glitter of armor, flash of helmet, gay flutter of pennant and waving of plumes, into the obscurity of the pine forest below, which swallowed up the troop and hid its further progress from sight, she leaned wistfully upon the window-ledge, buried in thought. She was wondering if she were different from other maidens, that her heart had not been touched, but that she had rather been repelled by the handsome knight who had just left her; and she half doubted whether he had not been right in likening her to a human iceberg.

Suddenly her reverie was broken by the shrill, clear blast of a horn, which arose from the pine wood below, and came soaring upward like the piercingly sweet song of a bird that pours its whole heart out singing and straining its flight toward the blue heaven.

The sound broke in upon her reverie as if it were a summons from some of the mysterious powers whose home was in the forest. Often as she had heard a bugle hailing the warder of Rittenberg, it had never happened that there had come with the sound such a thrill as this call brought. Far stretched and weird the great Schwarzwald lay, the warm summer sun seeming to glance from its impenetrable surface, unable to pierce to the depths wherein lurked the wild woodland creatures as the nixies lurked in the lakes; and something that was half a shudder crossed her frame, as the note of that horn called up the thought of all the strange secrets which therein lay hidden. Then, with an effort, she shook off the momentary oppression, and threw her clear glance down into the valley to see whence came the call.

II

HOW ONE CAME.

Erna leaned forward over the wide stone window-ledge, and turned her gaze downward to where the road, little more than a bridle-path, emerged from the obscurity of the pine wood to begin its

winding ascent to the castle gate. A second blast of the bugle-horn, blown with full lungs and with a good will that seemed to promise a jocund disposition in the visitor who came thus heralded, and there rode out of the wood a knight, followed by his squire and a couple of men-at-arms.

The countess strained her eyes in a natural curiosity to discover what manner of man the forest was sending her as a guest. He was too far below for her to be able to distinguish his features, although he rode with beaver up; but she could appreciate the fact that he sat his horse, a superb chestnut stallion, with the ease and grace of one thoroughly bred to knightly customs. He was a man of commanding stature, overtopping the squire who rode close behind him, and dwarfing the men-at-arms by contrast. His armor, she was able to perceive as he rode up the hill and thus came somewhat nearer, was of the richest, and the flash of jewels on his bridle-rein caught her eye as he rode into the sunlight.

So striking was the mien of the stranger knight that Erna suddenly found herself affected with a strange kindness for him, and unconsciously sighed as the thought flitted through her mind that whoever he might be, he was probably merely a traveller who sought rest and refreshment in the castle to-day, to vanish to-morrow into the unknown world from which he had come. Then she smiled at her own folly in thus grieving at the departure of a perfect stranger before she had even met him to welcome his arrival; and as he drew near the castle gate, and the squire for the third time blew a merry blast on the horn, she drew back from the window. As she did so, she fancied that the unknown cast a sudden glance up to her casement; and far away as he was, she seemed to catch a glimpse of eyes dark and full of fire.

Full of curiosity, Erna waited to be summoned as chatelaine of the castle, to go through the formality of according the hospitalities of the house to the guest. It was the generous custom of the Von Rittenbergs to receive all who came, although the Lady Adelaide was continually predicting evil results from a hospitality so unguarded and so unusual in a fortress where the head of the family was an unmarried woman. The countess took pride in keeping up the family traditions, but she was even more moved to this course by a genuine religious charity. It seemed to her tender heart monstrous to deny food and shelter to any when it was possible to give them; and if her course had been shaped rather by the sentiments of her confessor, Father Christopher, than by ordinary considerations of prudence, there had at least no harm befallen from her custom thus far.

When Erna descended to the great hall to meet the new-comer, she found him conversing with Father Christopher, whom he overtopped by nearly a head. She was astonished by the stranger's wonderful beauty. His face was of a mould as powerful as his figure. A heavy chestnut beard, curling and glossy, but barely descending to his collar, covered the lower part of his countenance. His head was firmly poised, and carried with the air of one accustomed to absolute mastery. His brow, displayed by the removal of his helmet, was wide and high.

But what most impressed Erna in the appearance of the stranger knight were his magnificent eyes, which were like no others she had ever seen. They were brown and liquid, with that glance at once appealing and defiant, pathetic and fierce, which one sees in the eyes of a stag that proudly leads the herd. One perceived that they could upon occasion kindle into splendid rage, although they were capable of looks of such wistful tenderness, such longing, such melting desire. As Erna advanced down the rush-strewn hall to meet the guest, it almost seemed to her that his glance drew her on, so strongly was she impressed; and yet when he spoke, his voice to her was more strangely sweet than even his wonderful eyes.

Father Christopher announced the new-comer as Baron Albrecht von Waldstein; and he added, with a touch of the gossip, that the knight's home lay in the Neiderwasser valley, to the northward.

The baron himself explained his presence at the castle.

"One of my retainers," he said, "was this morning, as we were riding toward the south, smitten with a strange illness. I feared that we should leave his bones to bleach in the forest for lack of a leech; and he himself had either small courage or strength to ride on. Fortunately his fellow knew that we were near Rittenberg, and I have ventured to bring him here, in the hope that we might for a little find shelter and the aid of a leech."

"He shall be looked to," Erna answered with a gentle gravity which became her well. "Our leech is not unskilful, and his best is at thy service."

"I thank thee," the baron responded, bowing profoundly. "It were a matter of much inconvenience to be left with but one man-at-arms thus far from home."

"Thou must, too, be concerned at the suffering of the poor man," the countess returned. "I am always unhappy if one of my people is ill. They seem so much like animals in their pain, and as if they could not understand what had happened to them. It is very pitiful."

The baron regarded her with a look of inquiry on his handsome face.

"Of course one cares for his servants," he assented, "since he can so ill get on without them."

Had her cousin, Count Stephen, the beat of whose horse's hoofs had so lately died upon the air, said these words, Erna would doubtless have regarded them as shockingly heartless; but now so strongly had the appearance of this stranger won upon her, that she only smiled and shook her

head.

"Of a truth they have not our feelings," she said; "but after all, they are yet human beings. Wert thou in the forest through the night?" she added. "Thou canst not have come far this morning, especially riding with one who was ill."

"We were in the forest all night," the baron responded. "We made shift to shelter us in a cave that we chanced upon. It was the sickness of the man which prevented that we rode further yester-e'en, till we had found lodgings."

"But hadst thou no fear of the wood-sprites?" Erna asked.

"Nay," replied Baron Albrecht, "they troubled us not; though we were aware of them as they passed us by," he added, smiling.

"Thou art a bold knight," she murmured beneath her breath.

"Truly thou art favored of heaven," Father Christopher said, "if the wood-sprites can do thee no harm."

The countess looked at the stranger with admiration and astonishment. Bold as were the knights who had made the name of her family respected far and near, they had not been free from the fear of the wild folk of the wood, and it was with a thrill that she looked at the stranger knight as he avowed his fearlessness.

"At least now," she said, "we will do what is in our power for thee, whether it be to protect thee against the dangers of the forest or to offer thee rest and refreshment."

She gave the necessary orders, and passed down the hall again the way she had come. As she ascended the winding stair which led up toward her chamber, she turned and looked backward. The Baron von Waldstein stood where she had left him, and his eyes were fixed upon her retreating figure with a gaze which made her thrill with mingled confusion and pleasure. She turned away her face with a blush which she could not repress, and hastened on.

In her chamber Erna found her great-aunt, all alive with eager curiosity.

"Who is he?" Lady Adelaide demanded. "Elsa says he is the handsomest man alive, and that his jewels are wonderful. Is it so? Didst thou notice them?"

"He is certainly handsome," Erna answered. "As for his jewels, I do not think I noticed them; but now that thou speakest of it, I do remember that there was a splendid red fiery gem on the front of his corselet. It shone so that it caught my eye from the top of the stair as I went down."

"It must be a carbuncle," the old lady responded. "He must be a knight of much consequence; and yet I cannot remember that I ever heard of the Von Waldsteins in my life. I wonder if I have ever seen any of the family. How does he look?"

"He looks," replied her niece absently, "like a woodland god."

Her eyes, as she spoke, fell on the scroll she had been reading earlier in the morning. The place had been the passage in which Saint Cuthbert warns against the snares of appearances. She sighed and turned away from the eager questioning of her companion to take again the pious scroll; but when the Lady Adelaide, grumbling that her curiosity could not be gratified, had left the chamber, the parchment slipped unheeded to the floor, and the countess looked out over the undulating waves of the pine forest with eyes that saw not, so deeply was she absorbed in reverie. The sage words of Saint Cuthbert were forgotten, and she dreamed of the splendid knight of whom she knew nothing but what was to be learned from those appearances against the deceitfulness of which the page she had been reading admonished in vain.

III

HOW THE KNIGHT SANG.

The Lady Adelaide found small satisfaction for her curiosity so far as her niece was concerned, but she set her damsel Elsa to collect whatever information might be obtained from the knight's little retinue. Elsa, she knew from experience, might be trusted to gather whatever gossip was afloat about the castle, and to repeat it in a lively and entertaining fashion. But on the present occasion even the skilful Elsa failed to elicit much from the taciturn men-at-arms of Baron von Waldstein, and she could in the end report to her mistress little beyond the fact that the baron was travelling southward, though whether to join the court or army of the Great Emperor or for some private expedition did not appear.

Of his wealth there could be no question when the very bridles of his horses were set with jewels over which the eyes of the Rittenberg servants grew large and round with astonishment and admiration; while from the respect of his men it was evident that he was accustomed to being served as are only those who are born with the right to command. The sick retainer had under the care of the leech recovered somewhat from the severity of his first attack, and his disorder

had been pronounced nothing contagious,—a point upon which the Lady Adelaide had been much exercised,—with the opinion of the leech that it would be necessary for him to rest a couple of days before continuing his journey.

Lady Adelaide was forced to be content with this scant information until the assembling of the family at dinner gave her an opportunity of observing the stranger for herself. She came into the hall with her niece prepared to subject the guest to a searching examination, such as she knew herself to be abundantly able to conduct; but for almost the only time in her life the ancient dame found herself from the first moment so completely under the spell of the stranger that she gave herself up unquestioningly to the charm of his presence and his conversation, without even an attempt to force him to give an account of himself.

Nor was she alone in this infatuation. Both Father Christopher and the Countess Erna were as strongly impressed with the singular fascination of the baron. There was about him a contagious joyousness, an exhilarating fulness of life, as if he had drunk from some fountain of youth, and shed about him the influence of his superabundant vitality. Doubtless the unusual vigor and manly beauty of the knight contributed much to this result; but back of these seemed to lie some rare and powerful quality in the nature of the man himself which was more effective than either. It would have been impossible to analyze his charm, but it was also impossible to resist it.

The talk at the table was so animated and full of frank gayety that they lingered by common though unspoken consent far beyond the usual time. The baron had throughout addressed himself to the whole company, seldom speaking directly to Erna, although he now and then appealed to the Lady Adelaide or to Father Christopher; and yet the countess was subtly conscious that in all he said there was a secret intention of interesting herself. She blushed as this thought came to her after she had retired to her chamber and sat over her embroidery, while the priest and the knight were left to entertain each other. So unsophisticated was she that this thought seemed almost unmaidenly, and she contradicted it as soon as it showed itself in her mind.

She was a maid with soul as white as the unspotted ermine. She had been bred under the eye of Father Christopher,—a priest who was also a man, and one of rare insight. She was as ignorant of evil as one must be who had lived ever in seclusion, and her temperament naturally inclined toward piety. Something of an education she had received from the priest. She could read; and there were in the castle several pious books, most of them, it is to be feared, looted by the late Count von Rittenberg on the day of some victory of the Great Emperor in the south at which he had assisted. Over these parchments, mostly religious works, although a wicked volume of the heathen poet Ovid had somehow chanced among them, Erna passed much time. The brilliant scroll of Ovid, with its profane pictures, at which she had never looked more than in a single glance that showed her what they were like, she had hidden away after a consultation with Father Christopher whether it should not be destroyed despite its value.

The colored threads of her embroidery that afternoon were scarcely more bright than the thoughts which floated through Erna's brain as she sat among her maidens, directing their work; and yet in her mind was no thought which was consciously different from those of the day before or of all the days that had preceded; only that now suddenly all those days appeared, as she looked back, somehow colorless and dull. She did not say to herself that the coming of the stranger knight had suddenly put new meaning into life, but her secret heart knew it, albeit she had yet to understand what her heart felt.

When that night she came into the great hall for supper, a lily-white maid in soul as well as robe, the eyes of the baron glowed as he looked at her. There was in his glance an adoration such as a noble dog might give to his mistress, a tender appeal as of one who beseeches a higher being to take pity upon him; and Father Christopher, who observed closely whatever concerned the countess, sighed as he looked, and secretly shook his head.

The talk at supper touched upon hunting, and the eyes of the baron sparkled as he said:

"Ah! when the wild boar turns on thee, and there is only thy spear-head between thee and his tusks, that is pleasure! That sends the blood through one's veins, and makes the heart tingle!"

Erna shuddered.

"I cannot understand how it can be pleasure," she said, "to put one's life in danger, or to take the life of a beast that has never injured thee."

Baron Albrecht regarded her in some surprise.

"I have never thought of that," he returned frankly. "Why should one consider the beasts? They are made for our sport, are they not?"

"I know you men think so," she responded with a smile; "but I cannot bear that they should suffer for my amusement."

The guest still looked puzzled, and apparently was on the point of questioning further, when Lady Adelaide, evidently fearing lest the words of her niece might offend the baron or give him the idea that Erna was full of strange fancies, said quickly:

"And yet thou canst sing very prettily of the hunting. Let us get nearer the fire, and thou shalt sing for us now. Beshrew me, but this storm is enough to freeze one's bones."

The night had indeed darkened into a storm such as it was unusual to experience at that time of year. Outside the castle turrets they could hear the wind and rain beating, and all the wild uproar of the tempest, as it howled and raged along over the wood. They drew close about the broad hearth, where a cheerful fire had been lighted, despite the fact that the month was June; and in accordance with her aunt's wish, Erna took her lute and sang a gay little ditty in praise of hunting.

"I do not mean it," she protested as she ended, and smiled in pleasant fashion, as if it were his opinion which she was anxious should be set right.

"Perhaps," Father Christopher said, "thou also canst sing, Sir Baron? If so, it will delight us to hear thee."

The request was warmly seconded by Lady Adelaide. Erna said nothing.

"Is it thy wish that I should sing?" the stranger knight asked, turning toward her.

She flushed a little as she answered in the affirmative, and then said to herself that her confusion arose from the fact that there was so seldom any need to consult her wish in such a matter that the attention seemed unusual.

The knight took the lute, which in his large and strong hands looked absurdly out of place, yet which he handled with a great deal of dexterity, and after a brief prelude began in a voice of wonderful richness to sing

THE KOBOLD'S SONG.

The kobold's life is full of glee.
For him the forest is made;
For him the leaf swells on the tree,
The fount wells in the glade.
Well he knows every nook,
Every pool where the brook
Breeds him trout in the sun or the shade;
Where the wild berries grow,
Where the cool waters flow;
Where dappled deer hide them
With sleek fawns beside them;
And where the wood-dove's eggs are laid.

He knows the hidden mountain mine
Where wondrous jewels lie;
The caves in which their glorious shine
Dazzles his feasting eye;
He heaps up the red gold
Till his treasures untold
Would the souls of a multitude buy!
All the wealth of the earth
Is his dower from birth.
Who can strength with him measure?
Who baffle his pleasure?
What kings with his riches can vie?

When winds rush whistling through the wood,
The kobold's merry heart bounds;
For well he knows the bugle good
That calls up horse and hounds.
The Wild Huntsman rides past
On the wings of the blast,
And the forest with tumult resounds;
The blithe wood-elves are there,
With the sprites of the air;
And as faster and faster
They follow their master,
He joins in their turbulent rounds!

The baron would have sung further in his wild praises of the life of the race of forest sprites with whom his verse dealt, but he was interrupted by the Lady Adelaide, who crossed herself fervently, exclaiming:

"Now beshrew me, Sir Baron, but it is ill to speak of the Wild Huntsman on a night like this when he may be abroad. Heaven send he be not near enough to the castle to have heard your song!"

The singer stared at her an instant in silent amazement, and then broke into a peal of golden-throated laughter, which was hardly as respectful as was the due of a person of the age and quality of the old dame.

"By my sword," he cried, "it is, then, really true that thou art afraid of the Wild Huntsman! I give thee my word that he is far too much engaged in his pleasure to bother his head about what may

be said of him."

It was the turn of the company to stare at the speaker, who seemed to realize that his words might seem strange to them, for instantly he hastened to apologize, and laying aside the lute endeavored to give a new turn to the conversation by a reference to the talk which had taken place at table. But the priest, with a gentle smile, brought him back to the song.

"It is a heathenish ditty, Sir Baron," he said, "with which thou hast favored us, if thou wilt allow me to say so. The treasures of the little men of the hills are doubtless mighty, if half that is said of them be true; but when they boast that their gold can buy the souls of men, they claim too much."

The guest regarded the speaker with a new look of interest and respect; but as he made no reply, Father Christopher continued:

"It is said that often the little men, and the Devil who is in league with them, have tried to entice men to barter their souls for gold; but even if they succeed, it is the Evil One to whom the soul goes, and the kobolds are no richer."

"That is indeed true," the knight responded gravely. "The soul is a curious thing, and the kobolds can have little idea of what it is like. Indeed," he continued, after a moment's pause in which the others regarded him in wonder, "dost thou not suppose, Father, that a kobold might think he were better off for escaping a responsibility so heavy as that of a soul?"

The priest looked at him in gentle reproof, while the Lady Adelaide again crossed herself with the air of being not a little scandalized.

"Perhaps a kobold, who has no soul, might have such a thought," Father Christopher said; "but it is strange that it should come into Christian heads like ours, my son. It grieves me that thou shouldst harbor such fancies."

"Nay," interposed Erna, softly, "I am sure our guest meant no harm. To beings so unhappy as not to know the glory of having a soul, very likely it has been kindly permitted not to realize how melancholy their case is. They are like the animals."

The eyes of the knight were fixed on her face with an intense gaze of wistful longing, and had her earnestness been less she must have blushed under their fire. As it was, she remembered, after she had lain down upon her bed, the look which the baron bent upon her as she thus spoke in his behalf. She rose with the words, and after bidding the guest goodnight, withdrew with Lady Adelaide, leaving the priest to sit over the dying fire with the baron as long as suited their mutual pleasure.

IV

HOW HE REMAINED TO WOO.

The stay of the Baron von Waldstein at the castle prolonged itself from day to day. At first there was the continued illness of the man-at-arms, which did not yield to the remedies of the leech as quickly as was to be expected; then there was one pretext after another; and in the end there was no pretext at all, save that the guest was loath to depart and the folk at Rittenberg wished him to remain.

He was like a great, sunny, jovial comrade in the castle; and his presence seemed to change the whole atmosphere of the household. Before his coming the Lady Adelaide had seemed to be the dominant spirit because she most asserted herself. The gentle, quiet chatelaine, absorbed in the half-mystical contemplation which had been encouraged by the life she led and nourished upon the pious writings that formed her little library, had allowed the reins of government to rest undisturbed in the hands of her aunt; seldom interfering unless the matter were really serious. She was known among the few peasants that were scattered through the neighborhood as the "White Lady," and the charcoal-burners of the forest would almost have said their prayers to her with as much confidence and reverence as to the Holy Virgin herself, so pure and saintly did she seem to them.

As to Father Christopher, he was of a nature too kindly and easy-going to interfere with the domination of anybody. The good priest was full of simple faith, of genial, sane belief in God and man; he had confidence in the higher nature which he believed to lurk in every human creature, no matter how hidden it might have become by the overlaying of worldliness or of sin; while in all desperate cases he fell back upon an implicit trust in the efficacy of the Church,—an unshaken rock in the midst of the tempests which he had seen rend the whole world in the troublous times in which he lived.

The countess would have found it impossible to define the pleasure she experienced in the society of Baron Albrecht, had she attempted to express it, but she went no further than to say to herself and to her aunt that he was by far the most pleasing man she had ever seen. The careful student of events, had such an one been present, might have found food for thought in the mutual influence which the hostess and her guest exercised on each other. No one could see them together and fail to appreciate the fact that Erna affected the baron profoundly. He had often, it

was true, the appearance of failing fully to understand much that she said and did, but he evidently regarded her with a feeling akin to reverence, and it was even possible to perceive that through his interest in what she did and as he grew more thoughtful and earnest.

The effect of the stranger upon Erna was even more marked, perhaps because it showed itself in outward acts rather than by the signs of inward changes. She took up various habits and sports which were calculated directly to please Von Waldstein; riding with him through the forest, and even standing to watch him setting out for the hunt, a pastime which she had hitherto held as cruel, although from old the Von Rittenbergs had been famous hunters. The alteration in her was subtle, but it was real. Father Christopher viewed it with mingled surprise and doubt. Lady Adelaide, on the other hand, was naturally delighted with a change which brought her niece more near to her own worldly views; and while she was too clever to praise openly the course of Erna, she found ways of lending her aid to the helping forward of the work which the mere presence of Baron Albrecht seemed to be effecting.

One lovely summer day, when all the forest was filled with sweet breath of balsamic odors, the perfume of flowers, and the gentle coolness of the breeze which brought both to the riders as they passed along the paths of the wood, Countess Erna and Baron Albrecht rode through its ways, now full of golden sunshine and now dim with delicious shadow, to a mountain tarn, set in the wooded hills like a gleaming gem. Blue as a sapphire under the clear sky stretched the lake, all the surrounding hills reflected in its surface, while along its shores the wild flowers bloomed in rich profusion; the clustering primrose, the dazzling white thistle, now fading beneath the fervid suns of summer, and the blue forget-me-nots, dear to lovers.

The ride had been a long one; and when the lake was reached the countess dismounted from her palfrey to rest. She seated herself upon a bank of greensward where she could overlook the smooth blue lake, and Baron Albrecht threw himself upon the ground at her feet, looking rather at her than at the water. Behind them the wind murmured in the pine-tops, chanting the song which is never done, but which rises ever from the heart of the Schwarzwald as the wail of the ocean rises continually from its beating waves: the yearning of the wild races of beings who live and die in its mysterious recesses; the cries of the beasts who perish without understanding the strange secrets hidden in the shadows of the wood, secrets which men feel with awe, but which even they cannot fathom.

Erna was conscious of the spell of the forest, and the tones of the song in the pine-tops rang in her ears with powerful appealing; but she was secure in the protecting presence of her companion, and she was more deeply still conscious of the earnestness of his gaze. So closely did Albrecht regard her that without comprehending her own feelings, she began to be embarrassed; and at last to cover her confusion she said:

"Didst thou know that where we see a lake there was once a noble convent, surrounded by beautiful gardens and even with fair pleasure-grounds?"

The knight looked from his companion to the blue tarn below them.

"But where?" he asked.

"Where the lake is. It was the richest and the most influential convent in all the Ober-Schwarzwald. All the nuns were of noble birth, and all had brought with them rich dowries to the convent. But they were wicked nuns; for Father Christopher says that even nuns and monks may be wicked. They feasted and sported and flew falcons, and there was only one in all the convent, a poor little novice whose betrothed had been killed, and whose heart was broken, that was not given over to sin."

"Is it a sin, then, to be happy?" asked Albrecht, smiling up at her from his station at her feet.

"Oh, no; not for us. But they were nuns, vowed to Heaven."

"I never could understand," he began with a puzzled face; then he broke off suddenly. "No matter!" he said. "Go on with thy story. What became of the convent?"

"The Lady Abbess," Erna continued, "was worst of all there; and on her birth-night she made a great feast for all the nuns. They sat and drank wine, and out of doors there was a bitter, bitter storm. And just at midnight there came a knocking at the gate. The Lady Abbess, flushed with wine, told the little novice, who would neither eat nor drink herself, to go and see who was there. So the little novice went, and found an old, old man, all drenched with the rain, and weak with hunger and cold. So she went to the Lady Abbess, and begged that she might be allowed to let the old man in, lest he perish with cold and hunger before morning."

"Why should she care?" the knight asked, as Erna paused and looked over the dark-blue lake as if she could see the scene she described.

"Oh, I told thee that she was not wicked like the rest."

"But would it be wicked not to care for a worthless, broken-down old man that one never saw before?"

The countess smiled upon him.

"When thou askest me questions like that," she responded, "I know that thou art laughing at me or trying to tease me."

A strange look flitted across the face of the baron, but he only replied by a smile.

"But the Lady Abbess," went on Erna, determined to finish the tale she had begun, "would not allow the gates to be opened. 'Thou mayest throw him down thy bread, if thou chooseth,' she told the little novice; 'but thou wilt get no more in its place.' So the little novice wrapped the bread up in the only blanket she had for her bed, and threw it down to the old pilgrim, and then she had to shut the window and leave him there in the cold. That very hour the water began to roll into the valley, though where it came from no one could tell; and it rose, and rose, and rose. And the wicked nuns ran to the top of their towers, but it was of no use, for the water rose over those until they were all drowned, and there was this lake."

"And didn't even the little novice escape?"

"Oh, yes; there came a boat, shining all like gold, and took the little novice off of the top of the tower; but when the others tried to get into it, it glided away and left them."

She crossed herself as she finished. Albrecht raised his eyes from the blue lake to the blue sky above them, and sighed, a sign of sadness Erna had never seen in him before.

"Why dost thou sigh?" she asked him.

"Because thou hast taught me to," he answered, with the wistful look of a loving animal in his eyes.

Then he laughed gleefully.

"Should not one sigh for the poor drowned nuns?" he asked.

"Yes," Erna said gravely; "they lost their souls."

"Always their souls," her companion responded impulsively. "Why is it that it is always the soul of which one speaks?"

"Because," she answered, with the same air she would have worn had his question been a reasonable one, "the soul is all; it is this which makes us different from the animals."

"And the nixies," he added; "and the undines, and the kobolds."

"Yes," she said gravely. She was silent a moment, and then added: "I do not know if it is right, but Father Christopher thinks it is no harm; I have always pitied the nixies and the kobolds. They are not so bad; and it is not their fault that they have no souls, and that they cannot be saved."

"No," he assented soberly, "it is certainly not their fault. Hast thou never heard it said," he went on, "that if one of them marries a mortal, he would win a soul?"

"Yes," she replied; "but Father Christopher does not believe that that is true."

"But if it were," he began, "wouldst thou—"

He broke off suddenly, and sprang up.

"Come," he cried, with his infectious laugh, "thou art making me as solemn as an owl. Did I talk in this sombre fashion when I came to Rittenberg?"

She did not answer save by a smile. She was aware that the knight had changed since he had been at the castle, although she did not realize what the alteration might mean. She had herself changed too much in the same time to be able to appreciate the subtle difference between what he now was and what he had been on his arrival; and she was too well content with whatever he was to study deeply over the question of the effect of her influence upon him. She rose from the grassy mound on which she had been sitting, and soon they were on their homeward way through the forest.

The day was wasting as they neared the castle, and already in the shadows of the forest the tree-trunks were black and dim. The way wound through the solemn pine-wood, rising and falling as it crossed the hills. Far above them they could see the peaks reddened by the rays of the late sun, while they rode forward in the dimness of the bridle-path below. Now and then some sudden turn in the way brought them to the crest of an elevation from which they could look far over the wide range of the tree-clad country. Spread before them were the sweeping black forests of pine, broken here and there with patches of ling and heather, as the surface of the ocean may be mottled by lighter spaces that mark where the concealed currents run.

Suddenly, as they turned a corner where the path ran along a rocky hillside, becoming so narrow that they were close together, Erna laid her hand on the arm of her companion.

"Look!" she exclaimed, pointing with the other hand.

Far, far before them, bathed in the golden light of the dying sun, lay the peaks of the Alps. White and pure as crystal the snowy summits rose toward the sky, while lower the slopes were flushed to rosy pink, or dyed to strange and lovely hues of gold and crimson and purple. From a cloud of rainbow colors soared the rosy peaks, fairer than dreams.

Erna checked her horse, and her companion did the same, although he seemed not fully to comprehend her enthusiasm.

"It is like heaven," she sighed. "Only once before in my whole life have I seen the Alps like that; they are not often to be seen from here."

Albrecht did not answer, but gazed upon the distant mountains, as if he were trying to understand why their appearance should affect his companion so strongly. As they gazed, the hues on the sides of the hills deepened; the rose and gold of the peaks faded; the white of the summits seemed to become transparent, as if one could see through them into the sky beyond; and little by little the sharp outline blended with the quickly dimming heaven against which they had stood out in relief. The shadow of the lower world crept upward; and as they stood there the glorious vision vanished. Only an empty sky where the dimness of night was growing lay in the distance before them in place of the beauty they had seen.

"It was like heaven," Erna said again, as she started her palfrey.

"Then," responded her companion, in a tone of deep gravity, "one must have a soul to appreciate it."

She turned and looked at him questioningly; but with one of those quick changes of mood which always seemed to her so surprising in so manly a knight, he burst into a merry laugh, and began in his rich voice to sing a gay hunting-song.

V

HOW THEY DISCOURSED OF KISSES.

The damsel Elsa was a trim and comely maid, with a bright eye and a ready tongue, of which the men and youths of the castle had learned to have a wholesome fear. She went about her affairs singing pleasant ditties, and one morning she crossed the great hall where Baron Albrecht was waiting for the countess, with whom he was to ride out, as had become much their fashion now; and as she went, she sang in her sweet, clear voice a little love-song that ran in this wise:

"When winter howls across the wold,
And all the gates are fast,
Then is thine heart, shut from the cold,
Safe from the blast,
And safe from whomsoe'er goes past.

"When Spring makes lovely all the land,
And casements open wide,
Beware lest some gay wandering band
Should slip inside,
And steal thine heart, and thee deride!

"When once 'tis gone, to win it back
Full vainly mayst thou try;
Nor golden bribes nor tears, alack!
Lost hearts can buy,
Since who loves once, loves till he die."

Baron Albrecht listened to her singing with a smile on his face.

"Now, by my beard," he said, "a song like that is worth a reward."

And he put his great shapely hand beneath her white chin, and kissed her full upon her red lips. At that very moment the Countess Erna came into the hall. Her cheek flushed as the damsel uttered an exclamation and fled hastily, and she looked at the baron in the evident expectation of seeing him also covered with confusion. But Albrecht merely smiled, and smoothed his chestnut beard.

"The damsel sings passing sweetly," he said, unmoved by her glance.

"Is it for that that thou hast kissed her?" demanded Erna, scornfully.

"Truly," replied he.

Erna regarded him with a look in which amazement struggled with disapprobation. She could not comprehend his strange indifference at being discovered.

"And hast thou no shame," she demanded, "to be seen trifling with the girl?"

"Shame?" he echoed. "Why should I have?"

"Nor any fear of my displeasure?"

"Thy displeasure?" he repeated. "Why shouldst thou be displeased?"

She regarded him in silence a moment; and as she did not speak, he continued:

"Surely thou canst not be jealous of a serving-wench?"

She drew herself up proudly, all the blood of her ancestors aflame in her clear pale cheek.

"The Von Rittenbergs are jealous neither of serving-wenches nor on account of strangers," she returned haughtily.

Albrecht looked at her in a perplexity that it was impossible not to believe genuine.

"Then what is my offence?" he asked. "I did but kiss the maid. I meant her no harm. Why should not one kiss a smooth cheek if it likes him?"

He spoke humbly, yet with no air either of bravado or of conscious guilt. She felt that his ignorance was not feigned, yet could hardly bring herself to believe that he did not understand what her feeling must be at discovering him in the act she had seen. Moreover, she found herself strangely at a loss how to reply to his question, if it were in reality serious. If he did not perceive the impropriety of his conduct, it was not easy for her to explain it to him. She stood a moment in silence, regarding him with a penetrating glance under which he showed no sign of wavering, and then instead of turning away to leave him as had at first been her intention, she smiled faintly, and with an expression of doubt still in her eyes.

"One would think, Sir Knight," she said, "that thy father's house must needs be a rude place if it is there held proper to kiss the damsels that please one, without hindrance."

"In thy father's castle," he answered slowly, "we have perhaps lived in a fashion that would seem to thee rude, for that my mother died at my birth, and there has been no one but men to make the rules of the house; but why it is wrong to kiss a comely woman if she please thee, is one of the things that I have never been told there or here."

Erna's tender heart was at once touched by the thought of her companion's orphanage, her own motherless childhood being still too fresh in her mind not to render her susceptible to this plea. She took up her whip from the bench, and turned quickly, that he might not see the tears that sprang to her eyes whenever one mentioned the loss of a mother.

"Well," she said, "I will leave it to Father Christopher to deal with thy transgression."

The change in her tone did not escape his quick ears, and he hastened to follow her to the courtyard, where the horses were waiting.

Their way that morning led them over hill and dale, until they came at length to a wide meadow, where the knight was minded to fly his falcon. A stream ran through the midst of the valley, and along its banks the grass was as vividly green as the emeralds which sparkled in the hilt of Albrecht's dagger; while all through it the golden buttercups were set as thickly as the stars in the sky of a summer's night. Here and there grew clusters of tall reeds and water grasses gently swaying in the soft breeze; and as Albrecht took his falcon from the wrist of his squire, who carried the bird, a splendid white heron rose with smooth, steady flight from amid the rushes, and went soaring upward. The baron quickly and deftly pulled the hood from the falcon's head; but just as he was loosening the jess Erna leaned forward and laid her hand on his arm.

"Let the heron go unharmed," she said. "Why shouldst thou strike him down?"

"Because," he responded, "thou art to wear his plumes in thy cap after I am gone, in memory of me."

"After thou art gone?" she repeated softly, drawing back.

He smiled and shook off the hawk, which rose in graceful circles until it was far overhead, and hung dizzily above the meadow. It sailed to and fro a moment until its prey, which had discovered it and in dismay was straining every nerve to quicken its flight, was just beneath it; then suddenly, with the rapidity of a thunderbolt, it fell straight upon the beautiful heron. Erna uttered a cry of dismay, and covered her eyes with her hand.

"It is too cruel!" she exclaimed.

Albrecht struck his hands together in glee.

"It is a brave bird!" he cried. "I would rather lose a gold mine than that falcon. He is as sure of his quarry as the rain is to fall to the ground."

Erna did not answer, but she regarded him with the look of one who strove to understand his pleasure, and to understand is almost to share. She said nothing while the squire rode off to bring in the game; and when the noble heron, its glistening throat stained with blood, was brought to them, she not only strove to restrain the involuntary shudder which seized her, but she did not remonstrate when her companion continued the praises of his bird.

"Did one ever see a more rich plumage?" Albrecht demanded. "It will set off thy cap bravely; and I have always been told that womenkind are fond of gay attire."

"It is indeed a beautiful bird," Erna responded; "but dost thou know that there is always something very amusing in the way thou speakest, as if thou hadst never seen human beings till now."

A faint flush crossed Albrecht's cheek. He looked at the dead heron.

"I never thought of it before," he said; "but it does seem hard that he should have to be killed just to please me."

Erna flushed in her turn. She thought she had offended him by her criticism of his manner of speech.

"I beg thy pardon," she began; but he interrupted her.

"Thou hast no need," he said. "Besides, thou art right. I know nothing of women. I do not even know, it seems, how they should be treated, or how to please them. Otherwise," he added with his warm smile, "I should not have offended thee this morning by kissing the damsel who sang so sweetly."

The countess smiled, and turned toward him with her face full of light. They had not dismounted, but had halted their horses near the margin of the brook on the banks of which the heron had been feeding lower down.

"That," she said, "is not a thing to be taught. It is learned from the air and from the birds."

"Then why has it not been revealed to me? I have been much in the forest."

"To kill the birds! In good sooth, I know not that one may learn of the air and the woods who goes as thou goest, with falcon and boar-spear. But at least," she added, regarding him with a smile, "thou must know that when one loveth—"

She broke off suddenly, and turned away her face, with a flush creeping up into her cheek.

"Well," Albrecht demanded eagerly, "what then?"

"I was but thinking," she returned, in a voice lower than before, "that certainly every man knoweth that when one truly loveth another, he will care for the caress of none save only the loved one."

"I had never thought of that," the knight responded gravely.

"Then of a surety thou hast never known what it is to love."

"By that token, never," he answered, smiling; "albeit it were possible that the test would not hold; and in any case it were not difficult, perchance, for thee to teach me."

The Countess Erna looked into his face all flushed and radiant, and there was that in her eyes which no man could see and fail to understand; and although the squire waiting hard by might not note that aught had been said or done out of the ordinary course, none the less had their hearts spoken each to each from that moment. Erna wheeled her horse, and began to move toward the entrance of the valley; and as Albrecht rode beside her, he suddenly leaned forward and caught her palfrey's rein, so that the beast was almost thrown upon his haunches with the abruptness of his arrest.

"Do not ride toward the upper ford," he said; "the nix is in an evil mood to-day, and mayhap might do thee a mischief in her spitefulness."

Erna looked at him with astonishment and alarm.

"And how knowest thou of the moods of the nix?" she demanded.

His eyes fell, and a flush stained his swarthy cheek. Then he seemed to recover his self-possession.

"It is a knowledge," he replied, "that is learned from the air and from the birds, but only by those who are in sympathy with the woodland creatures so that they may comprehend it."

Erna laughed merrily, and turned her palfrey toward the lower ford.

"In sober sooth, thou knowest no more of the nix than do I," she told him; "but I mind not if I please thy fancy."

But when alone in her chamber she thought of this, she crossed herself and shivered a little with a not unpleasing awe.

VI

HOW THEY CAME TO KISSES THEMSELVES.

From that day when they rode together to the slaying of the heron by the stream in the meadow, there was a new bond between the Countess Erna and the Baron Albrecht. There had been nothing further said between them of love, even in the impersonal way in which they had then begun to talk of it, but the revelation of the glance which had then passed from her eyes to his changed all the old relations. They knew that they loved each other, and although they were not yet come to the confession in word of their love, they understood well that they belonged each to

the other.

One day the countess sat at her embroidery in the hall, with her guest near her, and Father Christopher not far away. Without, a wild tempest of wind and rain shook the castle towers, and swept over forest and hill. From the casements one looked out upon a sea of mist that rolled above the tree-tops, beaten and torn by the wind, and lashing the hills in angry, mimic waves. All the weird voices of the Schwarzwald, melancholy or fierce, raged and wailed in the troubled air. It was a day when the unholy powers of the forest held high festival, and it was with inward shudders that Erna heard afar their hoarse tones, calling and yelling to one another in the storm.

Sitting at her embroidery frame without her damsels, who were scattered about the castle upon one mission or another, Erna talked with the baron and the priest, now and then thinking with dread of the night which was not far away, and hearing in her fancy already the roaring of the blast about the towers, the shrill cry of the Wild Huntsman, and the shrieks of his elfin train. When she looked up at the splendid form of her guest, however, her fears vanished in a breath, and she smiled that she should have found it possible to fear while he was at her side. In the warmth of his glance the tempest and all the dread dwellers in the forest were forgotten, and she was conscious only of the joy of his presence.

The knight had been asking concerning the armor of Erna's father, which hung in the hall; and from this the talk easily drifted to the Great Emperor, his noble deeds, his splendid army, and the brilliant court which he had gathered about him.

"How much I should like to see it all," the maiden said dreamily, as she looked earnestly at Albrecht; "the tourneys, the feasts, the processions, and all the beautiful court life."

Father Christopher regarded her in some amazement.

"Is it thou," he asked, "who sayest this? Thou who hast always been so thankful that thou wert spared the temptations and the worldliness of the court? Didst thou not refuse to go to Mayence when Charlemagne was there with his train, because thou didst not wish to fill thy mind with frivolous images?"

"So I did, Father, but mayhap my aunt was not wholly in the wrong when she called me a fool for my refusal," Erna answered, smiling.

"The court would ill suit me," Albrecht remarked, while the good priest remained sunk in astonishment at the change which the words of Erna indicated. "My choice is for the forest, for the hunt and the chase. The only thing at court that would attract me would be the tourney."

"Would that I might see thee in the lists!" Erna half murmured, leaning a little toward him.

"Mayhap that thou shalt," he replied. "Stranger things than this have come to pass. If thou dost, thou wilt see me break a lance in thy behalf right gladly."

"And thou no longer thinkest," Father Christopher interposed gravely, "that it is wrong for knights to risk their lives in mere wanton pastime?"

"Oh, there may be some danger," she returned with a slight air of impatience, "but why must one be forever troubling to examine too closely? Is there to be no pleasure in life lest harm should come after it, forsooth?"

Father Christopher left his seat, to stand for a moment looking at the countess as if in bewilderment. He did not in truth know what to make of his mistress in such a mood as this, so different was it from all that she had ever been before. He seemed minded to speak, and then, as if reflecting that her words did not after all contain aught which he was called upon to regard with severity, and perhaps that in any case what he might wish to say to her would be delivered better privately, he sighed deeply, and moved away without further speech. Erna looked after him as he slowly passed down the hall, the edge of his robe here and there catching upon one of the rushes with which the floor was strewn.

"Poor Father Christopher!" she said with a low, sweet laugh, "I have grieved him. It is a pity to make him unhappy. I never used to do that."

She regarded her gay-colored embroidery a moment absently, as if she did not see it; then suddenly she dropped the hand which held her needle and leaned toward her companion.

"What hast thou done to me?" she demanded. "Hast thou bewitched me, that all the things that I loved have become dull to me, and all the things which I wished not for are now in my thoughts with longing?"

A roaring blast shook the castle windows, and it was as if the spirits of the storm, sweeping up from the bosom of the wild and mighty Schwarzwald, shouted in mocking laughter outside; but neither Erna nor Albrecht regarded.

"I have done nothing to thee," the knight answered, in his turn bending forward; "but what hast thou done to me, that I linger here day after day, and that I consider now the pain of the beast that dies by my spear, or of the bird that my falcon strikes?"

"Nothing have I done to thee," Erna answered; but her voice faltered, and her glance fell.

Albrecht reached out his big brown hand, and took her milk-white fingers in his.

"Only," he said, "I love thee."

Erna rose to her feet, and cast a swift glance around the hall, as if she were minded to escape; then she turned toward him, and he sprang to her to clasp her in his arms. The knight kissed her glowingly upon her red lips.

"Now thou art mine," he said, "and all the world shall not wrest thee from me."

He had scarcely spoken when in the darkening afternoon a mighty blast seemed to throw itself against the tower; a yell of elfin laughter resounded in the hollow chimney, and the hound which had lain at Erna's feet crouched flat on the rushes, whining with deadly fear. Frighted, yet too full of her love to heed the cry of wild sprite or the fierceness of the tempest, Erna clung closely to the knight, and thus together did the Lady Adelaide, coming unexpectedly into the hall, surprise them.

"Body of Saint Fridolin!" she cried.

The lovers started, but although they released each other from the embrace in which they had been wound, they still stood together, and the arm of the knight was about Erna's waist. She clung to his hand in maidenly agitation, not wholly unmixed with the fear which the sudden vehemence of the tempest had aroused, yet she smiled bravely upon her aunt, with eyes which shone with the firmness and the joy of the troth she had just plighted.

The Lady Adelaide, whose nerves were already upset by the storm and by the weird sounds which were heard about the castle, was doubly overwhelmed with emotion by the sight before her. It was a shock from which it was not easy for her to recover, to see her niece in the arms of any man. She had so long looked upon Countess Erna as cold and devoid of all warm human passion, that she could scarcely believe the evidence of her own senses now that she beheld the countess with her lips pressed to those of a lover. She had so long cherished, moreover, the hope that by a marriage with Count Stephen Erna might still bear the Von Rittenberg name, that it could not but be with a keen pang of disappointment that she saw all these schemes swept away.

Most of all things, however, did Lady Adelaide desire to see her niece married, and since it could not be to Count Stephen, she was not averse to the choice that Erna had made. She had been like everybody else in the castle, and had fallen an easy conquest to the fascination of Baron Albrecht. His joyous, winning manner, his persuasive presence, had captivated the ancient dame completely; and now when Erna was prepared for the gravest disapproval, she met, to her great surprise, only smiles.

"Be not angry, Lady," the baron said, looking the old duenna frankly in the face, "but we were plighting our troth."

The cheeks of Erna were like a late rose amid untimely snow, but her eyes did not flinch from the regard of Lady Adelaide.

"Give us thy blessing," she pleaded; "the castle of Rittenberg is to have at last the lord which thou hast so long wished for it."

The old dame laughed and came forward.

"The time has gone by," she said, "when elders were asked to advise in the love affairs of young folk, but mayhap all goes not wrong for that. Thou wilt have thy own way in this matter, so why should I cumber myself to frown and chide at what cannot be helped by me?"

"Now, nay, Aunt Adelaide," Erna responded, smiling at the manner in which the other accepted the situation, "that is but a curt and unkind way in which to give greeting to me on my betrothal; and thou alone of all my house left to wish me joy!"

The great-aunt put up her shrivelled lips and kissed the girl, patting her hand kindly.

"Nay, nay," she said, the tears coming into her aged eyes, "I wish thee well, and thou shalt not lack for my blessing, though the Von Rittenberg name vanish from the earth when I am laid away. I wish thee joy; and, Sir Baron, I give thee my greeting. It is much that thou askest, when thou wouldst claim the last of our house, but there is that about thee that speaks the brave man, and one who will defend her in these troublous times."

The sight of a pair of lovers in their first joy will move even hearts which are encased in triple coats of worldliness and pride; and the Lady Adelaide, who of all folk was least likely to be touched by sentiment, when she had clasped the hands of Erna and Albrecht, had wet eyes as she went slowly down the hall again as she had come, leaving them alone.

And thus were the Countess von Rittenberg and the stranger knight betrothed.

VII

HOW THE TIME WORE TO THE WEDDING DAY.

Much had matters altered at Rittenberg since Baron Albrecht came thither, and yet still more did

they change after his betrothal to the castle's chatelaine. The whole household took on a festive air, until even the humblest retainer seemed to be affected by the joyous spirit which Albrecht had brought. The change in Erna herself doubtless had not a little to do with this, since it hath ever been found that the mood of the mistress is likely to give the key-note to her dependants. The countess had laid aside all her old air of pensive contemplation, the pious mien which had so wearied her cousin Count Stephen; and had so taken on an air of gayety that all in the castle felt it, and each in one way or another, according to the nature of each, responded to it.

Now and then over this gayety seemed to steal the faint shadow of some unknown dread from the forest. The retainers whispered among themselves that there had been strange portents and signs that the wood-folk were astir and full of excitement. Now and then one of Erna's damsels would hint that wild rumors were afloat. The churls that drove the swine and the geese afield had seen vague forms flitting among the shadows of the glades; they had heard what they could not tell, yet what had filled them with terror; and while no one could say why the unhuman beings who peopled the dim recesses of the forest should be thus aroused, there was much dread of them in the timorous bosoms of the serfs and serving-wenches at Rittenberg.

But however greatly these things perturbed the simple-minded serving-folk, they did not trouble the happiness of Albrecht and Erna. Between the knight and his betrothed there were now many sweet confidences, in which, indeed, nothing especial was imparted by one to the other, but which nevertheless gave them great satisfaction. They had met little opposition to their wishes, and indeed, when one considered the rank of the countess, and how completely a stranger was the baron, it might be wondered much that there was not more difficulty in his obtaining his bride. But the times were uncertain, the castle had no male head, Charlemagne was far away, and who knew what might happen if they waited to ask the imperial consent to the alliance; while the baron had won everybody to his side by his winsomeness. He pressed for a speedy marriage, and no one said him nay. They had in the war-full years learned to do quickly whatever was to be done at all, and there seemed no need to hinder the joy of the young people, which might at any moment be broken, should a summons come from the Great Emperor calling all the knights to his standard.

Toward her lover Erna was by turns arch and tender, as if she had not yet mastered the art to conceal her feelings, even in sport. She said to him once, as they stood together by the window in the great hall of the castle, looking down into the valley where the solemn pine-forests stretched far and far to the very horizon:

"Hast thou learned yet why one does not kiss any maid save the one whom alone he loves?"

"I have at least learned that there is no kiss in the whole world so sweet as thine," he answered.

Father Christopher was of all the house most deeply moved by the betrothal of his mistress, and although he had become much attached to the baron, he was not without forebodings for the result of this marriage.

"It is in thy hands, my daughter," he said solemnly to Erna, "to shape the life of this man. He is noble and generous and true, and I believe that his heart is all that one might wish. But he knows little of spiritual things, and I consent to unite thee to him that thou, who hast been richly blessed by Heaven, mayst teach him the high things of life. His soul will be required at thine hands in the Day of Judgment; for while the souls of all husbands are in the keeping of their wives, his will be doubly so in thine, for that thou hast been taught the heavenly way, and I gather that his childhood has been but an heathenish one, and his youth without godly instruction. On thy head be it, daughter, if he be not led to the light; and great will be thy blessing if thou doest but win him to paths of spiritual life."

If Erna received these words with less pious enthusiasm than would have been the case a few short weeks before, she was yet much moved by them, and most solemnly did she promise the old priest that she would spare no effort to draw her lover toward those higher things for which he did indeed as yet show small concern.

"Father," she answered humbly, "I know not what I may do, but as much as is in me I will not spare to work and to pray for the salvation of him whom I love."

"With love and faith," the priest replied, "and the blessing of the holy ones, there is nothing that a woman may not do in the heart of her husband."

It was on the same morning that these words passed between Father Christopher and Erna, that the betrothed pair rode out of the castle into the forest, followed by a groom who carried on the pommel of his saddle a covered basket.

"I feel so safe in the forest when thou art with me," Erna said, as after descending the hill they turned from the broad way into a narrow track overgrown with ferns and wild shrubs, and heavily shaded above by the interlaced branches of the murmuring pine-trees.

"There is naught to fear in the forest," he answered, smiling, "save only when—Nay, we will not talk of that. Whither do we go?"

Erna looked at him with a doubt, born of his broken speech, in her eyes; but the brightness of his smile reassured her.

"The little daughter of the charcoal-burner is ill," she answered, "and I am carrying her food and

a healing draught from the leech."

"But why shouldst thou trouble about the daughter of the charcoal-burner?"

"Why should I not? Is she not human, and has she not a soul like ours?"

"Like thine, perchance," the knight responded. "Thou hast a soul like a child's, all white and fair."

And for all the rest of their way through the forest he was so deeply sunk in thought that he said scarcely a single word, so that Erna could not but wonder what had come over the spirit of her merry betrothed. From time to time he looked at her and sighed, as if he were reasoning with himself whether he did well to be still with her; and at last, as they rode homeward, she questioned him of what was in his mind.

"It is the doubt," he told her, "whether I had the right to make thee love me. It did not come to me to consider that until now; and now—"

"And now," she said in a ringing voice, as he broke off and left his sentence unfinished, "now it is too late."

The knight shook himself, as if to shake off a gloomy doubt, and struck his spurs into his splendid chestnut stallion.

"Yes," he cried in a voice of exultation; "now it is too late!"

And away they went, galloping madly down the shaded woodland way, bursting soon into laughter and singing as they dashed along.

These moods of Albrecht became more and more noticeable as by the intimacy of their betrothal the lovers were brought more closely together. Erna pondered sometimes when alone whether it were possible that her lover had upon his conscience some dark deed which made him in truth unworthy to claim her love; but no sooner did such a suggestion present itself to her mind than it was rejected with indignation. She was as sure of his innocence as of her own, and perhaps no proof could have persuaded her to the contrary. Yet she did secretly feel that there might be some mystery hidden behind the outward frankness of Albrecht; though even if there were she loved him with a passion that was now too strong to be restrained by any vague suspicions or dim forebodings.

When the baron was asked if he wished to send for any of his people to be present at his nuptials, he had answered:

"My mother died when I was an infant, and I have neither brothers nor sisters. My father lost his life in a snow-slide three years since, so that I am the last of my race. I will send my squire home for a certain fardel that shall be my *Morgengabe*; and if I may have leave, he shall bring back with him my old foster-father, who has taught me knightly customs and the fashion of Christian folk."

"He shall be right welcome for thy sake," the countess had answered. "How is he called, and who is he? Is he of thy kin?"

"Nay; he is only a friend of my father," the baron replied with a strange smile, "but he hath dealt well by me. He is called Herr von Zimmern, and he hath an infirmity in his walk, concerning which I would that thy people vex him not."

"He shall be courteously dealt with by them all," was Erna's response, "even as if he were thyself."

So the squire and one of the men-at-arms rode off into the forest to take the road to Castle Waldstein in the Neiderwasser valley, to fetch the *Morgengabe*, the gift of gold or of gems which the bridegroom gives to the bride on the morning after their marriage; and the knight abode at Rittenberg, being always by the side of Erna, so that it was not strange that the two became more and more like to each other in their thoughts with every day that the sun brought on its rising to the Ober-Schwarzwald.

And so the time wore until the day before that set for the wedding morn, and on that day arrived the squire who had been sent to the castle of Waldstein.

VIII

OF THE EVE BEFORE THE WEDDING.

With the squire came the foster-father of Baron Albrecht, and a singular-looking mortal did he prove to be. He had apparently been a tall man and a strong, but that one of his ankles was lame, as if it had been houghed, either by some accident of warfare or by the cruelty of some enemy, so that he must needs forever thenceforth go halting through life. His eyes were keen and piercing, and there was in them a sinister gleam, a smouldering evil fierceness, from which Erna shrank in dread, although for the sake of Albrecht she strove to conceal her feelings and to treat the newly come guest not only with kindness but with warmth. The sight of his burning eyes, his shaggy

hair which hung in tumbled black masses about his shoulders, his knotted powerful hands, which he had an uncanny fashion of clenching as he talked or as he thought deeply, together with his sunburned face, seamed and marred by deep lines which might tell of both sins and sufferings to the eye that was wise enough to read them, made her shudder; and when she thought how this strange man had been the companion of Albrecht, she no longer wondered that her lover should show so little knowledge or sympathy with spiritual things, since in the keeping of Herr von Zimmern had his youth been passed.

The dependants of the household were one and all afraid of the new-comer, and indeed some among them were ready to swear on the book of the Gospels that this was the same man that in the guise of a beggar had been in the castle just before the going of Count Stephen von Rittenberg. They muttered among themselves that there was evil in the cripple, and Elsa even whispered in the ear of her mistress, crossing herself not a little meanwhile, that it was believed among the folk of the castle that Von Zimmern was really some demon of the forest who was striving to win power over the soul of Baron Albrecht, that he might lure it to destruction.

"Fy upon thee for a fool!" Lady Adelaide said testily. "There be demons enough in the wood, it is true, but it is not to be believed that they would venture into the houses of Christian folk where mass is said by a consecrated priest. Leave thy silly gossiping, or it may hap that the countess shall get some hint of it, and then if it go not ill with those who dare to chatter about them that belong to the train of her future lord, I ken little of the Von Rittenberg blood."

It was evident that Herr von Zimmern had the happiness of Baron Albrecht much at heart, so greatly was he delighted at his approaching marriage. He was wellnigh oppressive in the warmth of his manner. He spoke with the greatest feeling to Erna, while to the Lady Adelaide he was so complimentary that her old heart, already perchance somewhat fluttered by the unusual doings at Rittenberg, was all in a tremble of delight, and had she been but the better part of a century younger there would have been no telling what might have come of her liking for the flattering guest.

It was in the evening of the day on which the squire returned, and it was on the morrow that the bridal rites were to be celebrated, when after supper the household and their guests sat together by torchlight in the castle hall. The Baron Albrecht was in the wildest spirits, and played innumerable harmless little tricks upon the priest and upon his betrothed. He was so full of glee that one could not but smile to behold his joyousness, and to be touched by the sight of a happiness so genuine and so keen.

Erna had astonished them all that night by appearing in the hall clad in a robe of saffron-hued silken stuff, while on her neck she wore a triple string of pearls. So simple was her attire in general that they stared at her in surprise as she came in dressed in this sumptuous guise. She flushed a little as she felt their glances, but she only held her head somewhat higher, smiling on them all, but most upon her betrothed, and so took her place in the tall carved chair where she always sat at supper. Now that the meal was over, she had moved to a lower seat, and there she leaned back in a corner, as if she were half timid in her new robes; but the Lady Adelaide muttered to herself in satisfaction that this marriage was like to make a woman out of her niece after all; for the shrewd old dame knew that when a damsel begins to give her heart to the frivolities of attire she cannot long remain an iceberg.

Not far from the young countess sat Herr von Zimmern, a dark figure, the more sombre by contrast with her golden brightness. He seemed to watch the company with the deepest interest, and if there were in his intentness something too eager to be wholly pleasing, no one regarded this, since the little company were all absorbed in observing the jocund merriment of Albrecht and the blushing fairness, half timid and half sportive, of Erna.

Suddenly Albrecht sprang up as they sat together chatting gayly, and seized a boar-spear which chanced to be standing in the corner where Erna sat.

"See!" he cried, aiming at the head of a deer which was fixed high against the wall over the great hollow fireplace.

Like a shaft of light the spear flew gleaming down the long hall, straight as a sun-ray and swift as the wind. It transfixed the brown head exactly between the eyes, although in the dim and flickering light of the torches such a shot might well have seemed impossible, and there stood quivering.

A cry of applause greeted this feat.

"Bravo!" exclaimed Herr von Zimmern. "That is a pupil to be proud of."

"It is, indeed," responded Father Christopher. "If thou hast taught him to throw the spear, thou hast truly no reason to look upon thy pains as wasted."

"All that I know of knighthood he has taught me," Albrecht said heartily. "He found me an unlicked whelp of the forest, and whatever I am he has made me."

"Then," Erna rejoined with tender archness, turning toward Von Zimmern, "I have to thank thee that thou hast trained a husband for me."

"Only," burst in Albrecht, with a rich laugh, "if in anything I do not suit, remember it is he and not I who is to bear the blame."

"Nay," she said, giving the black-browed guest her white hand with a gesture of infinite grace, "I thank thee for thy work, even though he should contrive to spoil it himself."

"Come!" cried Albrecht, playfully threatening her with his hand, "that is rank insubordination, and as such—"

"As such, Sir Baron," interrupted his foster-father, with a smile that hardly made him less ugly than before, "you must bear it still a while. There has been no promise to obey or to honor as yet."

The Lady Adelaide simpered, and laid her hand upon the arm of her niece.

"Think of it, Erna," she whispered, "how wilt thou like to obey?"

"Oh, of that I have small notion!" the countess retorted aloud. "When it comes to that, we shall see!"

The gay spirits of her lover had infected her, and she answered with a manner quite unlike her own. Herr von Zimmern chuckled, and drew from his otter-skin pouch a tiny roll of soft leather.

"So well doth this sentiment approve itself to me," he said, "that humbly and with my Lord Baron's permission I make bold to offer you a token in honor of a marriage to be conducted on principles so reasonable."

There was a mocking note in his voice, albeit his face was too perfectly controlled to betray any undesirable emotion. As he spoke he unrolled the leather, and brought to light a ring of red gold in which was set a large carbuncle engraved with strange characters. Erna could not restrain a cry of admiration at sight of so splendid a jewel, and Lady Adelaide broke out into voluble expressions of delight.

"It is not so much," Herr von Zimmern said coolly, as he cast a side glance at Albrecht, "but it is cunningly fashioned, and—"

"But on the wedding eve," interrupted Albrecht, somewhat abruptly, "no one gives a ring to the bride save only her betrothed. All in good season, Herr Frederich, she will doubtless be glad to wear thy ring, but to-night it is mine that must fetter her."

As he spoke, he leaned forward, and took the carbuncle ring from the hand of Erna, who was about to slip it on her slender finger, and before any one could object or protest he had thrust it into the embroidered pouch by his side, and had in its place produced a second ring in which blazed a ruby so splendid that it seemed to emit sparks of fire.

Across the face of Von Zimmern shot a glance of baffled rage and anger so fierce that the priest, who alone caught sight of it, shuddered and secretly crossed himself under his robe; but it was gone as quickly as it came, and Herr Frederich smiled as he said:

"My gems must needs be poor beside yours, my master, but the ring had powers which made it not unworthy the acceptance of the bride."

"Do not I know its power?" responded Albrecht, gayly. "There is time enough for the proving of its might without troubling the bridal therewith."

As he spoke, he put the glowing ruby on the white finger of his betrothed, and raising the hand to his lips, he kissed it fervently.

"Body of Saint Fridolin!" exclaimed Lady Adelaide, "what a gem! It is like a coal of fire. It is worth a king's ransom."

"It is not rich enough to be worthy of the hand that graces it," Albrecht cried joyously.

Then, without waiting for further speech, he suddenly caught up a lute which lay upon the broad ledge of the open window, and after a few notes by way of prelude burst out into this song:

"My love has eyes like the roe,
And a voice like the wood-dove's call;
While her bosom is white as the snow
Of the foam on the torrent's fall.
Fine her hair as the mist
By the sun golden kissed,
And my heart she holds in its thrall.

"My love has lips like the glow
Of rubies red from the mine;
And her glances thrill me so
For her I'd life resign.
For their fire makes my heart
Wake to tremble and start,
With a passion no words may divine.

"My love has a throat like the swan
That haunts the river reeds;
Not shapelier the dappled fawn

That feeds in the flower-set meads.
When I clasp her, no bliss
Has all earth like her kiss,
No sweetness her sweetness exceeds!"

The effect of these ardent verses upon the company was apparently rather one of astonishment than of admiration. The Lady Adelaide simpered and assumed an expression of virtuous disapproval; Herr von Zimmern laughed significantly and openly; while a look of pain came over the face of Father Christopher.

"It is a ballad rather for the singing of an effeminate and sensual Southron," he said, "than for the brave and virtuous lips of a Northern knight."

"It is a foolish tune which Herr Frederich here taught me," returned Albrecht, in too good spirits to be cast down by the reproof. "There is no harm in it that I can see, save that it cannot tell half that a lover feels!"

"Body of Saint Fridolin!" muttered Lady Adelaide, greatly scandalized.

Erna cast down her eyes and said nothing; but though her glance fell only upon the rushes with which the stone floor was strewn, she saw still the form of Albrecht as he stood erect in splendid manly beauty, with the boar-spear poised above his head, ready to fling it like a dart of light down the long hall to transfix the head of the deer above the chimney-place.

IX

OF THE WEDDING MORNING.

Father Christopher lingered long at his prayers on the wedding morning. There was in his heart so deep concern for the good of his beloved mistress, and so keenly did he feel the responsibility which rested upon him as the spiritual head of the castle, that he could not but be most profoundly anxious that naught of evil should come of this marriage.

The good priest was not without a secret consciousness that his consent to the union of Erna and Albrecht had been in no small degree due to the interest which the knight had aroused in him. He could not tell why he was so strongly attracted toward the stranger, and he endeavored to convince himself that it was because he recognized in Albrecht the possibilities of a high and spiritual life, and believed that it lay within the sphere of Erna's influence to bring these possibilities to fruition. The fascination of Albrecht's personality was so great, however, that it followed the man even into his closet, and made him secretly glad that the knight should have his will, whether it was to be justified to the mind of the priest or not.

It was still early in the morning, but from below the sounds of the preparations for the wedding rose to Father Christopher's ear. Somewhere over in the tower next to that in which was his cell, there sounded the tinkling of a rebec, as if one of the musicians were practising the minstrelsy with which the bridal pair were to be attended to church, and from the court below came the lusty voice of a knave that heeded not who slept, but sang in a full, lusty voice a rude song of the forest. The priest repeated his orisons, but it was hard to keep his thoughts fixed. Sighing, he rose at last from his knees.

"God grant I have not done amiss in consenting to this marriage," he said to himself. "At least I shall soon know how it lies with the soul of Sir Albrecht, for he comes to me for confession before the marriage. When I have shrived him I shall be lighter-hearted, albeit, God knows, I trust to find no evil in him. Even though, he added in his thought, I much misdoubt me of Herr von Zimmern, who has been his foster-father."

The sun was half-way to noon when Albrecht, with his firm, free stride, crossed the castle courtyard to join Father Christopher in the chapel, as had been arranged between them when the priest had requested the knight to receive shrift before he was united in marriage with Erna. The baron's bearing had in it little of that humility which might have seemed becoming in one who was on his way to confess his sins. His handsome head was carried well erect, and there was in his eye not only the joy of the bridegroom, but also a mischievous sparkle as of one who apprehends some merry jest which is forward. As he walked rapidly across the court, he hummed to himself under his breath a merry tune, ill suited to his pious errand.

The gloom and cool quiet of the chapel, as he entered the sacred place, checked for the moment Albrecht's song, and he went more soberly up the aisle between the rudely sculptured forms of dead and gone Von Rittenbergs, recumbent on their tombs in dismal state, until he found himself face to face with Father Christopher, who stood awaiting his penitent at the chancel. The chapel had already been decorated for the bridal, which indeed was to take place in little more than an hour's time, and all the air was fragrant with the odors of the boughs of pine. The damsel Elsa, who had had always a liking for the baron, and who liked him none the less since the kiss he had given her in the hall for her love-song, had taken it upon herself to see that the chapel was properly adorned and her skill and taste were alike evident from the result.

"I have kept thee waiting long, Father," Albrecht said, as he approached the priest; "but my servitor, whose illness was the cause of my first coming to the castle, is once more stricken down, and in the delirium of his fever he called for me so piteously that his fellow could not forbear to fetch me to his bedside. He believes, in his madness, that he is beset by wolves, and that none else save his master may avail to preserve him."

"It indeed waxes late," Father Christopher answered, "and it is well on toward an hour since the countess left me here. I have passed the time in prayers for her and thee, and perchance thou hast not so long a list of sins to confess that there will be lack of time, although it draweth toward noon and the hour of marriage."

As he spoke he moved toward the confessional, and with an expression of gravity which was new to him, the knight followed; but just at the moment when Albrecht kneeled to begin the recital of whatever transgressions might lie on his conscience, there arose without a horrid din, which penetrated the sacred place, rudely breaking up the stillness of the consecrated shrine. The leathern curtains which hung before the entrance were flung rudely aside, and with piercing cries a half-naked figure rushed forward, waving its arms and calling for help most piteously.

Albrecht and the priest both sprang to their feet, startled and amazed at this unexpected interruption; and the fleeing figure rushed down the nave to fling itself at the feet of the baron, where it knelt, clasping his knees and revealing in the dull light the disordered features of the fever-stricken man-at-arms.

"The wolves, Master!" he shrieked in accents of terror. "Save me! Save me!"

Down the aisle of the chapel came limping the sinister figure of Herr von Zimmern, who seemed to be in pursuit of the sick man.

"I tried to stop him," he said, with a singular smile which brought a sudden frown to Albrecht's brow, "but he escaped from me, and because of my infirmity I could not keep pace with him. He is stark mad till this fit passes, but after, he will perchance be as well-witted as ever he has been."

He stooped over the sick man, and endeavored to persuade him to allow himself to be led away; but the man-at-arms could not be torn from his hold upon the knees of Albrecht, to whom he clung with the desperate clutch of a wretch who clings for life to some last hope.

"It is useless," Father Christopher said, after they had for some moments united their efforts in a vain endeavor to bring the sick man to reason. "He is too fully possessed by his fears and the madness of his sickness to be within the reach of our words. He will yield to no one save to the baron, and unless thou art willing, Sir Knight, to lead him back to his chamber, I know not if he may not remain here till the very hour set for thy marriage. It would but ill accord with the place to use violence, and he is not minded to quit his hold on thee."

The madman had by this time thrown himself upon the pavement, as with heart-rending cries he called upon his master to rescue him in his peril, and not to leave him to be devoured alive. His yells had called half the servants of the castle to the spot, and the more superstitious of them crossed themselves in fear at sight of an omen so doubtful and fearful on the morn of their mistress' wedding day. They whispered together of their fears, and some of them recalled the signs which had attended the coming of the baron to the castle.

"The wood-folk are wroth," one old crone whispered to her favorite gossip. "They have smitten the churl, and who knows what power they may have over the master? Holy Wood of the Cross, but I fear me for the well-born countess!"

The confusion every moment waxed greater. The sick man had torn off his clothing until he grovelled upon the cold stone floor wellnigh as naked as he had been born, while his powerful hands, as yet all unwasted by his sickness, were clasped about the legs of Albrecht with a grip like that of the mountain bear in its fury when the huntsmen have reft away its cubs and it clutches the dogs in a last desperate struggle.

Herr von Zimmern stooped down and took the man-at-arms strongly by the shoulder.

"Come!" he cried in a deep, penetrating voice; "we must get away. The gracious baron will save thee, only thou must go with him away from this place of danger."

The sick man seemed to comprehend, for he loosed his hold and sprang to his feet.

"Go with him, my son," Father Christopher said. "Mercy comes before even a sacrament, and none save thee can lead this madman to his chamber."

"But my shrift?" demanded Albrecht, half under his breath.

"Thou must needs be married without it," the priest responded. "But I charge thee," he added solemnly, speaking so that his words reached the ears of the baron only, "if thou hast aught of crime on thy conscience, that thou do not betray the Lady Erna into a union with thy sin."

The young man looked straightforwardly into the eyes of the old priest, as in the same tone he answered:

"If it be not a sin to desire her love and to long more than for life to be lifted toward heaven by her, I have no sin on my conscience, Father."

The priest raised his hand in blessing, and the bystanders, although they knew nothing of the import of the words which had hastily passed between him and the knight, understood the motion, and bowed their heads in reverence. Albrecht as if struck with sudden awe fell upon his knees, and so received the benediction which served him instead of shrift on his wedding day. Then rising he took the arm of the demented man-at-arms, who for the moment seemed somewhat more quiet, perhaps through exhaustion, and so led him away, all the bystanders following until the chapel, with its stony knights in eternal rest, its fragrance of pine boughs and of forest flowers, was left for a little deserted.

X

HOW THEY WERE WED.

It seemed to the Lady Adelaide as a matter not unlike a scandal and almost savoring of impiety for the last of the Von Rittenbergs to be wed without the sanction of the emperor, and with none of that pomp and circumstance which had accompanied the bridals of the members of the house from time immemorial. She pleaded that at least the neighboring nobles might be summoned, but in even this she was overruled, her niece declaring that if they summoned one of the friends of the family they must needs bid them all, and that this she would not do. She was content, so she might but be united to the knight whom she loved, that none but those of the castle stand by, and that she be married with no more pomp than would attend the coupling of a kitchen-wench with the keeper of the swine.

"Body of Saint Fridolin!" Lady Adelaide cried in scandalized horror. "Thou art a changeling. Thou wert never born of our blood; the elf-folk in the forest changed thee in thy cradle. And yet thou art enough of a Von Rittenberg to have thine own way," she muttered under her breath, giving up the vain discussion.

So far as the emperor was concerned, Lady Adelaide was really not much disquieted at heart, since with feminine wit she reasoned that when once the thing was done, there was little likelihood that Charlemagne, busy with his wars and the cares of state, would take the trouble of breaking it. She took it upon herself to order that a messenger be ready to set out for Aix-la-Chapelle, where the emperor might perhaps be found at this season, to bear to his Majesty the announcement of the alliance and to tender the homage of Baron Albrecht. It had been suggested that Herr von Zimmern be entrusted with this mission, but he refused it.

"I have had you on my hands from your cradle," he said to Albrecht with that strange mingling of respect and scorn with which he was wont to address his master, "and now that you are disposed of I am to be free. Was not that our bargain?"

"Truly," the baron returned, smiling; "I promised thee thy freedom on my wedding day."

Greatly did Herr von Zimmern seem interested in this marriage, perhaps from this reason, albeit his service did not appear to be so irksome that he had great reason to complain of it. He set himself to do whatever might come within the compass of his station to hasten it onward; and yet it came into the mind of Lady Adelaide, who had not lived the better part of a century without learning something, and who whatever her natural short-comings was still a woman, and thus understood many things which do not appear upon the surface,—it being the kind provision of Nature that women, who cannot compass reason, shall be gifted with intuition,—that he was not in his secret heart so pleased as he took pains to seem. She pondered somewhat upon this contradiction, but she could come to no conclusion in regard to it, and so in the end she ceased troubling herself about it, the rather as she had just at this time many other things with which to cumber her head.

There was not long delay in the setting out of the bridal train when the hour had come. At high noon the sound of rebecs and pipes and tambours made merry all the castle as the bridal train moved toward the chapel. Even as far as the solemn, moaning pine-tops that murmured ever the strange secrets of the wood, the blithe strains sounded; and if indeed the wood-folk concerned themselves with the doings of the people in the castle they must this day have understood that the mood of the dwellers at Rittenberg was a jocund one.

And after the musicians came the pages, all in brave attire; and after the pages walked the damsels, shining and glowing in raiment bright and gay, and decked with many a gaud of gold and jewel; and behind the damsels came the bride herself in all her state and all her fairness. The Countess Erna was clad all in white, her long robe, which was trimmed with the snowy down from the breasts of swans, borne behind her by a pair of pretty pages, scarce large enough for even that weight. About her neck were wound strings of pearls, so large and so many that the ivory throat was scarcely to be seen because of them. In her hair was the tuft of white heron's feathers which marked her rank as head of the Von Rittenbergs, held in place by a single pearl so large and so round and of so silvery lustre that it was a wonder to see. The gem had been given to her father by a Greek whose life he had saved long ago in one of the emperor's campaigns in Italy, and never before had Erna worn it.

After the countess followed Lady Adelaide and those of the damsels of the castle who pertained

rather to her than to her niece, although, to say sooth, so little state had Erna kept hitherto that all the maidens had seemed to belong to her aunt more than to her; and behind, at a proper distance, came those of the household who were not of consequence to walk with the bridal train itself.

The Baron Albrecht, for his part, was on this day clad in green velvet of the color of a beech-leaf in the shade, slashed with samite of the hue of the same foliage when the sun shines upon it. Richly was his raiment wrought in gold with curious devices of leaf and blossom, and set thickly with gems which made the eyes blink to look at them, so bright was their radiance. The clasps of his mantle, and even those of his sandals were of precious stones, while about his neck was a collar of jewels such as had never before been seen at Rittenberg. On his cap of marten's fur was fastened a carbuncle as large as the egg of the wood-pigeon and as red as the heart's blood of a rock-dove when it is spilled upon the bird's white breast.

All of the retainers of the castle were there to witness the marriage, and even some of the serfs crept unrebuked to the doors of the chapel, where they could hear most of the service and haply see a little, albeit it was not to be expected that they could understand if they did hear, although under the pious rule of Countess Erna they were commanded to attend Mass.

The solemn words were said at last, and with an emotion which was unusual, Father Christopher united the maid whose guardian he had been from her earliest infancy to the knight. Even at the altar there came upon the priest a dim and nameless fear what might be the results of this marriage. In the elevation of that hallowed moment he seemed to catch some faint glimpse of startling possibilities which were to depend upon the union, of momentous consequences which transcended the bounds of ordinary experiences, and of some mystery that thrilled him without his being able to grasp or to understand it. He felt for the instant a wonderful uplifting, as of one called to take part in some mighty conflict, of which the outcome was doubtful, but in which the cause was glorious. It was as if he were seized upon by some mystic power such as thrills the heart of a seer in the moment of his ecstasy; as if his hand almost touched some profound and mighty secret upon which depended the fate of mankind. As if in a vision he felt about him the might of the forest and the terror of its witchery; the powers of night and of hell seemed to surge around him in awful conflict with those of light; he was as if for the moment rapt away from the holy place in which he stood, and encompassed by the blackness in which the wild and dread beings of the wilderness worked their sinful spells against mankind.

Only an instant did the vision, if vision it were, hold him, and then the candles upon the altar shone again upon him; but the soul of Father Christopher was filled with wild surmise and strange questionings what this might mean. He pronounced the nuptial benediction with lips that hardly knew what they said, and with eyes which scarcely saw the pair kneeling before him in all the glory of youth and beauty and the bravery of their splendid attire.

It was to be expected that Erna should be deeply affected by the rite which bound her for life and death to the knight by her side. Her religious nature was keenly susceptible to all the offices of the Church, and although she might at this moment be strongly swayed by passion and by personal sentiment, the occasion was one of too much solemnity to fail of touching her profoundly. What most impressed the good priest was the reverential bearing of the groom during the rite. There was in the mien of Albrecht a gravity and a respect which was to Father Christopher surprising, accustomed as he was to the levity and joyousness of the knight. The baron seemed even more serious and religious in his attitude than the bride, so that the priest could not but wonder at this reversal of their usual attitudes.

After the ceremony there was a feast in the great hall of the castle, and not a little wine was drunk, albeit the most of it was consumed below the salt. Never had Albrecht been so gay. The seriousness which Father Christopher had noted in the chapel had vanished, and he was like a roistering, jocund woodland god, overflowing with merriment. His mirth was contagious, and as he jested and sang, and in gleeful wise teased the Lady Adelaide, even the priest was constrained to laugh until the tears ran down upon his wrinkled cheeks.

It was after the feast was over, and the torches had been lighted, that Herr von Zimmern approached Erna.

"Gracious lady," he said, "I have ventured to provide a pastime for your wedding day. As we came hither through the forest the other day, we met a band of wandering gypsies from the South. They are skilful in the song and the dance, and I ventured to bid them to be here to-night. They are in the courtyard, and await your presence to begin their sports."

Erna hesitated a little, even while she thanked him; but Albrecht sprang up joyously.

"Oh, the gypsies!" he cried. "They are almost as good as the wood-folk themselves, for they live in the open air and love the forest."

Seeing that her husband was pleased, Erna yielded despite whatever secret disinclination she may have felt, and the company went out upon a balcony that overlooked the courtyard. There in a gay and picturesque group under the flaring torches were the wandering band, their tawdry finery showing in the wavering and uncertain light like real bravery of attire. The jugglers tossed the glittering balls; the dancers twined themselves lightly through the measures of their strange dances, and the poor tame bear was made to go clumsily through his uncouth antics. The serfs were clustered in wondering knots in the shadows; the torches flamed, and the quaint instruments of the vagrant musicians sounded weirdly on the night air in the plaintive tunes of

the wild folk. Erna felt an unknown feeling stealing over her, as if some incantation were being performed which was to transform her into a new creature. She fancied that secretly Herr von Zimmern watched her steadily; and half in pleasure and half in fear she shrank close to her husband's side, as if in him were strength and reliance.

At length a gypsy girl came forward into the ring which her fellows made for her, and after a short prelude on the instruments of the musicians, began to sing. Her voice was of passionate sweetness, full of the languor of the South, the luxurious sensuousness which is as sweet as love and as enervating. Erna's whole body trembled with a sensation such as she had never known, and she seemed to herself at once to cling closer to Albrecht and to desire to flee from him. The song was one of the gypsy's life and love.

"When day is breaking,
The gypsy, waking,
His way is taking
Through thicket and thorn.
No bird upward sailing
On glad wing prevailing,
More jocund is hailing
The gay, laughing morn.

"No walls may cage him,
No cares engage him,
No wars enrage him,
No castles can hold;
He roams with the breezes,
He loves where he pleases,
Ambition ne'er teases
His heart free and bold.

"The gypsy lover
From dreams that hover
Awakes to discover
His loved one nigh;
Oh, the joy of the hour
When hid in some bower
His passion's full power
No word can deny!

"Then lip to lip meeting,
Gives love's fullest greeting,
And hearts hotly beating
Respond each to each.
Then breast to breast straining
Fresh raptures is gaining,
And past all restraining
Love's ecstasies reach!"

Despite herself, Erna felt the hot blushes chasing one another over her face. She leaned backward to be in the shadow, while Albrecht bent over to touch under the chin the damsel Elsa, who stood close by behind the chair of the Lady Adelaide.

"By my sword!" he cried gayly; "but the gypsy maid's song is of warmer stuff than thine."

Herr Frederich chuckled, and Erna flushed more deeply still.

"Come," she said, rising, "we have had enough. The night air is becoming chill."

"And besides," Herr Frederich said softly, "it is time that the bride were conducted to her chamber."

She turned away from him, giving no sign if she heard; and the little party returned to the great hall, where indeed the maidens of the castle soon assembled to lead Erna to the bridal chamber, to the white and perfumed bride-bed which Father Christopher had blessed with prayer in his soul no less than upon his lips.

All white and blessed, like a blossom of the hawthorne over whose snow the flush of early morn casts a rosy tint, Erna lay to await the quick coming of the bridegroom, while the unknown world of married love stretched out before her, mystic, enticing, yet not without dread. One by one the steps of her maidens died down the corridor, and ringing upon its stone floor she heard the footsteps of Albrecht, swift with eagerness. And as if with an instinct half prophetic she almost comprehended that this marriage meant the saving or the wrecking of souls; so that when her husband came into the chamber and bent over to kiss her, warm and flushed, and glowing with love and with laughter, she threw her arms about his neck with sudden and inexplicable tears.

XI

HOW ALBRECHT CONFESSED.

The dawn was only just beginning to glow when Erna awakened next morning; but Albrecht had already arisen, and was standing, fully dressed, by the bedside. She started up from her pillow and regarded him with surprise.

"Where art thou going?" she asked. "Surely thou wert not trying to steal away without my knowing?"

Albrecht bent over and kissed her fondly.

"I am going," he answered, in a tone of strange tenderness and solemnity, "to the chamber of Father Christopher. I was interrupted yesterday when I should have made confession."

"Come again quickly!" Erna cried, putting up her white arms to clasp them about her husband's neck.

He returned the embrace with passionate eagerness.

"How can I ever repay thee," he murmured, "for what thou givest me! But at least, sweetheart," he added, as he freed himself from her clinging arms, "I have at last learned what thou didst mean when thou didst reprove me for kissing the damsel in the hall; and henceforth I cannot care for the kisses of any save of thee only."

There was in Albrecht's mien something which was new to Erna, and which affected her profoundly. After he was gone she lay thinking of the grave, half-wondering expression of his handsome face. She felt some subtle change in him so strongly that it seemed as if the real alteration must be in herself. The jocund, sportive air with which he had always treated her, even since their betrothal, seemed to have given place to a tender and almost adoring manner which touched her deeply while it made her flush with pleasure.

Father Christopher was at his orisons when Albrecht presented himself at the door of his little chamber, high up in the western tower, from whose narrow windows the kindly and pious old man could see the first gleams of the morning sun, and the last fading glimmer of the dying day, and from which he could look far over the wild and haunted forest which stretched like a sea about the hill on which the castle stood. The priest rose from his knees and opened the door, the surprise he felt at the sight of the baron appearing undisguisedly in his face.

"Good morrow, Father," the knight said, advancing somewhat hesitatingly into the chamber.

"Good morrow, my son," the priest responded, regarding his visitor curiously. "Is it well with the countess?"

"All is well with her," answered Albrecht, gravely, and with something not unlike timidity appearing in his manner; "unless," he added with sudden vehemence, "it be not well that she hath wed with me."

The face of Father Christopher became instantly grave.

"Why dost thou say that?" he demanded almost fiercely, coming closer to the knight.

"Nay, Father," Albrecht said, meeting the eyes of the other with a deep and grave regard that did not falter, "I know not that it be not well, and I have not knowingly done her harm. Only," he continued, his tone changing suddenly into one of entreaty and profound emotion, "I cannot tell what I may have done. Bless me, Father, and I will tell thee all. I have sore need of thy guidance."

He fell on his knees as he spoke, and half mechanically the bewildered priest extended his hands in benediction. The baron remained kneeling for a moment in the attitude of prayer, though his lips did not move. Then he rose, and began to pace up and down the little chamber with long strides.

"Father," he said, "it is an awful thing to possess a soul. Had I known—"

The priest seated himself and watched his visitor with concern and curiosity. As Albrecht broke off and walked with eyes fixed upon the floor and brows knit, Father Christopher said aloud, although he was really speaking only to himself:

"How ill was it that that madman broke in upon us yesterday! I should not be in this painful uncertainty but for that unhappy chance which prevented thy confession."

"Father," the other replied, turning toward him, "it was not a chance. The man did but act a part that Herr von Zimmern taught him. It was done that I need not confess."

"What!" exclaimed the priest, springing to his feet. "Thou hast mocked at the holy sacrament! Thou wentest to the altar with a lie on thy lips; thou—"

"Wait!" Albrecht interrupted, with an air of noble authority which arrested his companion's words and even somewhat reassured him. "I have come to tell thee everything, and thou wilt see that I was innocent because I knew not what I did."

"How can that be?" Father Christopher responded. "Surely, that it is impiety to trifle with the sacraments is known to every man."

Albrecht paused in his agitated walk, and for a moment stood regarding the priest with a strange look.

"To every man, yes," at length he responded, "but not to me. I am a kobold."

The priest sprang to his feet with a cry of astonishment and horror. Like a flash came the remembrance of all the strange circumstances which attended the coming of the baron and his stay at Rittenberg. He grew pale with anger and dread.

"A kobold!" he cried. "One of the accursed, soulless race!"

"Soulless no longer," Albrecht murmured, bending his head as if against a storm.

"What hast thou done!" the priest continued. "How hast thou dared to wed the countess with such a secret between you?"

"Father," the baron returned, laying his hand upon the other's arm, and speaking with more coolness than could have been expected, "it is only to-day when I awake with a soul, that I realize what I have done. How could I know before? I was like the beasts in the forest, and I have understood good and evil only as they. Now that the higher light has burst upon me, it dazzles and blinds me. I see only that I have wronged her whom now I would give my life to save from harm. She has given me a soul, and by it I realize how unfit I am to be her mate. Help me, Father, for with all the strength of my new soul I love her, love her, love her!"

The most profound feeling thrilled in Albrecht's voice as he pronounced these words. He sank down at the feet of his companion, and on his knees he clasped the other's hand.

"I am confused, blinded," he went on. "The prospect that opens before me is so vast that it overwhelms me. I have never feared anything in my life, Father; but of this thing which thou callest a soul that has come to me I am afraid, I am afraid, Father Christopher."

The priest was not unnaturally overcome by a situation so far aside from any previous experience of his life. His first thought was that he had to deal with a madman, but there was in the tones and manner of the baron that which compelled his belief. He could not understand, but he was too kindly not to be deeply moved by the emotion of his companion, and he wisely determined to learn as quickly and as clearly as possible the real facts of the strange situation, in order that he might determine what was his own duty in the case. He raised Albrecht from the floor, and motioned him to a seat.

"My son," he said gravely but not unkindly, "thou must be calm, and thou must tell me everything, that I may know how to advise thee and how to act myself. Relate all, from the very beginning."

Albrecht sank into the chair toward which the priest waved his hand, and for a moment he sat with his chin in his hand, his full chestnut beard pushed up so that it half covered his cheeks.

"I know not where to begin, Father," he said, "unless it be at my birth. My father was king of the kobolds in the Neiderwasser valley, and a brave and merry tribe they are. My mother died at my birth; and as this is a thing which seldom happens with our race, I was always looked upon as destined for some great or strange destiny. When I was four or five years old, my father caught Herr von Zimmern in the forest where he was hunting, and brought him home to the mountain caves where we dwelt, that he might teach me all knightly skill, for we kobolds are always jealous of the arts of knighthood."

"But did Herr von Zimmern desire to stay in such strange company?" asked Father Christopher, whose countenance expressed the greatest astonishment at this tale.

"He had no choice," rejoined Albrecht. "Once he tried to escape, and my father houghed him, that he should never again be able to travel through the forests fast enough to give trouble in bringing him back."

The priest shuddered, and the other for the first time in his life seemed to perceive the cruelty of this deed.

"My father," he said humbly, "had no soul."

Father Christopher's expression of horror changed to one of pity; and with a sigh Albrecht went on with his narrative.

"I was bred up at home," he said, "but now and then Herr von Zimmern has taken me to the cities, and to the fairs of the country, and now and then to a tourney that I might prove my knightly prowess. My father was killed in an avalanche some ten years since. He had offended the mountain sprites, and they lay in wait for him. I have lived with Herr von Zimmern since, and he has been my servant because I am ruler as my father was. It was he who told me of the delights of possessing a soul, and that a kobold might win one if a mortal maiden should love him with her whole heart and wed him. It was for this that he brought me to Rittenberg, and it was for this that I wooed its mistress."

There was a deep silence in the chamber as Albrecht ceased speaking. Strongly moved as he was

by the confession, Father Christopher felt his heart so strongly yearn toward the baron, and so touched was he by the other's evident contrition, that he could not find it in his heart to speak the condemnation which the knight's course might merit. It was now too late, moreover, to prevent the mischief, and there seemed more wisdom in considering whether it were not possible to comply with Albrecht's agonized request, and to aid him to become worthy of his wife rather than to make any endeavor to separate them. If this might be done, it would be the saving of a soul; and however it had been come by, if Albrecht had indeed gained a spirit, it demanded the priest's best efforts to bring it to salvation.

"My son," the priest said after some moments' reflection, "what thou hast done would indeed be a grievous sin if thou hadst been a mortal, and I know not whether it is to be called a sin as it is or no. But now at least thou hast a soul, and it is mortal sin to live unbaptized."

"I was afraid," Albrecht said with simple candor and with an air of relief, "that thou wouldst command me to leave my wife; and that I could not do."

"No," the priest answered, "whom God through the Church hath joined are not lightly to be put asunder; but the rite of baptism is not to be neglected for a single hour."

"I know so little of these things," Albrecht murmured doubtfully.

"The priests of the Great Emperor," answered the old man, "administer baptism to the barbarians in token that they desire Christian light, and I can do no less for thee, who art in a devout mind."

Albrecht leaned forward in his chair and put out his hand half timidly to touch that of the other.

"I feel that I am ignorant of everything," he said. "Father, it is like suddenly coming into a strange land where I know not even the tongue that I should speak. I am afraid to go forward, lest I stumble into pitfalls I do not see."

Father Christopher laid his wrinkled hand kindly upon that of his penitent.

"But the way will become clear," he said, smiling. "Only follow the light that is given thee, and pray to God and his saints."

"But I know not how to pray."

"My son," the priest responded with a smile which comforted Albrecht more than words could have done, "our Great Emperor has said in his Capitularies: 'Let none suppose that prayer cannot be made to God save in three tongues, for God is adored in all tongues, and man is heard if he do but ask for the things that be right.' Be of good cheer, my son; God would not give a soul and not add enough knowledge for its salvation."

There was in the mien of Albrecht, as he knelt to receive the rite of baptism, the showing forth of great feeling. He had the air of one who comes into the fruit of a quest with joy, yet who regards that which he has won with something of doubt and secret awe; while withal it was evident that to his mind did this christening seem a thing which should serve in a sort as a talisman to defend him from this strange and awful guest that had come to dwell within him, but which even yet scarce seemed a part of himself. He was as one who knew not himself, but who was rather confused than enlightened by the new vision which had been imparted by the miracle that had been wrought.

"Father," he asked hesitatingly, "my wife, must I tell her?"

The priest considered a moment.

"Dost thou wish to tell her?" he inquired.

"Would to God that she had known!" was Albrecht's answer, "but how can I tell her now? What if she should turn against me?"

The strength of his newly found soul seemed to go out in his love for Erna, and he was white and trembling at the thought of losing her affection. Father Christopher regarded him keenly, with sympathy and complexity struggling in his mind.

"Now thou needst not tell her," he said. "The time may come; but now strive to become worthy of her whiteness, her innocence, her piety. If thou wouldst be sure of her love, my son, look upon this as a respite that thou mayest be one soul with hers when the day comes that she must be told. And of this be sure," the priest continued, his eye kindling as if some higher power were speaking through him, "since thou hast won thy soul through her, it is with hers that thine must stand or fall. If thou shalt drag hers down, there can be no salvation for thine."

XII

HOW THE MORGENGABE WAS BESTOWED.

Albrecht walked slowly back to his chamber after he had left the priest, all his mind in a confused whirl of strange and new emotions. He could not find the old self in this man whom he had

become. He was still within the shadow of the awe which had fallen upon him when he awakened in the early dawn a human being, and he still thrilled with the reverential dread which had pierced him as the waters of baptism were laid upon his head.

Erna had not yet risen, but had fallen into a light sleep; and as he came to the bedside she softly murmured his name, as if she were even in her morning dream conscious that he had returned. Her white throat was bare, and from her lovely bosom the draperies were half displaced, so that its rounded swell melted into a foam of lace as if she were Aphrodite just emerging from the waves. All his newly found earnestness fell from Albrecht like a garment, and he was only conscious of his wife and his passion for her; albeit his love was not to-day the selfish desire of the kobold alone, as it had been last night. Fired by her beauty, he bent over and kissed her. She awoke with a smile that melted into a blush as she saw the ardent eyes of Albrecht bent upon her and felt his embrace steal about her. She let him lift her to kiss her again, and then she hid her shining face in his breast.

"Now thou must go," she said, as she returned his embrace. "They will stay for us in the hall. Send me my damsel, and I will be ready very quickly."

"Yes," he cried, springing up with all his old joyousness; "be thou as swift as may be, that we may bestow upon thee the *Morgengabe*."

The Lady Adelaide, after the manner of her kind, had been most curious in regard to the *Morgengabe*. Her maid Elsa had plied the retainers of Baron von Waldstein with questions, and the Lady Adelaide herself had not been above some cunning attempts to extract from Herr von Zimmern somewhat touching the nature and extent of the bridegroom's ability and probable liberality in this direction, but neither had obtained any definite information. Herr Frederick had replied that his master certainly had the means and the disposition to do things upon a grand scale, but he professed complete ignorance as to Baron Albrecht's actual intentions, a statement which Lady Adelaide took the liberty of doubting, as it seemed probable that the orders which her newly made nephew had sent home had been executed through Herr von Zimmern. As nothing further was to be got out of this functionary, however, and as Elsa found the men of the baron equally uncommunicative, there was no help for it, but curiosity must wait unsatisfied until the bridegroom's gift should be bestowed.

The Lady Adelaide, her black eyes shining with excitement, was already in the great hall when Albrecht and his bride entered, and Father Christopher was not far behind. All the household gathered, for the bestowing of the *Morgengabe* was an important ceremony which hardly ranked below that of the bridal. The damsel Elsa, who could no more help coquetting than she could help breathing, took advantage of a chance which for a moment brought her face to face with Baron Albrecht to cast upon him one of her most languishing glances, but to her surprise and mayhap vexation he only smiled good-humoredly like one who comprehended thoroughly her wiles, and passed on to the side of Erna, who had already taken her place in readiness for the entrance of the bearers of her husband's gift.

"Body of Saint Fridolin!" muttered Elsa to herself, unconsciously using her mistress's favorite expletive, "but the wind has changed, methinks, since he touched me under the chin last night. Marriage has tamed you quickly, my Lord Baron! But we may see wonders yet."

And now with a peal of music, a wild strain which the retainers of the baron had learned from no human master, the great doors were thrown open and the little train of Von Waldstein's followers entered. Behind the musicians walked Herr von Zimmern, and after him followed six servitors, each pair bearing between them a casket of goodly size and apparently of some weight.

"The baron's *Morgengabe* does not take up too much room," murmured Elsa in the ear of Lady Adelaide, behind whom she stood, with the familiarity of long and close service.

"Hush, simpleton!" her mistress responded. "If those caskets hold jewels, he is giving her a king's ransom."

The bringers of the *Morgengabe* marched up the long hall, and saluting the company, the musicians fell back and ended their weird refrain. Herr von Zimmern stopped before Erna, and made a sign to the first pair of his followers to set down their burden at her feet.

"Gracious lady," Albrecht said, indicating it with his hand, "deign to accept this casket as a part of the unworthy *Morgengabe* that I offer."

At a sign from Herr von Zimmern, the thralls threw back the lid and lifted out the trays of the casket, while a murmur of astonishment and delight ran through the hall. Within, in a glowing heap, in strings and clusters and singly, lay the most glorious carbuncles and topazes and sapphires that had ever been seen at Rittenberg, where, too, there had been some notable jewels in times gone by.

"Body of Saint Fridolin!" cried the old great-aunt. "Oh, that I were young and had married thee, Baron!"

A sunbeam shone through a high window and fell upon the gems, making them glow with all the hues of the rainbow. Erna knelt down beside the glittering heap, an exclamation of surprise and pleasure on her lips. She took up in her hands now one and then another of the splendid bawbles, her woman's love of finery and her sense of beauty alike appealed to by the wonderful stones. From the treasures she selected a string of magnificent sapphires, blue as the sky in springtime,

and clasped it about her throat. She said not a word, but her look satisfied her husband. At a sign from him, Herr von Zimmern moved the casket aside, and had the second set in its place. This in its turn was opened, and within were gems more splendid and more precious than in the first; emeralds, rubies, and diamonds. The wealth of the coffer was confusing, so great was it.

"God's blood!" cried out the Lady Adelaide, falling back upon the oath which she kept for the very last extremity; "it is the ransom of a kingdom rather than of a king. Should the Huns hear of this *Morgengabe* they might well come from the North for no other purpose than to capture it. By my soul! Herr Baron, one would think that thou wert in league with the gnomes to be possessed of jewels like these."

"I am on friendly terms with them," he answered, his truthfulness passing as a jest.

Father Christopher said not a word, but he observed how a sudden look of malice darted through the eyes of Herr von Zimmern at the words of Lady Adelaide, and how he smiled at the reply of his master. The good priest was troubled in his mind at the sight of all this wealth of gems. He saw how Erna's eyes shone, and with what fondness she gazed upon the gleaming, glancing stones; and he saw, too, how the expression of the face of Albrecht, as he regarded the treasures and the delight of his bride, lost the look of reverence and earnestness which it had worn when he left the priest's chamber, and took on an expression of greed and passion. The old man sighed, and looked away as still another casket, the third and last, was brought forward and opened at the feet of Erna.

If the third casket when it was opened did not shine with so great a splendor as did the others, its contents were none the less wonderful and beautiful. It was filled with pearls of the most clear and exquisite sheen, and with opals of fires as varied as the changing hues of the sunset, or of the foam-bubbles on a mountain-stream rocking in the sunlight with the swiftness of the current.

Words failed them all as they looked at the three caskets, and even Lady Adelaide was reduced to inarticulate ejaculations of amazement and admiration. Erna still said nothing, save now and then to cry out in wonder at the glory of some jewel more magnificent than its fellows, but she paused now and then in her gloating over the treasure to take her husband's hand and press it in a sort of ecstasy of fond delight.

"That is all the *Morgengabe* I have to offer thee," Albrecht said with a smile, as the last casket was opened. "I cannot pretend that it is worthy of thy beauty, but it will make me happy that thou shouldst accept it."

"That is, forsooth, but false modesty," Father Christopher broke in with a brusqueness quite unusual in him. "The gift is one which Charlemagne himself need not be ashamed of; and indeed it is of too great splendor for simple folk like those who are not sovereigns but subjects."

Albrecht turned toward him with a fleeting expression of disquiet which was instantly chased away by a jovial smile.

"But the countess is a sovereign, at least of me and mine," he retorted.

"Doubtless the baron thinks the price small to pay for the joys of his wedding night," broke in Herr Frederich with a laugh.

Erna flushed and bent lower over the pearls she was examining, while Albrecht turned haughtily upon Herr von Zimmern with a look of rebuke under which the other dropped his head. Bowing profoundly to the company, Herr Frederich made a sign to the musicians, and as they again took up their wild strain and led the way down the hall, he followed with the bearers who had accompanied him to bring in the caskets.

For the first time in his life Albrecht found himself penetrated with a sense of disgust and of distrust of his teacher as he looked after him. He felt for the first time that the relations of himself and his wife were too sacred to be jested upon, and it seemed, moreover, as if his new powers gave him an insight into the true nature of Herr von Zimmern which he had never possessed before; so that one of the earliest results of his winning the quest to which he had been incited by his instructor was the springing of an instinctive repulsion from the latter as from an evil thing.

All this, however, was but the feeling of an instant as he stood in the hall and watched the delight of Erna over the jewels. He laughed at her childlike surprise and delight, and jested with the Lady Adelaide in his accustomed fashion. He even had a smile for Elsa when that forward maiden, behind the backs of the ladies, held a great carbuncle, as large as a pigeon's egg, up to her ear, and pretended to find the weight unbearable. But at last a chance word of Erna's changed again his mood.

"Look!" she said, holding up a rope of pearls, "they are as large again as those the emperor gave to the Madonna at Mayence."

And at the name of the Madonna Albrecht remembered his baptism, and the burden of his soul once more fell upon him.

XIII

HOW THE DAYS SPED AT RITTENBERG.

In the life of the late Count von Rittenberg it had fallen to the lot of Father Christopher to see not a few strange things. He had accompanied that warrior in several of his campaigns, and he had seen the fierce Huns and the gigantic Saxons, with their barbaric ornaments of beaten gold, their dress of skins, and their strange weapons. He had more than once pondered in his mind whether these hordes of the dark North had human souls, at least before the Church had set upon them the seal of baptism and thus forever marked them as separated from the beasts of the field or the forest which to the eye of the priest they so much resembled.

All that he had hitherto seen, however, faded into insignificance in his mind when compared with that which was now daily before his eyes. He seemed to himself sometimes involved in some strange dream from which he might at any moment awake with only a more or less confused remembrance of what it had been. His old vague questionings concerning the souls of the Huns recurred to his mind; but the perplexing thing was that they who really had souls should have so completely seemed to lack them, while Baron Albrecht, with his magnificent beauty, his manly bearing, his knightly skill and courtesy, should have in truth been without an immortal spirit. The secret of which the priest had been made the repository so absorbed his attention that he could scarcely give either thought or interest to anything else, and not infrequently did Erna laughingly assure him that his one occupation in life seemed to have become watching her husband.

It was noticeable how much Erna had changed since she had known Albrecht. Even Father Christopher, who so deeply loved her that he had secretly regarded her as perfection and therefore could conceive of no possible alteration in her, was not so blind that he failed to appreciate that she was a different creature from the white, calm maiden, with unstirred soul, who had welcomed the baron on the morning when he had ridden with call of bugle and gleam of jewelled armor out of the gloom of the pine forest below the castle. Whether this change was one for which to be glad Father Christopher could not determine. His love for Erna and his loyalty to the Von Rittenbergs rendered it impossible for him to feel that it was not an improvement that now Erna should be gay where she had hitherto been calm, that she should be jocund where she had before been only happy, that she should apparently have discovered the delights of the eye, of the body, and of the world, and exchanged her former innocence for a more worldly wisdom; and yet all this confused him. He could not think it wrong that now the countess adorned herself with the splendid gems of which her caskets were so well filled; especially as she had bestowed upon the Madonna in the castle chapel jewels that would have bought the entire holding as it had been before Baron von Waldstein's coming. He did not find it in his heart to reprove or indeed even to blame her newly developed fondness for hawking, a sport for which her husband had a strong inclination and in which he had also unusual skill. He could not condemn her gay raiment, her frequent laughter, her increased attention to the comforts and luxuries of the castle. There was nothing in all this which was sinful, there was not even anything which was not eminently fitting to the youth of the countess, her estate, and her condition.

And yet the mind of the priest was somehow strangely troubled. Perhaps his inner consciousness apprehended a change in Erna that was so subtle as not to be tangible to the outward sense. Certain it is that a doubt so vague that he could not have defined it even to himself, but so real that it filled him with a shadowy fear of coming evil, weighed upon the soul of Father Christopher whenever he thought of his mistress and of the effect which this marriage had wrought upon her character.

When it came, however, to attaching any blame to Baron Albrecht, the mind of Father Christopher drew back at once. Here he had no doubt in one way. He could not but feel that if any harm came to Erna through this marriage it would be from the fact that her husband had been born in the accursed, soulless race of kobolds; but his sentiment of love, of respect, almost of reverence for Albrecht was developing so rapidly that he could not even then attach any blame to the baron personally.

The possibilities of spiritual life, of high aspirations, which had been opened to Albrecht when upon the kobold had dawned the glorious light of a soul seemed at first to dazzle him. He walked as a man in a dream, or as a prophet who hears voices and sees visions. His joyous, sensuous, wild nature did not, it is true, at once lose its strength. He was the inciter of the countess to the sports of which under his guidance she began to be fond, her former dread of giving pain to the defenceless animals yielding to the delights of the excitement of the chase; he infused into her a new gayety, an animal zest in life, a sensuous eagerness to seize upon the joy of the moment and to forget past and future; he inoculated her, in a word, with the spirit of his being as he had existed hitherto, of the kobold not yet fully transformed into a man, although the process of this transformation had begun at the moment when he had been gifted with a human soul.

As for the Lady Adelaide, she was thoroughly delighted with the change which had come to Rittenberg. This, she declared, was like the gay times when Erna's father was still alive, and the castle was the rendezvous of many bold and merry knights and dames. She began to bring from the recesses of her memory numberless tales of the old time, and now she was pleased to find that her grand-niece would listen to histories and scandals which hitherto she had refused to hear. Lady Adelaide assured Elsa, in those confidential moments during which that damsel was engaged in assisting her at her toilet, that the baron had quite made the countess over, and that

the transformation was little short of a miracle.

"Heaven knows what a prude she was," Lady Adelaide would say, long years of habitual freedom of intercourse with her damsel having brought her to a degree of intimacy in her speech with Elsa which was unusual with one of the latter's station; "she used to blush, God's blood! at the mere mention of a man; and as for having any witty talk with her, I might as well have gone to the chapel for a cosy chat with the Virgin on the altar, Heaven save the mark! Now it is all quite different, and I can have some real comfort in gossiping with her."

"Yes, doubtless marriage is a wonderful thing," demurely responded Elsa, who was betrothed to the steward of the castle, and was only waiting to assure herself that she could not possibly do better before she took the irrevocable step of marrying him. "It has changed the countess much; and her husband, too, meseems."

"That is to say, he does not chuck thee under the chin any more, or kiss thee in the corridors. Well, beshrew me, but 'tis quite as well. Little does it increase the peace of the family to have the lord of it too fond of the damsels. Baron Albrecht has improved quite as much as she, to my thinking. He is not so bold and reckless. I used continually to dread lest perchance he should do some outlandish thing. He seemed like a mad creature when the mood was on him, and his tricks frightened me wellnigh out of my five wits."

"But always was he good-humored," Elsa returned.

"Oh, of a truth; but lawless was he as the wild wind in the pine forest. It made no difference against whose feelings he hurtled. Now he is so much more human. Meseems now that Erna is in sooth happily married, and with Baron Albrecht's wealth there seems to be nothing lacking."

It was certainly true that to all outward appearance the marriage of Erna and Albrecht was a fortunate one. Every day they seemed to be brought more and more closely together. The countess lost that reserve and unworldliness which her aunt had stigmatized as austerity; the baron gained those spiritual qualities the lack of which had been his only deficiency. Each found in the other new experiences, fresh fields, an unexplored region of pleasure. Life at Rittenberg was wellnigh ideal. The accustomed occupations of the wife were full of novelty and of attractiveness to the husband. The pair read together in Erna's few but well-loved books, and when the wildness of the storm-sprites kept them within doors they found in these and the talk to which what they read gave rise the means of passing many a happy hour. Here Erna took the lead, and Albrecht was like her pupil. In the more active, out-of-door sports and in-door revelry it was to Albrecht that the initiative fell. Each had much to teach and much to learn, and in teaching and learning alike were both happy.

All this Father Christopher watched with eagerness born of his love for the young couple and his desire for their spiritual welfare. Could he have been sure that this state of things would continue, he would have been fully contented and happy in regard to them, and he was wholly unable to explain to himself what possible grounds there could be for doubting that Albrecht and Erna would still live together in mutual helpfulness and pleasure. Yet in his mind was the vague form of some doubt which he could not name but which he could not banish. It might be that he was accustomed to being confronted by the fact that all spiritual good is the price of hard struggle, and he unconsciously waited to see in what form would come the contest in which Albrecht must sooner or later fight with the powers of darkness for the soul which he seemed to have won and to enjoy without a battle. He felt, too, that the powers of the forest, the evil spirits of the waste and the night, would not yield up Albrecht without a struggle, and his was the attitude of one who waits for coming conflict.

One summer morning the priest came into the great hall of the castle to find Albrecht and Erna standing together at the window looking out at the weather. It had been raining at intervals ever since daybreak, and great masses of broken cloud were trailing their ragged edges over the far-spreading forests of pine that covered the mountain slopes. Now and then the sky would lighten as if the storm were ended, but again it would lower, and the rain come dashing down, swept by the wind against the castle windows.

"I am sure that the rain is over," Erna said persuasively, as Father Christopher came within hearing. "We can get to horse now, and by the time we are well under way the sun will be shining. Besides, what does it matter if it does not clear off? We shall not mind that if we can but get into the open."

"In the first place," returned Albrecht, smiling upon her and then turning to look out again over hill and valley and up at the stormy sky, "Meseemeth it is soon to rain very heavily; and in the second place, I am not sorry that we should be kept at home to-day that we may go on with those words in the scroll of Saint Cuthbert we were called away from yesterday."

"But the reading can always be done," was Erna's answer, "and who knows when we can ride? Besides," she added, a dazzling smile parting her beautiful lips, "we can read Saint Cuthbert when for very age we cannot ride."

The priest did not stay to hear how the matter was settled, but went on his way down the long hall; yet as he went he thought wonderingly of the strange fact that it should be Erna who urged for pleasure, and Albrecht who desired that the time be given to pious employment.

XIV

HOW THE PRIEST BECAME TROUBLED.

The days went by, until already the autumn crocuses began to star with their bright colors the glades among the hills. The time of year had come when the blood of the huntsman begins to tingle in his veins because the best sport of the whole twelvemonth is at hand. The sky mellowed like the winter pears which were showing the first shade of the tawny and russet hue that should cover their cheeks when the time came for their gathering.

Now of nights the Wild Huntsman was often heard riding with mad crew of wood-sprites through the forest; and as the days shortened and the dusk of twilight gathered earlier than before, it happened that not a few of the churls and serfs of the castle caught glimpses of vague forms stealing through the gathering darkness, now on earth and anon in the air, as if the wood-folk were watching what was in progress at Rittenberg with the most careful eagerness. Father Christopher, when these tales came to his hearing, sighed and shook his head. He could easily comprehend that all the wild soulless folk of the wood, whether in league with the powers of darkness or not, might well be interested in the fate of one of their band who from a wood-creature had become human, and, whether they were plotting to do him harm or no, would long to watch how he bore his new powers and his gift of immortality. But withal was Father Christopher troubled in his mind lest these strange sprites might be other than creatures who looked upon Albrecht with wonder and longing. He knew how prone are the wood-folk to do mischief; and as the wild herd will set upon a tame animal though he be of their kind, so it might well be that the unbaptized crew were eager to do harm to one who had deserted their ranks.

More than the doings of the creatures of the forest, however, did the ways at Rittenberg concern the priest. There was day by day a more and more jocund stir in the castle. The countess seemed to drink in animation from the air, which was now chill in the morning, and ever did she become more and more eager in the chase and in all merry-making. The hounds and the hawks were well looked to in these days; and old Rupert, the chief huntsman, whose office had become a mere idle name in the days before the coming of the Baron Albrecht, found himself so busy that he lay down at night on his hard pallet with all his aged bones an ache. He was full of pride in the revival of his art, and he began to boast that the sport was as well followed now as in the days of his former master, the late count; but he sighed to himself now and then when he was alone, and shook his head, wondering whether he should be much longer able to keep up to the pace which was now the custom of the castle. He began to say to himself more and more frequently that he was, after all, an old man, and that it was getting to be time for him to make way for the young fellows he had trained. It made him melancholy enough to consider this possibility, but it was a great comfort to him that the revival of venery at Rittenberg gave him a chance to show those who were to take his place how things should be done, and to prove his own cunning in the chase before he resigned forever the boar-spear which was his badge of office.

For there were gay doings at Rittenberg in these autumn days. The doves that of old had sailed so smoothly and sleepily about the castle towers, had now no rest, so greatly were they excited by the sound of hunting-horn by day and of lute by night, the stir of huntsmen in the courtyard, and the laughter of Erna and her maidens ringing out through the windows of the great hall.

"All the castle," quoth the Lady Adelaide to Father Christopher, "seems to have caught the spirit of the baron. Everybody is full of life now, and Heaven knows we were dull enough before he came. Count Stephen told me that he felt as if he were in the tower of the Sleeping Beauty when he was here."

"The sleeper has awakened," the priest responded, with a smile that was not without some secret shadow. "In truth, the countess and her husband have become so truly one that it is not possible to say that either is gayer than the other. They think alike, and they feel in all things the same."

He spoke reflectively, and even as he spoke there came into his mind a doubt whether his words were exactly true. He had watched with the keenest interest and anxiety the growth of the spiritual in Albrecht, and the gradual humanizing that had been wrought in the kobold by his marriage. He felt profoundly his own responsibility in regard to both the baron and Erna, and the beads of his rosary were growing more and more smooth under his fingers in the days and nights that had sped since the wedding.

He had watched Erna no less carefully than Albrecht, and he was beginning to wonder with some sense of fear how far the influence of her husband was destined to lead her from the condition of innocent and spiritual calm in which the Baron von Waldstein had found her upon that spring day when she had first met him in the great hall. There was nothing in the life of Erna which the priest could look upon with blame, and yet he was vaguely uneasy when he thought of her. He said to himself that he was really only unduly affected by the changes which were natural under the circumstances, and that his charge had only developed; and yet the more he pondered the less was he satisfied. He found Albrecht every day more interested in things which concerned the soul which he had won. Continually he became a deeper student of things spiritual, and less wholly given up to the pursuit of pleasure. Erna, on the other hand, seemed each day more intoxicated with the joy of living, and more absorbed in the delights of the world which belongs to the senses.

"It is natural that husband and wife should become alike," Lady Adelaide answered the last

remark of Father Christopher's with an air of the greatest wisdom; "that is, if they are at all in accord. He hath waked her, and she hath toned him down, and it is an improvement on both sides. I must say that taking into account the magnificence of the *Morgengabe*, I do not see that the countess could possibly have done better. The baron was always delightful, but thou must remember that he was as wild as a hawk when he came to Rittenberg."

"He has certainly changed much, and that for the better," answered her companion.

The priest was thinking of how he had stopped a moment to chat with Rupert, the huntsman, as he crossed the courtyard that morning, and how Rupert had praised the kindness of the baron to the dogs, telling how in the boar-hunt yesterday Baron Albrecht had been as tender with Gelert, the hound that was so badly hurt, as could have been Rupert's own wife, who was used to tending and nursing hurt dogs. Father Christopher remembered how in the early days of his coming to the castle Albrecht had laughed at the bare idea of one's caring for the suffering of an animal, and that even when his man-at-arms had been ill he had shown not the slightest comprehension of any reason why one should be affected by the pain of another.

The priest stood by the window in the hall where he had been talking with Lady Adelaide for a long time after she had gone, thinking of the problems which her words suggested. It was too evident that Erna and Albrecht had greatly influenced each other for even the most careless observer to overlook it, and no one could tell where this change of character would end. Out in the courtyard he could see the workmen who were finishing the preparations for a show of the mummers which was to take place that morning. Directly after the wedding day Herr von Zimmern had announced his intention of going to visit his family, and since then they had had no word from him directly. He had however given them proof that he did not forget his former lord, since from time to time troupes of dancers, jugglers, or of mummers arrived at Rittenberg, sent by the cripple or directed by some hint which had evidently come from him. Father Christopher was secretly troubled by these evidences of the continued remembrance of Herr Frederich. The priest had distrusted him from the first, and since he had been acquainted with Herr von Zimmern's history he had dreaded him, feeling sure that the time would come when he would seek revenge for his long captivity and the cruel maiming inflicted upon him by the kobold king.

Erna welcomed these wandering bands of players with more and more eagerness, while the priest was confident that in Albrecht he perceived signs of a growing weariness of their dances, their tricks, and their clumsy mumming. The present troupe was more numerous than any of its predecessors, and the preparations were of far more than usual elaborateness. As the priest looked down into the courtyard the last touches were being put to the stage; and presently the players, already in their dresses, began to appear from the quarters which had been assigned to them upon the side of the court opposite to that from which the windows of the great hall looked. The household was gathering, and the Lady Adelaide, with Elsa behind her chair, had taken her seat, although those of the lord and lady of the castle were still vacant.

Divided in his mind whether to go down and join the company of spectators or not, the priest was standing irresolutely at the casement when Albrecht and Erna came together into the hall.

"Come, Father," the countess said gayly, "they say these are the best mummers that have ever been seen in all the Schwarzwald. They are to give a wonderful play of the life of Helen of Troy, and after that there are to be dances."

She was as joyous as a child, her cheeks flushed with eagerness and her lips parted with laughter. She was a being as far removed as could well be imagined from the serene, pensive maiden who had watched the Baron von Waldstein ride out of the pine forest below the castle slope so few short weeks ago. Her mouth had shaped itself to a new seductiveness, her eyes had kindled with a new and less heavenly lustre, and her bosom had swelled into a new fulness. She was more beautiful, and yet the priest could not repress a sigh as he looked at her, so far from her old state of innocence and of spirituality did she seem in her rich beauty.

Before the priest had time to answer her invitation to the mummers' show, the countess's woman, Fastrade, appeared and came down the hall toward the group.

"I beg pardon, gracious lady," she said, with a little hesitation, "but the charcoal-burner is below."

"Well?" demanded Erna, a shadow flitting across her bright face.

"He says," Fastrade continued with evident unwillingness, "that his little daughter is dying, and that she prays the gracious countess to come with the priest to see her before she dies."

There was a moment's silence in the hall. Both Albrecht and the priest looked at Erna in evident solicitude in regard to her answer. She herself seemed to feel their looks as a sort of challenge, and she threw back her head with an almost defiant gesture as she replied:

"Father Christopher will go, of course, but I could do no good, and just now I am engaged."

Her husband laid his hand lightly upon her arm, and bent toward her beseechingly.

"But surely," he said, "since the little maid is dying, thou wilt go. The mummers can wait. There is time for that afterward, and for this it would be too late."

The priest did not speak, but he waited with the deepest anxiety for her answer, since it seemed

to him that it would be so significant of whatever change might really have taken place in her who once would have let nothing stand between her and a call of mercy. He saw her lips harden, and a cold light come into her eyes.

"What is the charcoal-burner's daughter," she asked slowly, "that I should give up my pleasure for her whim, even if she be dying?"

The waiting-woman stared at the countess in amazement, the priest regarded her with a look of deep sorrow, but in the eyes of Albrecht Father Christopher saw an expression in which were both remorse and terror.

XV

HOW COUNT STEPHEN RETURNED.

The bright-hued harvest-crocus had faded in the meadows, and over the blackly green pine forests had come a colder hue; the ferns in the beech wood were beginning to look wan and yellow, as if the thought that autumn was at hand had already dismayed them. The heather was tinged with russet, and all the skies upon which Erna looked, as one morning she gazed discontentedly from the casement of her chamber, were filmed with soft hazes whose faint purple was as intangible as the first shadow of coming twilight, which one feels rather than sees.

Erna sighed as she leaned half over the stone ledge upon which the sun lay warmly. The doves were preening themselves almost within reach of her touch, and she waved her hand impatiently to frighten them away, since in her untoward mood their soft reiterated coo vexed her ears. She had learned in these days, during which she had been seeking pleasure as she had never sought it before, the meaning of ennui. She was restless with the awakened stir of a hundred desires which demanded continual gratification. She longed for excitement, for the movement of crowds, for the delights of the eye and the lusts of the flesh which once would not have awakened in her heart a throb of interest. She wanted continually fresh diversions, new sports, strange revels, rich viands, all the alluring joys of the senses to which she had of old in her innocence and ignorance been so indifferent.

This morning she had been urging her husband to take her to court. Charlemagne was at Mayence, and there were echoes of the gay doings there forward which reached even as far as Rittenberg. The countess longed to see the brave shows, the rich pageants, the gorgeous raiment; to sit at the banquets, and to dazzle the eyes of the gallants with her beauty and her jewels, finer than the queen's own. She had urged upon Albrecht the propriety of paying his respects in person to his sovereign; but her entreaties, her arguments, and her protestations had been alike unavailing. Albrecht was kind in the manner of his refusal, but he was still persistent in it, and in the end Erna had found herself utterly powerless to change his determination not to leave Rittenberg.

"They tell strange tales of the court," he said in reply to her pleading. "There is more license there than it becomes a modest woman to see, and over-much worldliness as well. Surely it were not well to put one's self in a place like this needlessly, beloved."

Erna had answered nothing, but she had left him with a feeling almost like anger in her heart. She knew why he wished to stay at Rittenberg. It was that he might go on with his tiresome studies with Father Christopher, to which Albrecht gave more and more time every day. As for the wickedness of the court, she was a married woman, and with a husband to protect her, and one moreover of a bearing so knightly as that of Von Waldstein, it was not to be supposed that she could come to any harm. She sighed with fresh impatience as she reflected how deeply immersed in the study of spiritual things her husband had become since their marriage. She was not, she assured herself, less fond of him than of old, but it was to the last degree provoking that just as she had learned to appreciate the delight of life, Albrecht should devote so much thought to things which she had laid aside as dull.

As she mused in this fashion, looking out of the window as she had looked when Albrecht rode gallantly out of the pine forest at the foot of the castle hill on that day when Erna first saw him, once more she heard the note of a bugle-horn in the valley, and once more a knight rode out of the covert into sight, followed by his men-at-arms. With eager curiosity Erna peered out at the new-comer, and almost instantly her eye caught sight of the pennon of the Von Rittenbergs of Schaffhausen, and understood that the visitor was her cousin, Count Stephen, who was probably on his return from Strasburg, and who had accepted her invitation to repeat his visit to Rittenberg.

For an instant her cheek flushed with vexation, her old dislike of the count reawakening, but instantly her changed taste asserted itself, and she smiled. She watched the train as it rode up to the gate, and then she turned back into her chamber with joyous haste. It came into her mind that she could make an impression upon her guest, and she began straightway to consider how she should array herself to go to meet him. She chose from her jewel-case a string of rubies, and quickly bound it upon her head like a fillet; and as she did so her woman, Fastrade, came to announce to her the arrival of Count von Rittenberg.

The Lady Adelaide reached the great hall before her, and Count Stephen was speaking with the old dame with his back to the stairway by which Erna descended. The countess was already close to him before he perceived her. Then he wheeled suddenly, almost turning his back upon Lady Adelaide in his astonishment at the beauty of the woman before him. Erna did not lose one shade of the look of amazement and admiration which came into his face as he looked at her.

"God's blood!" he cried. "What has come to thee, Cousin? Indeed, this marriage of which they told me at Mayence has made a new creature of thee. I greet thy ladyship, and that I did not send congratulations on thy marriage is no fault of mine, since it was all over before I knew of it."

"It is no matter," replied Erna, giving him her hand and smiling upon him with a pleased sense of companionship which she had never experienced in his presence before; "since thou hast come in person to bring them, we consent to overlook the fact that thou art somewhat tardy. But hast thou been at Mayence as well as to Strasburg? I did not know that was in thy mind."

"It was not when I left here," he answered, regarding her with so undisguised a look of admiration that she blushed under it and turned aside her eyes; "but being in the way of travelling I pushed on to Mayence, and there I saw the court, and there I heard of thy marriage."

"Fain would we hear of the court," Lady Adelaide said, leading the way to a seat in the broad recess of a window. "Sit thee down here, and tell us what thou canst of the doings and the braveries there, while the page brings thee a cup of wine. I hope too, on my soul, that thou hast more wit in speech of woman's apparel than have most of the knights I have known, for we would know of the raiment of the queen and her damsels, and in good sooth it is seldom that a knight is cunning enough to tell anything of that sort rightly, albeit so simple is it that the most foolish kitchen wench that had but seen the royal train ride past could describe it all."

"And therein is it to be seen that a knight's head is not like that of a foolish kitchen wench," laughed Count Stephen, seating himself comfortably among the cushions beside the two ladies.

"But tell me," Erna said, "from whom didst thou hear of the marriage? It is not likely that it is a topic which is greatly discussed at court."

"The court concerns itself with many a matter that is of less moment," replied he, gallantly; "but it was from a certain Herr von Zimmern that I had the tidings. He was at an inn where I lodged, and when he heard my name he made bold to speak to me. He is an ill-favored knave enough, but a shrewd and a witty."

"I like him not," Erna answered.

A brief silence followed this remark. Erna was confused by the fact that the count, whom she had found so little to her taste before, should now seem to her so agreeable. It was impossible for her not to see from his admiring looks that he was pursuing a somewhat similar train of thought in regard to her, and at the reflection she blushed faintly once more, with a thrill of gratified vanity.

"But where," Count Stephen broke the silence to ask, "is the Baron von Waldstein? I am anxious to meet my new relative, and," he added, with a look into the face of Erna, "my successful rival."

"My husband," she replied, vainly trying to appear as if she had not heard the latter part of his remark, "is with Father Christopher. They study together sometimes."

"God's blood!" cried Von Rittenberg, with a burst of laughter, "hast thou then married a clerk, Cousin? Fain would I see this new master of Rittenberg that studies with a priest. If the Huns come, thou mayst have to call upon the younger branch of the family to defend thee," he added, turning to the Lady Adelaide. "At least we can bear swords if we be only the 'Schaffleute.' We are not to be looked for in the cells of priests."

"Body of Saint Fridolin!" cried Lady Adelaide, in angry return. "It is not to outsiders that we have been forced to look for defence in the past, and it were well that thou seest the new lord before thou speakest scorn of him so lightly. Belike it were not so well were he to hear thee!"

"My husband is here to speak for himself," Erna interposed, rising with great dignity as Albrecht, summoned by a page, came into the hall.

The count looked at the superb figure which advanced toward him, and for an instant he stood struck dumb with astonishment.

"God's blood!" he cried out so loudly that Albrecht heard him half-way across the wide hall. "That is not a man; it is a god!"

"It is the lord of our poor castle!" returned Lady Adelaide, sweeping him a sarcastic courtesy. "Accept our thanks that thou hast promised to defend it and him from the Huns when they come."

XVI

HOW THE COUNT TALKED AND SANG.

The uncanny wood-folk who hovered about Rittenberg in these days might well have had their fill

of minstrelsy and mirth. If life had been jocund before the return of Count Stephen, it may well be understood that it was gayer yet now that he had come. Von Rittenberg had vowed his life to pleasure; and life to him was much what it was to the soulless creatures of the forest, in that it meant to him nothing higher than the delights of the senses. He prolonged his stay at the castle upon the slightest urging, suggesting one amusement after another, and joining with hearty zest in whatever sports were forward.

"It is well that my steed brought me hither," the count said to his cousin one day. "Indeed the beast was wiser than I, for I was minded not to come this way at all, so little did I dream that thou wouldst have been so changed."

"And is it only thy steed, then, that we have to thank for thy visit?" she asked with a smile.

"Only the steed," he returned; "for when I was come to the place where the ways part, I was minded to turn southward, and to ride on homeward without let or stay; and then it was that my horse would not, and resolutely set his head toward your castle. My squire will have it that an old man with a white beard and eyes like fire did catch at the bridle-rein, but I saw naught, and do not regard his foolish fancy."

Erna laughed and made some jest at the knight's unwillingness to come to Rittenberg; but Albrecht, who had been by, turned pale, and when he was next alone with the priest, he said to him:

"Dost thou think, Father, that the folk of the forest can work harm to one who has won an immortal soul?"

"That thou shouldst know better than I, having lived among them," the other answered; "only of this be sure: however much they might harm the body, it is not given them to reach the immortal part. What dost thou fear?"

"I fear naught," Albrecht answered; "but he who is ruler of the kobolds in the forest round about Rittenberg, as was my father in the Neiderwasser valley, is sore incensed by my marriage. He hath had certain speech with Herr Frederich concerning it, and it is he who turned the Count von Rittenberg in this direction when he was minded to ride past. I like it not."

Neither did it make the priest more easy in his mind to learn that the king of the kobolds was become concerned in the affairs of his mistress; but there seemed naught that he might do concerning the matter save to watch for what should come and to pray fervently to the saints for their gracious protection. He could not divine what it could boot to the kobold that Count Stephen should come again to Rittenberg, but none the less he wished the guest gone.

There was little token, however, that the guest was minded to take his departure. He lingered from day to day, and always he became more and more the leader in the life of the castle and in all its gayety. It was a constant source of amazement to Count Stephen that Erna should have so changed, or, as he phrased it to himself, should so have improved during his absence. She was no longer a cold passionless maiden, moving in a world of ideals and pious dreams remote from his ken; she was a beautiful, passionate woman, who stirred his pulses, and who responded with eager readiness to any suggestion of pleasure or sport which he made. He began to feel that he had made a grievous error in refusing the alliance which had been tacitly offered him, and to nourish a sense of injustice toward the man who had robbed him of the possession of this beautiful woman whom now he found so suited to his taste. He did not reason that to Albrecht must be due in no small measure this transformation, and if such a thought had crossed his mind he would not have doubted his own ability to produce the same result had Erna been his wife instead of the baron's.

It was hardly a proof of the vanity of the count that he believed that his cousin, as he continually called her, making of the relationship a pretext for many little familiarities which, albeit they were harmless enough, caused the eyes of Albrecht to glow with jealous rage, felt the attraction which their natures had for each other. She showed her liking by tokens which though they were slight were unmistakable; and Count Stephen, who had had not a little experience in love affairs, smiled to himself as he reflected upon the faint pressure of the hand, the half averted-gance, the almost unheard sigh which he had from time to time won from Erna.

It was quite in keeping with the count's cleverness that he had not failed to perceive that the sympathy between Erna and her husband was becoming fainter. It was evident that every day they found themselves less wholly one. More and more did the baron give himself up to pious studies, while Erna was thus more and more thrown into the company of Von Rittenberg. Count Stephen had secretly a profound contempt for his host, the idea of piety and that of study being alike ridiculous in his mind. He admired Albrecht's skill in hunting, his strength, and his superb figure, but he was never able to look upon the studies which had become the chief interest of Albrecht's daily life as other than a subject for jest and ridicule. It is true that he had learned that Erna resented his jests upon this theme, but he was acute enough to observe that her anger was turned quite as much toward her husband for giving occasion for them as at her guest for daring to make them. He found in the Lady Adelaide an ally, since that worldly old dame liked the ways of Albrecht no more than did Erna; and the fact that the great-aunt was really very fond of Albrecht only made her the more irritated at his course. She joined with Count Stephen, and often the quip which he left half spoken was taken up and put into words by Lady Adelaide, while Erna frowned and bit her lips with vexation.

"Good sooth," he said one morning, as he sat with Erna, who was working a tapestry in which with cunning skill she was depicting those wars of Charlemagne in which her father had led the Swabian guard of which the emperor had been so proud, "thy husband should to court. The king is marvellously well disposed toward learning. Thou knowest he hath forgiven the offence of Eginhard, the clerk, and wed him to the fair Emma, his own daughter."

"And what," asked Lady Adelaide, whose bright old eyes were also watching her needle over the tapestry, "was the offence of Eginhard?"

"It is a fair tale," responded he, laughing. "It made much scandal. This Eginhard is a man that hath hot blood though he be clerkly, and too hath he good trim limbs and a winning eye. That he should dare to raise his glance so high as the daughter of the king might move one to wonder, but it was not so strange that she should smile upon him when he had done so, for he might well stir a maiden's fancy. They were secret in their loves, but not for the fear of the displeasure of even the king, her father, could they restrain the fury of their passion, and one night did Eginhard steal to the chamber of the princess, there to enjoy the fruits of his wooing without more delay, or the form of a priest's blessing."

"Body of Saint Fridolin!" exclaimed Lady Adelaide; "and she a king's daughter!"

"The night wasted," continued the count, "without that they found it over-long, I trow; and before they were aware, the dawn began to appear. Then Eginhard would fain have gone the way he came, across the court, but the heavens had betrayed them. The snow had fallen and covered the ground so that he could not step without leaving the trace."

"Body of Saint Fridolin!" cried Lady Adelaide, again; "that was the judgment of Heaven upon her for betraying the honor of the king."

"Even if it were," Count Stephen rejoined, "the Princess Emma is not one to be lightly daunted, even by the judgments of Heaven. She was well aware what would befall her lover if the track of his footsteps were found leading from her window, but she trusted that her royal father, who has not been able to rein in his own blood over well, might be moved to forgive her, if it appeared that the transgression had been hers, and that she had sought her lover's chamber."

"It is ever the woman who sacrifices herself to the man," muttered Lady Adelaide. Erna still listened to the tale in silence, while her cousin watched her with penetrating gaze.

"So the princess took the scribe on her shoulders," the knight went on, making no reply to the dame's interjection, "and carried him across the court to his own window, so that only her tracks would appear in the snow."

"Body of Saint Fridolin!" ejaculated Lady Adelaide, for the third time. "Is it thus that they do at court? And what said her father when he was told that she had been with the scribe Eginhard?"

"As fate would have it," the count answered, pulling at the long silky ears of the hound which lay at his side, "the king himself had been that morn troubled in his sleep, and had risen to stand by the window looking out at the newly fallen snow before that the court was astir to besmirch it with their footsteps; and with his own eyes he saw his daughter carry her lover across the place."

"What did he?" asked Erna, raising her eyes from her embroidery for the first time since the tale began.

"Oh, he doubtless cursed for a little, and then he remembered himself, like the wise man that he is, that it were well not to make a bad matter worse, and that love is free and not to be constrained even by the bidding of a king."

He looked into her eyes as he answered thus, and so significant a glance accompanied his last words that hers fell before it. She flushed and once more fixed her attention upon her embroidery, while Count Stephen went on to relate how Charlemagne had told the tale before the whole court to the shaming of the offenders, and had then forgiven them and had them married out of hand.

Then, when he had replied to the questions of Lady Adelaide, who found this gossip a most savory morsel under her tongue, he suddenly caught up a lute that lay near him upon the cushioned window-ledge, and running his fingers across the strings with a swift rattling of tinkling notes, sang not unmusically this song:

"The bird flies jocund through the sky,
And sports in upper air,
Only too soon fluttering to lie,
Caught in the fowler's snare,
The wind constrains the forest tall,
The tempest rules the sea;
The mighty hold the weak in thrall;
And only love is free.

"Nor bonds, nor bars, nor word of hate,
Can love's sweet will control;
Or quench the flame resistless fate
Hath kindled in the soul.

The mind may bow to slavish law,
As kings in chains may be;
Reason to wisdom bend in awe;
Yet still will love be free.

"What's plighted troth or formal vow,
When hearts are turned to fire?
As chaff on tempests blown, I trow,
Such bonds before desire!
Let whosoever come between,
To part my dear and me,
I'd beat down all to reach my queen,
And make our loving free!"

His voice rang out with a strain of passion as he sang these last words. His eyes shone, and he bent forward toward Erna as if he would constrain her to understand the message of his song. And when Erna, rising hastily, dropped her embroidery and hastened out of the hall, there came into his face a look of triumph which it was ill to see. He bent over the hound at his feet to conceal it from Lady Adelaide, who looked after her niece with astonishment.

"Body of Saint Fridolin," quoth the old dame for the hundredth time that morning, "but she is becoming flighty instead of settling down, now that she is married."

Meantime Albrecht sat in the chamber of the priest, learning the wonders of that soul which had been so lately bestowed upon him by Heaven.

XVII

HOW THEY HUNTED THE STAG.

It was on a glorious autumn afternoon, when all the air was fragrant with the odor of pine trees steeping in the warm sunlight, and dim with the hazes which were smoke-like without being smoke, that the folk of Castle Rittenberg set forth to hunt the stag.

While the hounds were baying in the courtyard eager to be off, and the sound of trampling horse's hoof and jingling bridle-rein, with cry of groom and laugh of page, came through the open window, Erna and Count Stephen stood in the hall waiting for Albrecht. At a little distance stood Fastrade and Elsa, both of whom were to ride with Erna to follow the hunt; and Elsa said to her companion, pointing to the boar-spear which still stuck in the head of the deer that hung above the chimney-place:

"If the baron can but make such another shot as that he made when he thrust that spear into the bone from the other end of the hall, may I be there to see!"

The eyes of both Erna and of Count Stephen turned to the spear, as the damsel spoke; and most vividly before the mind of the countess came up the picture of Albrecht as he had flung it on his wedding eve, full of buoyant life and of joyful love.

"I have noticed that spear before," Count Stephen said, turning toward his cousin. "How came it there? Did the baron in sooth throw it across the hall?"

"Yea," she answered; and then she was silent because there came over her a feeling that she had been untrue to her husband by the leaning toward her companion of which she had been half-conscious in her secret heart.

"It was indeed a shrewd shot," observed Count Stephen, looking upward to the spear, which was high above their heads.

Erna did not reply. Suddenly there came into her mind, with the picture of that evening when the spear was thrown, the remembrance of the ring which had been given her by Herr von Zimmern and taken from her by Albrecht. She tried to recall exactly what had been said, but she had forgotten her husband's words, only half heard when they were spoken. She wondered why the ring had never been restored to her, and dimly she recalled to mind the fact that it had been engraved with symbols which had looked to her in the brief moment she had seen the jewel, strange and mysterious.

"Albrecht," she said to him when they had mounted and were riding out of the courtyard into the way which led down the hill, "dost thou not remember the ring that Herr von Zimmern would have given me on the eve of our wedding day?"

A faint shadow crossed his face. He did not look toward her, but pretended to busy himself with the bridle of his horse.

"Yes," he said, "I remember it. It was overbold of him."

"I see not that; but that is no matter now. What I was wondering was that thou didst never give

me the jewel."

"Hast thou not rings enough?" he asked lightly, although Erna could see that her words troubled him. "I will give thee more jewels if so be that there were not enough in the caskets."

"But why not that ring?" Erna persisted, urged on by a secret conviction that here was some mystery. "I seem to remember that Herr von Zimmern said something about wonderful powers in that ring which other jewels have not. I would have the chance to test the matter for myself."

"The ring," Albrecht answered with a seriousness which impressed her, and which yet rendered her only the more anxious to possess the jewel, "had indeed strange powers, but they were unhallowed ones. It were not fitting that a Christian avail himself of the spells which have been wrought by sinful sorceresses."

"Thou art truly become virtuous," Erna retorted with a tone in which she had never before spoken to her husband. "Good sooth, when thou camest to Rittenberg I heard nothing of scruples so nice!"

Albrecht turned and regarded her with a glance so reproachful and so full of pain that she could not bear it. She struck her palfrey sharply with her whip, and dashed recklessly down the hill, crying out to Count Stephen, who had been in advance a little until she thus ran by him, to race with her. Tears of vexation were in her eyes as she dashed down the woodland path, and the sting of her own words wounded her to the quick. She became recklessly gay, and all through the afternoon when she was not separated from her cousin by the chances of the chase she jested and laughed with demonstrative merriment.

Through the thickets where the leaves had begun to fall, under pine boughs which had strewn the ground thick with brown spicy needles year after year until the horses' feet bounded upon an elastic cushion, past rocks violet in the sun and rose-hued in the half shadows, over meadows set with jewel-tinted autumn flowers, sped the hunt, the mellow baying of the deep-mouthed hounds ringing out upon the air, and the horn from time to time waking all the echoes into inspiring music. Erna kept well to the front. She had never ridden so recklessly, and never before had the passion of the sport so fired her blood. She was, moreover, trying to escape from the smart of the taunt which she had flung at her husband, and her palfrey flew so fast that sometimes she even led the way for the huntsmen to follow.

Count Stephen was never far away from her. Close behind or beside her as the ways through which they sped allowed him, he pressed forward with the countess; and Erna was well aware that he had set himself to keep with her, and that his quest that day was not simply the stag which was fleeing before the deep-baying hounds, but rather the love of the woman with whom he went crashing through the thickets where the leaves came down in showers about the horses and the wood-scents rose balsamic or musky under the beat of the swift hoofs of their steeds. She was so conscious of his presence that she could not look at him, but kept her face turned away, urging her palfrey forward rather as if she were fleeing than as if she were of the band of pursuers.

And now and then, too, she had a strange sense that she was not alone with her companion, but as if some unseen creature were following and were watching her. She tried to shake off the notion; but when the thickets rustled after they had both drawn rein to listen for the hounds and to recover again the trail which they had for a moment lost, she had started and shivered, remembering the sprites of the wood that have the power of walking invisible. Then she would glance at the count and backward to where Fastrade strove to urge her palfrey forward lest she lose track of her mistress altogether, and with a new smile upon her lips would once more rush madly forward.

The hunt was not long. It was swift and dashing, the stag seeming to exhaust himself in one grand burst at the outset; and before the light of the autumn afternoon had waned the yelping of the hounds and the baying of the beagles told that they were almost upon their prey. Erna and Count Stephen were riding desperately, following the trail; but now the countess, who knew the country better than her companion, suddenly struck off along the side of a hill which the hunt had crossed.

"Come this way," she called back over her shoulder to her cousin. "We shall intercept them thus at the end of the valley. The stag has doubled."

He followed without hesitation, and in brief space they burst through a thicket to find themselves at the head of a little valley carpeted with turf still green and untouched by the frost, and set around with beech trees whose leaves were shining with the slanting beams of the sun, which shot through a break in the hills at their left hand. The whole vale was illumined with the red light, and into it, just as they came out of the wood, dashed a superb stag of ten, the dogs already at his throat; and close upon his track, almost within arm's length, madly rode Albrecht.

"I thought the baron had been behind," Count Stephen exclaimed in astonishment.

"His woodcraft is too good," Erna returned. "It is idle to match with him; he has outridden us. He must have cut across our track at the last turning. Mother of God!"

Her cry was one of mingled astonishment and of dread. Her husband had taken advantage of a stumble which the unhappy stag made, the good dog Gelert being already at the beast's throat, to drive his horse abreast of the deer, to leap from his saddle, and to seize the fleeing animal by its

mighty horns. The pair on the hillside opposite drew rein involuntarily, and Erna tried to call out to Albrecht, in the vain hope that he might free himself from a position of so much danger. Before she could speak, however, he had thrown all his force into one powerful effort, and before their eyes had twisted the head of the stag half-way around. The creature dropped with its neck broken, falling among the yelping hounds and at the feet of Rupert, the master of the pack, as suddenly as if an arrow had reached his heart.

"By the wounds of God!" cried Count von Rittenberg, pricking his horse forward down the hillside; "what a giant is this!"

Erna hastened after, her heart beating, and all her body burning with the sudden rush of blood that for one breathless instant had seemed to gather itself into her heart, leaving her cold and lifeless. She had never seen her husband as in this act he had revealed himself to her, and she was divided between wonder and a fearful admiration. He had seemed a creature more than human as he bent the mighty neck of the great stag, and there was in her proud sense of his prowess not a little feeling of dread and too of strangeness, as if this hunter were not only the husband she knew, but some strange being whose true nature she had never before suspected. As her palfrey carried her across the narrow valley, she remembered the taunt she had flung at him as they left the castle, and it flashed through her mind that anger at herself might have mingled with the excitement of the chase to move him.

The hunt was all about the dead stag by the time Erna reached the spot. Albrecht came forward to help her dismount. His eyes were shining, his cheek was flushed, and under the open collar of his hunting-jacket, pushed back from his throat, his chest rose and fell. He had never looked handsomer, and as he swung his wife down from her palfrey, she brushed his hand with a quick kiss. The restless fancies which had been weaving themselves about her and drawing her nearer as in a net toward Count Stephen seemed to be snapped and swept aside in an instant, and her heart was as truly her husband's as on the day when she had wed.

XVIII

HOW HERR VON ZIMMERN CAME AGAIN.

For a night and for a day Erna's love of her husband burned again with its most ardent flame; but Albrecht, so far from rejoicing as she did in the mighty feat he had done at the stag-hunt, seemed to be repentant that his old-time mood should have got the better of him, and when Erna told the tale of his prowess to her great-aunt the baron hastened to change the conversation, and that with the air of regretting and being ashamed of having given way to the impulse of the moment.

So strangely changed was Erna from the maiden who had welcomed Albrecht to Rittenberg that she could not even understand a feeling so nice, but only felt with a secret irritation that contempt which any mortal feels for a prejudice which he has outgrown; and nothing appears more foolish and contemptible than a scruple that has been outlived. Albrecht and Erna had changed each other, but the impetus in each case had been so strong that both were carried beyond the point where their tastes and desires came together. It was as if two stars had attracted each other, and then shot past the place where they met, parting again from the stress of the very force which had drawn them toward one another. Every day they seemed to have less in common. The glories of the spiritual drew Albrecht as strongly and as irresistibly as the delights of the senses attracted Erna, to whom all this was a new world. They had passed each other, and now they were parting more and yet more widely.

However little he understood the cause of this, Count Stephen was keenly aware of the fact that Albrecht and Erna were not fully in harmony, and he neglected no effort which might increase the breach between husband and wife. He had set himself to win the love of his cousin, and it was an important part of his game to nourish the growing lack of sympathy between Von Waldstein and the countess. Nor was the count without a deal of cleverness in the way he set to work to accomplish his purpose. He said nothing directly; he made no move openly; but with a thousand insidious words which in themselves meant little but which together were a mighty power for evil, he nourished the sparks of discontent in Erna's mind, and continually kept her attention fixed upon the fact that her husband was more engrossed in his studies with the priest than with her wishes and her beauty. He surrounded her with a dangerous and seductive atmosphere of devotion and of passionate admiration, furnishing her conscience with a ready excuse, should it take alarm, by claiming the right to admire her in virtue of his cousinship.

How much of this Albrecht saw or knew, Von Rittenberg could not divine. Sometimes he had an uncomfortable feeling that the baron was better aware than appeared of what was going on, but as Albrecht gave no sign he consoled himself with the belief that his host was too deeply absorbed in his pious studies to heed whether one made love to Erna or not.

It was not many days after the stag-hunt that Herr von Zimmern suddenly appeared at the castle. Whence he came no one knew, but as they sat at breakfast in the hall he entered, and with no more greeting than if he had parted from them all on the evening before, he took his place at the board and ate with the rest.

Count Stephen regarded him closely. There was something in the manner of this man which attracted his attention, and it had seemed to him that a shadow crossed the brow of the master of the castle when the new-comer appeared. Von Rittenberg instinctively felt that here might be an ally. He understood that Von Zimmern had been a retainer of the baron, and it seemed to him natural enough to suppose that the man might be in possession of secrets concerning the former life of Albrecht which, discreetly poured into the ear of Erna, would aid him in his dishonorable wooing.

He greeted Von Zimmern with warmth, recalling their meeting at Mayence, and expressing pleasure at seeing him again. The cunning eyes of Herr Frederich twinkled upon him as he spoke, and Stephen felt that here was a man to understand him, and more than before was he sure that in Albrecht's former tutor he should find one to assist him in his schemes. He watched for what speech should be between the baron and the other, and as they left the hall, he saw the master of the castle lay his hand upon the man's shoulder. Hastily the count approached them, and while he seemed intent upon searching in his pouch for something which he wanted, he contrived to overhear what was said between them.

"Herr Frederich," Albrecht said, his voice so even that the listener could not determine whether he spoke in approval or in disapprobation, "we had not thought to see thee again at Rittenberg. When I set thee at liberty, it was to rejoin thy family."

"My family, gracious Sir," the other replied in a voice as passionless as Albrecht's own, "my family I found not. Only their graves were left to tell that they had ever been."

The hand of the baron dropped from the shoulder of the cripple, and an expression of pain contracted his features. He stood an instant in silence, and then with an evident struggle he held out his hand.

"Regret cannot change the past," he said; "but for the future—"

He seemed suddenly to become conscious that the count was so near him, and broke off in his speech, going hastily out of the hall. Nor did it escape the notice of Count Stephen that Von Zimmern looked after him with an expression of hatred so intense that his whole face was transformed by it into the likeness of a demon.

The coming of Herr Frederich to Rittenberg seemed to increase the gayety that already reigned there. He devoted himself to devising fresh amusements; and although Count Stephen suspected that his jollity was but feigning, he was the merriest of them all, and provoked them constantly to laughter and to jesting.

"Body of Saint Fridolin!" cried Lady Adelaide, when one night he had made them all shout with laughter over the merry tales which he told as they sat around the fire in the hall, "thou art a mad wag. One can see that no care or sorrow ever trouble thine heart."

And Count Stephen saw how Albrecht regarded the story-teller from where he sat somewhat in the shadow, sighing as if he were aware that under this gayety there were both pain and bitterness.

From day to day as the time went on, Count Stephen discovered that without his having asked aid from Herr von Zimmern, the latter was working for him. There was nothing open, and nothing which by itself might not have been the result of accident. It was only that Herr Frederich would engage Albrecht in conversation or lead him away that Count Stephen might be left alone with Erna; or again he would remark casually that he had seen the countess sitting by herself, and that her husband was with Father Christopher; hints which enabled Von Rittenberg to be with his cousin almost constantly, and much of the time without witnesses.

As warmly as he dared, the count pressed his suit. He was too determined to win to risk a rash declaration in words of the passion which really consumed him. He was a man so accustomed to succeed in such a quest as this that the difficulty of the present endeavor increased his ardor an hundred-fold. The looks, half of reproof and half of invitation, which Erna gave him, the beauty in which she glowed yet more richly every day, incited him to a madness which was fast reaching a point beyond his control. He trembled as he approached his cousin, and he felt that she was aware of his passion; and yet, though he saw her cast down her eyes when he came and follow him with longing looks when he went, he dared not speak. He was too well aware that when he spoke he put all to the test, and that he must lose or gain upon a single cast. He knew his cousin well enough, and the Von Rittenberg blood, to feel sure that if she did not listen with yielding favor to his suit, she would no longer tolerate his presence at the castle; and he feared to put into word that which he yet told her by look and mien a hundred times each day.

He was not without some fear, too, of Albrecht. Count Stephen was a brave man, but the baron was one of whom the bravest could not think lightly, and when it came to a question of wronging him through his wife, the count was well persuaded that if this thing were ever discovered, it would be no easy matter to hold against the wronged husband. Just now Albrecht was greatly engaged in looking after the state of his thralls and churls, and seeing that they were properly housed for the coming winter; a business in which he had been encouraged by Father Christopher, but which the guest declared should be the affair of the steward and not of the lord of the castle. Also Albrecht set himself to bringing peace among the dependants of Rittenberg, and so far as might be justice between man and man, and friendliness. He was evidently none the less attached to his wife, but every day was Count Stephen more confident that Erna found

herself less in sympathy with her husband and more nearly drawn to him.

One morning Erna found her cousin sitting alone by the great window of the hall, and came toward him with a smiling and mischievous face.

"Now," she said, "thou shalt see something wicked. I have only half looked at it myself, and I doubt it would be wise that I look further; but thou art not one, I trow, who will wince lightly."

"The wickedness which thou shalt tempt me into," he answered, "I will gladly bear the penalty of, at least, fair Cousin. What wickedness can be hidden in that roll of satin?"

"Thou shalt see," she answered, unrolling the embroidered cover, and bringing to light a parchment scroll. "It has been put away this many a day, and I only now bethought me of it."

"If it is written wickedness," the count observed, languidly regarding it, "it is likely to do me small harm. I have never bothered my head to learn their clerkly nonsense."

"This is in signs that one may understand if he cannot read," Erna replied, putting into his hand the parchment.

It was the scroll of Ovid which for years she had kept hidden away because of the worldliness of its pictures. The count regarded the images wherewith some gross clerk had decorated the works of the heathen poet, and the smile upon his broad lips deepened into a laugh. He was surprised that Erna should have shown him a parchment so marked, and he looked up from one of the pictures to see if she were really aware what she had given him. She intercepted his glance, and smiling bent forward to see what the picture might be at which he looked. As her eyes fell upon it a crimson flush covered her face, and she caught the parchment from his hands.

"Let me have it," she exclaimed. "I did not know it was like that. I should have examined it before I showed it to thee. I only thought it might amuse thee."

As she spoke she turned quickly, hearing footsteps behind her. Albrecht and Herr von Zimmern had come together into the hall, and were witness of her confusion.

"Herr Frederich has a plan for repairing the southern tower which he wishes to tell to thee," Albrecht said to his wife, apparently without noting her excitement.

He stood there so calm, so noble in his bearing and his appearance, that even Count Stephen, for the moment deeply concerned lest the scroll of Ovid should fall into the husband's hands, could not but admire him. He did not look at the guest, and in his manner toward his wife there was nothing to denote that he suspected that aught was wrong.

"But perhaps," the voice of Herr von Zimmern suggested, "this is not the time to talk of such matters. Perhaps we interrupt something. That scroll may be of importance."

He spoke with a careful appearance of humility; yet the count, watching him with attention which was quickened by irritation, detected a gleam of malice in his eye, and from that moment suspected the friendship of the cripple.

"The scroll is naught of importance," Erna replied haughtily; and for that time no more was said of the scroll of Ovid.

XIX

HOW ERNA AND ALBRECHT TALKED OF LIFE.

Not entirely had Albrecht and Erna lost the old fashion of reading and of talking together, although after the coming of Count Stephen and yet more after Herr von Zimmern had returned to the castle, so greatly was the time taken up with the chase and with jocund sports and with feasting, that there was little space in which to carry on the former studies. One morning when the rain was beating against the castle casements and the spirits of the storm were shrieking over the forest, they sat together in a chamber, and talked of the things which now were of chief interest to the husband.

"I cannot tell how it hath chanced," Albrecht said, "that we read so little together now."

"In the long winter there will be time enough for that," Erna answered. "Thou wouldst not have me like a clerk that cannot get his nose clear of a book. In sooth, I might as well be a nun at once and done with it."

Her husband looked at her in troubled silence a moment.

"Meseemeth, sweetheart," he said wistfully, "that I have made thee like to that which I was myself when first I came to thee out of the wood."

"And meseemeth, certes," she answered, with a faint touch of scorn in her tone, "that I have made thee like to that which I was when thou camest. I was but a dull brooder over pious scrolls, and not in the least did I know what life meant."

"And what does life mean to thee now?" he asked.

"That thou needest not to ask, for of a surety thou knewest when thou didst come to Rittenberg."

"But tell me, sweetheart."

"Life means delight; it is to be glad and jocund. To be sad and moping is to be dead," Erna cried impulsively. "Life is the chase and the dance and the feast; it is joy. Life is to-day, and not to-morrow; life is to do, not to wait; it is to rejoice, not to mourn. Callest thou that life which mews itself up in a cell like the dungeon of a felon, and flickers out like a candle in the dark? I trow that that is not life; it is only the poor, pale shadow of it."

"That is life as thou sayest," Albrecht returned, "that rejoices, and that takes delight in the chase and the feast and the dance; but even the beasts of the forest and the nixies and the kobolds can share all of these things. Surely thou dost not count this the whole of life?"

"Not the whole; no. Yet it is all that one can be sure of finding pleasure in; all that—"

"Nay," Albrecht interrupted softly; "since thou thyself hast taught me that man has other within him than the sense of the beasts and the wood-folk in the forest yonder, thou shalt not now belie thyself by putting thy kind on a level with the brutes. It is to foster the spirit which he alone of all living beings hath, that man should make his cumber, rather than to feed upon the delights of the body."

"Beshrew me," cried Erna, "but thou talkest as if I had indeed taken thee in hand to instruct thee as a master teacheth a pupil."

"It can scarce be," he responded, "that two live together, the more if they love each the other, without that they do teach and mould each the other. Thou hast in sooth instructed me in much more than thou knowest, sweetheart; and I would that I had as well influenced thee as thou hast me. Of a truth our lives now are that which we have made each other; and it behooveth us to look to it well that it be the life of the soul rather than of the body, which engageth us."

"In good sooth," Erna laughed back mockingly, "now thou talkest like a priest. Father Christopher shall give thee his gown, and thou shalt be sent to preach to the Huns and the Saxons in the north."

Albrecht cast down his eyes and sighed so heavily that Erna put her hand upon his arm and added coaxingly:

"Nay, dear heart, thou shalt not be vexed with me. I did but jest. I feel all that thou sayest, but the joy of life overcomes me. I cannot see why I should let to-day slip when to-morrow may be I know not what; when old age will come so soon, and I shall have strength for naught but to sit in the chimney-corner and think of what I would have done or of what others may still do."

"Thou art right, sweetheart," Albrecht said, "in that thou wouldst live to-day; but thou art wrong in that thou thinkest the best joys are in the sports of mirth and wantonness. Surely thou hast tasted the pleasures of the spirit within thee, and thou knowest that these are no less but rather more than those of the body. And for old age and its coming, since thou canst not tell of to-morrow, thinkest thou that it were a better preparation for a joyful morrow to live in jollity and in earthly wise, or to cherish the soul that is within thee to the end that in after time it shall be a companion to thee?"

Erna tossed up her hands with a wilful gesture of mockery and determination. Then she sprang to her feet and threw her arms about her husband's neck and kissed him.

"Come," she cried, "thou wert not wont to be so dull and so clerkly. Leave these things for Father Christopher. Is not my kiss better than aught thou canst find in the scroll of Saint Cuthbert? When we are old we will sit in the ingle together and learn all manner of pious lore for the good of our souls; but now we are young, and it is wisdom to seize upon youth while it is ours."

"Truly," he answered; "and yet it were well, too, to consider that the youth of the spirit should not be disregarded more than the youth of the body. Of a truth," he went on, his voice dropping, and a new light coming into his eyes, "what am I, sweetheart, to tell thee what the spirit is, when thou hast changed me from a wood thing that knew not of the spirit of man, into that I am; and yet so vast and so holy do these things of the spirit appear to me that I tremble, and all my heart is stirred. It is as if one approached the place of a god, is it not, Erna, only to think upon the possibilities of what is within us. How can I be content to become once more that which I have been, a creature as insensible to all this as the wolf that howls in the forest down there, and only cares for what he shall eat to-day? I am overwhelmed only to see how great and how noble are the things to which the soul of man may reach out."

Erna was silent a moment, impressed by his earnestness; then she shook herself and laughed.

"Hast thou then been a beast in the forest, or one of the wood-creatures?" she demanded mockingly. "Of what good is all this talk? Let us go down to the hall and hear Count Stephen sing the ballads he hath learned at court."

"And it seemeth to me," Albrecht said, detaining her yet a moment longer, "that thou goest to the forest too much. The creatures of the wood are on the side of body; and not that only, but they make for evil, and thou canst not tell how they may lure thee on to do that which is forbidden."

"Am I not, then, of strength great enough to guard myself from the ill counsels of the wood-folk?" she asked, smiling upon him. "Methinks that they can do small harm to Christian folk."

"They can do no harm to him that is in himself armed against them," Albrecht answered gravely; "but they are ever in wait for those whose mind may turn toward them and toward forbidden pleasures."

Erna flushed faintly, and her lips parted as if she would speak in impatience or anger; then she controlled herself, and replied with a show of gayety:

"Then it were wise not to forbid me aught, since then there will be no chance for me to follow after forbidden things."

And so she departed out of the chamber, and sought out Count Stephen with the petition that he sing to her; a request which he was not slow to grant.

XX

HOW THEY RODE TO FLY THE FALCON.

The wood was filled with whispers in the autumn afternoon, as if the trees were telling one another things which were to come to them soon, gossip leaning toward gossip with confidential mien. The sense of unseen creatures, presences quick with the keen life of their kind yet not sharing in human being, was diffused through the air like the scent of the fallen leaves. The Countess Erna, who rode here to-day, felt a vague dread, even in the sunlight and with her troop to come to her aid in case harm threatened her. She had a feeling as if she were watched and followed by the wood-folk, and had it not been that she was much engrossed with the consciousness of Count Stephen's presence she might have turned homeward.

As it was she struck her palfrey sharply with her whip, and went galloping through the wood, with her cousin close after. On her wrist was her favorite falcon, his bell tinkling as she rode. The west wind fanned her cheeks, hot with the flush which had sprung in them at the soft words Von Rittenberg had been whispering into her ears as they came through the pine wood below the castle steep. She heard the hoof-beats of his horse behind her like an echo, which repeated the things he had been saying, and although she knew beyond peradventure that she should lose in his esteem by not showing him that she was angry, yet withal so little had she been in sooth displeased, that she could but illy feign displeasure.

As they rode, the mind of the countess was busy with an endeavor to understand her own feelings, as a fly which hath been ensnared by the spider struggles to regain the freedom of his wings. She was herself entangled in a web of circumstance and of passion, and she glowed with a warmth which was at once shame and desire. She was not without some proper indignation against Count Stephen, and yet she desired with a curiosity which was not all unwilling, to learn what more he would dare to whisper in her ear before they came again to the castle from this hunt upon which she had ridden against the wish of her husband. Her blood seemed on fire. She repeated to herself the words in which she had for the first time set at naught the wishes of Albrecht, and with strange inconsistency she was angry that he had not forced her to remain at the castle. She said to herself that when she had declared her defiance of his will that she go not with the count to fly the falcon, her husband should have constrained her to obedience. She could not divine why it was that Albrecht seemed to look upon her as a being higher than himself, and to yield to her will as if it were that of one who had the right to command. He seemed less strong and noble than she had believed him when he failed to bend her pride to his wish.

Erna was a woman, and she did not ask herself what would have been her feelings had she at this moment been a prisoner at home, instead of careering thus across the forest with the soft west wind blowing in her face and a tingling sense of the hoof-beats of Count Stephen's steed just behind her. Though it be not when they are most kindly entreated that women be most just, yet are they not to be constrained into doing justice to those who love them.

Very lovely was the countess to-day, as she rode through the greenwood. She was clad in a robe of green cloth, the color of the new tips of the pine branches in the springtime. Her cap was embroidered with gold, and its tuft of heron's plume was held in its place by a clasp of jewels. Her hawk was a jerrfalcon as white as the snow new-fallen, upon which the sun shines ere yet it hath been smirched or sullied; and his hood and jesses were of crimson, of the same hue as her gloves, which were richly enwrought with golden thread in quaint devices. The spotless plumage of the bird against the red of the glove was wondrously fair to see, and wondrously fair was the lady as she carried the falcon against her breast.

Little did it please the temper of Erna that Herr von Zimmern should have taken it upon himself to suppose that she rode to-day because he had been to the trouble of riding in the early morning to the meadow by the lake and bringing word again that the ducks, now on their way southward, were there. She was well assured in her own mind that she had been minded to please no one but herself when she had insisted in setting out despite the wish of Albrecht that she go not. Certainly she had no longing to show friendliness to Herr von Zimmern for his service, since to say sooth the prejudice which she had from his first coming held against the cripple had in no

wise softened with time, albeit he had seemed to be devoted to Albrecht and to her; neither had it been her wish, she assured herself, to please Count Stephen, however his earnestness in the matter might seem to give color to such a supposition. She was only of the mind to come, and to show her husband, who each day became more and more wearisomely given to devout matters, that she was not to be ruled by his unreasonable whims and to shut herself up as if she were a nun in a cloister instead of being lady of Rittenberg, the fairest holding in all the country round.

She was not without a secret anger that Albrecht gave no sign of seeing how his guest was striving to steal away the heart of his wife. She set her teeth with vexation that no token indicated that the baron was even aware of the peril in which his happiness stood. She said to herself that there could be little love where one saw only such indifference. Her clear cheek flushed hotly as the thought came that it might after all be indifference rather than blindness which made her husband so calm. She recalled that while he wooed her he had found the kisses of Elsa to his liking, and the doubt whether he were not one of the men whose affection goes as lightly as it comes, pierced her heart. The very suspicion made her hot with rage.

Yet surely Albrecht had declared that the caress of no other woman could evermore be sweet to him; it was only that he was sunk into this mire of religious musing in which Father Christopher encouraged him. She half hated the old priest at the thought. She wondered how far it would be possible for Count Stephen to carry his wooing before the wrath of Albrecht would break out. The question affected her almost as if she already felt the caress of the lover. She became suddenly so keenly conscious of the presence of the count behind her that she glanced back as if in fear. Then she reined in her palfrey so that her damsel Fastrade, who rode discreetly in the rear, might overtake her.

For a time she paced forward demurely, feeling the sidelong glances of the count upon her like a hand, and with difficulty restraining the impulse to look up and meet his burning eyes. She knew well that he watched her as a fowler might watch a bird that is fluttering ever nearer the snare; and every moment it became harder for her to maintain her calm. Suddenly the impulse seized her to dash wildly forward along the woodland way.

"Come, Fastrade!" she called imperatively.

She struck her palfrey sharply, and onward she flew, her damsel following as well as she might. She felt as if she were escaping from danger; the wood seemed full of beings in league with Count Stephen; she even seemed to hear wicked whispers in her ears, so clear that she could have sworn that they were pronounced by unseen lips; some presence tried to hold her back, and only the need of escape made her forget for the moment to be afraid; for a brief time a wild exhilaration thrilled her blood, as if in leaving Count Stephen behind in the beech wood she were overcoming the unseen powers of evil and freeing herself from temptation.

"Ride, Fastrade!" she called backward over her shoulder, conscious in the brief glance behind that the plume of the count was still to be seen as he galloped easily after them. "Ride! faster, faster!"

The falcon fluttered against her breast, almost thrown from her wrist by the swiftness of her pace; her heart fluttered beneath, half in fear and half in a dangerously delicious confusion. The very air, soft and perfumed, languorous and enervating, seemed to melt her resolution and to help to overcome her. She held up her arm, and shook her falcon until he reeled again, tossing his hooded head so that his bell rang right merrily. She broke into wild laughter, and along the green arches of the wood she heard the soft voices of the unseen ones laugh with her; but she no longer felt as if she were combating the powers about her; she did but jest with them and they with her. She trembled without fearing and yet without knowing why.

"On, Fastrade!" she cried still. "Faster, faster!"

Suddenly, as she looked through the beech-tree boles, which here began to grow more sparsely, as the riders approached the meadow where they were to throw off the falcons, Erna saw two figures. Her first thought was that they were creatures of the wood, but in a moment more she saw that it was her husband riding with Herr von Zimmern. The sight sobered her instantly. She reined in her palfrey so abruptly that Fastrade, who had much ado to keep up with her mistress, hardly now escaped dashing against her. Erna could not divine why Albrecht should be here when she supposed him to be at home. Her first fearful thought, which the guiltiness of her mind conjured up, was that he had come to play the spy upon her and the count; but the openness with which he allowed himself to be seen, and the grave courtesy with which he saluted her as she rode by, showed her that this was not the object of his ride. Albrecht did not attempt to join her, but rode into the wood so quickly that neither of Erna's companions saw him, albeit had Fastrade been less occupied with her palfrey, thrown into confusion by the suddenness with which he had been checked, she might have perceived the baron.

Although Erna could not in the least determine why Albrecht was there, the sight of him had instantly subdued her wild mood. She became quiet and thoughtful, and for all the afternoon while they flew their hawks, she watched almost in silence; so that the count jested upon her soberness.

"Didst thou, then, see a ghost in the wood?" he demanded; "or was it that thou hast ridden across the track of the Wild Huntsman? Certain it is that something has come to thee since thou fleddest from me to ride on with thy damsel. Thou art too beautiful to be trusted in the forest without a knight beside thee; sooner or later is a kobold sure to capture thee if thou ridest thus recklessly."

Something in his tone angered the Lady of Rittenberg. Since the hour when she had thoughtlessly put into his hand the scroll of Ovid with its pictures of such wickedness that a modest dame might by no means give them unto the gaze of another, and which she blushed to see when she examined the parchment more closely afterward, it had seemed to Erna that Count Stephen accosted her with a freedom which he had not carried of old. She turned from him now, and bent her regard upon the jess of her falcon, as if she were making sure that it were secure, as the bird rested upon her wrist after having struck down a brace of ducks.

"Nay," the count continued, laughing and speaking in a tone which was of itself like a caress, "and thou takest to being angry with me, Mistress Cousin, I am indeed undone. It is but that the light of thy beauty hath so dazzled thy slave that I know not what I say, and so in sooth may unwitting offend thee."

"Now thou art minded to jest and to mock me," Erna returned, instantly relenting. "I am not angry. Why should I be? Only that it is perhaps not customary for the guest to praise the beauty of his hostess as thou hast of late fallen into the fashion of doing."

"No," the count answered gravely, and with a look into her eyes that she could not meet unabashed; "but then it is not often that the guest so truly and so heartily loveth his hostess."

"It hath a savor as if thou wouldst flout at my poor face," she continued, making her countenance as if she heard not his bold words; "and surely it is not seemly that one should mock his hostess."

"Of a truth, fair cousin," Count Stephen began eagerly, "I—

"Hush!" she cried softly, her manner changing. Then aloud she said, moving nearer to the spot where stood Fastrade: "Have we not a brave quarry to-day? I have never seen the hawks do better."

The day was well worn when the train started to return to the castle, and in the beech wood the shadows were gathering so that one could see but dimly there; and it might be that when Erna turned her head as she rode through a leafy covert and spoke as if to Fastrade, she in truth believed her damsel to be behind her, albeit the ambling of the maiden's palfrey was little enough like to the trampling of the stallion upon which Count Stephen rode, so near that the nose of his steed was all but touching the haunches of Erna's. And yet before she turned the countess hesitated and flushed there in the shadow, and her voice as she spoke the name of her damsel had in it a tremor which could hardly have been there had she in all verity spoken for the ears of Fastrade.

Count Stephen pressed his horse forward so that their steeds were abreast in the narrow way.

"Nay, it is I," he said, so close that as he leaned toward her in the dusk she felt his breath hot upon her cheek.

She reined her palfrey away from him, but it seemed to her as if something unseen thrust itself in her way so that she could not escape. It came upon her that the wood-folk were in league with her cousin, and her terror made her turn again toward Count Stephen, although she shook the reins of her palfrey to urge him forward. But the path was too narrow for two horses to run together in it, and Count Stephen kept his steed close beside her own. Her falcon she had given to Rupert, who rode far behind, and it occurred to her now that had she but kept it with her she might have let it escape and so produced an excitement by means of which to be freed from her entanglement.

"Dearest!" breathed the count at her ear; and the passion of his voice stirred her pulses with fiery dread.

She felt as if she were suffocating; she longed to flee, and yet she longed also to stay. Some resistless fascination seemed to overpower her, and without speaking she rode by her lover's side for the space of a falcon's plunge at his quarry. Then Count Stephen half threw himself from his horse to hers, cast his strong arm about her, and kissed her.

The touch of his lips broke the spell which passion and opportunity had been weaving about her. She tore herself out of his embrace with a vehemence which nearly threw him from his saddle, and struck her palfrey with all her force. Before he recovered his seat she was fleeing down the forest path with all her speed, panting and weeping, and urging her palfrey with voice and with whip toward the castle.

XXI

HOW ALBRECHT AND HERR FREDERICH TALKED IN THE WOOD.

Hardly had the hawking-party set out that day, when Herr von Zimmern, with a smile of cruel craft upon his face, went limping in search of Baron Albrecht. He found him with Father Christopher, and between the two lay upon the oaken table a scroll of parchment in which they had been reading.

"Pardon me that I disturb your studies," Herr Frederich said, with the air of one who strives to seem humble in his demeanor; "but I would that the Lord Baron come forth and ride with me. I have that to show which it were well for him to see."

"What is it, and whither should we ride?" the knight asked, looking up calmly; while Von Zimmern noted with amusement and mingled anger that into the face of Father Christopher there stole an expression of dismay.

"You are more cautious than of old, when it booteth not whither we rode so be it that our steeds were good and the quarry fair," the cripple responded with a discordant laugh. "For to-day trust me in the old fashion, and come without question."

"The old fashion is no more possible," Albrecht answered; "but nevertheless I will go with thee, if it be only that the occasion may serve for the saying of certain words that must sooner or later be spoken between us."

Von Zimmern looked at the baron in some surprise, but returned no other answer than a profound bow which seemed mocking in its excessive deference. He waited a moment while the other laid aside the parchment and prepared to accompany him, the priest all the while looking as if he had it in his desire to prevent this sally from the castle did he but know how to accomplish his wish. Herr von Zimmern found it not easy to accustom himself to this new Albrecht who had been developed out of the kobold lad whom he had trained and shaped at his will, and of whose simple wits it had been so easy to get the better by a little human guile. He had for long years foreseen the time when Albrecht should gain a human soul, and for this he had schemed; but now that the thing was accomplished he was confused by the result. Albrecht with a soul was not the being that Herr Frederich had expected him to be, and the fact continually filled the cripple with a baffled sense of confusion.

Together Albrecht and his companion got to horse, and without further speech they rode down the hill and into the shadow of the forest. The instant the shadow of the pines fell upon him Albrecht knew that there were evil influences abroad that day. He caught a glimpse among the tree boles of the shadowy form of a kobold, and he heard in the air the whispers of beings to which his sight was growing dim as he became more human. He looked at his companion questioningly, as if he suspected the truth; but Herr Frederich held his face under control, and did not betray the feverish glee which burned within him. Herr Frederich was secretly full of malicious triumph. He had gathered from the burning looks of Count Stephen when that morning the cripple had brought tidings of the quarry to be had in the meadow and from the ambiguous speech of the lord of Schaffhausen, that to-day was the lover determined to bring his wooing to a climax; and he had promised that opportunity should not be lacking, since the kobolds of the forest, urged on by Von Zimmern and angry at the desertion of their brotherhood by Albrecht, had given pledge to bring Erna and her lover together alone in the wood.

Herr Frederich had brought Albrecht forth from the castle to follow on the track of the hunters, feeling sure that the wood-folk would contrive opportunity, and that Count Stephen would not be loath or slow to avail himself of it to press his passion; and it was with the surety of being able to show to Albrecht his wife listening to the vows of another, perhaps even clasped in her lover's arms, that the malicious cripple led the way through the forest.

So still in silence they rode, until they did in truth come upon the hawking-party, as hath been told. When Herr Frederich beheld how the damsel Fastrade rode in advance with her mistress while the Count followed, as it at that moment happened, he muttered under his breath a curse bitter and deep.

"Now they have beheld us!" he exclaimed in vexation; and involuntarily he turned his horse toward the deeper shades behind the spot where they rode.

Albrecht followed the other as he wheeled, and rode after until they were out of sight of the hawking-party. Then he drew rein.

"Hold thee still there!" he commanded.

Herr Frederich, with a sudden thrill of rage and no less of terror, checked his horse, feeling that his quarry had escaped him. He sat glaring at the baron with eyes from which blazed the hate he would no longer take the trouble to conceal.

"Thinkest thou," Albrecht said in a voice so perfectly calm and self-controlled that it stung his hearer like the lash of a whip, "that I am so dull as not to understand that thou hast brought me forth into the forest to play the spy?"

"You were brought here," Herr Frederich answered furiously, "to see how your lady and her lover —"

No more could he say, for Albrecht with a sharp thrust of the spurs made his horse leap forward, and caught the other by the throat. For an instant, as the two confronted each other with blazing eyes, it seemed that the death-hour of the cripple had surely come. Then the strong fingers of Albrecht loosened their hold, an expression of regret softened the splendid rage in his face, and Herr Frederich wrenched himself free from the grasp that was strangling him.

Albrecht reined his horse backward.

"Beware that thou dost not provoke me too far," he said. "I was prepared for the foul thing that thou wast minded to say, but I will not listen to the name of my lady from thy lips. Dost thou think, forsooth, that I am so besotted that I have not seen that thou wast minded to play a part too foul for one to name it, and to bring about my dishonor in mine own house to the intent that I should be—Nay, to what intent thou best knowest. I had fortified myself to the end that to-day for the last time I should bear with thee patiently, but if thou takest the name of my wife upon thy lips, I will not answer for my forbearance."

Herr Frederich, panting and dishevelled, leaned upon the pommel of his saddle and regarded his companion with looks of burning ferocity.

"I did but try," he sneered, "to warn you in time, that you might save yourself from—"

The threatening look which gathered blackly upon the brow of Albrecht warned him to be more guarded in his speech, and he broke off abruptly, leaving the rest unspoken.

"The faithful service of the best part of my life," he went on, endeavoring to cover his anger with a show of wounded zeal and faithful affection, "counts for nothing with you, and it is not strange that this endeavor to serve you should bring to me only abuse. It was to do you a service that I adventured the rage of Count von Rittenberg, and—"

Albrecht put up his hand with a gesture which once more cut the speaker short.

"Why is it," he asked, "that thou hast gone about to do me harm? What cause hast thou to hate me? If I was not over-thoughtful of thee in the old days, I was at least never cruel, and I took care that thou shouldst fare as well as might be. Thou wert set next to myself, and never did I let that one of those under my hand should so much as speak to thee lightly."

Herr Frederich threw the reins down upon the neck of his steed, and with folded arms he sat confronting Albrecht. The supreme hour of his life had come. Now at last would he pour forth all the wrath that for long years had been festering in his soul. There was not more a need of prudence, of concealment, of a cloak with which to hide the intents of his heart. He labored only how to frame his speech so that it should sting and burn Albrecht to the very soul, like the lightning shafts, or the poisoned spear of the Wild Huntsman that leaves an incurable wound at its lightest touch. He glanced about with an instinctive, cowardly desire to see whither he could flee if the other's rage should overleap all bounds, and he muttered a spell to summon the sprites of the wood.

"Ah, thou art, then, in league with the folk of the forest?" Albrecht said, hearing him. "Couldst thou not trust thine own powers for evil, that thou hast called upon them to help thee?"

The cripple gave no heed to the interruption. He was lost in the fierceness of his feelings. He was determined that of the bitter joy of this moment he would lose nothing through craven fear. He cast all prudence to the wind.

"It is true," he began, in a tone which was at first low, but which increased as he went on, and the fierceness of his anger burst out more and more, as a fire that is opened to the wind blazes higher and higher, "that you had me treated well at the hands of the wild crew at Neiderwasser, since, forsooth, I was too valuable a thing to be lightly handled. If your underlings were forced to treat me with respect, were they ever allowed to forget that I was an underling also; I, who had been born a man and a freeholder? Oh, the fool of a kobold, that thinks himself able to understand men because, forsooth, he hath stolen a soul through his wife! Why do I hate you? You who kept me in thralldom among creatures no better than the wild beasts save that they speak and go upright! You, whose father stole me from freedom, from home, from the wife that belonged to me only, and from the children that were helpless without me! Why do I hate you? God's wounds, I had much cause to love you!"

His bitter laughter rang through the forest. Albrecht shuddered, but he drew nearer to the cripple, and Herr Frederich saw in his face an expression of compassion. The fierceness of Von Zimmern's rage was increased twofold that he could excite in the knight only pity and not the anger which he longed to provoke.

"Fool of a kobold!" he cried again, his voice rising ever higher till the hollows of the wood rang with it; "do you know why I taught you to long for a human soul, and why I spared no pains to fit you for the part you had to play to gain one, so that you should by no means fail? It was because till you had a soul my vengeance could have no hold upon you! It was that I was not content to hurt you for the short life which would have been yours in the forest; I would bring on you a punishment that should be eternal! When you were a lad I could scarcely keep my hands from tearing and maiming you, and I should have laughed had your accursed kobold father rent me limb from limb for doing it; but I waited for a better vengeance! The only thing that is wanting to my content now is that your father cannot know how I have paid my debt to his son."

He seemed to have gone mad, and Albrecht shuddered and crossed himself at the sight of fury so demoniacal. The cripple shivered and trembled with excitement; the tears gathered in his eyes, and the foam specked his lips. The knight's own eyes were dim, as he leaned forward and laid his hand upon the other's arm.

"I have indeed much for which to ask thy forgiveness," Albrecht said; "but I was, as thou hast said, only a kobold, and what could I know better than the rest of my race, save what thou didst teach me? Meseemeth that if thou hadst but cumbered somewhat to teach me mercy in my callow

youth, all soulless as I was I might perchance have learned somewhat of it."

"Oh, without doubt!" retorted Von Zimmern scornfully, as he shook off the hand which lay pleadingly upon his arm; "but that was reason enough why I should not teach. I was willing to suffer if thereby I could the better compass my revenge in the end."

"And yet," interposed Albrecht, inquiringly, "when my marriage was about to take place, thou didst all but prevent it when thou gavest to the countess a ring by which she might know kobolds from men?"

"Yea," Herr Frederich replied, grinding his teeth; "for a moment the thought of your present bliss was too much for me. I saw you look on your bride with longing and delight, and I thought of mine from whom I had been stolen. To see you so blest was a trial too great for even my patience; and for a moment I was so weak that had you not interfered, I had spoiled all, and cheated myself of the vengeance wrought out by all those years of waiting and suffering. I thank you for that!"

There was silence in the wood for a moment while the two confronted each other with piercing eyes. Overhead the wind soughed in the pine tops, and to the mind of Von Zimmern the sound brought the memory of the many long, weary days and nights he had listened to this wail in the tree-tops of the Neiderwasser valley. A new frown of hate came over his black face.

"Year after year," he burst out, "I pined in that cursed slavery, and longed and longed for those I had left behind; and you offered me nixies, and promised that I should be free to return to my own when I had married you to a mortal wife."

"And that promise was kept," Albrecht responded.

"Kept!" the other echoed with fierce scorn. "You kept it when all that I loved was gone. You set me free to seek a row of graves; to carry my miserable, broken body about the world alone. God's blood!" he went on, dashing the spurs into the bleeding flanks of his steed and still reining the animal back with a strong hand; "at the grave of my wife I took new oaths of vengeance, and I hastened back to keep them. It was not hard! The folk of the wood were eager to help me by bringing the count and the lady alone together in the forest, and he already had the work of winning—"

"Silence!" broke in Albrecht, in a voice of thunder.

The wild excitement of Herr Frederich was infecting him also, despite all his efforts at self-control. His cheeks were flushed, and he breathed deeply and pantingly between his teeth. The cripple was not slow to perceive these signs of growing passion, and he fanned the flame with new taunts and deeper reproaches.

"Fool of a kobold!" he cried out yet again; "to think you could play with a soul and be safe! Was it then like a boar-spear with which your hand could have its own will? Oh, the wise wood-creature!"

He broke into shrill laughter and bitter, till all the forest resounded; and among the dark recesses of the pines it seemed that unseen lips joined in the evil peal of wicked scorn and merriment.

"Now," he cried, and in his voice was a new ring of triumph, "our kobold hath ruined not alone his own soul, lightly gotten and quickly lost, but hers which could by no means be satisfied with such a brutish, half-human thing as her husband. It is not a marvel that she must needs turn toward a human lover after—"

The knight sprang upon him with a face distorted with rage and jealousy, and caught the cripple by the throat. He dragged him from the saddle, and Herr Frederich was as helpless in the grasp of those powerful hands as if he were in the clutch of a lion. Albrecht dashed him to the earth. His head was grazed by a stone, and for an instant everything swam before his eyes. The thick-growing ferns closed over him like the waves of the sea, and then they were parted by the face of Albrecht, who stooped toward him.

"Thou art a craven and a liar!" Albrecht hissed between his set teeth.

Then again with strong hands he seized Herr Frederich, and lifted him out of the bracken as if to dash him again to earth.

With a moan and a mighty effort to speak, the cripple, swinging in air, flung at the knight one last bitter taunt.

"It is bravely done," he cried, "to kill the man your father maimed!"

The clutch of Albrecht relaxed instantly. He lowered the other until he could lean against his horse, and then stood confronted to him with a face which kept Von Zimmern silent.

"Thou art right," he said. "God knoweth that I and mine have done thee evil enough already. I have need to ask thy forgiveness; and I would to God that there were reparation which man might compass, so be it that thus I could do by thee that which would undo what my father hath done unto thee. Only, since that may not be, I warn thee that thou come not in my sight again. I spare thy life when thou hast said words for which death were the only fitting meed; but I pledge not myself if I see thee again."

And as if he might not trust himself to say aught further, Albrecht vaulted into the saddle and

rode swiftly away through the wood.

XXII

HOW ALBRECHT RODE HOME.

Mighty was the struggle in the mind of Albrecht as he rode swiftly through the forest when he had left Herr Frederich in the wood. His good steed of his own instinct took the way back toward the castle, and strained every sinew that he might the sooner come thither, for that his master sharply spurred him on. Albrecht had only the thought that it behooved him to put all the distance he might compass between his angry heart and the temptation from which he fled, and he heeded not whither he rode. The falling leaves of the beech trees, yellow as topaz, rustled downward in bright showers as he sped; the pitchy cones of the pines, glistening with unctuous drops, fell now and then with a dull thud upon the soft carpet of brown needles beneath his horse's feet; the squirrels chattered indignantly at his intrusion upon their wild and quiet domain; and now and then some wood-bird flew startled from the thicket, oftentimes so close as almost to touch him.

The cheeks of the knight burned with a fever which the wind of the autumn afternoon, cool though it was and loaded with refreshing balsamic scents, could not allay. His heart beat hotly with rage and love and hatred and jealousy, until its fierce throbbing seemed wellnigh to choke him. Through a rift in the trees he caught a glimpse of the towers of Rittenberg; and he recalled the sight of them which he had when he first came hither, and how Herr Frederich had pointed them out to him, saying with his smile which now Albrecht so loathed:

"Now I will ride homeward, and await tidings of the speeding of your wooing. Yonder is the castle, and there shall you find both bride and soul!"

The memory surged over the mind of Albrecht like a bitter wave of the northern sea, black and stinging with its icy cold. He struck his clenched hand against his breast, and a groan escaped from his lips.

"It were better never to have had a soul!" he murmured.

A hollow laugh from unseen lips answered him. He looked around, suddenly checking his horse with a wrench of the bridle which wellnigh threw the good steed upon its haunches. He was silent an instant, as if he waited for some one to call out in mockery. There was no sound save the panting of his steed, the murmur of the soft wind in the tree-tops, and the distant hoarse cry of a heron scared by the fowler and fleeing toward the deeper recesses of the forest.

Albrecht put his hand upon his forehead like a man who awakens.

"I know ye, kobold crew!" he cried. "Ye shall not conquer. I defy ye, for I have a soul."

Then again he struck the spurs into the horse's flanks and flew onward toward Rittenberg. The dread that Erna might indeed be lost forever beset him like a flame, and he did not pause even on the steep below the castle gate. As if urged on by the furies he flew up the hill, and dashed into the courtyard spattered with foam from his horse's bridle.

He threw his rein to a servitor, and hastened to his chamber. He dashed his cap, its heron-plume torn and ragged from his wild ride through the wood, upon the rush-strewn floor, and with great strides he began to pace to and fro. He was confused by the emotions with which he struggled. Never in the months since he became a man had so fierce a rush of contending passions swept through his mind, and he was dizzied by their force. Below in the courtyard he heard light laughter, and a snatch of song which one of his men-at-arms had taught some serving-wench; and the sounds carried him back to the wild, free life of the forest. For a moment it seemed to him that he would gladly give up all that he had won could he but be once more the gay, soulless Albrecht who had come to Rittenberg; so strong was the rush of the old memory, the desire for the old lawless, jocund kobold life, that he was ready to curse the day that brought him to the castle and gave him a human bride. Yet the thought of Erna and the passionate love for her which filled his heart were too strong to be overcome, even by the swelling disquiet of his soul. He could not yet think first of the high spiritual blessings which the gift of a soul made possible to him, since ever the image of his bride rose before his mind as the chief desire of his life.

So long did Albrecht wrestle with the temptations which raged within him like ravening wolves, that the dusk began to rise from the forest to the height where the castle stood, as a night-mist rises from beneath. He thought of the wood-creatures who had mocked at his pain, and full well did he know how fain were they to do his bidding did he charge them to waylay Count Stephen in the forest and do him harm. Were it not madness to let all the instincts of his whole life go because of the fetters which were laid upon him by this thing which was so wondrously within him, and which had changed him from the most blithe and most bold of all the kobolds of the forest to the tame thing that dared not avenge himself upon the knight who would steal from him the love of his wife? The rushes were crushed and ground into dust beneath his heel as he strode to and fro, and the great drops stood upon his forehead.

Suddenly in the gathering dusk he stood still, as does a knight who turns at last upon his enemies and stands at bay, bidding them defiance. All the might of his soul did he call up to aid him in the conflict with the passions and temptations which beset him. There came into his splendid face a look of boldness, of confidence, yet too of horror, as of one who at last sees his foes for what they in truth are. A moment he stood motionless; then with firm step and resolute mien he went down the long corridor, which echoed to his tread, and descended the private stairway which led to the castle chapel. There before the altar he bowed himself in prayer.

Half an hour later, as Albrecht, calm and firm once more, was returning to his chamber, he encountered Erna in the corridor. She had been to his chamber to seek him, on her return from the hunt. The attendants had stared open-mouthed when she rode into the courtyard unattended, but she had given them no heed. She longed to fling herself into the arms of her husband, that he might shield her from the danger and the temptation which lay about her; but when she found his chamber vacant, suddenly she recalled seeing Albrecht in the forest, riding with Herr von Zimmern like an evil spirit behind him, and the thought brought with it a great fear of what he might have seen. At that moment she heard his step in the corridor approaching her. Her first impulse was to hide like a guilty thing; then she remembered that she was not guilty. She saw Albrecht standing on the threshold as if he were an angel of light. His splendid strength seemed to her that of a god. She ran to him and flung herself, sobbing wildly, into his arms.

It had seemed to Albrecht in the cool and holy quiet of the chapel, that he had conquered passion and come to desire spiritual good even above the love of this beautiful woman who now flung herself into his embrace, weeping so sore; but now that he held her fast he thought again of the folk in the wood, and how speedily they would rid him of his rival did he but bid them. Even were they in league with Herr Frederich, as well might be, they would obey him and do his will. He strained Erna to his bosom in a strong and jealous clasp; then, as a wave returns that has swept down the sea-beach, came again his will to conquer evil and to beat down this temptation. When in a moment he spoke there was in his voice no trace of the feelings which stormed within him.

"What hath affrighted thee, sweetheart?" he said, kissing her fondly.

She had clung to him, hiding her face, and feeling that his strong arms could protect her from the world; that now was all harm put away and all evil trodden down. Then when he spoke, it seemed to her, all unwrought and excited as she was, that his voice, though soothing and compassionate, was that of one who is no more cumbered by troubles such as hers. He was to her like one who is removed from passion, and the turmoil of a strife such as that which tossed her spirit, by the width of half the wide sky. He was so calm, so kind; he soothed her like a tired child when, forsooth, her soul hungered and thirsted to be comforted with the apples and flagons of love. She knew not for what she yearned, but she did not find it in his embrace, albeit he was full tender and fond.

Albrecht saw that she strove with herself that she might recover her calmness. She freed herself from his embrace, and stood wiping her tears, and calming herself in woman's wise.

"It is only that thou hast wed a foolish and timorous wife," she answered him; "I lost the hunt and rode home alone. Methought I heard voices in the forest, and it hath unnerved me."

Albrecht changed color. What peril from the wood-folk might not Erna have escaped! He started forward to take her again in his arms, but she turned away with a smile.

"Belike it was nothing but my own wild fancy," she said. "Indeed, now that once again I am safe at Rittenberg I know not if I heard aught. I cannot have left the hunt more than half an hour agone. I did but turn aside in the beech wood near the ford to follow a bird-cry for a little, and I lost my way thereby."

She cast down her eyes, for in truth as she thus put by his question with a feigned excuse she could not meet his gaze; and Albrecht, remembering what had been said to him in the forest concerning the estrangement of her affections, thrilled with a keen pang. She left him, and passed down the corridor toward her chamber; and he stood and watched her like one who seeth his dearest hope flee away before his face.

XXIII

HOW ERNA SUFFERED.

It had been after a wild ride homeward that Erna met Albrecht and turned away from him. When she dashed away from Count Stephen in the forest the tears had gathered so thickly in her eyes that she was perforce minded to trust to the instincts of her palfrey rather than to her own guidance to bring her home to Rittenberg. Perchance they were tears of remorse, of rage, of indignation, and perhaps not a little of excitement. Her horse made his way bravely along the bridle-path, now brushing the thickly set ferns and brambles, now skirting close to the banks of the frothy river, and anon hurrying through the gathering shadows of the black pine-wood; and still it seemed to Erna as if she were fleeing from a pursuer who might at any moment rush upon her. She felt that her only safety lay in her husband's arms, and with the thought came a bitter pang in the sense of the wrong she had done Albrecht in listening so long to the whispered love-

making of her cousin.

And it befell Erna, as she rode home thus swiftly through the forest, to come in mind to a burning sense of the change which had befallen her since she had bidden Count Stephen farewell when he set out for Strasburg. She seemed to look back from the depths to that height of purity and virtue where she then stood, and it was with the pricking of despair most profound that she felt how great was the distance between what she was and what she had been. A sob of passion and of terror rose in her throat as she thought of her husband, and for perhaps the first time since their marriage she appreciated how he had risen from what he had been. She did not realize that although she had been sinking, it was from her that Albrecht had gained his inspiration, and that it was he who had awakened in her those desires and instincts which had been her temptation. She only felt degraded and unworthy to stand before him, but with all the love of her heart she longed to fall at his feet and implore his forgiveness.

And yet how could she confess to him how she had fallen? She could not tell him that she had been kissed in the forest by another than himself, and she feared if she might compass that he should understand that after all she was not to blame. She had but been friendly to her cousin; had listened to him as any lady might listen to a knight who was handsome and debonair, and had responded only as might the dame of a castle to her guest, or at most as might one reply to a gallant warrior of her own blood. It had been but a glance now, and a pressure of the hand then; a whispered word, a sigh with which the count had looked into her eyes; and until to-day there had been nothing more. To-day——

Her cheeks glowed with the remembrance of that fervent kiss! She thrilled again with the ardor of the glances with which Count Stephen had regarded her as they rode to the meadows where the falcons had been thrown off, and when now and then his eyes had encountered hers as they watched the flight of the birds.

"My falcon outsailleth thine," he had murmured, "but his master's heart can never leave thee!"

She lashed her palfrey afresh as she recalled the words; they seemed to be again whispered into her ears, as if the sprites of the wood had heard them and repeated them to her shame and bewilderment. Her thoughts whirled through her head as the band of the Wild Huntsman, tempest-driven, might sweep through the forest. Had she forgotten, then, her love for her husband, she questioned herself, or was it that she had been bewitched and entangled perchance in the meshes of wicked sorcery? Surely, could she once take shelter in the arms of Albrecht and feel his strong clasp about her, she should be safe from these wild and sinful thoughts. She fled ever faster, hearing in the echoes of the hoof-beats of her own palfrey the trampling of Count Stephen's steed behind her.

Yet when she indeed stood face to face with Albrecht, it has been told how his calm and his seeming coldness did so repel and chill her that she was fain to escape from him without delay. He was to her as one withdrawn from the turmoil and the temptation of things earthly; and although she misjudged him gravely, yet none the less did she hasten speedily to her chamber, there to be alone with herself, that she might calm her mind and do away with the signs of agitation which Count Stephen would too surely mark on his coming.

She had scarcely reached the quiet of her chamber when she heard the hunt come clattering into the courtyard below, and the cries of page and groom as the horses were led away, and the damsels and the retainers entered the castle; and presently her woman Fastrade came into the chamber, while close upon her heels followed Elsa, both of them a-quiver with excitement and curiosity over what had happened, and of which they had been able only to guess a part from the little which they had seen. They might not ask their mistress concerning what had befallen, but they endeavored to lead her on to tell, if so be they might.

"The gracious count was like to one distracted," Elsa said volubly, "at that he had lost sight of the countess. He cried out that the Lady Countess was lost in the forest, and we could not persuade him that there could be no fear of that. He would remain to seek in the thickets, despite whatever we could say."

"Sooth, I know the wood-ways too well to miss my road," Erna assented.

"So in truth did I tell the gracious count," Fastrade quoth, with a nod of self-satisfaction; "but none the less was he still troubled lest some mishap should have befallen."

"He was so deeply concerned," continued Elsa, taking up the word, "that we feared lest perchance he might have offended——"

"Or that he might in sooth be to blame," remarked Fastrade, as Elsa judiciously left her sentence unfinished.

"And Count von Rittenberg is so desirous of pleasing——"

The cunning wench once more let the words die on her lips half spoken.

"And such a gallant rider as he is," chorused Fastrade.

"And no one, sure, could in the round world cast a falcon better."

Erna sprang to her feet, her cheeks burning red with fiery shame.

"Get thee gone," she cried to one and then to the other; "and thee also! Leave me!"

It came upon her burningly that it was to this that her dalliance with the count had brought her. That the very damsels of the castle were so well aware of her relations with her cousin that they thought to please her by sounding his praises. Low indeed had she fallen! She cast herself prostrate upon the stone floor, and grovelled there with weeping and with the bitterness of shame. Was it that she who had so long been as proud as the white heron whose plume she wore in state, had come to be gossiped about by her own train, to be the jest of menials, to be spoken of lightly and in very likelihood to be jested of with the tongue in the cheek! The very thralls belike had the tale of her weakness by heart by this, and could say it pat, as Father Christopher had never been able to teach them to say the catechism.

Surely it was since her husband, Albrecht, had come to Rittenberg that she had thus fallen from what she was; and yet he, in sooth, had constantly waxed in faith and in godliness. Erna groaned in spirit, since it appeared to her that it must indeed be that her nature was in itself wicked and prone to fare downward, while that of Albrecht was by some inner sanctity led ever in the way of grace. She fell into a passion of tears and lamentation until her tears had run dry, and she was exhausted with sobbing. Still prone upon the ground, her face hidden in her dishevelled hair, she heard footsteps approach; and presently the Lady Adelaide, her cane tapping sharply as she walked, stepped briskly into the chamber.

"Body of Saint Fridolin!" cried the old dame, in a tone of shrill amazement and anger; "what has happened? Elsa declares that thou wert wroth without aught of provocation, and that thou dravest both her and Fastrade out of the chamber, albeit she could not tell wherein they had offended thee. In the name of Heaven's Queen, what hath come to thee?"

The tone in which the old dame spoke showed some traces of compassion as she proceeded, for, to say sooth, she could not unmoved see the grief of her niece, and she ended by bending over to lay her withered and trembling old hand upon the fair prostrate head. Erna raised herself into a sitting posture, and taking the wrinkled fingers in her own, she kissed them warmly.

"Dear heart," she said, "I am in sore trouble, and I know not if there may be comfort for such as I; but wilt thou not go thyself to Father Christopher, so that none may know, and bid him that he come to me in mine oratory? Let him not delay."

And thus Erna resolved to confess to Heaven the sin which had been in her heart, albeit it had been only a vague desire.

XXIV

HOW COUNT STEPHEN MET HERR FREDERICH.

It was in sooth with angry mind that Count Stephen dashed about in the wood, seeking for his cousin. He did not in his secret heart expect to find her, but it seemed to him that if she had really fled to the castle this would mean a giving up of the hope of her love. If she was ready to yield to his wooing, she might indeed have been so taken by surprise and so overcome by shyness at the moment as to seek instinctively to escape him; but he refused to own to himself that he should not find her lurking in some thicket, waiting to be discovered and forced by kisses and caresses to own that her heart was his. It was that if this were true they might be alone that he had insisted that the rest of the hunt should return to the castle while he remained to seek in the by-paths, and he concerned himself very little whether his story that the palfrey of the countess had taken fright and run away with her was believed or not.

It was with a growing despair and a kindling anger that Count Stephen rode from thicket to thicket, finding in the bosky nooks only the gathering shadows and the birds and squirrels which fled at his approach. Though he had not truly expected to find Erna, none the less was he enraged and disappointed that she was not here. His passion for his beautiful cousin had taken too strong a hold upon him not to stir him now with deep feeling as he thought of the possibility of losing her. He dashed his heavily gloved hand against his brow, and the bosses of his hawking gauntlet left their imprint upon the flesh.

"God's blood!" he cried, in impotent wrath, "I will not lose her!"

He had hardly spoken when his ear caught the sound of a horse's hoofs upon the pine-needle-carpeted ground, and the soft thud sent a thrill through his whole being.

"Who goes there?" he called.

"The devil!" shouted a harsh voice, in reply; and with a burst of hoarse laughter Herr von Zimmern came riding out of the dusk of the tree shadows.

Count Stephen stared at him an instant, in mute surprise at his sudden appearance and the wildness of his manner.

"Whence dost thou come?" he demanded in a moment, regaining his composure and speaking with a haughtiness which betrayed his vexation.

"Out of the wood," the other answered coolly. "And thou?"

"What is that to thee, sirrah?" retorted the count.

It was so great a relief to have some one upon whom to vent his wrath that he made not the slightest effort to restrain himself, and his tone was so insolent that he was astonished that the cripple did not reply in anger.

"I crave pardon," Herr Frederich said, suddenly changing his manner, as if it occurred to him that it was not his wish to offend. "I was astonished to find you alone in the forest when I had thought that haply one we will not name might be riding with you."

Count Stephen ground his teeth, but he struggled with himself that he should give answer calmly.

"There is none with me," he said, "and in sooth I do not know by what right thou dost trouble thyself concerning my affairs. What is it to thee who may or who may not be abroad with me?"

Herr Frederich laughed mockingly.

"Now, by the True Cross," he returned, "you are indeed in an evil mood. It was but that I wished you well that I said it was strange to find you alone, when I had myself bought from the wood-folk a promise that you should this day have opportunity to be alone with one who is not here."

"God's blood!" cried the count; "what hast thou to do with the wood-folk?"

"But since forsooth you are in so shrewish a mind," continued Herr Frederich, ignoring his words, "we will not speak of it further. Haply I might have had that to tell which it would have been well for you to know had you been angry at being left thus alone; but it is of no account. Fare you well, Sir Count!"

He turned his horse as he spoke, as if he were minded to return into the gloom of the forest whence he had come. Count Stephen dashed forward, and caught his rein.

"Not so fast, sirrah!" he said angrily. "If in truth thou hast anything to say, out with it speedily, or by God's wounds I will slay thee on the spot. Thou mayst see if I am in the mind to be lightly trifled with."

"Nay," the cripple replied undauntedly; "you do not seem wholly calm and peaceable in your temper. It may be that it will mend if you can wait the issue of the errand upon which I am bound, since then it will go hard but you shall come nigh to the fulfilment of your heart's desire."

The count regarded the other somewhat askance. He doubted himself of this swart knave, and while he was not over-scrupulous concerning the means by which he came to the desires of his passions, he had yet a contempt for the traitor who could thus betray his own master. Moreover, although he had been indebted to Herr Frederich for many an interview with the lady of the castle, since the cripple had brought Albrecht into the hall on the morning when Erna had shown the scroll of Ovid, the count had shrewdly doubted but the man was a traitor to all, and bound only to make mischief. Nevertheless, so deeply did the heart of the count long for the love of Erna that he was ready for anything, short of the blackest villany, which would bring him nearer to the fruit of his quest. He bent forward in the dusk of the covert where they had met, and rested his hands upon the pommel of his saddle.

"Speak on," he said.

"It is not from any love of thee," Herr Frederich began with careless insolence, suddenly assuming the speech of an equal, "that I wish thee success in thy quest. If it can but be compassed that—Ah," he cried, breaking off and with his voice falling into a strain of the most passionate bitterness, "if I can wound him through his lady, I shall have it all; it is through his wife that I must reach him; that will give me my revenge here and hereafter! I can gloat over his soul in torments through all eternity!"

The count did not speak, but he drew back a little as if such fiendish hate made even him afeard. He could not compass the reasons for the bitterness of the other's mind toward Albrecht, and he waited for what more Herr Frederich might say.

"She is, in sooth, coy now," the other went on. "I saw her flee from thee through the wood. She has been bred by a priest, and she is afraid of her own desires. Her blood stirs for thee, but she is yet timid. Have patience yet a little till I come again. Then we shall see."

He had grown wilder in his air until he seemed but a madman raving; and Count Stephen, who knew not of the meeting of Albrecht and the cripple in the wood when Herr Frederich had thrown off all his disguises, was bewildered by the fashion of his companion's speech.

"When thou comest again," he repeated. "Whither, then, dost thou go?"

His companion bent nearer, as if he feared that in the shadows about them might be ears which should hear the secret.

"Listen!" he said. "When the *Morgengabe* was given, the Lady Adelaide put it into my head that if the Huns could be but told of the richness of the jewels that were brought to Rittenberg, they would not be long on their way hither. With me for a guide they will not linger. Ah, ha! My Lord Baron," he cried, throwing up his arms in a wild frenzy of rage and excitement, "when the red

cock crows on the towers of Rittenberg, and the wife is fled in the arms of her lover, I will forgive both thee and thy cursed father!"

The count regarded him in amazement and dismay.

"Art thou mad?" he demanded. "Wilt thou in truth bring down the Huns upon Rittenberg?"

"Yea; and when they are come, it will not be hard to bear the lady away whither it pleases you. Who is there at Rittenberg to let the Huns of their will?"

"I!" cried Count Stephen, with sudden rage. "God's wounds, dost thou take me for a villain such as thou?"

He flung himself upon Herr Frederich so forcibly that they both went down among the feet of the horses together. He caught the cripple by the throat with one hand, while with the other he drew his dagger.

"Take this to the Huns in token!" he exclaimed, dealing the fallen man stab after stab; "and this, and this!"

The other struggled fiercely for a moment. It was so dark there on the ground that the count struck at him blindly, and it was only when the blow had been repeated several times that the cripple was quiet. Count Stephen held him by the throat in his powerful grasp until he ceased to struggle; when he rose he became aware that Herr Zimmern's horse had escaped into the darkening forest. It was only from the chance that as he leaped from his own steed the rein had been thrown over the broken limb of a tree by which he was standing that he was not himself left horseless.

"God's blood!" ejaculated Count Stephen, wiping his dagger on the doublet of the dead man; "there is one less knave in the world."

He touched the corse contemptuously with his foot, wondering why Herr Frederich had so bitterly hated Albrecht, and for the moment considering that, after all, Herr von Zimmern had been his only ally at Rittenberg, and that it was not wise to have disposed of him thus. Yet when he reflected that if he had been left alive it would have been simply that he might have opportunity to bring in the dreaded Huns to devastate the land, he was satisfied that it had been well to kill the knave and put an end to his scheming. Count Stephen knew what the Huns were. They had overrun not a little of the country in the neighborhood of his home; and as he thought of them he became well pleased with himself for having slain one who would have helped the heathen.

But even the pleasure of having killed a varlet who would have given the land to the fire and the spear of the Huns could not for long put Count Stephen from the thought of Erna. He got upon his horse, and rode slowly toward the castle, as completely forgetting the dead man behind him as if he had never existed, and leaving the body to the wolves with as little compunction as if it had been the carcass of a hound.

He wondered how Erna would receive him, and whether she would have said anything to her husband of the happening in the forest; and at last he bethought him of a means by which he might test her feelings.

"I will send her word," he said to himself, "that I wish to take my leave. Surely, if she forgive me, or if there is hope for me, I shall be able to tell it when I see her. She cannot be so angry as to refuse to come; and besides, she would fear that her husband should ask the reason if she treated me with disdain. She must at least come to bid me farewell, if not to urge upon me a longer stay; surely she must come."

And with this design in his mind, Count Stephen rode on more briskly, reaching the castle a little before sunset.

"Gather the men and be ready to ride at once," he commanded his captain, whom he encountered in the courtyard.

"To-night?" exclaimed the man, staring with astonishment.

"God's blood!" stormed his master in reply, "it is necessary that I give orders twice? Now, I said; at once!"

And striding on, he left the retainer holding his horse by the bridle and staring after him open-mouthed.

XXV

HOW FATHER CHRISTOPHER SENT FOR ALBRECHT.

After Albrecht had been left by Erna in the corridor, he stood for a space as if he had neither the power to go nor yet to stay. He was full of jealousy and of fear at the thought of what might have befallen in the wood, and the agitation of his wife showed him that though Herr Frederich had

failed of fulfilling his mission of evil, yet had something unusual taken place there when the baron had not been present to see. He had long understood that Count Stephen would fain win the love of Erna, and mighty had been the struggle in his soul as he questioned with himself whether in truth it would not be easy for the knight to gain the love of a woman from one who had been born of the wild race of wood-folk.

He went sadly and slowly back to his chamber, where the shadows clustered as thickly as the trees in the forest, and there came to his mind how the creatures of the wood, angry that one of their race should have won a human soul, had been eager to give their aid to the schemes of Herr Frederick; and anew there came over him a sense of the mighty struggle in which he was engaged. The stinging taunts of the cripple wounded him afresh, singing themselves over again in his ears as he stood by his casement in the gathering darkness, looking out over the mighty stretch of the forest. He recalled the cripple's threat that the soul of Erna should be so dragged down by his own that they should be lost together; and the twofold terror of bringing upon her whom he loved the doom of eternal death overwhelmed him. The serenity which he had on his knees won in the chapel deserted him, and he cast himself down upon the rushes in agony of soul.

He hardly knew whether it was moments or hours that he grovelled in the dust,—nor could he know that apart in her chamber Erna, too, had fallen into a like abasement,—when the coming of a thrall disturbed him. He started to his feet, and waited for what message might be come to him. It had grown so dark that the glimmer of the torch which the servant carried shone in a golden line beneath the door. Smoothing his disordered hair with his hand as he went, Albrecht went to the door and opened it. The glare of the torch blinded him so that for a moment he could see nothing.

"If the gracious Lord Baron will," the thrall said, "Father Christopher prays that he come to him with no delay."

Albrecht stood a moment in surprised silence. Then he recovered himself.

"Is Father Christopher in his chamber?" he asked.

"Yea, my Lord Baron," the servant answered.

"Give me thy torch," Albrecht said, taking it, "and I will go at once. Thou need'st not come."

Not since the morning after his wedding had Albrecht climbed to the little room high in the western tower; and as he made his way thither he seemed to be once more on his way to confess to the good old priest the strange story of his life. As he climbed the winding stair of the tower his glance fell through a narrow window, and afar he saw the moon rising over the great forest where the kobolds were gathering for their nightly sports. All the old life came before him, and for the moment he seemed to have lost the one without that he had gained the other. He was no longer either kobold or man. Then, with the fierceness of one who fights temptation, he shook off these thoughts, and went on until he stood before Father Christopher.

The priest was walking up and down with his eyes fixed upon the floor. For a moment he did not pause or look up. Then he paused beside the seat upon which Albrecht had thrown himself, his kind eyes hardly higher than those of the other, so tall was the knight in his woodland strength, and stood looking into the baron's face with a regard penetrating but full of tenderness.

"The time hath come," he said, "when thou must tell to thy wife everything that is hid in thy heart."

"Everything?" Albrecht echoed, dismay and wonder in his tone.

"Everything," the priest repeated solemnly. "My son, dost thou remember that once in this very chamber I said to thee that thou couldst not hope to save thy soul alone, but that the fate of hers by whom thou didst win it was bound up with that of thine own? Now is it the hour when thou must save both hers and thine."

"Truly I would freely give mine that hers be not lost," Albrecht returned.

"It is in thine hands," Father Christopher went on as if he heard him not. "She loves thee still."

"Still!" Albrecht echoed in a piercing cry, springing to his feet.

His face was white with the terror of the fear which seemed to lurk behind the words of the priest. He caught Father Christopher's robe by the sleeve, and looked at him with terror and appeal in his face.

"Nay," the priest said, putting out his hand, and speaking with mingled sweetness and reproof, "we are speaking of the gracious countess and thy wife. Thou hast nothing to fear. It is only that the longings which thou hast thyself awakened in her are yet strange and not wholly mastered by her will. It is thou who hast given her these temptations as surely as she has given thee thy soul. There is never a gift between two; something is always given in exchange."

Albrecht bowed his head upon his hand. His eyes traced the long shadow which the torch, thrust into a ring upon the wall, cast along upon the floor, bare of rushes.

"But how may it be," he asked sadly, "that I, forsooth, can hope to save either her or yet myself?"

"Because," Father Christopher returned tenderly, laying his hand upon the bowed head as if inwardly he blessed the strong man before him, "thou hast the soul of a child and the strength of a knight; and because," he was fain to add, with a soft voice that was like a caress, "all that see thee must needs love thee."

"But why," Albrecht asked, "sayest thou that it were well that I tell all to my wife?"

The priest smiled with an expression which was at once tender and wistful, and through which yet a gleam of humor played.

"My son," he answered, "I am an old man, and I have in sooth seen much of the ways of the world, and of the ways of womankind not a little. Trust me that I reede thee good counsel in this matter. Thy wife is a woman, and so it is well that thou tell her. It is not always easy to say why one should do thus or so with a woman, but it may be wise to do that for which one cannot give a reason. And besides," he added more soberly, "anon perchance thou wilt thyself perceive a reason for what thou now doest blindly. Go, my son; and Heaven bless thee in thy going!"

XXVI

HOW ALBRECHT AND ERNA FORGAVE EACH OTHER.

Erna came from her interview with Father Christopher calmer in mind, but still full of unrest and disquiet. She feared to see Albrecht, and yet she had asked the priest to send him to her. She had confessed to Father Christopher how far she had gone astray, but his assurances that all would be well, and that she had turned in time from the temptation which beset her, could not console her without the forgiveness of Albrecht, and in her secret heart Erna did not lack that keen fear of her lord which is the necessary foundation of a woman's love. She believed that Albrecht had observed nothing of her intimacy with Count Stephen, and she dreaded lest his old imperiousness should break out at the disclosure which she must make to him.

Fastrade came to summon her to supper, which was already served in the hall; but Erna sent her away, and waited in the dusk longing and yet fearing to hear the approaching steps of her husband. When at last she heard him coming, she could not control the terror which seized her. She felt that kiss which Count Stephen had pressed upon her lips in the beech wood burning as if it were a spot of living fire, and she sprang up with the desire to escape overpowering all other feelings. She met Albrecht on the threshold of her chamber, and in the darkness she had touched him before she realized how near he was.

"I must hasten to supper," she said breathlessly. "Fastrade summoned me."

He put his arm about her and led her back into the chamber. She clung to him for support, for her strength left her, and she could scarcely stand.

"Wait yet a little," he said. "First I have that which I must say to you."

She submitted with a feeling of despair. She thought, with a terrible throb of pain, of the wedding night when he had first entered that room, and of all that had befallen since then. She was utterly abashed and humiliated, and in her own sight she was viler than the vilest. Albrecht led her to a seat, groping his way in the darkness to the very spot by the window whence she had first seen him riding out of the pine forest below like a forest god. She sank down beside him, and for a moment both of them were silent.

"I have to confess to thee," Albrecht said at length; and the strangeness of his tone and of his address struck her with so deep an amazement that for the moment all her own fears were forgotten in wonder. "If thou canst forgive the wrong I have done thee—"

He broke off and bent forward in the darkness as if he would have kissed her. Then he drew back.

"Forgive thee?" stammered Erna, confused and amazed. "How hast thou wronged me?"

"If one should come," Albrecht said, his tone lower than before, "and should win thee and wed thee when thou knewest not what he was, or how unworthy, couldst thou forgive him if afterward he loved thee truly and more than tongue could tell?"

The fear of some horrible revelation came over her. She forgot that she had shrunk at his coming. The thought that she might have been deceived drove from her mind all recollection of her own fault. She sat up with sudden energy.

"Albrecht!" she exclaimed. "What is it that thou hast to tell me? Art thou not noble?"

"I have not lied to thee," he answered with a touch of bitterness amid his humility which did not escape her. "My father was indeed lord of the Neiderwasser valley."

"Then what hast thou to tell me?"

It was some moments before he answered, but then, with a voice full of passion and pain, he told her all that he had related to Father Christopher on the morning after the marriage. Erna

listened with eyes wide stretched, as if she would pierce the darkness, her heart beating so that it seemed to her that it would suffocate her. It seemed a thing so impossible to understand that she had indeed wed a strange creature from the forest, and not a man at all, that at first she refused to believe it.

"If this were true," she said, "surely Father Christopher would have told me. He would not have suffered me to imperil my soul by such a union had it indeed been true that thou wert—Oh, Albrecht, thou surely art human! I should not love thee else."

"And dost thou indeed love me?"

She flung herself forward into his strong arms.

"I have loved thee," she cried, "from the first moment when I saw thee ride out of the wood below."

"And now?"

"And now," she repeated, "thou tellest me that thou art not a man, but that thou art a monster of the wood."

"Truly I was a monster, but thou hast made me other. Thou hast given me a soul, and now I am human as thou art. It was that I might have a soul that Herr von Zimmern trained me, and only to-day I know that it was because he wished me ill, and schemed that I should be lost forever."

"And must thou indeed be lost forever?" Erna cried, starting away from him and then clasping him more closely.

"Nay, sweetheart; thou hast given me a soul, and I have striven that it be not lost. Thou hast given me a soul, and thou wilt help me that it be for me all blessedness instead of the ruin that he in his wickedness meant."

"I?"

The remembrance of all that she had not told him swept over her like a wave of the sea. She slipped from his side down to his feet, and crouched there, clasping his knees. She remembered all her old longing for spiritual greatness and for virtue, and how she had fallen into the temptations of the lower things. Bitter tears gushed from her eyes, and a sob choked her voice.

"Oh, it is not for me to help thee!" she cried. "Thou art above me, kobold though thou hast been. Thou shouldst not confess to me; it is I who must confess to thee. It is thou who must forgive. Thou canst not guess why Father Christopher sent thee to me to-night."

"Sweetheart," Albrecht answered, bending over to raise her, "I have seen all from day to day, and I knew how the count would have ensnared thee; but I had no fear that in the end thou wouldst understand what danger lay in him. It is I who am at fault, since it is I from whom thou hast learned the longings that have made thy temptation. If thou canst forgive me, and love me still, it may be that in the end we may help each other, and our souls that are one be together lifted up."

Beneath in the courtyard there was a stir as of horses and of retainers, and upon the ceiling over their heads there flashed the light of a torch which some servant carried down below. In the faint reflected light Erna could almost see the face of her husband, and with a sob of perfect peace and of swelling aspiration she cast her arms about his neck, and felt herself gathered into his strong embrace.

As they sat there talking and telling each other all the things which they had hitherto kept secret, the bustle in the courtyard increased, and presently came the damsel Elsa to say that the Count Stephen had determined to take his leave of Rittenberg that night, and prayed the countess to receive his farewell.

"To-night?" Albrecht repeated in astonishment. "Surely he is jesting."

"So the gracious Lady Adelaide said," returned Elsa, with saucy demureness, "and she swore it by the body of Saint Fridolin; but still the noble count declares that he will set out."

"But the darkness, and the danger of missing the way," Erna said; "and above all the wolves!"

"The Lady Adelaide mentioned them all," the damsel responded, "and witnessed them all by Saint Fridolin's body; but quoth the knight that if he could not keep his bones from the wolves he deserved to have them picked. Only on one charge will he stay."

"And what is that?" demanded Erna; but she saw the look askance which Elsa gave toward Albrecht, and the blood rushed into her cheek.

"It is that the gracious countess insist upon his staying," Elsa answered, courtesying so profoundly that the rushlight she carried wavered and flared.

Erna waved her hand in dismissal, and the damsel with her rushlight took herself out of the chamber. Left together in the darkness, their eyes blinded by having looked on the flame, Albrecht and Erna drew close together, and she clung to him as if he had saved her from some mighty danger.

"Wilt thou that he go or stay?" Albrecht asked, the tenderness in his voice showing her that he

did not ask the question from any doubt of her. "Do not dismiss him for fear I shall be troubled if he stay."

She led him to the window where the torches below shone strongly enough for them to see each other's face, and there she looked into his eyes a moment.

"What I desire," she said, "is that he go and leave us alone together as we were before he came. Wilt thou not go down and receive his farewells? I wish not to see him again."

He kissed her with fervor, and yet with something of solemnity in his manner.

"We have forgiven each other," he said, "and now we will help each other."

Then he went down to meet Count Stephen; and Erna, left alone, looked out upon the lights of the courtyard with a sigh and yet with a great peace and joy filling her breast.

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